

America

_November 15, 2004

Bibby-Darling

My cousin telephoned to say Aunt Bib is dead. The funeral is two days hence. No need to wait. At ninety-four she's outlived all her peers. The pastor will officiate. Of course, I reply. Will you sing, she asks? Of course. And you'll come back to the house afterward? Of course. It will be good to have everyone together again. It will. Good- bye. Good-bye.

Next morning she calls again: the organist will meet you at church an hour before Mass. That will be fine. The family will gather at the funeral parlor to pray the Rosary. Fine. There will be no viewing. Ohhhh. We'll see you tomorrow. I lay the telephone in its cradle...no viewing...never see her again...never say good-bye...but I must...I must.

Aunt Bib's name was Elisabeth--spelled with an "s" she would explain. Her sisters used that name, as did her friends of many years. To her acquaintances she was Miss d'invilliers; but to the younger generations of nieces and nephews, she was always Aunt Bib or Aunt Bibby. I don't know who started "Bibby-darling," but it was a commonly acceptable term of endearment once one was middle-aged.

It's a two hour drive to Philadelphia. I go directly to the funeral parlor, ring the bell, and wait. A long minute passes before the lock turns and the heavy door opens. A portly, dark-suited gentleman, his face awash with funereal solemnity, addresses me: "Yes?". I ask to visit Miss d'invilliers' body. It sounds so cold, so clinical. After all, I cannot tell him she dried my tears, listened to my secrets, told me stories, and prayed

for me for fifty years. He hesitates. "There are no flowers in the room." "Silly man" I want to say, "I didn't come to see the flowers. I only want to be with Bibby-darling one more time." Aloud I say: "That's quite all right."

He ushers me inside: "Please wait." He melts into the thick, dark velvet drapes and disappears. I hear him shuffle about, his heavy footsteps deadened by the carpeting. A dim, rose-colored ray of light slips between the drape and door frame. Then he reappears and holds the drape aside: "You may go in." The drape falls silently behind me.

My heart drags behind my feet as I approach the open casket. Bibby was always tiny; now, wasted by months of dying, she is as small as a child. I loom over her like some great giant. I kneel. It brings her closer. My eyes are drawn to her hands: the large diamond is missing; her finger looks strangely bare. I once asked about the ring. It had belonged to a woman she nursed many years ago. "She had no way to pay me, so she gave me the ring before she died. I couldn't bear to sell it." Though she could have used the money, Bibby wore the ring for forty years. What has happened to it, I wonder, as I rest my large hand on her tiny wrinkled ones.

My attention shifts to her face and I realize her eyes will never again invite me into her heart-space. Those wonderful warm brown eyes: wide with wonder and soft with compassion, dancing with laughter and brimming with tears. Bibby's heart hung in the windows of her eyes.

Her house smelled of freshly scrubbed floors and freshly baked cookies. When I was three or four, we would lie on the floor together as Aunt Bibby built card-houses

with infinite patience, all the while warning me not to breathe lest the house come tumbling down. Excitement mounted till the last card was in place. Then we'd both take a deep breath, and blow the house down amid shrieks of laughter.

Aunt Bib never read to me. She preferred to tell stories--stories of the family, of the French several-greats-Grandmother who sent her two little boys to America, of aunts and uncles and cousins who peopled her childhood. She told unforgettable stories, making them up on a moment's notice: stories of Bad Brownies who lived in the cellar, and children who got lost in the woods. But when she gathered a stuffed animal in her arms, I was ready for the best treat of all. Dogs and teddy bears came alive as we paraded out of the house, Aunt Bib in the lead. We marched into the woods or around the neighborhood, wherever the plot led us. When I was very little, I marveled that the story always ended "happily ever after" the very moment we turned the door knob to re-enter her house.

How will the next generation of babies grow up without a Bibby-darling? Who will tell the stories? Even as I ask the question, I realize the answer is contained in the genealogy we pored over last month when we celebrated the birth of the newest child to bear the family name: Aunt Bib herself inherited the story--and perhaps the story-telling as well--and spent her life handing it on to us for safe keeping. She is the last of her generation. We all move up a notch to assume more responsibility for handing on the faith and sense of family she entrusted to us. Tonight and tomorrow and in the days to come it will be our turn to tell the stories.

I sit uncomfortably on the prie-dieu. What a great lover she was. Four generations of children cuddled in her lap, rocked in her arms, dandled on her knees. Four generations of adults confided in her. Though she never married, she mothered us all. As a young woman, she had wanted to enter the Convent. When the Mother Superior told her she was needed at home, she said no more about becoming a Nun. She simply lived her vows as daughter, sister, aunt, friend, and confidante for sixty years. At the age of eighty-two, she was received into the Secular Order of Saint Francis, taking the name Regina. As "Sister Regina," Bibby radiated new depths of inner joy that God had allowed her to be a "Sister" these few years. We had a long conversation several years ago. She confided to me she didn't think it would be difficult to die. After all, she said, it was simply a matter of moving from one world to another. I hope it was. And I hope heaven is all the love she lavished on others returned a thousandfold to her.

I rise, bend over and kiss her cheek, pat her hand and tell her I love her. Lifelong rituals, one last time. "She was a very special person in our family," I remark as the funeral director ushers me to the door. "That's nice" he replies lamely, closing the heavy door behind me.