



A Rose in December

My family experienced a tragedy when I was 11 -- my sister Kathy, who was born with a leaky heart valve, passed away. Her life had been tough in many ways. She could never exercise, her baby teeth never fell out, and her skin was grayish from poor circulation -- she was called a "bluebaby," and kids made fun of her for that.

It's a condition that medicine found a simple cure for, to be administered at birth -- a few months after she was born.

Kathy was a girl of great gentleness and sweetness. She was a painter and drawer, and a lover of horses. All my childhood, my job, and my brother Pat's, was to run and fetch things for her, because she did not have the strength.

She was a sophomore in high school when she went into a coma and died. Her death made for a stormy adolescence for me. I stopped going to church, I got into trouble with the law, I became a bit of a hard case.

Now fast-forward into the future, to my 15th high school reunion, in 1982. I returned to my small town with a bad

attitude, determined to show people how far I had come -- not financially (I was broke) but in daring and worldliness. I drank with old girlfriends, I kissed my old prom date on the lips. I pissed off their husbands, on purpose.

I had too much to drink, and I saw, at the bar, a big kid I remembered from grade school, Jim Mussina. He was the class psycho, built like an adult even as a kid, with a brutal jawline and a dead look in his eyes.

In sixth, seventh, and eighth grades, Mussina made my life miserable, chasing me on the playground, throwing me up against walls, and slapping and pummeling me. He hated me for some reason I didn't understand, and saw me as an appropriate victim. That's what bothered me the most -- I did not want to be a victim of anything.

Taking courage from the liquor, I challenged him. "Mussina, what made you hate me so much in grade school? I wasn't a bad kid. What did I ever do to you?"

Mussina winced. "Hey, man, I'm sorry. I was so crazy in those days. I had all kinds of problems."

But I wouldn't let him off so easy. "OK, but why me? Why did you choose me to pick on?"

He looked at me levelly, and I could tell something still bothered him. "Because you laughed at your sister's funeral."

I flashed backward. I was excruciatingly self-conscious the day of the funeral. I was upset about Kathy, and I didn't want people peering in on our problems. But the funeral was a big event in the town. My whole school, St. Joseph's, was taking time off to attend.

I remember glancing about during the service, looking for reassurance from my classmates that they wouldn't always know me by this moment. That this wouldn't mark me forever. I'm sure I tried to smile.

It was a terrible day.

Back to 1982. "Jim," I told him. "I wasn't laughing. I loved my sister, but it was no one's business but mine. I must have smirked, but you have to know I was dying inside. "

"I know, Mike. I loved her, too."

So that's what it was. When all the other kids called Kathy bluebaby, or warned her about the purple people eater, Jim was her avenger. He beat up a dozen kids, and some of them must have said something. He showed his devotion the only way he could -- with his fists. When she died, he transferred his enmity to me. Out of love.

Jim went to Vietnam and was a behavior problem there, spending time in the brig. Now he was better, and counseled other vets with emotional disorders.

And me, after what seemed like a lifetime of being alone, I met and married my best friend Rachel. Rachel, too, went through the mill, losing her father at 16.

It's been an interesting marriage, because we are so gentle with one another, so aware of the old pain. Sometimes it seems like we are brother and sister.

Now fast-forward to the present. My daughter Daniele, whose face so resembles my sister, is now her age, when she died. When I think of my sister's terror at that age, I can't help crying. I have a good one about once a month.

And as I try to prepare Daniele for the long future ahead of her, I thank God for her health.

You can not believe how rosy her complexion is, on a crisp December day like today. Or how embarrassed her brilliant color sometimes makes her.

Or how beautiful she looks to me.