

ONE
NIGHT
IN A BAD
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A TRUE STORY BY

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ONE AFTERNOON ON THE JEFFERSON SLOUGH

IT ALL STARTED when I heard that my great-grandmother was accused of murder.

There we were at Aunt Aila's, sitting in the living room, sipping tea, munching cookies, and visiting. After a little while, Aunt Aila got up and left the room. She returned with a large box. She said Sammy had sent it (my uncle). She set the box on the coffee table and opened it. She withdrew a large envelope from the box and from it a piece of paper which she passed to us. I had never seen such a paper. Printed in bold type across the top was "Descriptive List of the Prisoner." At the bottom were two pictures of a striking young man, one facing forward, the other to the side. I read quickly down the page. The crime was murder.

"Who was *this*?" I asked.

"Archie," Mom said, "Grandma's brother, your great-uncle."

My great-uncle?

Auntie Mary told us what happened. Oh, my. I hardly knew I had an Uncle Archie, now I knew why. Then she started talking about the fire and about finding the body and about Grandma T's mother being arrested. I was floored.

"Was that the time Mother told the man's fortune?" Mom asked.

"No, that was another time," Auntie Mary replied, another barn-burning story and another scandal. I had heard that one.

"I never heard any of this," said Mom.

"I was a middle-aged woman before I knew my mother lived in an orphanage," declared Aunt Aila in reply.

"Orphanage?" asked my brother, Jeff. "What was she doing in an orphanage?"

Nobody seemed to know.

I sat there listening to all this, hardly knowing what to make of it. These stories were incredible, and they were about my own relatives,

Grandma T's mother and brother, and this on top of all the other incredible stories Mom and Grandma had told me over the years. I knew from those stories that Grandma came from a notorious family, but I had no idea they were this notorious. I also knew that she had endured an unbelievably difficult life fraught with more hardships and horrors than one person can be expected to bear, and none of it her own doing. I was too shocked and overwhelmed by some of the more dreadful tales to ask questions, so I knew only snippets, and some of the stories were too awful to ask for more details; to do so would have seemed cruel. The important detail I did know was that she refused to have any part in filling that family closet full of skeletons nor did she wallow in those hardships. She knew she was captain of her own ship with regard to character. She chose to rise above it all, and she did. She was a remarkable lady. Now five years after she passed away to hear even more stories about her notorious family—it was a lot to take in during the span of one afternoon.

The next day I flew home, and as the days passed, Grandma and her stories sat quietly in the back of my mind, a pleasant I'm-here-for-a-reason memory that happily would not go away. Mom had been saying for years that someone should write all this down. She said it again that afternoon at Aunt Aila's. "Somebody should write a book about this," she said. "Oh, no!" said Auntie Mary. "Why not?" said Aunt Aila.

So I did.

First I had to find out the rest. I had no idea what I was getting into when I started. The research turned into quite a detective hunt and took me all over the country and to Europe. It was a tremendous amount of work, very difficult, and loads of fun, and I'm glad I did it. As I gathered family stories from everyone I could find, and read and researched and sought to learn about the places and times in which my grandparents and great-grandparents lived, and corroborate all I'd been told, and discover what I had not been told, the story only grew more interesting, much more interesting.

Here's what I found out. We begin with the fire.