

FICTION

THE LAST DAY OF SPRING

LINDA SILLITOE

LAURIE HAD WANTED for a long time to visit Jen. When Mama took David, the baby, to visit their favorite aunt she and Carol complained.

"I know you want to see her," Mama explained, "but she's changed. I don't want you to see her like this. I don't think she does. David's so young he doesn't notice."

Mama was taking them today for the wrong reason. "I know it will be hard for you," she said when she asked them to get ready. Her voice was as raw and scratchy as stretched rope. "But it will be easier for you to let her go if you just see her."

"Why aren't you ready?" Mama said now. "Aunt Margaret will be here pretty soon."

She sat down suddenly beside Laurie on the side of the bed. Laurie reached for her shoe.

"I know you think I don't understand. You know, Laurie—" she cleared her throat—"Margaret and Jim accepted this long before I did. So did Daddy. But I just couldn't—"

Laurie bent down to ease her heel into her shoe. Now Mama had made her throat hurt again, and she resented it, so she let Mama talk to the back of her neck and her curved shoulders.

"Maybe we're wrong, Laurie."

Laurie put on her other shoe and stood up. "But maybe we're not." She turned on one heel and talked over her shoulder the way Carol did sometimes. Carol would be a high school freshman in the fall. "I'm ready. And I want to visit her."

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Laurie stopped for a moment at the mirror. She could feel Mama's eyes and moved so that her own image blocked her mother's reflection. Her hair was all right, smooth and shiny though not as dark and glossy as Carol's. Her pink dress looked fine with its V-neckline. Even her skinny legs looked better in nylon and low heels. She carefully applied the light lipstick Mama let her wear, blotted it, and rubbed the tissue on her cheekbones. Carelessly, she dropped the tissue into the small wastebasket by the closet and left the room.

Laurie had no intention of letting go. She knew that Jen would get well. She walked briskly out to the living room, clicking her heels, to watch out the picture window. Laurie heard stories about miracles and healings almost every Sunday. Every time as she sat listening hard, her knees clamped together but still trembling, she could see that Jen too, Jen for sure, would get well. David got better, and they had really been anxious about him.

The day David visited Jen, Daddy had picked up Laurie at the junior high to drive her to her clarinet lessons. He told her how David perched on Jen's bed and sang "You Are My Sunshine." He'd learned it from one of Mama's old records.

"David's were the only dry eyes in the room by the time he sang, 'Please don't take my sunshine away,'" Daddy said. "I don't know if you realize it, Laurie, but we almost lost David when he had pneumonia last winter."

Laurie nodded. She could feel that odd trembling in her knees.

"Jen wanted the drapes pulled back, and since it was about two-thirty, the sun just blazed through the windows. They look west. David was right in the brightest square of sun on the bed."

Laurie could visualize him there, his blue eyes flashing with delight at being the center of a circle of adults.

"Then Jen said, 'I wish I could see him better.' She was laughing and wiping her eyes and didn't see the look your mother gave me. That's how we know she is going blind."

Laurie jumped when Aunt Margaret rang the doorbell. Laurie could tell by the way she greeted Mama and lifted her eyebrows at Carol and Laurie that Aunt Margaret thought it was a mistake to take them but wasn't going to say anything. Her own children hadn't visited Jen.

Laurie watched Mama and Aunt Margaret walk out to the car. They looked young and pretty with their white bags and shoes, the spring sunshine on their hair. She and Carol wore their Easter dresses with last year's summer shoes which pinched a little. It was warm this morning. No one needed a sweater.

On the way to the hospital Carol chatted with Aunt Margaret about Sylvia, the cousin Carol's age. No one said anything about Jen. Laurie felt that she could run faster than the car was moving, race it to the hospital and get there first. There were a hundred things she had to tell Jen. She wanted to interrupt Mama and say, "Even if Jen can't see well now, will she want to talk to us? Will she want to know what we've been doing? Can I say. . .?" But it sounded stupid even in her own head so she kept still. She didn't know how the three of them could act as if they were going shopping or out to lunch.

Any other year they'd already be looking forward to the Fourth of July party at Jen's. Sometimes several parties came first as if no one could wait. On the Fourth there would be a barbecue on the patio. Everyone would sit in lawn chairs and on blankets eating from paper plates. The little cousins would race and tumble over each other, kicking cups of lemonade and squashing their toes into abandoned ice cream cones.

After dinner the oldest girls always huddled in one of the cars, playing the radio, talking, and shrieking with laughter. Carol and Sylvia watched enviously, pretending not to notice. Maybe this year they would be old enough to get into the car.

