

COUSIN WILDA

Still waters run deep.

Only once did I go with Daddy to pick up Cousin Wilda before our annual Christmas Eve dinner at Grandmother and Granddaddy Street's. She lived in a dark den of an apartment all by herself and had worked hidden away in a back office of the county clerk for twenty-seven years. Yet, out she came each December, trailing the tinsel and accompanied by cranberry sorbet.

I'd seen a picture of her somewhere, standing outside a buff-brick, three-story building with black iron bars on the windows. She was squinting in the bright sun and I know why. The inside of her basement apartment had no light—well, almost no light. The bulbs were perhaps forty watt and layered with dust so thick that the inside had no more than the amber glow of a windowless bar. I felt kind of ashamed...of me or her, I'm not sure.

Wilda Addell McElhiney was the only surviving child of Grandmother Street's oldest brother, long deceased, William Akers McElhiney. An infant brother had died, and the only reason Wilda hadn't joined him was due perhaps to the desperate attempts of her parents, and the fierce, stubborn, even a bit angry determination of Wilda herself. She outlived seventeen operations and almost all her blood relatives.

In my mind's eye, Wilda seemed shriveled—like perhaps she'd once been bigger, but life had sucked all the height and plumpness right out of her. She was no more than four foot ten. Not even heels could add a smidgen to her height—no one sold them in size two.

When I went shoe-shopping with my mother, she would often pick up an extra pair in the children's department for Wilda. Meaning, of course, that Wilda often wore the same Mary Jane's or shiny patent leathers with a bow across the toe that I did.

I liked Wilda. She talked a little funny and had a scar that split her upper lip, but she would always sit and chat with me between the pumpkin pies and "The First Noel" on Grandmother's grand piano.

And when it came time for unwrapping gifts, I looked forward to Wilda's more than any other. Every year she gave me a Madame Alexander doll—one from India, another from Scotland, even three of the four "Little Women," Beth, Jo, and Meg. I suspect my mother picked them up for her because Wilda never went anywhere beyond work and the grocery store. Even then, she'd complain that pig-tailed little girls would whisper and stare and giggle with a hand over their mouths, as if she couldn't see. I never giggled. Wilda was my very best first-cousin-once-removed.

When Granddaddy Street moved from "this life to more life," as my pastor likes to say, Wilda moved from the basement to Granddaddy's bedroom.

"She's getting kind of old," Grandmother explained, at nine years her senior.

Wilda and Grandmother bickered a bit, as old women are inclined to do, but for the most part they got along quite nicely, especially with the extra three hundred dollars that Grandmother collected each month for Wilda's room and board.

Shortly after Wilda moved in, Daddy decided to move seven hundred miles away to the mountains of Colorado and near the cabin that his mother had built back in the twenties. Wilda just couldn't believe that he'd go off and leave his mother all alone after fifty-two years, but he promised to return often.

Every three or four months, he made the commute back home to the humidity of Oklahoma to look after their affairs. Once he tried to convince Wilda to move her savings from a passbook account, earning one or two percent, to a more lucrative Certificate of Deposit, but she refused to mess with such a thing. It was just too complicated. She named him her heir anyway, despite his meddling, seeing as there was no one else alive with her blood in their veins and the vigor of sub-golden years.

At sixty-five, Daddy died. Wilda was eighty-four and Grandmother, ninety-three. It just didn't seem fair at all. Despite a stroke a few months later, Grandmother hung on determinedly, her devotion to Wilda and duty to her brother sustaining her, despite being "good for nothing."

Three years later, a frail, sickly, almost-alone-Wilda finally passed at eighty-seven, Grandmother following in three months. Knowing my grandmother would not be far

behind her, I didn't make the cross-country trek to Wilda's funeral, but Lord knows she merited the honor.

When her will was read, my mother dismissed the raised eyebrows of Aunt Betty, who had also married into the family, when it was discovered that Wilda had left everything to "Nell Phillips Street."

"Oh, don't worry," Mother assured her, "She couldn't have much of anything anyway."

Her checkbook proved otherwise: line after line, year after year, check after check; one for ten dollars, another for twenty-five, occasionally a fifty, all written to the American Cancer Society, the Shriner's Hospital for Crippled Children, the March of Dimes. Many other children around the world who talked funny with a split upper lip would get what she never had: a life without ridicule, a life without shame, a life lived in the light. And my mother got the remaining hundred thousand.