Spring 1955

Usurped

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Susan stood gazing stiffly from the kitchen window at the colorful pattern of the garden in the warm forenoon sun. As her eyes traveled unseeing down the row of bright hollyhocks standing tall and straight against the white fence, to the blood red of the coxcombs at the far end of the plot, and finally to the blazing yellow and orange of the marigolds bordering the center path, she listened in silent fury to Marjorie chattering gaily as she helped Grandma put away the last of the breakfast dishes.

Susan hated Marjorie. God wouldn't like that because Marjorie didn't have a mama now—Aunt Louise had died last year—of cancer, Mother had said. But Susan didn't care. Oh, she was sorry Marjorie's mama had died, but she hated Marjorie for taking Grandma away. Other summers she had always been Grandma's girl, but now that Marjorie had come, Grandma loved Marjorie better. Things like today made Susan sure of it. Why wouldn't Grandma take her to town too, if she liked her as well as Marjorie? Instead she had said:

"You stay home today, Susan, in case someone comes for eggs. Marjorie and I will only be gone about an hour."

"Eggs! That was just an excuse. Grandma just didn't want her along.

"Susan!" For an instant her heart leapt in anticipation—maybe Grandma was relenting—perhaps she wanted Susan to come after all! But, "Susan, if someone should come to buy eggs, the change is in the cracked blue bowl in the cupboard. Do you think you will be able to make change all right?"

"Yes." Ordinarily Susan would have choked with pride to be entrusted with such a grown-up responsibility, but today the pleasure was as gall. Grandma was only using it as a sort of bribe to keep Susan from going with her and Marjorie.

"All right, Dear, we won't be gone long."

"Bye, Susie. I'll tell you all about the animals we see on the way," called Marjorie happily.

Susan haughtily turned her back and gazed again on the garden. Watching a hummingbird as he disappeared into a hollyhock bloom
and emerged again, she thought of the game of counting the farm animals on the weekly trip into town. She and Grandma had made it up. It had been a mistake to tell Marjorie about the game; it wasn’t just Susan and Grandma’s secret anymore. Now Marjorie had broken another of Susan’s intimate little ties with Grandma.

As distance swallowed the sound of the receding car motor, Susan turned and wandered aimlessly toward the front of the house. Entering the living room, she discerned Marjorie’s doll house in the cool gloom created by the drapes drawn against the sun. Going to the east window, she pulled the drape cord, allowing the sunlight to suddenly flood the room and illumine the miniature house with its one side cut away as if slashed by a giant axe, revealing the tiny, carefully placed furnishings within. The doll house was Marjorie’s pride, her birthday present from her father. Susan had secretly thought, though, how her daddy would have bought her a much nicer one.

As she stood there surveying its fragile intricacy, she was suddenly seized with an overpowering urge of destruction, a desire to trample, to crush this symbol of Marjorie in all its vulnerable frailty. The intensity of the compulsion shook her. Her hands felt hot and moist; instinctively she scanned the window and the room behind. Then she backed a quick step away. Desperately she thought aloud, “I mustn’t! What would Mama and Grandma say when they knew?” But must they know? Her mind gaining momentum spilled out thoughts tumultuously. “I wouldn’t tell Grandma I did it. I could say I don’t know how it happened. I’ll tell her that maybe it was one of those brownies in the story she read us last night.” And think how Marjorie would look! Maybe she would cry, and then Grandma might not like her so well—“Big girls don’t cry,” Grandma had said.

Susan moved to the toy house and shook it tentatively. A few pieces of furniture tinkled as they fell over. Experimentally she shook it harder. More pieces were jarred from their places as Susan watched fascinated. The delicious power of destruction became malicious ecstasy when Susan thought of Marjorie. Gently she kicked the structure, then harder. Her foot went through an opening representing a window, tearing the pasteboard on either side. Thinking of Grandma and Marjorie, Susan remembered the ice cream cone Grandma always bought her on the way back from town. Today Marjorie would get the ice cream cone—her cone. Suddenly she drew her leg back and kicked hard, consigned to her task of demolition.

Startled, she turned from her survey of the ruin before her at
Grandma’s voice calling “Susan?” Frozen, she watched Grandma and Marjorie come toward her. Grandma was taking off her hat as she spoke,

“Did everything go all right, Dear? We brought you back a surprise from town for—why, Susan, whatever happened? What have you done?” she repeated, her voice rising.

Susan experienced a brief glee at Marjorie’s stricken look and inarticulate cry, but looking again at Grandma, the glee was overshadowed by a rising uneasiness. If only Grandma wouldn’t stand there with that silent look of hurt. All Susan’s protestations of ignorance, her innocently suggested solutions stuck in her throat. Frantically she choked, “Grandma, I didn’t do it! Honest, I—I—” The tears were close now.

Grandma spoke slowly, “Susan, why? What has happened to you?”

Fear closed in on Susan. She was unable to utter a word. Everything had gone terribly wrong.

Grandma was saying perplexedly, “You haven’t been the same girl this summer, Susie. Something has come over you. Marjorie has been so nice to you, but you have treated her so meanly, and now this. I’m afraid I’ll just have to call your mother tonight to come after you. I can’t put up with this any longer. Why couldn’t you be a nice little girl like Marjorie?”

Over her panic and the grief of being sent home, Susan reasoned despairingly, “That proves that she loves Marjorie best. She said—she said Marjorie is nicer than I am.” Then defiantly, “I don’t care; I’m glad I did it. That will fix Marjorie. I’m glad!”

Later that evening after a quiet meal at which even Marjorie’s usual chatter was stilled, Susan stood alone at the same kitchen window, staring dejectedly out at the garden now dim and shadowed by late twilight.

Grandma’s voice cut into her thoughts. Turning she saw Marjorie standing beside Grandma with a small box in her hand. Grandma was saying,

“Susie, Marjorie has said she will forgive you. Isn’t that nice of her? If you will tell her how sorry you are for what you did and promise to be a good girl like her, I will let you stay. See, she even brought a present for you from town.”

Susan looked slowly from the small box in Marjorie’s outstretched hand to her benignly smiling face. Bringing her hand up in a flashing movement, she knocked the box violently from Marjorie’s grasp. “I don’t want your stupid present! I won’t say I’m sorry because I’m
not! You took Grandma away from me, and she was my Grandma first! I hate you!"

Through a mist of furious tears, she saw Marjorie recoil and Grandma, with a gasp, put her arm around Marjorie’s shoulders. Running blindly past, she screamed again, “I hate you!”

Adeste...

Into little oriental town of wooden shacks
Came little men in white collars, turned backwards,
Who spoke the great and only truth.
Down came evil idols.

And, in season, old woman put statue of saint
With little candle on table in shack in wooden town.
And went with age and cane to wooden church.
Down fell blessed candle.

Three fishermen, watching over their nets by night,
Saw little light rise in the east
Until it was a great light that shone round them.
Up came empty nets.

“Eight hundred homes destroyed,
four thousand homeless,
Girl burned to death in teeming port city.”
That’s what the newspaper said.

... Wesley Grunther