

END OF A WEEK

TUESDAY

"Sheila! Why are you crying? What's the matter? Sheila: SFEI-LA! Sheila lay forlorn upon the pillow. "I'm not crying."

"You are--you're bawling. What's the matter?"

"Oh, don't, don't talk. You're just--too little."

"I'm not. I'm ten. Janie's the one who's little and I'm five years older. And you're not grown up just 'cause you're fifteen!"

"But--Oh, Nan--"

"What are you hugging me for and crying? What's WRONG?"

"Nan--" (I can't. I can't possibly tell her. She's too young. She'd cry too and -- Why did it have to happen? I can't stand it I can't bear it, I'll--)

"Sheila, don't cry--don't, Sheila!"

"Nan, I'll tell you. Promise you won't tell. Promise. I have to tell you. I have to tell someone. Nan, listen to me. Mama's--going to die."

"Mama's--Mama's going to die?" An enormous white cloud passed through Nan's mind, blew away. Something fierce rose in her bosom. "No--you're just bad to think that, just because she's been sick so long. Other mothers have been sick long too. You're--you're mean to say that!"

"I know, Nan, I know it. I heard Dr. Sam. I heard him talking to Father in the den. He didn't say 'die.' He didn't say the word. He--"

"Sheila: That did he say? What?"

"He said 'There's simply nothing more to do. It's a matter of a few days now, maybe a week.' Maybe a week is what he said. Oh! Mama can't die—she can't—she can't!"

A great load of fear welled up in Nan's eyes. In the darkened room they shone, luminous, frightened. There arose in her mind a vision of Mama. Mama lying on her white bed, on her white pillow, her face white, her hands white, her lips white. Yes, that was it Otherwise her lips would be red. White lips. Dying. Dead. She would be dead, the doctor said---dead---dead---dead---

"Nan! Please--don't scream so---don't! Someone will hear. Oh, I shouldn't have told you. I should have known. You're too little--too young!"

"No, you shouldn't have said it I hate you! I love Mama and I

hate you I'll always hate you as long as I live!" Great turbulent waves rushed through her brain. And then, arms around Sheila whose eyes were dry and weary now, clutching, pleading arms, crying arms. "I don't hate you, Sheila, honest I don't. You can't help it. Maybe she won't die. Ask the doctor. Maybe she needs an operation--or a new medicine. Sheila, tell the doctor--tell him!"

"Hush! Don't scream so. I told you what he said. Doctor Sam knows. And now it's got to be a secret. You musn't tell, especially Father."

"But Father knows!" Scalding tears oh her upturned hand. She wiped them off on the sheet. They hurt, they burned.

"Father said to Doctor Sam 'The children---they musn't know---they musn't know now.' Nan, promise, cross your heart and promise. You musn't tell Father that we know. You musn't cry---"

After a while they stopped clutching each other. After a while the soft south wind care through the open window. Nan could feel the last tears grow stiff and dry as thin paper on her

cheeks. She turned once to look at Sheila. Sheila was staring at the ceiling. (I hate to have her stare like that.) "Sheila!" She pulled up the sheet. "Guess we—we better sleep now." Sheila was silent.

WEDNESDAY

Down by the brook Nan and Janie were sailing paper boats. "Nan, look! Look at mine float! I told you I'd make a good one. It won't sink for a long time, you'll see."

Nan looked at Janie's boat. (It used to be fun. But something happened to spoil it. Mama spoiled it. But how could Mama spoil it when she's so sick? Mama was going to die. That's what Sheila said. It isn't true but Sheila's put a hard heavy lump on my chest. It won't go away. It stays and gets heavy every now and then, except when I put my arms in the water like this. It's so cool in the water. It makes me feel good. And it's far away from the house. I'd like to run away, a hundred miles away and start over again with a different family. This one makes me cry so much. Only Janie doesn't make me cry because she doesn't know about--IT. Maybe Janie and I could run away together. We'd be happy together. I could spank Janie when she gets mean. Because I'd be the biggest and I'd have to take care of her and bring her up right. I'd be like her mother. Like a mother). Something strange formed in her throat. "It hurts me to swallow."

"Maybe you got a sore throat." Janie jumped up and down on a rock and sang "I saw three ships go sailing by--sailing by!"

"Keep quiet--you!"

"I don't have to. Sailing by--sailing by--"

"Janie, you know what?"

Janie saw a swift wild lock in Nan's eyes. Abruptly she stopped her song. Nan had her by the wrist. Long fingers dug into her flesh. "That hurts, Nan, quit it!"

"Janie, promise you won't tell. It's something awful, something that will make you cry and cry. But you musn't tell Father or Sheila.

They'd---well, you got to promise, cross your heart or--hope to die," She shivered. Something in those words startled her. Janie's mouth was open. She looked at Nan a little afraid, but excited.

