

Day of Death

Richards Phillips

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I'll always remember it that way. It was a summer morning that couldn't be beat. The sky was that special shade of blue-green that comes with bluebirds among appleblossoms after a late snowfall. That morning had a newness about it as though after centuries of using the same morning Recipe, Mother Nature had thought of a new ingredient that had given each twig and bud a new purpose in living. It was a beautiful morning we all agreed as we sat at the breakfast table where we could see through the open doorway, the Empress of Japan, a diminutive pink tearose, elegantly nod to the small breezes that passed her trellis. Mother said, "it's too beautiful!"

We all agreed, that is, Julia, Virginia and I agreed, that it was a day for a picnic. A day for the beach. A day for a charitable lady to come and take us in her car. To take us to the laughing gulls, the lemon-yellow verbena that stretches rubberized over the dunes, the wild strawberries nesting in last year's footprints, the shell soups from ancient slabsides, wabiscuits, ropes of sea flowers that make salty garlands. Another piece of chicken? We would bring the food. Fried chicken, yes. But no fried rabbit. Lady Buck, Long Legs, Traveler and True wouldn't be eaten by anyone. Ever. Never. Their cars need a good hormone treatment.

Mother repeated, "It is too beautiful a day. A pause. Her voice tent with emotion she said, "I had a dream last night and I don't want any of you children to leave the house and yard today." She turned to Dad. "I want you to tell them that they can't go any place today."

We weren't too concerned. Julia and I, 10 and 8 years, already had on our rabbit clothes, Red Rooster coveralls that were chewed with a thousand tiny bite marks, by our pets. Virginia just turned sixteen was too grown-up for coveralls. She wore a rabbit-eaten gingham dress. As Julia and Virginia went out to feed the rabbits, I lingered at the table trying to finish my bowl of honey. Mother said to Dad, "Jim, dear, I had the most awful dream last night." It was so terrible that I hate to talk of it but I feel that I must." She lowered her voice and continued, while Dad spooned honey on his toast, "I dreamt that Virginia was drowned. I saw her laid out in her coffin and all the neighbors and our friends were here in our house crying. It was a terrible dream. What on earth would ever make me dream of such a thing. I can't imagine. Well, one thing is certain, the children will have to stay right home here today." Dad's reaction was one of busy interest. Struggling lawyers can't worry too much about dreams.

Even was busy and as we were busily washing the windows, a very pretty lady drove up to our house in her Hudson Super-Six. It's Mrs. Fell. We ran to the car. Here is our day at the beach after all. Mrs. Fell had lunch with us and sat in our yard sipping tea through a glass straw. She said that she wanted to take Virginia with her for a drive up the Synochee valley. Virginia said, "Please Mother, let me go."

I know there are lots of black berries up there and I will be able to pick two and a half gallons at least and I'll sell them at the berry center on the way back into town and with the money I'll be able to buy enough gingham to make a dress for myself. You know that as a senior I'll need a new one for Fall.

Mother said she couldn't go. The dream. Virginia laughed, You're just a superstitious old Indian. Nothing will happen to me. I'll just pick berries and that's all. I won't even take a bathing suit. She ran up the stairs and got her big brown straw hat. As she went out the door she stopped to smell the honeysuckle vine and waved her hat to Mr. Persich, a grizzled gas worker who lived across the street. The car drove away with a great roar of engine and a cloud of smoke that settled into the noontime haze. Mother gave Julia and me permission for a ~~small~~ Gambria tea party under the Willow tree, but Julia soon tired and went in the house to practice her violin, for which lessons the chickens were paying with their eggs. I lay on the grass and dreamt of being grown up - of wearing black silk stockings, drinking coffee and driving a Hudson super-Six, and heard mother humming "Back of Ages" as she gathered in the wash. Among the ferns under the willow, I began to feel surrounded - like a dandelion in the grass - and in a confiding way I ran to pick up the wash cloths that were ^{laundry} put on the small shrubs for bleaching. Mother no longer humming took several deep breaths. She said, I have never seen the garden so beautiful. It is truly heaven and there is such a fragrance. It is so wonderful. I held Mother's hand and felt her tremble. She

said, I know that something has happened to Virginia. I know that something has happened to Virginia. She is here with us now. The moment passed and we sat on the chairs in the yard watching the birds dip in and out of the homemade birdbath ~~XXXX~~ while Kotzer told about Grandpa's garden in Wisconsin which he planted alternating vegetables and flowers so as to have visual pleasure with his labor. She told about Belly the saddle horse of her girlhood who would allow no one to put the bridle on her until she had been given a piece of maple sugar candy. She sat there saying nothing more but waiting for something. Then she knew what it was, as the phone rang. It was then we heard about the two bathing suits Arg. Fell had in the car, how the hot afternoon seemed to call for a swim. A swim that took the younger girl over the falls, where her cries for help never reached the shore. Of pulmotors. of death.

I went up the stairs to her room where her bed was not yet made. It was of her. On the floor near the bed was a shabby copy of Louise Alcott's "Old Fashioned Girl". Here on the table were the rose sachets she was making for christmas ~~XXX~~ gifts for her friends. Sachets that now would never hold the rose petals from the garden. Here were the hand knitted slippers she had worn only this morning, never to wear them again. Then she was in the room.

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Daylight turns to darkness over on such days as on others. This night found our housefilled with the soft pitying voices of Italians, Croatians and other slavish tongues.

All different nationalities who had come in unity to share the sorrow of the universal bond of death. It was like the dream . That deep away sense of loss. The bloody towels of the palmator. That small waxen face with the black hair lying in wet tendrils. The tender but fearless lips. The busy, now-stilled small hands. The gentle word- gone.

The night wore itself out with exhaustion of tears, of disbelief. The following days were stunned with new and sudden outburst of feeling of loss until one day they gave me ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ (as a treat while they went away for a few hours.) an orange, the only bright thing in a world that was weighted about my neck.