

Discovery of the Sunlight

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WHEN PROGRESS closed the coal mines, the city of Shenandoah lost a purpose for being. It ceased to move forward with time and remained a product of another age. As part of this city isolated by black hills of coal, my grandmother's house with its many rooms and sloping floors provided a perfect atmosphere for make-believe. It was customary for the presentation of a play to highlight each visit to her home. These plays meant days of pleading with reluctant aunts for the use of their best jewelry, combing the attic for props and creating a script that would satisfy everyone's vanity. Memorable moments of this parlor theatre included Uncle George's interpretation of the papa bear while smothering in a moth-eaten fur coat, Cousin Harry's performance as King Midas singing "Gold, Gold, Gold," an original composition, and of course no presentation was complete without Aunt Margaret playing the "Black Hawk Waltz." When she could be persuaded, Grandma herself would appear in her best nightgown as the forest nymph. Whether or not the script required a forest nymph was irrelevant.

Any time I was not working on the play, I spent with my Aunt Elizabeth. As a child she had been the victim of polio, which paralyzed her left hand and caused her to walk with a limp. Her appearance never changed. Always she dressed in dull colors, wore high laced shoes and parted her hair severely down the middle and pulled back so tightly, it looked painted on. Watching soap operas and cleaning house occupied the majority of her time. She went for walks only in the rain. Although she was like no one I had ever known, I never felt strange or ill at ease with her. Perhaps this was because we shared a common love for make-believe. When alone together in her room with the high-postered bed and blue-flowered wall paper, only we existed. For hours she would tell stories, play records, or show me the dolls she had collected. I especially awaited the chance to hold the china-faced doll with the brown curls, who always sat alone in the corner. Most of the time Elizabeth talked, but sometimes I asked questions. Once when very young, I asked why she didn't walk straight. She answered, "I can only walk straight when I wear my white shoes." That was all and I was satisfied. Elizabeth never wore white shoes.

When my grandmother died, the funeral was held in her home. For the first time the house with its many rooms and slanted floors became strange and unfamiliar. People whom I didn't know filled every room, introducing themselves saying, "Do you remember me? Why I knew you when you were only so high." Their conversation made no sense. Everyone had assembled for one purpose but talked of everything alien to that purpose. But strangest of all, Elizabeth no longer talked to me. She just sat in the corner and stared

blankly into space. Looking at her, I thought of the china doll.

The evening before the funeral I wandered downstairs. Finding the dining room doors closed, I turned without thinking into the parlor. Dim light flashed on and off from the neon sign across the street. I was suddenly aware of being alone in the room with my grandmother's coffin. The air was heavy with perfume. The sound of the clock ticking from the mantel filled the room. It seemed so loud. I wondered why I had never noticed it before. Then I realized that this room had always been filled with the make-believe world of the plays, a world where the ticking of a clock was out of place. I began to cry because death was so near, not the death of my grandmother, but of the make-believe world she represented.

I heard angry voices coming from the dining room. People were arguing about what should be done with the house. Elizabeth shouted something and then began to cry. There was silence again except for the steady ticking of the clock. She did not understand. It was too late. She had lived too long in a world of make-believe and could not face the reality of this moment. For me it was not too late.

It began to rain. Elizabeth would go walking tomorrow, for she only went walking in the rain. When it rains, the world changes its appearance. The color of the brown earth darkens, the smooth surface of the leaves shines and the pavement of the city's streets resembles polished marble. Seeking shelter, people become unrecognizable figures darting to and fro with their faces cast downward or hidden by hovering umbrellas. The water collecting in pools reflects and adds new dimensions of space while the falling grey torrents blur any remaining marks of clarity. Like the rain, make-believe and imagination cause reality to change its appearance. Qualities are exaggerated, new dimensions are added, and clarity is lost. But as the world of the sunlight is barren and parched without the rain, without imagination the world of reality becomes tedious and dull. The ability to distinguish between and to keep the worlds of reality and imagination from overwhelming each other is a sign of maturity. As children our lives are dominated by make-believe, a desire to animate the inanimate. We spend much of our time imitating a grown-up world, our conception of which combines idealistic dreams and is often incomplete. As we grow, experiences expose our misconceptions and reveal life as it really is. If we refuse to accept these discoveries by retreating deeper into a world of fantasy, we will not find happiness in a real world. These discoveries need not replace our dreams and desires, but rather combine with them to create the beauty of life, as together the rain and sunlight create the beauty of the rainbow.