Jen's husband, Al, usually found a shady corner and stretched out on the grass, his hat over his eyes. All the clamor and talk drifted over him like a cloud of gnats. The two oldest boys played catch on the far edge of the long side yard, endlessly throwing a softball back and forth, warning the younger boys to stay out of range.

Then when it was dark, too dark even to play no bears are out tonight, Al would light the fireworks—flares, fountains, Roman candles and rockets. And how could the neighbors complain when in sight from their windows stood Daddy, often in uniform straight from shift. Even if he worked a plain clothes shift, his gun and handcuffs were in the locked glove compartment, his badge in his wallet.

They all sat in groups on the lawn, peaceful and privileged, watching the gleaming showers of sparks float shimmering and singly down through the warm, cricket-noisy air to melt in the black grass.

Laurie sighed and rolled down the window a little, not quite enough to blow Carol's hair. She listened to Aunt Margaret for a moment to see if they were saying anything about Jen, but they were talking about Aunt Margaret's next door neighbors. Their daughter was getting married, and Aunt Margaret's youngest daughter was going to be the flower girl. Aunt Margaret had been sewing her dress.

Laurie had often seen a wedding dress glistening like a ghost in the hall between the bedrooms in Jen's house. Jen often made them for the daughters of close friends or relatives.

"I want you to make my girls' wedding dresses someday," Laurie heard Mama say once as she stood admiring the white creation in the hall.

Jen smiled and shook her head. "You'll want to make them yourself."

Laurie rolled down her window another inch. Mama and Aunt Margaret were still talking about the wedding, and Carol was listening closely. She wondered if Al would be visiting Jen at the same time they did. Laurie felt a hollow in her stomach. Suddenly she missed Al almost as much as she had been missing Jen. She didn't dare ask about Al, though.

Al had a shop in the basement of his house. He drove a big black van, and all the children loved to clamber over his plumbing tools and peek out through the small rear window. Children were seldom allowed in Al's shop downstairs, but once when Laurie went down she saw a bed there. She wondered about that, if Al actually became so weary working in the shop that he couldn't climb up the stairs to the white double in Jen's bedroom.

Once on Thanksgiving the entire family tugged their chairs around Jen's train of white-clothed tables placed end to end through the living room and dining room. As they looked toward Al at the end of the row, he slowly sank from sight. He landed, they found by leaning from their own chairs, on his side still in his chair on the floor. After the concerned exclamations and a little suppressed laughter, Al picked himself up and a Thanksgiving blessing was said.

As the dishes began traveling up and down the sides of the tables, the teasing and laughter rose again. Then Jen said dryly to Al, "I asked you to fix that chair months ago."

Everyone laughed uproariously, but when Laurie looked at Jen she saw that she was not laughing, and Laurie's own grin felt stiff. Jen was watching Al, who went on heaping his plate with food.

It was bad enough to have the summer ruined, Laurie thought bitterly as they turned on State Street, but what if Jen weren't well in time for Christmas? Most Christmases Al made something wonderful for at least one age group of cousins. She and Carol had in their bedroom duplicate doll bunkbeds and wooden cupboards with glass windows.

From Halloween on, visits to Jen and Al's house were almost torturous as adults were spirited away to the basement and returned with bright, secretive eyes. No child was allowed past the pantry above the basement stairs.

One year everyone received wooden turtles with wheels on the underside, and they raced down the frozen sidewalks yelling and falling off. Last Christmas had been quieter, but the year before there were huge toy chests for the boys. Daddy and Uncle Jim carried in the first one. As they set it in the center of the living room floor, one of the twins leaped out with a rebel whoop. The shrieks of the girls, the crying of little Judy, and the loud, free laughter from the grownups still echoed in Laurie's head as Aunt Margaret said, "Well, here we are," and Mama set the brake on the car.

The inside of the county hospital seemed dim. The green walls shone faintly, but the floors were dull. Jen had been moved here a week ago because the months of hospital treatment had depleted her insurance and bank accounts. Mama had explained that to them last Saturday, adding that she and Aunt Margaret couldn't fill all the hours of constant care Jen needed now with friends and relatives. They hired a private nurse.

After she told about the nurse Mama paused and added, "If Al comes by sometime and neither Daddy nor I are home, I don't want you to let him in."

Carol and Laurie exchanged startled looks. Carol pressed for more information. Laurie was outraged. Mama wouldn't say much but made them promise just the same.

"Al is a little different than we thought. Maybe because he's upset and worried."

