My Sister Winkie

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Abstract

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IT WAS too beautiful a day for a funeral. The mid-afternoon sun shone down unpityingly on the open grave. Cottony white clouds moved slowly across the blue April sky, and the breeze that rustled the pages of the minister's book was warm and gentle. People filled the small graveyard—our family, our relatives and friends. The casket stood covered with flowers beside the grave. Through those flowers I seemed to see the pale beautiful face of my older sister.

The minister's voice broke the silence. It was quiet and deep and kind. "I am the resurrection and the life, saith the Lord; he that believeth in Me, though he were dead . . ." DEAD . . . the word startled me. "Winkie isn't dead." I wanted to cry it aloud. She was too light-hearted and gay and beautiful to die. It was only a short while ago . . .

We were in the kitchen, Winkie and I. I handed her a match. She leaned farther over the oil stove than she needed to to light it. "Bettina, honey," (she always called me that) "I'll tell you something if you promise not to tell a single soul."

"Oh, I won't tell anyone," I cried, not caring what promises I made just so I was let in on the secret. I was very proud that Winkie told me things she did not tell my other sisters.

"I'm in love."
"Who with, Jimmy Carey?"
“No, his name is Julien Peters, but remember, you must not breathe a word.”
“Can’t I even tell Mom?”
“No, you promised.”
“But why can’t I?”
“Because she wouldn’t understand.” Winkie’s eyes avoided mine.
I thought, “How funny to keep it a secret that you’re in love. I certainly would tell the world if it ever happened to me!” Before I went to sleep that night I lay in bed imagining what Julien must be like—tall, dark and handsome. . . .

“In the midst of life we are in death—” the minister was still reading, and my mother wept out loud now. She leaned against my father, but he was not able to comfort her. What had my mother said to Winkie that day . . .

It was over three weeks ago on a Saturday that I heard voices in the kitchen as I came bounding down the stairs. I stopped short and then proceeded on tiptoe until I was within easy hearing-distance. Winkie and Mom—arguing!
“But, Mother, you’ve only seen him once. How could you tell what he was like?”
“I saw enough to know that he isn’t our kind, Ruth.”
“But he is,” Winkie’s voice held despair. “He is better than our kind. He is sweet and understanding, and he—he loves me, which is more than you do.” She ended with a sob.
“Ruth, that’s unjust. How can you say such things? I am sorry but I cannot have him here and that’s final. You know that your father does not want you to see him at all.”

A shadow fell on the graveyard as the sun went behind a cloud, and the flowers on the casket shivered at the touch of the rising breeze. . . .

It had been chilly and dark that other day, not a week ago. Dad had lit the fire in the fireplace, which was unusual for April. A gloomy atmosphere hung over the house. Winkie had been gone three days, and everyone else was glum and out of sorts.
“Why doesn’t somebody talk or smile or at least look pleasant?” I asked peevishly, warming my back in front of the fire.
“Look, little one.” It was my sister Marian, two years older than I, who spoke in a condescending voice. “You wouldn’t understand, so hush up.”

Tears came to my eyes. I was thirteen now. I would understand, and I wanted to know. When she saw the tears, Marian was sorry. She led me over to the piano and showed me a clipping that had been lying on top of it. It said, “BOY ACCIDENTALLY SHOOTS HIMSELF WHILE HUNTING IN NEARBY WOODS JULIEN PETERS . . . .”

When I saw the name, I felt sick inside. I was trying to think—think of Winkie, poor Winkie when the front door opened. She walked in. But this was not the same Winkie. Her face was chalky white (made whiter by the black dress that she wore) and her eyes were black hollows, as if she had not slept during the three days and nights since Julien’s death.

No one spoke to her—oh, why didn’t I! But I was afraid. She looked so different. She walked upstairs and did not come down until the next morning. . . .

Only half-consciously I saw them lowering the casket into the grave. The clods of dirt thumped fully on top of it. “. . . and we commit her to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Hot tears stung my eyes. This was Winkie that they were putting into the ground. I would never see her again. Lovable, laughing, generous Winkie. . . .

She had been at home two days, days of tenseness and gloom. She hardly ever came to meals, and when she did, her eyes were always on her plate. No one made any effort to speak to her. One night she sat curled up in the big living room chair with the light from the lamp behind her making a halo of her golden hair. She wore her hair loose. It hung long and silky around her shoulders, framing her pale face, with her full mouth and slightly upturned nose and her dark blue eyes that always looked now as if she had just been crying.

“Bettina,” she said in a voice measured and quiet as death. “How would you like to have my dolls?”

I looked at her in surprise. Did she really mean it? For years my sisters and I had been begging for her to let us have the dolls that she had played with when she was a little girl and which
she kept in her bureau drawer. Now she was going to give them all to me. I glanced over to where my father sat reading, but he apparently had not heard. My mother looked up from her book but only for a moment.

"Yes, sir-e-e-e," I answered.

"Well, come along with me then."

I followed Winkie into her room, and there I got another surprise. It had been stripped practically bare. Everything had been removed form the dresser and from the tall mahogany chiffonier. Even her favorite China dogs were gone. "You've cleaned the room up," I said, and then I saw all of the dolls laid out on the bed, and I gave no more thought to the room. "Are you sure that you want to give away Catherine?" I fingered the broad piece of lace around the bottom of the doll dress.

"Yes, I'm sure," she laughed, but it was a mirthless laugh. I looked up at her quickly. She was looking out of the window that faced the back yard, and something in her face made me get up from the bed and look too. At first I could see nothing through the darkness, but suddenly a bright red glow appeared in the direction of the dump heap. "I guess Mom's been burning trash. The wind might spread it, mightn't it? Shall we go and put it out?"

"No," she answered. "It will die out."

For a moment my thoughts returned to the graveyard where I stood, for someone had started singing "Jesus, Lover of My Soul, let me to Thy bosom fly." Soon everyone was singing it. "Hide me, oh, my Savior hide, 'til the storm of life be passed" . .

She was lying in the Sorority Rooms when they found her. The girls had turned off the gas which had been on all night long. They had called for an ambulance, but it came too late. When my father reached her room, he noticed the slip of paper on the floor. Her poem began: "Somewhere in God's great universe thou art today."

The music had stopped and the minister was praying over the covered grave, "Unto God's Gracious mercy and protection we commit you."

I walked away from the people standing there. I didn't cry any more. I didn't want to. Now I understood.