

Karen Neubauer  
Short Fiction-Wolfson  
Dec. 1, 2003

### Sissy's Story

Hilda was the least likely to commit suicide. She was the one who got away. Made it far from the grimy wallpaper life of Depot Street. Way beyond the city limits of Silver Falls. Past the crumbling family farmhouse lost to the bank before she was born, now hemmed right up to the sagging front porch by a mantle of field corn toasting in the Iowa sun.

“Goddamn Swenson just leaves it there to mock me,” her father spat out the window of the Packard on their way to church each Sunday morning. “Son-of-a-bitch could get 20 more bushels just knocking her down. Leaves it there to show me up. Rotten bastard.”

He let loose another stream of brown spittle toward the fence line, but it slopped on the edge of the window and slid down the faded green metal that hadn't seen a coat of wax since the showroom. It trailed into other brown streaks from 15 years of Sunday drives.

“Yes, Daddy, it's a shame,” Hilda nodded in the seat next to him. She and her siblings called their father, Richard Morland, “Daddy” even into their 60s, after he'd been dead 10 years and Hilda for five. Maria Morland was “Mama” until she died in 1970, before them both. She sat in the back seat, staring out the grimy window and humming softly while fiddling with a bow on her bodice that had come untied. Hilda would fix it when the car stopped, and make sure her mother's dress wasn't tucked into her underwear when she went up to the altar for communion.

Maria didn't dress herself, rarely took a bath, and frequently forgot to wipe. She tried to eat out of the garbage can. Daddy bolted the doors and windows to keep her from wandering into the neighbors' yards. Especially after Old Lady Shultz came home one quiet summer evening to find Mama sitting naked in her porch swing and chattering away about Jackie Onassis.

Hilda, as the last to leave home, monitored Mama's craziness as best she could. Bathed and fed the old woman every morning before walking to school. Fed her canned creamed corn at lunch and made them all dinner every night, although she usually had to warm up Daddy's when he got home from the pool hall, reeking of bourbon and cigars. She'd get Mama off to bed after "I Love Lucy," and pour Daddy in beside the snoring, fleshy heap later.

The others stopped by and helped out some, but it was Hilda's turn and she knew it. As the youngest, she'd been spared the farm work and many of the beatings. One by one, her siblings graduated from high school and fled just out of Daddy's reach.

Hilda was her father's favorite, but none of them minded because they adored her even more. Pixie-cut hair the color of an overripe peach, with tiny soft freckles splayed across her nose and spread over her arms. She was cute till the day she died. She giggled constantly, huffing through her crinkled nose, and spreading an irresistible grin that liquefied her brothers' icy hearts. She helped them haul coal to the stone basement and gather yellow apples from the knarled tree that hung precariously over the creek at the base of their sloping back yard.

She didn't tell when a branch gave way and tumbled her onto the rocks, gashing her right eye just under the brow. Not even when Daddy made her cut a switch from the same tree. Her brothers applied cold washcloths to the cut on her face and the scratches he left on the back of her legs.

Too young to be a threat to her older sisters' beauty, Hilda was like a golden retriever pup at their heels, waiting to be patted or played with. They gave her a spritz of au de' toilet before going on dates. They dabbed just enough "Cherry Blossom" on her bottom lip to satisfy her, without drawing Daddy's attention. They slept with her between them in case he got up in the middle of the night looking for a young bottom to squeeze.

They protected her as best they could while they lived at home. And she did the same for them. Daddy was gentler with the girls, as long as they fawned over him at the end of the workday, bringing him slippers and beer, and occasionally emptying the spittoon before he stumbled over it on his way to the can and dumped the whole frothy, stinking mess on the worn carpet.

The boys just tried to stay out of his line of sight. A glimpse of one might send Daddy into a rampage about some imagined chore that “sure as hell wasn’t done yet.” He threw out the second eldest, Earnest, at 14. Daddy took a swing at the teenager’s head, lost his balance and landed face down on the kitchen linoleum. Earnest stepped over him and went to live with Daddy’s older brother and his kindly wife about 10 miles away.

