

Amy

Bonnie Britton

LSD, R.I.P., Child of Aquarius, 1953-1970.

There is snow on the ground these days when I visit the cemetery where Amy is buried. Cold and white, like a blanket hugging the ground to keep my baby warm.

But Amy isn't a baby anymore. Or wasn't. Maybe that's where I made the mistake all along, thinking she was still my baby, that I would protect her from the world but most of all from herself.

She was only seventeen, but they grow up faster now. Seventeen. At that age I was watching Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland from the front row of the Rivoli every Saturday night. Or Errol Flynn swashbuckling across the screen with half of MGM's extras swarming over the side of his ship. Or swooning as Clark Gable wooed Vivien Leigh in "Gone With the Wind."

And where was Amy the last year of her life? In Chicago watching nameless actresses and actors cavort about a stage sans costumes, or at the movies seeing a picture rated X.

Amy. "Once in love with Amy. . . ," that's what Ray Bolger used to sing. And so we named her Amy, knowing that she'd grow into a beautiful, gentle young woman, just like the one in the song.

At three she resembled Shirely Temple, blond and soft and round, bouncing with energy and impishly precocious. She was our Shirley Temple, a newer model with many extras and options not found on the original.

When she turned six, it was time for school. First grade was a traumatic experience. Not for her, but for me. Happily, willingly she let me dress her in new clothes and lead her to the school which seemed to me a thousand miles away. At the door of her room, the teacher took her hand and she followed her gladly like an old friend as I walked away in tears.

Kittens, bicycles, Brownies, Girl Scouts, piano lessons, braces and boys followed that first year and just as the boys appeared, so did my first gray hair.

At fourteen, she discovered that it was time to stop walking around like the Hunchback of Notre Dame and stand up straight. "Be proud that you're a woman," I would say, and then she'd blush and sigh "Oh mom."

She stopped playing football with the neighborhood boys, and a few of the more advanced young men invited her to the Saturday matinees to see a Walt Disney movie, or a film with a horrible title like "The Tarantula That Swallowed Detroit."

There were "just dances" and then the Junior Prom with the special date who wore glasses and was an inch shorter than Amy, but who opened doors and did other terribly chivalrous things.

Was it so soon after the Prom that we began to lose her? Or did we always have a "failure to communicate" as she like to quote Paul Newman, long before we realized that one existed?

At sixteen she began to wonder, like many of her friends whether a God really existed, all Good, all knowing. "How could there be war, famine, disasters, death if God really watched over us?" she asked. She couldn't understand how men could kill each other, or how people could just sit back and let children starve to death, or how God could send a man to Hell for missing Sunday Mass.

And I didn't know the answers because I am from yesterday when everyone knew that there were no solutions. Today demanded answers that I didn't have, and when I admitted my ignorance, Amy looked at me strangely and said "How can you give me a plastic world when you promised me pearls?"

"Jesus Saves," the signs along the highway read. "Saves what," she asked, "green stamps?" And I slapped her.

There were other things too, that slowly tore us apart. Amy couldn't understand an attitude of "my country right or wrong." She had never lived through a war where people's daily lives were touched and shaped by the conflict. Maybe it's because I've survived two wars that I trust my government to see me through another. Or maybe she was right in saying that I fear an economic depression. I don't know anymore.

On racial matters we agreed, yet neither of us practiced what we said we believed. Her friends were all white, like the people who came to our house for dinner or to play cards.

Early last spring Amy's father died, and again she asked why. But I didn't know and yet I pretended to find solace in church.

Then suddenly everything changed. Her style of dress, her room, her friends were different. The nice conservative skirts and sweaters yielded to minis and bellbottoms, rawhide shirts with dangling fringes,

boots and moccasins. All were crowded into her closet beside last year's stove pipe pants and loafers.

Amy's little cousin fell heir to her stuffed animals, and the smell of incense replaced the scent of perfume. Psychedelic posters were tacked to the walls, and new friends came to share her life.

Then she left. No note, no message. She called that night and begged me not to worry.

Her voice was distant, and she cried a little when I told her how much I needed her. Then a click and the phone buzzed impersonally into my ear.

The police were very kind, but they had so many other runaways to look for that Amy was just another routine case. Several leads disintegrated into nothing, and a month turned into three with no word from Amy.

Then just three weeks ago there was a knock on the door in the middle of the night and it was Amy, looking like a poor bedraggled kitten abandoned in the rain. Her face had aged and her eyes were dull. There were a few needle marks on her arm but she told me she had only "shot up" four or five times for kicks. I think we both slept better than night than either of us had for months.

Away from drugs, Amy perked up. Her face became less haggard and she began to relax. Then wham.

The doctor called it flashback, an after effect of an LSD trip Amy must have taken months ago. We were shopping for clothes for college when she began to scream that the mirrors were laughing at her. In her mind everything became alive and writhing. Dresses leaped off racks and tried to choke her. I tried to hold her but she ran though the store shouting for someone to come and stop the things that were chasing her.

She ran into the street, oblivious to traffic and was hurled into the air by a car turning the corner. And so my Amy lay dead in a pool of blood, a victim of the Age of Aquarius.

I don't pretend to know the answer why. I never knew the answers before. Sometimes on Sunday I ask God why Amy had to die but He never says a word. Maybe He doesn't know. Jesus Saves. Amy.

