

IRENE'S UGLY TEETH

by Luke Longstreet Sullivan

I am looking at the old pictures of my father. It's time to put them away for awhile, but perhaps one more look. There he is, my father – 9 years old in his Sunday School clothes, sitting on that stone bench. At the bottom of the picture, Grandma Irene Sullivan's shadow, elbows out, as she holds the boxy Kodak camera. (She was cold like a rock and so we six boys named her "Grandma Rock.")

I turn the pages and there's a photo of Irene, not smiling as usual. In the next one she is the same, without emotion, a degree shy of a scowl. I count again the number of pictures without smiles just to make sure, and it's true: of the 44 shots of Grandma Sullivan, only four show her smiling, and in two of those she has her hand over her mouth. In one, her smile is like a paper cut. But in the last, Grandpa Sullivan's camera caught her off guard. It is a smile. And it is genuine.

I get out the magnifying glass to study the only photographic evidence that Grandma Rock expressed emotion and I see her teeth are, well, they're pretty bad.

I set the glass down and wonder.

Was all this, my family's pain and its implosion, was it caused by Irene's ugly teeth? The theory's at least feasible.

A Coshocton, Ohio, school girl is raised on a farm, back when there were no braces and no overnight teeth whitener. Her teeth make her self-conscious and slow to laugh, slow to smile. In middle school the boys make fun of her and in high school she stays home from dances and perhaps reads her father's Bible, the parts about how physical beauty can't fit through the eye of a needle on the way to heaven.

She discovers no one makes fun of her at church and soon the bosom of Jesus is the place she feels most welcome. At age 31 she is saved, she thinks, from certain spinsterhood by the death of the local minister's first wife. In her new son's eyes she sees the boys who used to reject her: boys who were so fair playing baseball under the Ohio sun with their shirts off, boys who made faces after passing her, faces she saw reflected in the store windows. Momma tells the little boy other people can't be trusted and the only love anyone really can count on is from Jesus.

It's feasible.

If the explanation is not in Irene's teeth then perhaps it's somewhere in all these volumes of old letters here on the desk: something Mom wrote, a nugget, some incident, some detail in the police reports, something he saw in the Rorschach tests – something. I want there to be a smoking gun, an a-ha moment. Without it, I'm left only with, hey, my Dad was crazy. It's what the doctors at Hartford said.

It makes for easy writing, but it's not the truth.

The final answer is banal. My father got into the booze and it poisoned him and then killed him. It's a story neither sadder nor bigger than one of those articles in back of the newspaper: "Toddler Chokes to Death on Toy." The toy was on the floor and the baby put it in his mouth. The bottle was on the counter and Dad drank it. When he did, it made him crazy and his family suffered and he died.

I remember asking my father's boss, Dr. Coventry, if he thought the death of Roger's mother had anything to do with his relapse and final dissolution. The dry answer given by the Mayo scientist makes sense now: "Oh, I doubt it. There's always something in life. You're never going to be free of those things. No, he was simply a recidivist. He couldn't handle his problem."

Not a bang, but a whimper.