

Had it been me, and not her, that life-changing night, she'd have brushed off the adults' sympathetic hands and ignored their concerned words, because she knew the reality of our play. We would hide. And we would be found.

Had it been me, she'd have gathered my toy soldiers from our playroom floor and placed them in my toy chest for the time I would reappear, either approaching along the dirt drive that led to our farmhouse, or clamoring over the large wooden gate beyond which our fields and pasture spread.

How can I know this? Because we knew practically everything about each other. We were farm kids, twins but for the year that separated us, left to our own devices.

A rift in time occurs when a loved one dies. She'd have found herself, and my absence, to one side. On the other would have remained our parents and the distant rest of the world. Across that rift she'd have witnessed our mother clutching for days what would have been my shoes, watched our parents struggle with a sorrow she could not comprehend.

Had it been me, she'd gradually have realized that my room would remain empty, that my chair at table would go unoccupied, that each Sunday I would not sit beside her in our church pew. But only later would time have impressed upon her the finality of death. She'd have kept loyal to our shared existence, insisting that my toy chest be moved into her bedroom, keeping in her treasure box my favorite marble, the blue cats-eye, and returning to the barn's haymow where we had plumbed the silence of swallows, mice, and each other's thoughts. We were like that.

Time's rift gradually narrowed, becoming more a lens through which she'd have forever viewed her altered life. She'd have done as most children do: grow and thrive. Yet, on her birthday and mine, at Christmas, or at no particular time, she'd have felt a twinge of sorrow or of loneliness that gave her pause, but which no one else seemed to notice. At those moments, she'd have lapsed into memories that had slowly begun to fray and dissipate, making her sense of separation keener still.

Both time and memory can be gracious in loss. Had it been me, through the years she'd have been the one making room for girlfriends, boyfriends, employers, family—all of life's trappings. And I'd have receded in her memory, save always for those sudden, unexpected instants when a photo, a song, a story would have returned her to some moment we had spent together.

All of life's trappings—and what would life be without family? She'd have had children—probably many children, for I have many children. She'd not fail to tell them about an uncle they'd never known but surely would have loved because she had loved me. They'd have found the idea of an unknown uncle curious, and a bit sad, especially since she'd have been able to show them a picture of me when I was eight, forever eight, and she then nine.

She'd have had grandchildren—probably many grandchildren, for I also have many. And despite all the relationships, struggles and joys that would have brought her to her 70th year, yet I'd have remained safely tucked somewhere in her mind, some place with the aura of our old playroom, perhaps, or the haymow, or even the lofty tree house where we held ourselves above the world's concerns.

Had it been me then, and not her, I believe her life in its entirety would have aligned closely to mine. I claim this because, for several years, we lived essentially as one organism. Virtually everything we did, we did together. We knew each other's words and anticipated each other's actions. In each other's eyes, we saw ourselves.

Of course, almost seventy years ago, it was not me, but her. She did not sit apart from the adults as I did, the night of the tragedy, eating ice cream because the adults hoped food might distract me from boyish grief. I dismissed their concern, spooning in the cooling treat, knowing they were wrong in their grieving. I knew that the next day, or the next, my

sister and I would be as we were before, so I did not grieve then.

I came to grief slowly. I grieve now, piecemeal, knowing I might have called her on the phone just to chat, or to get together for coffee, or have her over for Sunday dinner. I grieve, hearing in some girl's words a quality her voice possessed, or seeing, in some woman's face, features bringing hers to mind. Scenes of the countryside, barns painted red like ours, chickens roaming farmyards, a dog playing with children—such places and things recall her to me. I grieve out of necessity, grief so essential for everyone who has loved and lost. Quiet, contemplative, intermittent grief remains for me an act of love.

Her name? Shirley. Each time I think her name, or hear her name spoken, I sense a catch in my breath, a hitch in time, or I view, through that dedicated lens in my mind, a sacrosanct place where she dwells, accessible always to me. Comfort prevails there, not sorrow.

Beyond sorrow and grief, and through love, flows the joy of lives shared. As I age and recall those early years spent together, our daily games, our gambols through tall meadow grasses and the smell of freshly stacked hay we played in, I feel great joy. With a certainty as tangible as her impact on my life, I know that she'd now be experiencing that same joy, had it long ago been me.