All Daddy’s 10 brothers and sisters took in some of his children at one time or another. He was their youngest brother and they knew about his drinking. It was because he was spoiled, they said. Ten years younger than his oldest sibling, and born after two miscarriages, Daddy was his mother’s miracle. But he was his father’s “mistake.” The rest of the family took turns holding the baby and changing his diapers. He tagged along with them to the fields and on dates. He’d slept in their parents’ bed till he was 11, when their father fished him out from under his mother’s grasp, shoved him alone into a cold bed and warned, “Don’t come back.”

At least that was the story that Daddy gave his older brother at their father’s funeral five years later. The youngest son refused to be a pall bearer and kicked a clot of black dirt on the old man’s coffin after it was lowered into the family plot. Two months earlier, he’d wailed over his mother’s body as it lay in state in the parlor of the farmhouse. Everybody knew of the battle that raged between the father and son over Nana Morland’s affections. Papa made no secret of the fact he hadn’t planned on another child. His son had no problem hiding behind his mother for

protection. The animosity was so palpable that, after she died suddenly of a stroke, the siblings all but removed their teenage brother from the family home. He was passed between households almost daily. In addition to meat and potatoes, he'd sometimes get a sip of their homemade hooch or a pinch of snuff. "Come on, a little bit once and a while ain't gonna hurt," he'd plead. By the time they compared notes at Thanksgiving and realized their combined indulgences meant daily doses of alcohol and tobacco, their baby brother was hooked. And, without regular chores and little supervision, Daddy never developed the Iowa work ethic. Or any other kind of ethics, his brother Norris reminisced.

"Never learned to do for himself, that one," Norris explained. In his guilt, Norris raised his nephew as one of his own sons and provided a safe haven for most of the rest on occasion.

Except for Hilda. She stayed with Daddy and Mama until the day she left town. She'd gone to Silver Falls Community College and got her secretarial certificate. Daddy insisted on going to her graduation, the first and only such ceremony he'd attended even though other children earned degrees too.

Mama told the Schmidts seated next to her on the bleachers that it was Carol crossing the stage to get her certificate. They knew, as did the whole town, that Carol died as an infant in the same tornado that wiped out the crops and caused the farm to fail. Evelyn Schmidt patted Maria's fleshy hand and remarked how proud she must be of her daughter. She pitied the poor soul, married to that horrible beast who left his baby girl's funeral to play snooker and drink with his cronies, then ended up getting into a fist-fight and spending another night in jail. Served him right to come home to a woman curled up next to the cradle in one corner of their bedroom, a china-headed doll baby clutched to her breast.

Even with her crazy, he'd managed to impregnate Maria one more time. Hilda helped everybody but Mama deal with Carol's death. In Mama's bent brain, Hilda *was* Carol. Unfortunately, the masquerade was never enough to coax Mama from benign madness.

For the rest of the family, Hilda was a warm, cleansing breeze. She could defuse Daddy's anger with an impromptu somersault. She could climb on a sulking brother's lap and wrap his calloused hands around her waist, leaning back against his filthy shirt to watch the sunset off the porch. She stood on a chair with a dishtowel wrapped to her chest to help a sister roll out biscuits for dinner, or stir the gravy so it wouldn't burn.

She was their little sister, but she was also the strongest. Hilda never complained about home. It was all quite normal to her. And her absence left a big hole. Nobody went to fetch Daddy from the bar after Hilda left for Des Moines. Her sisters and sister-in-laws each took a night checking on Maria. They made enough dinner for two, but left half in the rumbling Kenmore that smelled of 7-up and old ice cubes no matter how many times they defrosted it. Most gathered in the dining room after church to read Hilda's letters, occasionally accepting a highball from Daddy which they nursed till it was time to go home for dinner.

