

Aunt Etta

It was unusually quiet; but I guess when someone dies people tend to tip toe around and whisper. When you think about it, it's silly. Just plain silly, the dead can't hear and we sure as hell won't disturb them. Guess I shouldn't have used that word. It's almost as though someone was watching the house. It's too quiet, far as I'm concerned.

Momma's nose is red from all that blowing she's been doing lately, and her eyes well they've always been kinda pink around the edges...I hope they don't get any worse. Wish she'd wear some make up, like Hanna's mother does. She always looks pretty and made up.

Now my Momma must be close to forty years old ,or even older. If you ask me it's time she started dressin up once in awhile. I'll bet not one of her dresses ever got a spot in front. Every morning she puts on a apron just as sure as she puts on a pair of shoes. She don't own a pair of slippers. She says,
"Slippers are for people that sit around, and we'll have none of that in this house."

I don't want you to get the wrong impression, Momma's pretty and she's nice and all that. She takes care of the house, the cooking and washes all our clothes. That includes me, Aunt Etta, Poppa and Eleanor my little sister. Well, she's not so little, I mean she's younger than me by just ten months. Sometimes Poppa calls her their 'little surprise' and then Momma giggles and puts her hands up to her mouth. And Poppa he just sits back and smiles, like I don't know what's going on. Of course I know what they did, and they did it too soon. I think it's Poppa's way of flirting when he says that.. You wondering know how come I know? Albert Billings told a bunch of us kids all about sex after school one day, had to be over a year ago. I feel funny, guess I get embarrassed, when Poppa talks like that but I have to act like I don't know what their talking about. They'd be mad as hell if they knew I knew exactly what they did.

What just happened last Sunday now was that Aunt Etta died. She'd been sickly for some time now. Momma said it was only three months she was so sick , but it sure seemed like longer to me and Eleanor.

Aunt Etta had an important job in town, worked as a clerk in the Savings and Loan Company. It was the biggest building in town and I felt proud that my aunt worked in such an impressive building. She had something to do with money, so that meant she had to be pretty smart. She always dressed up and walked out the front door with a black patent leather purse tucked right under her arm. There was something about the way she walked and kissed us all goodbye; you couldn't help but like her.

I don't know how Eleanor felt, but I sure do know that I wanted to grow up and be just like her. Not that I didn't love my Momma a lot more, but Aunt Etta's life seemed a lot more interesting than Momma's. Now don't you ever tell a soul I said that. I'd never ever want to hurt Momma's feelings.

Well now that Aunt Etta is dead, it looks like either me or Eleanor is going to get her bedroom. Neither one of us mentioned it, but I know it was on Eleanor's mind just as much as was on mine. Personally, I didn't care who got it, as long as I could have a room to myself. Boy, that'd be great. I wondered how many days we'd have to wait until we could tactfully bring it up. The wake was on Tuesday and Wednesday, so we certainly had the good taste and good manners not to mention it until at least next weekend.

There were friends, and family even Momma's and Aunt Etta's brother Uncle Ben, who we hardly ever saw, they all came to the funeral to show their respects. They must have closed the Savings and Loan Company she worked for down early, on Wednesday every single one of the people that worked there came. They all looked sad.

Aunt Etta lay there in the coffin in one of her prettiest dresses. I couldn't help but peek in to see if she had her black patent leather purse under her arm, but she didn't. You know how they always put glasses on dead people, so they look normal. I wondered why they didn't put that purse right under her arm. Far as I was concerned she would have looked more like herself.

There was this one man at the funeral parlor that looked very serious, and I didn't remember ever seeing him in the Savings and Loan building. I wondered where he was from.

We had to be in the funeral parlor for two whole days from two to four in the afternoons and then again from seven to nine both nights. It got to be real boring. Eleanor and I would go downstairs to the smoking area just to get away for a little while. We couldn't play Bingo or even Hearts. Momma said it wouldn't be proper.

The funeral service was scheduled for Thursday at nine. It was in the Dutch Reformed Church, right across the street from the funeral parlor. I've often wondered why they always have funerals so early in the morning. What about the people that had to travel from far away to get there? The Church obviously shows no consideration. But today I didn't mind at all that it was early. I was glad all this sadness and ceremony was coming to an end.