Carol and Laurie could see her sorting through her thoughts like playing cards, sifting most back into the pile, turning a few face down on the table and turning up several for them to see.

"Jen finally asked us not to schedule Al to stay with her, because he would just leave, and then she didn't have anyone there." She hesitated again.

"He changed the locks," she said at last and her voice trembled a little. "We used to go by once in a while and pick up things Jen wanted. He changed the locks. And there have been other things. We just want you to be careful even if you don't understand."

Now Mama and Aunt Margaret paused before a door and spoke briefly to a nurse who was leaving the room. Laurie stopped just inside the door, realizing in time that she had missed hearing that they were going to visit someone else first. She waited politely for them to finish with this friend of Aunt Margaret's or great-aunt-whoever. She hoped they would hurry.

Then Laurie noticed that everyone except the woman in the bed was staring at her oddly. Carol seemed embarrassed as if Laurie were a child about to throw a public tantrum. Annoyed, Laurie smiled and stepped forward, waiting to be introduced. Then she realized with a jolt like the night she stuck her finger into an empty light socket in the dark that she knew this old, thin woman.

"Hi, Jen," she said and moved toward the bed, ready to gulp the words back if she was wrong.

The woman didn't answer but now, standing beside her, Laurie could see that she had Jen's cheekbones and chin, her long straight arm and broad hand. The skin stretched over her bones like old tissue paper, grayed with delicate dust. Her hair was also gray and drawn back from her face. There was a transparent tube in one nostril. Her stillness was the stillness of stone.

"Mmm, pretty flowers," said Aunt Margaret cheerfully. She looked at the card. "Adria sent them, I see. Pretty red tulips, aren't they Ruth?"

"Lovely," Mama answered. "You look better today, Jen. It's warm and beautiful outside."

Carol and Laurie looked at each other desperately across the bed. Neither could speak.

"Carol and Laurie wanted to come," Mama said, "so I brought them along. They're out of school now and bored already."

Carol managed a short laugh. Laurie tried to echo it but only squeaked. Horrified, she covered it with a cough and looked away.

There was a card on the inside of the door, mounted with tape. It said, "Dear friends and family, Please remember that as far as we know, Jen still hears well and govern your conversations accordingly." She looked back at Jen. Jen's hand was just inches from her own. She wanted to touch it, but she was too frightened. Jen's fingers were curled in as if she were holding something.

Once when Jim Jr. and Mike were throwing a softball back and forth Jen passed them on her way to the patio. She suddenly stepped in front of Jim Jr. and caught the ball with a quick upward swing of her arm. She fired it to Mike as everyone cheered and Jen bowed and bowed, shaking her stinging hand.

"Dorothy and Sam called from California," Mama said sweetly, smiling at Carol and Laurie. "They send their love. She said they think of you all the time and pray for you every night."

A croak came from the bed. Laurie jumped. It came again, a noise that might emerge from someone deaf from birth who had never heard the texture of a human voice nor been trained to imitate it. Mama and Aunt Margaret bent over Jen, no longer casual.

"Margaret?" Aunt Margaret said. "Do you want me to stay with you this afternoon?"

The noise came again. Jen's lips barely parted, there was no motion in her face or throat, yet Laurie could see the cords in her neck sharpen into ridges. She wanted to run.

"That's not it," Mama said.

"Miriam!" Margaret exclaimed. The sound stopped. "You want Miriam to come? That's it, isn't it? I'll call her this afternoon. I'm sure she'll come."

Jen was silent for the rest of the visit. Laurie was silent, too, staring at Jen then looking away. The only other person she had seen so motionless was her grandfather in his coffin. Yet although Jen looked far less lifelike than he had, Laurie was reminded by Jen of a jungle cat in the zoo, its eyes open only a silent slit, its powerful limbs indifferent. She hates having us see her like this, Laurie thought.

Laurie remembered that once last summer Jen had stayed in bed during one party and lay on the chaise lounge most of the others. Once when she started to go after something, Aunt Margaret said, "Lie down. You're supposed to be resting."

Laurie looked up surprised because with a baby on Jen's lap, David perched at the end of the lounge, and a dozen chairs crowded around it with everyone talking full speed, she hadn't realized that Jen was doing more than visiting. Jen caught her scared look and winked.

Suddenly Laurie remembered the most amazing thing in Jen's house of wonders—her clock. She had brought it home with her from a trip back East. It was electric with a gold rim and hands, but there was only air where the face should be. There were not even notches along the rim to mark numerals. Laurie had thought the clock very odd and fascinating, but now in this brief, endless visit she thought that all clocks should be like Jen's. She thought the clock should be here in this room with Jen and nearly mentioned it. But Mama and Aunt Margaret were kissing Jen and leaving the room with Carol.