Earnest would read aloud from the letter first and then pass it around for everyone to read again for themselves. He'd just shown up one Sunday after church and sat down without so much as a peep of protest from Daddy. His sister passed Hilda's letter to him, and he got it first every Sunday afterward.

Hilda wrote of riding an elevator to a restaurant at the top of the Strand Hotel from where you could see all of downtown Des Moines stretched out to the sunset. She talked about the two young women with whom she shared an apartment. And she lamented that city people didn't take any better care of their teeth than country people. Her siblings imagined Hilda zipping

between tall, gleaming buildings. She would flash her smile at passersby in suits who were having very dull days until the little sprite shared her sunshine. It made everybody's week go by quicker, thinking of Hilda's glamorous life in the city.

But Des Moines was within a day's drive for Daddy, even allowing for a stop to fill up the Packard's radiator. So when one of the roommates moved to Omaha, Hilda packed off too. She still wrote every week, but the family was sad to know they could no longer dip into the sunshine for a weekend, but had to wait until the annual June picnic in Foster Park.

They were devastated when she went to Denver, Colorado, and didn't make it back in June. Daddy was roaring drunk by noon and passed out under the weeping willow next to the shelter house. Earnest read of mountaintops and traffic lights. They all remarked how quiet the picnic was this year, even with 21 screaming grandchildren. The potato salad seemed to be missing something and the fried chicken was dry.

Six months later, Earnest opened the familiar pink envelope and announced that Hilda was getting married. They wondered aloud about the groom. After all, Hilda was a free thinker. Could be some damn hippie. Maybe even somebody a little browner. "You know how Hilda is," one sister reminded. "Color doesn't matter to her. But for all our sakes, I hope he's white."

Rob was tan, but definitely white. A skiing instructor who'd come into the dentist office where Hilda worked for his annual cleaning. He flashed his perfect, white teeth as she introduced him to each one – shaking the men's hands vigorously and offering a clumsy hug to the women. She sat on his lap and they kissed often.

Daddy was especially taken with Rob, calling him "my boy" and refilling his glass each time he topped off his own. They sat on the porch and Rob talked of shushing and snow pack. It

reminded Daddy of his mother's tales of Pomerania, when the whole family bundled off for a week to a local lodge.

Of course, the wedding was in the church in which Hilda was first communed. Rob didn't have a religion anymore, so any preacher was fine with him. They all got new clothes and cried as Hilda walked down the aisle grasping Daddy's arm. She looked so grown up with her hair teased into a bouffant under a veil starched stiff so as not to crush the hairdo. Her legs were slim and tan under the white mini-dress.

Afterward, everyone gathered at the house. Most of the men adjourned to the kitchen to be closer to the ice cubes, while the women and older girls sat around the dining room table to watch her older sister remove Hilda's veil. Children played hide-and-seek outdoors or banged on the upright piano in the parlor. Nobody tried to hush them or warned them not to get their good clothes dirty.

About 5 p.m. Daddy came crashing into the dining room, landing up against the buffet, knocking over family photos and crystal candlesticks. His daughter-in-laws rushed to straighten the photos and candlesticks. Their husbands tried to herd Daddy away.

Brenda, the second-oldest granddaughter, whispered loudly to her mother, "He's drunk again."

Daddy swung and pointed a shot glass at Brenda. "Watch it, you little bitch!" he warned, pointing a finger at the 16-year-old while sloshing whiskey over his daughter-in-laws. They moved their chairs aside but stayed seated. Their husbands had long ago warned that there was no reasoning with the old man. "Just try to stay low," they advised. Most rarely even came to the house anymore. But today was special because Hilda was home.

“You know,” Daddy continued at Brenda. “You think you’re better ‘an everybody. Little snot!”

Brenda’s father was tugging on the patriarch’s free arm. “Come on back in now Daddy. You’ve told her. She’s heard you and she’s sorry. Come on back in now.”

