

Kindred

That day we played croquet on the lawn by the two towering hemlock trees high atop Black Mountain. And danced to the laughter of a brook we waded through on our way to the bamboo forest where we robbed blackberry bushes all afternoon. And filled our lungs and our spirits with the freshness of early summer mountain air. What were we? Eleven or so? Tossing our hair in the wind as we ran like two young fillies, not a care in the world . . . that day.

And here I sit, holding your hand. Gazing at your fairy hair feathered against a hospital pillow. Knowing somehow that an angel holds your other hand, and while you linger, my mind returns to all the places our spirits soared and dived and soared again.

Fourteen, you used to take me by the hand and drag me laughing down the hall to flirt with the boys. You, the stronger, more self-possessed. Giggling, when I wondered out loud why your boyfriend had stopped and parked the car. You in the front seat and me in the back with his junior high friend. What was his name? Andy some-thing?

I forgave you for that.

Maid of honor for my wedding; matron of honor for yours - you asked me to sing at your reception. Which was worse? My forgetting the words to my solo or picking up the wrong ring from off the ring-bearer's pillow? (Did you forgive me for that?) You still got married. Tall and statuesque, looking so romantic in your tea-length dress, all layered in Victorian lace and a garland of flowers nestled in the dark tresses of your long wavy hair. I had worn an ivory church dress and a hat when I had married just six months before. Practical. Functional. Yours was a matching mauve when you gave a reading about the unity candle he and I lit. Two years before, you almost made me promise I wouldn't marry him.

I forgave you for that too.

Suddenly you cough and gasp. I move to lift you forward and cradle your head in the crook of my arm. Slowly you sip at the straw I've placed at your colorless lips. But your eyes stay closed. And you sigh softly, your body relaxing and slipping back into mine. I hold you a while longer.

Was this how you felt when I fell off the horse and you lay beside my motionless form? I had been riding well that day, you had said. It had been a wonderful taste of freedom, galloping along on a tall white horse named Serenity. Neither of us had seen the hole that broke his stride, catapulting me over his right shoulder, headfirst to the ground below. Right arm snapped in two, right knee twisted. And my face? Not pretty. I don't remember a thing, just what you told me. How you turned me over and lay down beside me on the ground and looked up into the sky and prayed, till help came. I'll never forget that.

And there was nothing to forgive.

So what if we didn't wear riding helmets. We never did. The only mandatory head-gear for you was your signature red lipstick.

Remembering this, I slide my arm out from beneath your head and explore the room for your purse. There it is in the back corner of a table almost hidden by vases of wilting mums and roses on top a litter of opened cards and envelopes. The metallic tube isn't hard to find among crumpled tissues and cough drop wrappers. Bright red – a shade somewhere between fire-engine red and cherry. Funny, whenever *I* tried to wear it, it always looked a hideous pumpkin orange.

Carefully, I tint your lips with the tube, softly whispering as I paint, "Well, now. Can't have you half dressed when it's time for you to go . . . home. Why, the angels might not recognize you without your red lipstick."

A sob sticks in my throat momentarily. I swallow it and go on. "You look so beautiful now. But *Sis'ta* (she would call me this when she was being funny), when we get you out of here, we're going to get your highlights redone!"

Suddenly I can't speak. There is no getting you out of here. This is good-bye. The family will be back from a lunch break any moment, and my private vigil will be over. I pick up her hand again and hold it gently in my own. Would I keep you here if I could? Perhaps, but not like this.

Remember that day in Tuis at the waterfall? How you stood in the middle of its cascading waters, looking up to the sky, singing and crying? You wept, you said, for the sheer joy of beauty and for the way you felt embraced by God. The sun broke through the canopy and burst into a rainbow above you. I saw it, though I am not sure I believed it.

It was a sacred moment, and I shall always picture you that way.

For hours we had climbed and slipped and crawled among the fronds of exotic tropical ferns and fauna, gasping with wonder at a flurry of orchids that hung like a garland around the trunk of a canopy tree. I remember the stream that had piqued our quest, its waters growing more pristine as we hiked higher up into the virgin rainforest. How would water like that taste right now? So pure, it seemed celestial. Heaven must be something like that. So exquisitely and wildly beautiful that you weep with longing and dance with unfettered joy.

And I . . . I am finally ready to let your wildly beautiful spirit – my kindred soul – go fly to its home.