

Hello from the October Country

“It’s weird Sandra.”

“What’s weird, Jeffery?” His sister asked while cleaning her camera lens.

Jeff finished zipping up his black Calvin jacket, “We spent sixteen months zooming between New York, London, and Warsaw. It feels like we never left.”

Sandra shrugged, tucking the clean lens into its case, “It does feel as if we’re coming off vacation. You packed the candles?”

“Yes,” Jeff looked over the bedroom, a legacy of their grandparents, left in the care of the new owners. He gathered up his Coach Messenger bag, “Well, maybe someday we can return to settle down here?”

“Not me, I’m a forever freelancer.” She swung the camera over the right shoulder followed by a spot check of her auburn bob cut in an ornate mirror outside of the many rooms, “Let’s get this day started. Happy Halloween.”

He trailed after her, walking the hallway where they played as kids. Their Great-Grandfather had built the Victorian manor in the waning years of the nineteenth century. It remained the center of their dwindling family until Grandma died. The siblings walked down the curved staircase into the main foyer where guests lingered.

“Happy Halloween morning!” Becky greeted the siblings decked out in a bright orange and black chunky sweater.

“Morning Becky.” Sandra smiled, “The house looks amazing.”

“Thank you. You did right by selling to us.” She said, “Come on, breakfast is waiting.”

Glancing at Sandra, Jeff protested, “We have a full day ahead.”

Placing her hands on their shoulders to shuffle them forward, Becky retorted, “I promised your Grandparents I’d take care of you. Now that you are back jet-setting, you need a proper Pittsburgh breakfast.”

The conservatory made an excellent sunny dining area. Hanging mums and fall floral arrangements joined with vintage Halloween decorations. The siblings sat in a pair of chairs with a clear view of the continental breakfast. Becky sailed in with two plates in hand, slipping the breakfast in front of Jeff.

Jeff enjoyed the arrangement of the poached eggs and bacon into skulls and bones. Sandra left him alone, leaving him to watch the people outside. As he waited, he wrote in his tan leather journal short stories of people he saw—notes for future writings. The pencil lead broke forcing him to stop and look up at the woman by the continental table.

Dressed all out in black, save for a collar of gray mesh on the shirt, the woman studied the table with intense care. Her pale skin contrasted with her chestnut pixie cut.

“It’s rude to stare.” The woman’s direct tone surprised him.

Suddenly Jeff felt warm, “Sorry. I’ve never seen anyone fully scrutinize breakfast before.”

“So many pastries,” She made a quarter turn towards him, “Perhaps you can make a recommendation?”

Drawn to her, Jeff stepped up to the table, selecting a small package of cereal,
“Can’t go wrong with the basics.”

“Thanks.” She spoke with a familiar, yet sharp accent. “May I sit with you?”

With a friendly nod, they sat at the table, chatting until Sandra returned, “Hello?”

“Sandra, this is... I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Lina. This is your sister.” She said, adding, “I love the picture of you both in the parlor. I adore your house.”

“We sold this to Becky and Paul last year, they renovated it into a B and B.”

Sandra corrected. “Certainty a lot better than what those developers wanted.”

“Did you stay the night?” Jeff asked.

Lina thoroughly devoured the cereal, “Yes, in the Lavender room.”

Nearly jumping out of her chair, Sandra said, “My old room.”

“I found it homey.” The woman’s smile brightened her gray-green eyes.

“Your accent, is it Polish?” Sandra asked, adding in Polish, ‘*Are you a student?*’

It was a bit forward of his sister to ask, but Lina smiled, ‘*Yes, I am.*’

Their Grandparents insisted they learn the language, ‘*Where from Poland are you?*’

“My family is from Osieck, just south of Warsaw.” She paused to taste her orange juice. Jeff noticed her odd reaction, it seemed to be off.

“Really, our mother’s family is from the same region. We visited them over the summer. I remember taking a day trip through Osieck.” Jeff’s interest peaked.

