

The woman with no face.

IT WAS no secret that Detroit's Fort Wayne was haunted, but the ghosts caught tourists by surprise.

So it was, one Sunday afternoon, when a shadow seemed to pass in front of two sisters as they toured the fort. "Did a cloud just go over?" one sister asked.

"I don't think so."

"That was odd." They didn't give it a second thought.

They were history teachers, and twins, with their yuck-yuck husbands on a yes-dear vacation. The men, Tony and Terry, wore bright red Hawaiian shirts. They looked like they'd been dragged to a furniture store.

The restored facade of Fort Wayne's officers' quarters was impressive. The foursome entered and nodded to the docent.

"Hey Tone, check out this view," Terry said, gesturing at his wife's derrière as she bent to read a placard. "Looks like the same views I get," snickered Tony.

Terry's wife straightened up and frowned. "Don't you get sick of the same old joke? It stopped being funny years ago." She stepped to a window overlooking the parade grounds and, beyond that, the Detroit River. She peered out the window - froze - and her face blanched.

"What's wrong?" asked her sister, joining her.

"Oh my God."

Walking slowly toward them was a petite woman, opaque in a faded white skirt, blouse and bonnet. Where her face should've been was uniformly pale and featureless.

The sisters clutched each other's forearms so hard that they made fingernail marks.

Terry's wife turned to the docent. "There's a woman out there! She - "

" 'Oh my God' what?" interrupted one of the husbands." What are you talking about?"

"She has no face!"

"She's gone," said Tony's wife. Her eyes had not wavered from the spot.

"Who's gone?" Terry looked back and forth between the sisters.

Terry's wife pulled her sister away from the window. "We have to leave," she said. "We have to leave, right now. *Now.*"

"What's going on?" Terry turned to Tony. "Do you know what's going on?"

"I have no idea," Tony shrugged. The sisters were already at the door. "Why are you leaving? You're not done with your tour."

"There was a woman out there," said Terry's wife. "We'll tell you in the car." Her eyes flamed. "We need to get out of here."

"Do you mind completing this survey before you go?" The docent pinned on a smile, careful not to sound glib.

The sisters and their husbands did not stop driving until Toledo.

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One hundred years earlier, in the summer of 1868, Fort Wayne had serious structural and health issues, reported precisely by B.J.D. Irwin, Surgeon, United States Army. There were other issues as well.

The soldiers were ordered to bathe daily. The companies' first sergeants escorted their men at dusk to the Detroit River. On their return to barracks, they hauled barrels of water to the officers' row and the laundries. Laundresses, married men and officers had separate quarters.

A first sergeant, one T.R. Phillips, escorted the water to the laundry. Although he was married, he was not shy in his affection for one of the laundresses, a petite girl whose comely shape attracted him from the moment he'd first seen her. Her simple white skirt, blouse and bonnet bespoke purity. Her countenance was demure, yet she felt flattered by the sergeant's attention to her. With each visit to the laundry, his affection gave way to infatuation, then desire, then love. Time has obliterated the details of their affair. Suffice it to say that the laundress, complicit though she was, felt powerless to object.

As it usually goes, something ended their relationship – not Sergeant Phillips' guilt about his adultery, but his commanding officer's discovery of the liaison. The C.O., indeed the entire garrison, would be shamed if word were to get out, and that was unacceptable. Above all, we cannot lose face.

Directed by his C.O. to stop visiting the laundress, Sergeant Phillips hung his head. But it was better to part ways with the girl than to lose his post.

The laundress was summoned to headquarters, a place appointed in an opulence that she had only imagined. She did not, however, imagine that Sergeant Phillips would be there, too. Seeing him, she felt light headed and queasy.

The commanding officer, ever so polite, welcomed her. He offered no chair and so she stood as he explained her transgression. The sergeant had acknowledged his dalliance, and they were grateful that there had been no emotional attachment between the Sgt. and the laundress. At that, the laundress's face flushed. She tried to make eye contact with the sergeant. He sat head down, intrigued with a floor board.

We have prepared a confession for you to sign, the commanding officer told her.

*A confession of what?*

Surely you know, miss.

What she knew in her bosom was that they had loved and that her love was betrayed.

*I have nothing to confess but my love for Sgt. Phillips.*

Very well, then. You will be reassigned, said the commanding officer.

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Mrs. Phillips asked her husband, what did the commanding officer want?

It does not concern you, Sergeant Phillips told her.

It does concern me. People are talking.

It does not concern you.

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That night the laundress's queasiness grew worse, and she was overcome by a fever that was spreading throughout the barracks. She suffered abdominal pain and severe, bleeding diarrhea. Dehydrated and delirious, within days she lost consciousness and succumbed. Dr. Irwin reported the cause of death as dysentery.

But death did not diminish the laundress. In summers to come, she watched a certain company of soldiers bathing on the shore of the Detroit River. Sometimes tourists lucky enough to be in the right place at the right time spotted her, like the shadow of a cloud passing over them.

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