Brenda’s cheeks were crimson and her forehead furrowed over tears that slid out despite her efforts to squeeze them back. Next to her, Hilda wept softly. Nobody moved.

Finally, the oldest daughter put down the hairbrush and walked over to Daddy. She laid her hand on his outstretched arm and softly said, “Come on now Daddy, that’s enough. You’ve made Hilda cry on her wedding day.”

Daddy shrugged free, hauled back and struck his 35-year-old daughter on the cheek. Screams erupted from all parts of the house. As Daddy raised back to strike another blow, his son tightened his grip and shoved the old man up against the buffet. Rob flew in from the kitchen, grabbed his new brother-in-law by the shoulders, flipping him around and landing a punch square against his jaw.

The table scattered. Older cousins gathered little ones like chicks in the rain and herded them out to safety on the front lawn. Inside, a mob of fists and grunts was making its way from the kitchen out the back door. Hilda fetched some ice for her sister’s cheek. And Brenda stood in the middle of the dining room screaming that she “hated everybody in this Goddamn house.”

There were no more picnics in Foster Park after Hilda’s wedding. People had to work. Children came down with the flu every June. Hilda wrote that it was Rob’s busy season. The letters came less frequently to Daddy, but everybody else got one a month. After Mama died, they came about every six months.

One day Earnest opened the envelope and announced that Hilda was moving back to Iowa. She was bringing her two children, but Rob was not coming. She didn't want to move in with Daddy, even though, Lord knows he needed looking after. It wouldn't be good for the children. She found a tiny house on the other side of town. They all chipped in for the rent and groceries. Dr. Langstrom welcomed her back, saying he hadn't found a decent assistant since Hilda moved to Des Moines. But she was only part-time and the skiing instructor wasn't regular with child support.

The family didn't mind. They were very concerned about Hilda. She took good care of the children, but was thin and sallow. One day her sister stopped by to find Hilda picking chunks of red hair out of the sink.

"I'm molting," she smiled weakly. When she confessed that she hadn't had a period in six months, Hilda's sister put her in the car and drove to the town clinic. The doctor prescribed Librium when Hilda refused the Valium.

"That's Rob's drug," she explained. "Even though he says I'm the crazy one."

Daddy told her she was nuts for giving up on a good man.

"He ain't perfect, Sissy, but nobody is," he said, patting her hand. "Nobody but Daddy, that is."

Hilda stared at the old man. The cool blue eyes were cloudy with cataracts that he refused to believe existed. Patches of white whiskers splotched across his face, missed by the straight razor he still insisted on wielding with a shaky hand. Permanent brown stains creased a mouth with only a few scraggly teeth inside. He wouldn't wear his hearing aids and shouted at everyone to "speak the hell up."

“Come on home, honey,” he pleaded again. “You know you was always my favorite. It’ll be like old times. Like before Mama died.”

They both knew it was only a matter of time before she caved to his pleas and the mounting bills of her own life. She and the kids would move in with Daddy temporarily, to save money. But Daddy had long since lost his driver’s license and been banned from every bar within trudging distance. His clothes stank and he had trouble reaching his own behind. He lived on whiskey and peanut butter sandwiches.

On the way back to her house, Hilda pulled into Foster Park and wept. She called Earnest and said she was packing to move in with Daddy. Could he come by the next morning and help?

The children answered the door in tears. Their bags were packed and boxes clearly marked in heavy black marker. The title to the car, a term life insurance policy, and a will drawn up a month earlier sat in the center of the kitchen table. An envelope bearing Earnest’s name asked him to call the ambulance and keep her secret from the rest.

She must have stayed up all night and, as the sun crowned the horizon, laid down on the bed next to her children. Just enough pills were gone and just enough time elapsed to avoid inquiry.

At the funeral, her older sisters sat on either side of Daddy. Afterward, they helped him into the van from Whispering Pines Care Center, tipping the driver for his trouble, and waving to Daddy. Earnest pulled the station wagon up, and they rode to the cemetery together.

###