“I knew I recognized you.” Lina gave them a wide grin, “So are you two a photographer and a writer?”

Sandra perked up, “We’re freelancers, working for magazines and such. Right now, we’re working on our own project. Halloween celebrated in Western PA.”

“Sounds like a serious project.” The way Lina presented herself was familiar. He couldn’t place it. “Honestly, I don’t get it at all.”

Jeff chuckled silently, “You sound like our Polish cousins. They loved the idea of dressing up and partying, all the rest not as much. Too pagan, too occult for their sensibilities.”

“Now, Dad’s family, our Irish cousins, it’s a celebration.” Sandra sipped her coffee and smiled.

Lina shifted on the seat and looked at a barren brown tree decorated with jack-o-lanterns and owls. “This is interesting.”

Sandra leaned forward, “It’s a Halloween Tree, from one of our favorite books. Each pumpkin is a relative or friend we lost. The top two are our grandparents, Mom and Dad, and our sister.”

“I’m sorry.” She gently tapped the last pumpkin.

“It’s okay. Are you alone?” Jeff asked the woman.

Sandra gave him a perked glance, as Lina answered, “Yes. I’m here for the weekend. Why?”

“If you aren’t doing anything, we could show you Halloween in the city.”

“I don’t want to impose...” Linda answered softly.

“It’s not,” Sandra interjected, “You’ll love it.”

Lina looked at them, was she wondering why strangers were inviting her out? They could feel the same way towards her. Yet there was an easiness between them that didn’t feel strange.

"Sure, I'll get my coat," Lina said standing.

The siblings waited at the bottom of the stairs for Lina. She walked downstairs sporting a denim jacket while looking at the pictures on the wall. Stepping on the landing, she said, "Beautiful family."

“Thanks.” Sandra said, “I love your jacket, I had one like it in high school.”

Lina smiled, “Yes. I’m ready to explore the October Country.”

“Sounds perfect,” Jeff said after cleaning his glasses, his pale green eyes now staring back clearly.

“How do people enjoy that?” Lina asked panting on the street. Minutes before they broke out of the haunted house in combination with laughter and screams.

A flash from Sandra's camera caught the moment as Jeff spoke, "We love it. It's just fun being scared."

Lina turned around to look up at the art-deco building, “It’s a perfect setting for scares.”

“It’s one of the oldest haunted houses in the country, we have been going here... twenty years.” Jeff noticed his sister studying her camera, again. “The building began as a bank, an office space, a theatre, and now a premiere haunted attraction.”

Checking her phone, Sandra said, “Hey, Jeff, we need to head over now.”

Looking at his watch, “Yeah. Lina, if you don’t mind there is something we need to do.”

Lina became stoic, “Of course.”

As they returned to the parking lot, Jeff asked his sister, “Is there something wrong with your cameras? You have been funny with them all day.”

“I don’t know. The autofocus is giving me trouble.” She answered, “Anytime Lina is in the shot the camera can’t focus on her. I have to go manual or focus on a point near her. It works great when you are in the shot.”

As Sandra scrolled through the pictures, their familiarity touched him, “She’s beautiful.”

“She is a great subject. Jeff, I like her.”

He looked back, Lina was several steps behind. “She is great. I have to admit she is really easy to know.”

“Hey, where are we going?” Lina asked.

The siblings nodded once, Sandra answered, “To do a family tradition.”

Perhaps one of the understated facts about Pittsburgh it retains a rural character with an urban setting. The forested hills and valleys blended with concrete and steel. Jeff parked the car in the cemetery's gatehouse lot. Gathering what they needed, the trio left the car and began walking the curved trails of the hills.

“Most of our family is buried here.” Sandra explained, “It’s one of the oldest graveyards in the region.”

“The most rugged, they built it to avoid floods from the three rivers.” Jeff said, “I won’t drive it at night.”

