

AMBROSIA

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It is late fall, and we are on our way to have Sunday dinner with my maternal great-grandparents. We have been there before, but I am eight years old and this is the visit I will remember.

My older brother, Johnny, my younger sister, Libby, and I sit in the back seat of the Nash as we enter Beech Grove, turning at Judge Wilson's mammoth three-story house with gingerbread trim, driving past Cordelia O'Shea's tiny cottage where we were once invited in to see her parakeet, and on down Mulberry Street to the corner of Chinaberry, where Papa eases the big car up to the curb.

The old house sits high on a hill overlooking the street, the bare branches of the giant oaks standing guard. At one end of the long front porch a swing rattles in the cold wind; at the opposite end are two silent rocking chairs, their matching cushions caved in, as if two invisible people keep watch. Dry, parched leaves, rustling like tissue paper, flit across the yard.

We tumble out of the Nash and scramble up the steep embankment to the pathway but stop dead still when our great-grandmother appears at the door. She looks as fragile as the leaves, this person from another time. Her hair, still black but for a few threads of grey, is gathered in a roll at the nape of her neck, and the white lace collar of her dark dress flutters in the gathering wind as her sunken eyes give us a dark and piercing look.

We take a step backward when our great-grandfather materializes behind her. He is dressed in a brown suit and vest, a gold watch-chain dangling from the breast pocket. His head is edged in a fringe of snow-white hair, a few strands combed carefully across the dome. A sudden

gust of wind picks them up and waves them back and forth as Momma and Papa catch up with us. In a flurry of greetings, we are moved inside.

The parlor is dark and foreign. A huge brown horsehair sofa sits along one wall faced by two matching chairs, their backs draped with large crocheted doilies. A mahogany library table sits between the chairs, and an enormous grandfather clock ticks in the corner. Mouthwatering aromas drift from the kitchen, so we head in that direction.

'Ya'll come on back here, now,' Papa says, motioning to the couch. 'Sit down.'

He removes his hat and places it on the library table as Grampy grabs the arms of his chair, his arms trembling as he lowers his body into a sitting position. Papa sits down in the chair opposite him, and we arrange ourselves in a line on the sofa.

Momma follows Granny into the dining room, the door swinging shut behind them, and all is quiet except the ticking of the grandfather clock. Every time I move, the horsehair scratches my legs, but I can't seem to sit still.

Grampy lifts one foot and strikes a match on the sole of his shoe, cupping his shaky hands around the flame as he sticks it into the bowl of his pipe. Puffs of vanilla-scented smoke spout upward as his wrinkled cheeks sink in and poof out. He settles back in his chair and crosses his legs, smoke swirling around his face.

'Well, John, I hear they're gonna build a big nuclear plant up there around Paducah.'

'Yep,' Papa says. 'They say they'll put about a thousand men to work when it's up and running.'

Johnny, making sure he is not being noticed, rises and saunters into the bedroom. Libby and I follow.

The room is cold and dark, heavy with the scent of mothballs. A large cannon-ball bed, covered with a white crocheted spread, sits against one wall. I imagine my great-grandparents in it at night, asleep in the darkness, and I shiver. A matching dresser crouches on clawed feet against the opposite wall. The oval mirror is tilted, and our small pale faces seem out of place in this strange, dark place.

(end of excerpt)