Now don't get me wrong, I loved my Aunt Etta, but three days of sitting around dressed up, smiling at people was more than enough respect for

me to show. A lot of them I'd never even seen before. Let's face it, I'm only a kid.

That man I was talking about, he'd come in and just walked up to the coffin, like he was saying hello to Aunt Etta and then he'd go sit down; he'd stay right up until four o'clock. He showed up for the nighttime vigil too. I asked Poppa who he was ; he said he had no idea. He didn't recognize him. He was dressed respectful and all, but it sure was strange that no one seemed to know who he was. Not a soul walked up to him or sat next to him.

Then, like a bolt of lightning, it hit me; HE WAS AUNT ETTA'S SECRET LOVER. He had to be, why else would he be there? Suddenly sitting there watching and studying him I wasn't bored out of my mind anymore. I figured out how it all must have happened:

He was driving through town one day on his way to his big important job in some fancy office in Farmingdale; when he realized he'd been on this same street twice before, so he knew he must be lost. And who do you think suddenly appeared?...There in front of his very eyes was a pretty woman with the patent leather purse under her arm walking down the street. He decided he'd ask her for directions. He did and she smiled at him and told him exactly how to get to Farmingdale . Better yet, she said, she'd drive with him , show him the way. I'll bet that's how it started And then he fell madly in love with her. I thought about it for a while and then I realized, it never couldn't have happened that way. We'd have seen him around the house, and we never did.

I'll bet Aunt Etta's funeral holds the record for being the longest funeral there ever was.

When we got to the cemetery Eleanor finally noticed the stranger and asked me about him.... Sometimes I think she's a little slow. "How should I know?" I said. We couldn't tell if he was crying or not, but he was standing there off to the side. Looked like he was straining real hard to hear every word the minister said.

On the way home Eleanor couldn't keep her mouth shut another minute. "Can I have Aunt Etta's room now?" " I can't believe what I'm hearing, your wonderful Aunt is barely cold in the ground and your thoughts are just of yourself..., Paul, can you believe that? I never thought we had such a selfish child." Poppa said," That settles it, you don't get the room Eleanor, your sister gets it."Talk about lucking out.....I was so excited, but I couldn't show it . I knew I was still supposed to be sad; so I played the part real good. I whispered,

just loud enough for everyone in the car to hear.

“ I’m really gonna miss Aunt Etta.” ...I sure hope I don’t go directly to hell for that one.

Momma said, “Tomorrow we can start moving Etta’s things out and donating them to the Salvation Army.”

“Don’t some of those pretty dresses fit you Momma?”

“ I guess they do, but I’d never be comfortable wearing her clothing it just wouldn’t be right.”

I asked if I couldn’t keep her black patent leather purse. Told them I really liked it... I wouldn’t use it or anything, I’d just like to keep it so I could always remember her.

“ Did you hear that Paul, how sweet is she? Why of course you can keep it darlin’.”

I could feel Eleanor making a face at me....a real ugly face, bet she even stuck he tongue out at me.

It was hard for me to sleep that night. I kept thinking about tomorrow’s big move...I’d be on my own. As far as sisters go Eleanor and I got along pretty well, but I loved the idea of my very own room.

I tried falling asleep best I could but I just kept getting more and more excited. I couldn’t help myself. So when I was sure everyone was fast asleep I got out of bed and tip toed into Aunt Etta’s room; closed the door and turned on the light on the night table.

The room was pretty big, bigger than our room. It even had room enough for a book shelf, and a closet. I bounced on the bed. It was soft and besides it being more comfortable than mine it was twice as big.

The book shelf was crammed full of books. There was The Holy Bible, Winnie the Pooh, Webster’s Dictionary, the Deluxe Edition, Catcher in the Rye, and a book called, Anything You Ever Wanted to Know About Sex. I grabbed that one and pulled it off the shelf. I couldn’t believe my eyes, and it wasn’t the dirty pictures that shocked me;..... It was the money, one hundred dollars bills started flying out of the book all over the place. I’d never seen so much money in my whole life. My heart started to pound, so I grabbed The Holy Bible thinking it would stop my heart from pounding and give me some guidance....and you know what? More money fell out. .Every book that I opened was filled with hundred dollar bills. I didn’t know what to do. If I woke Momma to tell her she’d know I was snooping where I wasn’t supposed to be, so I grabbed up all the bills tucked them into my pajama bottoms as best I could, shut out the light and went back to bed. I don’t know how I managed, but finally I fell asleep.