"I won't tell. Cross my heart."

"Janie---Mama's going to die."

Janie looked at Nan then she looked at the ground. Her bare toes kicked at the loose gray sand and she looked up, finally, at Nan again. Nan's fingers loosened on her wrist.

"Did you hear? She's sick and she's going to dies Doctor Sam told Father. Sheila heard, Sheila told me. And I told you. Oh, I shouldn't have told you I shouldn't! I don't know why I did. Promise you won't tall--please--"

"Will she go to Heaven and be an angel, Nan"

"Yes."

"With wings?"

"I---I guess so."

"But---who will be our mother then---Sheila?"

"We---we won't have a mother."

"I wouldn't let Sheila be _{my} mother. She's too bossy. She made me put my squacker balloon away today. She hid it because vow I can't find it."

"I saw it in the kitchen cupboard. She just thought she hid it."

"Goody. I'll let you blow it now. Let's go home now and sneak it away. The old smarty.

I'll let you blow it--honest."

"Maybe you---you better not blow it, Janie, rot while Mama's sick-- not till---Oh, gosh I don't want to blow that nasty old balloon anyway. I hate it; I hate you---and everybody in the whole worlds"

"Even Mama?"

"No, I don't hate her."

"Will she be able to see us down here when she's way up in Heaven?"

"No."

"Aw---heck!"

THURSDAY

Sheila lay in the hammock under the linden tree.

(Maybe I can sleep here a little while. I'm so tired but my eyes won't shut. They ache but they won't shut. I should sleep in, the daytime if I can't sleep at night. I hate the dark. I see things and I dream. In the day-time people don't dream--or do they? Last night I dreamed that Father looked at me. He kept pointing his finger at me, his finger grew longer and longer and he kept trying to say something and then suddenly he whispered "You know!") Sheila felt her mouth go dry as she recalled the dream. (It was horrible. Everything was horrible. The whole world with all its people. Mama---I mustn't think of her. It doesn't do any good just to think and think. It doesn't keep people from dying---people who have to die. Poor Mama---what will it be like when she dies? What happens when people die? Where is the life that was in them? Where, does it go?) She raised a frantic hand to her mouth. Out of her mouth came warm living breath. Yesterday her father had said "Better to keep out of your Mot^her's room for a few days now. Doctor Sam said she needs rest, musn't talk. Don't go in now---for a few days." Sheila had uttered a cry when she saw her father turn away slowly, when she looked at his back, his slumped shoulders. "Yes," he had said, turning around dust a little, "I know you'd like to see Mama but we must mind Doctor Sam."

Sheila was glad she couldn't go in, glad the doctor had said that. How could I look at Mama--knowing? I couldn't do it---I couldn't. When will it be---to-morrow? Saturday? Sunday? Maybe never. Maybe it won't happen. Of course it won't. Mama could get well, even now.)

But she laid her fingers over her eyes and felt the rushing of tears through them.

FRIDAY

"Why can't we go to see Mama, Father?"

Father looked down at Nan. His face was drawn, pale and drawn. He seemed not to hear her. He seemed to be looking far away, but still, he was there.

"We must let her have a long quiet rest for a few days."

"Yes." Nan shyly took hold of his finger. "So she'll get well and strong and be up soon." (There--now Father would never know she knew about Mama. She was brave. She would tell Sheila how, brave she's been. But no---Sheila would cry. It's funny, but I don't cry as much as Sheila. Sheila cries and cries. I hate it. I wish there was something to do. But I don't feel like doing anything. Janie's no fun any more. I can't like her too much. I have to keep warning her not to tell. She might and then Father would cry. Father musn't be made to cry. Men don't cry. I couldn't stand it if he did. I just love Father. I love him better than any man I know.) She thought so much about how she loved Father that tears welled up in her eyes, faint dewy tears, tears that didn't hurt her eyes the way they used to.

Janie came around the side of the house and Nan left Father standing alone. She ran towards her sister.

"Remember, Janie---you musn't tell."

"I won't!" Janie sounded impatient.

"I'll twist your arm if you breathe one word:"

"I won't. Besides I can twist as hard as you and I can bite too!"

"Oh, Janie, go away. I don't want to talk to you. I wish I could eat supper---or something!"

She looked up towards the house, towards the east window that stood curtained against the sun. That was Mama's room. Mama was in there-- sick. Lying on a white sheet, on a white pillow. Her face was white, and her lips. "Oh, Mama, I want to talk to you. Please let me talk to you. There's nobody in this whole world to talk to and I feel so--so lonesome." She crept along the side of the house till she reached Mama's window. Through the pane the dull red roses of the drapes wavered before her eyes. She raised her fists for a moment as if to shatter the glass. And in an instant the mood was gone and she dropped her arms to her sides. Then she stepped softly out of sight.