"Good-bye, Jen," Carol said.

Laurie walked to the end of the bed. She looked hard at Jen. Even at Christmas Jen had seemed well enough, sitting on the floor with the kids singing Christmas carols, the parents behind them on the sofa and overstuffed chairs. Six weeks later Jen had checked into the hospital.

Laurie had glanced back quickly at Jen in the middle of a carol and caught her with tears in her eyes. Jen had grinned, and Laurie pretended not to notice the tears. She remembered them now though as she left Jen's room. She didn't say good-bye.

When they walked out of the hospital doors the street seemed altered. Laurie remembered the ride home from the hospital after her appendectomy when she was ten. During those lost two weeks the leaves had turned and

fallen. Now the city shimmered with the heat and hues of summer. A child with only basic colors in her crayon box had colored the grass strong deliberate green, the sky a relentless blue, and the sunlight so yellow she could almost see the crooked black smile crayoned on the sun's round face. The vivid red, orange and violet flowers in the hospital garden burned her eyes.

Aunt Margaret wanted Mama to drop her off downtown to have her glasses adjusted. They talked of ordinary things, but the back of Mama's neck looked strained. Carol seemed uncertain, dabbing at her eyes. Laurie was amazed that Mama had taken them. She thought she could see something of what it had cost her in the set of her shoulders as she drove and the deliberate way she avoided their eyes in the rear view mirror.

"I'm positive she was asking for Miriam," Aunt Margaret said.

After a minute Mama said, "You're probably right."

"Miriam tells her she's going to get well. She wants her to come and tell her that again."

Laurie listened intently but Mama seemed to be concentrating on the traffic. Laurie stared out the side window. It was easier now. The colors in the heart of the town were dusty, softer.

"Hey, there's Al," she said sitting up straight. "Look—there! He's going into that restaurant with that lady."

They all looked, Mama's foot braking instinctively. A man with brown, thinning hair and long arms like Al's was holding the elbow of a red-haired woman. They disappeared behind the tinted glass door of a restaurant.

Carol and Laurie looked at each other and read mutual question marks. They listened expectantly. Mama changed lanes to turn the corner.

"It could be anyone," Aunt Margaret said. "Al is a very average man."

Carol was leaning forward the way she did when she found out about square roots or spontaneous combustion. Then her face shut, and she sat back sedately.

Laurie slumped down in the backseat and began chewing on her thumbnail. She could see the whole afternoon stretched out before her like a blank inch on a road map. It was her turn to fix dinner and set the table. Carol's turn for family prayer. Laurie suddenly knew that Carol would pray for Jen's suffering to end and that she, Laurie, would refuse to say amen.

That night Laurie lay motionless in bed waiting for Carol to go to sleep. She startled as Carol slid with a thump from the bunk above her, swept her robe around her, sobbing, and burst out of the bedroom, slamming the door. In a minute or two Laurie heard Mama's voice mingled with Carol's, the two of them talking brokenly. She could even see them through the closed white door, arms around one another. The lift of relief and acceptance in the voices tightened her throat. Her cheekbones ached. They had ached forever.

For a second it was almost too much for her. In the arches of her feet she could feel herself spring from the bed and run from the bedroom in her bare feet and summer nightgown into the peace of the eye that was opening in the storm. Then the jumbled voices clarified for a moment, and she thought she heard Mama say, "We have to let her go."

Laurie gripped the covers tightly and held on, glaring up at the springs of the top bunk and thinking of bitter, biting things to say to Carol when she returned to bed.

Laurie didn't know she was asleep until she woke up sitting erect with tears dripping from her jaw. The house was dark and silent. The bunk above her sagged in the center. She sat there a moment, gasping and trembling, before the dream returned.

She was wearing the swishy yellow dotted-swiss dress Mama made the summer she was nine. It was after church—Sunday evening. They were running through the twilight across Jen's green hill of a front lawn, snatching up pods fallen from the maples and prying them open to press the sticky sides of the Y's against their noses. Then they ran past Al, stepping nimbly, lightly, over his hands outstretched above his head as he lay on the grass. He grabbed at their ankles, and they shrieked and ran on laughing, laughing.

The ache in her cheekbones eased as more tears washed over them, and kneeling flat on her legs she bent from the waist over her arms pressed hard against her stomach and cried into the nightgown bunched over her knees. She cried for the singularity of the childhood she had lost, and for all the things she thought she had understood and was now quite sure she would never understand.