They walked the trail upwards, passing the grave of Andrew Simons, surrounded by jars filled with coins and action figures. Sandra dropped a few coins into one, “He liked collecting coins.”

Lina paused for a second, looking over the grave, nodded once, and continued forward. “A lot of these are decorated. People still remember, like you.”

Several graves had Halloween decorations with carefully placed skeletons, jack-o-lanterns, lights, and other elements one could mistake this for an attraction. “Yeah. People change these up over the year.”

“It’s sad coming during Christmas,” Sandra spoke softly like walking through a church.

A huge grim pumpkin stared at them, Lina spoke up, “The stories say that these are meant to keep away the bad spirits, but instead, you remember them.”

“Our parents are buried up around the hill, in a little nook on the side, with our grandparents and sister.” Jeff wasn’t sure which one of them spoke. His mind was thinking of someone else.

“You two mentioned your sister only a few times all day.” Walking slightly faster, Lina moved ahead, “Was there something wrong with ... her?”

The question stunned them. It was deeply personal, but that didn’t seem wrong Lina asked. Sandra began, “Her name was Paulina. I was four when she was born with

damaged lungs and a bad heart. She barely lived for a day. October thirteenth, twenty-one years ago.”

Lina stopped. “I’m sorry.”

Jeff continued as memories surfaced. “Nothing could have been done for her.”

“Do you remember anything about her?” Lina asked with a strange sense of feeling to her tone.

Jeff sighed. “Goodness, I remember how frail she was. I told her that I would always protect her.”

“For me, all I remember is that I wanted a baby sister.” Sandra’s cracked. “I never cried so hard. Even after the accident that killed Mom and Dad.”

Jeff reached into the travel pack, and removed an artificial candle, “it’s a family tradition to place candles on the graves at this time.”

“I know,” Lina turned towards them, “It’s a Polish tradition on the First of November, All Saints Day. Followed by drinking and eating.”

Sandra brightened, “Yeah. Our Irish side would start on October thirtieth with wild drinking and eating to celebrate the dead.”

“They like that.” Lina smiled. “Often spirits visit the living to see how they are doing. Some may try to cause harm while others just want to say goodbye.”

The hills and valleys funneled the wind, blowing a hard cold along the trails. As they approached the final turn, Jeff realized they were following Lina.

“Even though she died, I always invited Paulina to my tea parties. She sat at the end of this little tea table, between Snugs the Seal and Flappy the Owl. I would sing silly

songs to them.” Sandra’s voice cracked. “There were times I could visualize her singing with me.”

“They weren’t silly.” Lina continued towards their family’s section. Light shone from lampposts of a century past, casting a sepia tone over the monuments and temples, broken mausoleums, and fallen statues. Her voice carried on the wind.

“Fly little Owl, fly with your breakie feathers, silent and proud, high and far...”

“That song...” Sandra froze in place, “How did you know?”

Lina turned around and approached the siblings getting close to Jeff. In the muted light, he saw the shadow of their mother. He did nothing as she removed a candle from the bag, stepped away, and began the final walk up the stone stairs into the Harrison's lot.

Surrounded by the graves of departed cousins, uncles, aunts, and grandparents with several generations of great, Lina went straight for their parents’ graves.

Two moderate stones of polished marble glowed a translucent blue under the light. Beside them was their sister’s marker, a simple headstone with a pair of doves etched into it.

Lina knelt in front and began pulling away dead dry leaves and weeds as Sandra and Jeff came up behind her. He had a revelation of Polish nicknames. They never had a chance to give Paulina one.

In shock, Sandra dropped beside the woman. It can’t be true. Yet, they spent the day with her. Took pictures with her. They ate pizza and funnel cakes together. She was here with them. “Why?”

Removing the last bit of clutter from in front of her name, Paulina turned on the light, resting it on the top of the stone. She looked at her sister and then at him.

“I came back to say hello.”