About dusk, there was a loud pounding on the front door. I heard it, but I just pretended that I didn't. Then I heard Poppa say, "Hold you're horses, I'm coming."

My sister whispered to me, "what's the matter with you don't you hear somebody banging on the front door?"

"I don't care who's banging just leave me alone, I didn't sleep good last night; you go see who it is." As soon as she left the room....I got out of bed real fast, spread the money evenly under my sheet and made the bed, best I'd ever made it in a long time...No one could ever tell there was anything under the blankets.

I overheard them downstairs as I was sneaking back into Aunt Etta's room to grab her purse. After all, Momma said I could have it.

"Eleanor, you better go wake your Momma; tell her there's a man here from the United States Treasury Department."

United States Treasure Department I wondered what in the world could he want with us? Quick as I could I ran in Aunt Etta's room, grabbed the purse and then I started flipping open every book on the shelf. This part may be hard to believe but I had to run fast to get my pillow case to hold all the bills. They just kept falling out of every single book.

"I've got a search warrant right here "he said "to examine any property that belonged to your sister."

"What are you talking about? What are you looking for? My sister was a fine respectable woman. I can't believe this. There's no way that God fearing sister of mine ever did a dishonest thing in her life. "

"I'm sorry Mam, but there's stocks and property, some loans and even cash your sister might have been involved with that seems to be missing. Good honest people invested their hard earned money with the Savings and Loan Company and now there's not a trace of what happened to it. We have to investigate everyone that worked there. Sorry but I'm going to have to search her room and all of her belongings."

"I can't believe this is happening...Girls you get back upstairs in your bedroom, this man's has to take a look in Aunt Etta's room. "

As he was walking up the stairs I recognized him. It was the man I thought was Aunt Etta's lover. He was looking in all the drawers. I even saw him flip open some of the books. After about an hour or so he left. Said he had to examine her records at the Savings and Loan, but everything looked clear here at the house.

It didn't take me long before I found a good hiding place for the money. I hid it under a loose floor board in the closet. I decided it would be a smart not to spend any of the money right away. I planned that when I got a little older I'd start spending it just a little at a time. That way Aunt Etta's secret would be safe with me. It would have broken my mother's heart if she knew that her sister was a crook.

You're not going to believe this but there was 36 thousand dollars hidden in those books. Remember the black patent leather purse? To tell the truth I was a little disappointed, I figured that she'd have some money hidden in there, but she just had the usual stuff ladies carry around; a lipstick, a comb, some tissues and a fountain pen. It didn't matter, I still thought it was a swell looking purse and I couldn't wait until I was old enough to carry it around. I'd carry it right under my arm just like she did..

It's been more than 25 years now, and I can still remember the first day I started dipping into my savings. It was just before I got married. A girl's got to have a nice wardrobe to go on a honeymoon with. Lester and I got married and luckily he never paid no mind to my spending. If I wanted something I could just go get it. It sure was lucky for me that Aunt Etta never got caught. I was always very careful not to go overboard so as it would be noticed; but both my daughters Etta and Ellie were the best dressed girls in town, just like their mother.

I even got myself a fancy new car. One day I called Lester at work laughing and telling him what a surprise I had for him. Told him I won a car in a raffle.

"You must be kiddin'; he said.

"Nope, when I was in town, about a month ago, the Savings and Loan Company, you know the one where Aunt Etta worked, well they were having a raffle on a carSo I took a chance, it was only a dollar and guess what, I won. He believed every word. He almost never went to town so he never suspected a thing. A woman's got to be very clever to manage money you know.

My girls are growin' fast, and they'll soon be needing lots of things when they go away to school...I guess we've all noticed how fast money goes these days?. So I been thinking that as soon as they leave for college, I'll go into town and see about getting myself a job at that Savings and Loan Company.

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