

My Sister (1961)

One theme that was prominent in my life never made it into my little dialogues -- the theme of love and suffering. It began five years before I was born, in 1945, when my sister Kathleen was born. My mom and dad were newlyweds. Paul was off to war -- well, doing Navy duty in Sault Ste. Marie. And when Mary gave birth to a baby girl, doctors didn't tell her what made the frail infant special. It wasn't until months later, reading an issue of Life magazine about "bluebabies," cyanotic kids born with defective heart valves, and condemned to short lives of low energy, that she realized what had befallen her.

After we moved to Ohio, Kathy grew into a gracious, thoughtful, girl. But her complexion remained gray-to-lilac. She missed school a lot. Just as I liked writing, she liked sketching and acting. She was very social, and she and a friend staged cornball Mrs. Magillicuddy plays in our garage, and she loved horses, though we could never afford one. Kathy tried to be good-humored about it -- she laughed when one schoolfriend said "Look out, Kathy, here comes the purple people eater!"

My brothers and I were relegated to the role of gofers, always running to get things for her -- art supplies, books. I loved her because she liked my jokes, and she taught me to draw. But other kids could be cruel. Many taunted her for being different.

How different was she? At age 15, she still had all her baby teeth, because her body never got enough blood oxygen to outgrow them. Lacking the density of adult teeth, they became infected. And when a dentist agreed to extract them -- first requiring that my mom sign a paper releasing him from responsibility for the consequences -- she went into a coma. I remember standing in our back yard and watching the ambulance people pack her into the back, still clutching her cloth scapular. After four days she died. It was May 5, 1961.

I was very distant at the funeral, embarrassed by the attention a guilty town poured out on her. We lived far from relatives, and

my father was no help at this hour. So my mother had to call family and friends herself. So she spent an entire day on the telephone, breaking the confession of total failure, over and over and over. By the end of that day, she was just wet, raw meat. And after that she lived in a kind of emotional closet, a glass both in which certain topics up could never be brought up.

And now I'm in Ohio, and I've made a little getaway from my mom's house. "I'm going to get some groceries," I told her. But I stole away to this place, her grave marker in South Amherst, not far from the sandstone quarries. And I do the math on the marker -- 1999 take away 1961 equals 38 years. Thirty eight years, yet I still feel the loss of my sister, my friend.

I still cry sometimes. I think about the fact that she was never kissed by a boy. Then I think about how she knew she would never be kissed by a boy. Then I think about how she knew she was going to die, and how scared a 15-year-old girl could be.