SATURDAY

Nan and Sheila stood in the garden. They had been there for an hour watching the parked car, Doctor Sam's car, watching the west window. The blinds were drawn up, the drapes hung limply, pulled half-way across the windows. The sun was warm. There was shade under the linden tree but the shade was forgotten. They saw the nurse in her white uniform stand for a moment before the open window.

"Maybe she wants us," whispered Nan "maybe---"

"I told you not to talk."

"Sheila, I can't keep still. What are you looking at? What do you see?"

"Nothing."

There was the car. Why didn't Doctor Sam get in, drive off, leave the house? The burden was heavy. This heaviness on Sheila crushed her, weighed her down. Her shoulders felt heavy, her legs felt heavy, her brain felt heavy as lead.

"Why don't I go away?" she moaned to herself. "Why don't I leave? What good is this---this wondering?" But she knew she would stand there till the car drove off. Then it would be another day, and another. She leaned against the tree, tired. Nan sat down on the grass. Twisting her fingers into a pattern she put then up to her eyes and perred through them.

"Look, Sheila, this is a trick. See if you can tell which fingers belong to my right hand. Bet you can't."

Sheila saw the nurse again in the window.(Did she raise her hand? A signal, perhaps? But no---she doesn't know we're here. She doesn't know we know. Perhaps if I walked up to the window and looked in I could see---Mama.) A shiver went through her body. (But I don't want to see Mama! Why don't I want to? Why?)

Suddenly the door opened. Doctor Sam came-out carrying his bag. He looked the same, just the same. (Mama didn't die. She didn't die!) Sheila said this to herself. But the burden grew larger and larger and enveloped her completely.

"Let's go in, it's hot out here."

Slowly Nan followed her into the house. She looked and looked at Sheila. But Sheila's face was a mask.

SUNDAY

They were told after breakfast. Doctor Sam told them. Father was in his room. Doctor Sam said, "Better not disturb him now, girlies." He stood behind Sheila and grasped her arms in his large firm hands as if to steady her, patted Janie softly on the head, glanced at Nan for a moment and left. They heard the engine of the car, heard it whirr down the driveway, slowly fade away. Nan was twisting a paper she had found on the floor, twisting it into a rose flower, twisting, twisting till it broke. Janie was the first to speak.

"I'm going down by the brook. I got a new sail boat hidden in the grass. Paul Berty made it for me yesterday and I've been keeping that a secret I hid it but now I'll show it to you. I'll let you sail it, Nan, honest I will." Inquiringly she looked at her sister, studying her mood, poised like a bird waiting, waiting for the miracle. Maybe now Nan would come with her, the way she used to---laughing. But Nan's face was wet with tears and she was whispering, "Mama---Mama's dead! Oh, Mama---I love you---I love you so much!"

Janie pressed herself shyly for a moment against her sister who seemed like a stranger now. "Don't cry, Nan. I'll give you the boat-- cross my heart. I'll give it to you if you'll stop crying and come with me. Please."

Nan looked down at her sister now who was holding her hand, gently, as if she held a wounded bird in the palm. Slowly Nan smiled at her.

"I won't take your boat, Janie. But promise you'll let me be first to sail it."

"Cross my heart."

Down the path they sped, stopping at the brook to take off sandals and socks. The water was cold---delightfully shimmering between their toes. They squealed.

"Now I'll shut my eyes," said Nan, "and you bring the boat and when you have it right in front of me yell OPEN!"

Then she opened her eyes there was the boat and there was Sheila. Sheila watched the boat rock on the water for a moment, then it sailed. So smoothly did it sail, so peacefully and erectly, as if it were launching out into a brave new world. Yes, it was a good boat, it wasn't going to tip. "I guess boys just know how."

Slowly she slipped off her shoes, uncurled the socks, plunged her bare feet into the water. Like a refreshing breeze the coolness spread through her body, up from her toes, through her legs, her thighs, her arms. Wetting her hands she put her two palms to her cheeks. The cheeks were warm and the water cooled them. She closed her eyes.

"My, but I'm sleepy," she said to Nan and Janie. "I think I'll go home in a little while---and sleep."

Nan looked at her sister. She smiled. Sheila's face was tender mm and sweet and her eyes responded to Nan's. It gave Nan a restful feeling and for a moment she felt part of another world, suspended, light and calm. When Sheila turned to go Nan watched her for a small minute, then she pulled Janie from the grass with both her hands and laughed. "Come on, Janie, let's play---oh, let's play!" Janie laughed too. She began tumbling on the soft grass that was still damp from the morning's freshness. She tumbled and jumped and shook the grass from her skirt and plunged into the grass again. "Look, Nan," she cried, as she suddenly turned to the water. "Looks Our boat's gone: But I don't care---do you?"

Olga Stepanek

830 South 37
Lincoln, Nebraska.