

I meandered along the narrow aisles of my father's antique shop, looking at the newly arrived chinaware. It was a trim little store, quietly situated on a downtown corner of our small country town. In good weather, I always made a detour there on the walk home from my elementary school.

A delicate dolls' tea set painted with golden hearts along the rim caught my attention, and as I reached to pick it off the shelf, I spotted a golden locket lying next to it. Curiously, I picked up the heart-shaped locket and carried it to my father's desk.

"Can I play with this necklace, Dad?" I asked, holding it up.

"Forty-four, forty-five, fifty, fifty-one. Hmm?" His keen blue eyes peered up from his ledger. "Where'd you find that, Claire?"

"Over by the china," I pointed.

He slowly shook his graying head, a mixture of irritation and amusement twitching at his lips. "Your mother must have stuck it there. She was helping me set out the latest order yesterday. Sure, play with it, but put it back in the jewelry case when you're done, okay?"

My father was meticulously neat and organized. He had a rigid system of classification in which every antique had a specific place. On the rare occasion a strange object defied his system, he would reorganize his entire shop or sell the offending object to another dealer for whatever they would take for it, often at a loss. My mother, much to my father's despair, was erratically disorganized, but in an artistic way. She had probably put the locket to match the gold hearts on the tea set.

I walked to the sunny back room where I often played and stood in the middle of the floor, fondling the engraved floral design of the locket and running the chain through my fingers. I found the latch at the side of the pendant and almost hesitantly opened the heart. Inside was a tiny black and white photograph of a stunningly beautiful young woman. I was entranced. She had thick, shining black hair loosely pinned up and gently waving about her round face. Her neck rose gracefully out of a white lace collar to a firm chin and high, proud cheekbones. Her skin was smooth and clear and of a cinnamon color, like the princess on the cover of my *Arabian Nights*. Her full lips parted in an open smile and her dark eyes beamed with warmth. Her face radiated an air of tranquility and purity mingled with something else. As a ten year old I called it "knowing," but now I recognize it as wisdom.

The opposite panel was lightly engraved with the words, "*Irene Aiyana Wilson 1918.*"

Wilson was our last name and at the time I thought it a funny but not improbable coincidence, for *Wilson* was common enough.

How long I stood gazing at her, I know not. All I know is that suddenly my father was there, staring over my shoulder and making a stifled gasping sound. I spun around and he snatched the locket with a trembling hand. I had never seen his dear face so pale. "You should be going home," he whispered.

I went. I knew not to argue with a man in that state.

Tucked in my bed that night, I could hear my parents' low voices in the next room. They never realized how thin that wall was and as a child, I did not realize I was eavesdropping. I always listened to their conversations.

My father's voice sounded recovered but slightly shaken. "You're sure this came in with my last order? How on earth could it have gotten there? He must have carelessly pawned it. Sentimental fool! Better he had melted the wretched thing."

My mother's voice had a hardness I had never heard before. "It doesn't matter. At least it fell into our hands. We should destroy--." Her voice fell and seemed almost to fail. Then it came back, hard once again, but with a quiver of doubt. "No, it would be risky to try and get rid of it again. Give it to me and I will hide it. Yes, and we will forget anything ever happened."

My father's voice assented and the conversation drifted to other matters as I drifted to sleep.

The next time I saw the locket was a lifetime later as I was packing for my freshman year at college. It had taken some hard work to convince my family to let me go and even harder work paying for a fourth of the tuition. I loved my family to death but I knew I needed to get out of our little town and see the world before I went crazy. I was in my parents' room, rummaging through my mother's drawer of old accessories, looking for things that did not look outdated. From under a yellowed glove peaked a gold chain. I pulled it out and almost froze. I felt like I had been hit in the side of the head and was standing back in my father's storeroom on that day I had almost forgotten. The locket lay in my hand, just as beautiful as the first time I saw it. I'll never know what made me do it. Call it curiosity or destiny or theft, but I quickly slipped the locket into my suitcase. After all, my mother had said I could take anything I wanted from the old drawer.

The first months at college whirled by me without any time to investigate the locket, but I wore and thought about it constantly. I never was a locket-wearing type of girl, but somehow this locket was different. Often when I was alone I looked into Irene's face. I never tired of her and I seemed to know her more intimately every time. Sometimes I even thought I saw a flicker of something familiar in her features, but I never could exactly describe it.

The first day I had some leisure time from college life I began my investigation. I had a burning curiosity to discover the identity of the woman and the reason my father had been so affected by the sight of the locket. It would be too tedious to write or read every technical detail of my investigation, so I will just tell the important steps on my journey to the truth. Using the skills gathered from my childhood in an antique shop, I eventually found the jeweler of the locket and received this note from his son.

Dear Miss Wilson,

In regards to the locket in your possession, I was able to look in my father's account book and found this entry: "10 kt. gold heart locket. Design NO 15. Commissioned by Josiah M. Wilson on April 25th 1918 for \$37." I hope this will be of service to you.

Sincerely,

Michael Foster, Foster Jewelers

This simple note stunned me. I sat at my dorm room desk reading and rereading the ledger entry. Josiah M. Wilson was the name of my uncle, my father's oldest brother and the one who most resembled my merry grandpa John. My uncle was a cheerful, bear like man who spoiled me with peppermints and magic tricks. He always seemed at odds with my aunt Lizzie, who was as tiny and prim as he was rough and clumsy. I vaguely knew that as a young man, Uncle Josiah had gone to Montana to seek his fortune in the mining rush, but found it in a business enterprise there. He never once talked about his life there though.

After the initial surprise wore off, I pushed aside questions and wild speculations to think about my next step in uncovering the secret of the locket, which had so suddenly become the secret of my family. I decided to gather as much information about my uncle's life in Montana. Some guarded questions to my relatives revealed that he had left in 1898 for the little town of Browning, stayed there twenty-two years, then returned home. I wrote to numerous public agencies that might have records of my uncle's life in Browning with little success until I

received a letter from the Browning First Presbyterian Church. It was from the vicar there. I will only record the part of the letter that was of any importance.

“Mr. Wilson married Waynoka Inayat, a Cherokee woman, on June 3, 1899. They had somehow met soon after Mr. Wilson joined our church. I performed the ceremony and I have never seen a more devoted or blissful couple, although the union was somewhat frowned upon. Their child was born the following April and christened Irene Aiyana Wilson. They attended church every Sunday and the girl always looked like a white rose, so sweet and fresh and always dressed in white. I remember they sent her to a private college at nineteen.”

I immediately dashed off a letter to the college, the address of which was included later in the letter. The time it took to receive a response gave me more than enough time to reflect. It strangely never occurred to me to be surprised that my uncle's wife was Indian. I finally came to the conclusion that his wife and daughter had died in some tragedy that was too painful to talk about. How else could anyone account for his total silence on his life in Browning? The letter I soon received from the matron of the school proved me wrong in a way I could never have imagined. This is the letter I read, sitting alone at my desk in my tiny dorm room:

“Dear Miss Wilson,

I most assuredly remember Irene Wilson. During her four years at my academy we became quite close and we kept in touch until her untimely death. I assume you are a family member in search of her end and I am afraid the story I am about to relate will pain you.

From the first day at the school, she proved herself a remarkably gifted young woman, but more than that, she had a depth and purity to her character that was very pleasant to see in the young generation. She had no relations nearby, so I sometimes invited her to dinner, where she told me about her father and her Indian mother. Being liberal minded, her Indian blood never troubled me as it sometimes did others.

She was very happy here until her third year when her mother died. She went to the funeral in Montana, dressed in white for her father loved her in that and could not bear to see her in black. She wished to stay with her father, but he urged her not to fall behind in her studies. She returned here and he moved back to his family in Illinois. They wrote each other constantly, and when she learned he was considering, at his family's urging, remarrying, she urged him as well. She went that summer to meet her father's family for the first time, although she had been in steady correspondence with them since she was a child. I was therefore surprised that she

returned a month before school resumed, looking more grieved than when she had left. She had no friends back at school yet, so she dined with me almost every evening, where she finally told me her story. When she met her family, they were horrified to find that she was “part savage” as they indelicately put it. Her father had never told them his wife’s heritage and his parents, brothers, in-laws all utterly refused to accept her into the family. She tried everything she could to reconcile them. Worse than that, her family and the family of her father’s fiancée absolutely refused to accept her father back into the town unless he renounced her. Somehow they insidiously turned his head, likely aided by grief, and he did. She was disowned.

She slowly recovered from all this to her sweet self with no more than a certain sad look and some fatigue, for she had to now support herself and pay her tuition. I gave her a teaching position at the school and she graduated on time near the top of her class. She returned to her mother’s family and I believe did some social work or teaching at their reservation. She died there at the age of thirty in an outbreak of fever.

I offer my sincere consolation to the grief this may have caused you and if there is anything else I can do for you, please do not hesitate to ask.

With my heartfelt condolence,

Martha Gibbons

It is almost impossible to tell the tangle of emotions I was trapped in. My cheeks burned in indignation at the injustice done to Irene before draining white at the realization that this was my family. My family had disowned and rejected this girl they had known through letters since she was a child. The people I loved most in the world had done this cruelly senseless act. My gentle grandmother, my merry grandfather, my sweet aunt, my uncle and my loving parents. How could I never know that they held such an ugly prejudice and how had I ever been spared believing in it? And how could even the deepest prejudice induce them to separate a father and a daughter? My head spun and I was almost sick as I saw each of their lovely faces distorted in my mind into something hideously ugly, and always among them was Irene, her beautiful face washed away by tears.

All through my life I have been an even-tempered person. Only once or twice have I ever truly flown into a passion. This was one of those times. A rolling hot surge of anger gripped me and I almost leapt out of my chair. I snatched my coat from its hook and ran out the dormitory into the icy wind that was rattling the old sycamore trees about campus. All of my investigations

had taken time and it was now mid-November and quite bitter. I flew blindly along the streets to nowhere. All I could think or feel was a nauseating hatred of my family. They had deceived me my entire life as to what they really were: prejudiced and cruel. I raced along against the icy wind, my mind caught in a blazing circle of hate and shame. My whole body shuttered in rage confusion as I sped faster and faster against the wind. And as suddenly as my fury started, it stopped. I was no longer a possessed mind, but an exhausted girl shivering in the dusk far from home. I slowly picked my way back, groping for some reason, for some vestige of reassurance from somewhere, but I found none. I had not the heart to even open the locket. The thought made me sick.

Fortunately for everyone concerned, my roommate invited me to her home in Chicago for Christmas and I avoided a painful interview with my family. I was no longer furious, but caught in a wheel of disbelief and resentment and shame. My family's darkest secret had ultimately become mine, but for a far more disgraceful reason.

I do not know how this terrible business would have ended for me if it had not been for Irene. That April, I received a graduation picture of her from Martha Gibbons, without a letter but with a note on the back. "*She insisted on wearing white, the color her father loved in, and a locket containing a picture of her father's family.*" I was afraid to look at the photo. I did not want to see hate and hardship and grief mar her perfect face. Though Martha Gibbons said Irene had forgiven her family-my family- I could not or would not believe it. I breathed heavily in and looked at the picture in my hand. Her face was the same as in the locket. Dressed simply in creamy white with a chain just visible at her throat, there were the same smiling dark eyes, smooth skin, unclouded intelligent face. Perhaps she looked tired and older than her age, but though I searched, almost desperately, for some trace of bitterness in her countenance, there was none. The only bitterness was in mine. I thought long and hard about this woman who could forgive and honor the family that had ostracized her. Every time I looked at her picture, she seemed to be urging me to follow in her steps and forgive them too. For awhile I held out and bitterness reigned, but every letter from my family showing their integrity and loving kindness weakened my resolution until I forgave them too. I was still deeply ashamed but I don't think Irene would have wanted me to hate them on her account.

Why have I written this? I don't know. For many years I have been too ashamed of the actions and prejudices of my family to speak of it. I wanted to hide away the locket's secret,

though I have worn the necklace ever since I stole it from my mother and I carry Irene's picture with me to this day. Though I forgave my family long ago, it has taken a lifetime to understand them the way Irene somehow did. All of their acts of compassion and honesty over the years have seemed impossible contradictions to me. Yet now I know that they *are* truly compassionate people full of integrity, who at the same time are gripped by something hideous and poisonous. Like my father, I've always tried to see things in black and white, neatly classify everyone into good or bad. Now I realize that is impossible with humanity. Everyone has good and everyone has evil. People are too full of contradictions, too messy to ever put in a box

I am in no way trying to excuse or rationalize my family's actions. Nothing I can ever do or say will contradict the fact that, in that moment at least, they were cruel and unjust, though I would like to hope they later deeply regretted their actions. The only thing I can change is the senseless prejudices that fractured a family, and I believe the only way to do that is to personally confront these prejudices. Maybe that is why I write this. A hidden monster cannot be fought. Or maybe I do it in memory of the relation that I have grown closest to over the years: my cousin, Irene Aiyana Wilson.