

A Little Lamb Atop A Tombstone

(author unidentified as per submission guidelines)

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It was a May day like any other, in and around the farming town of Hensall, nestled in the rolling countryside of southwestern Ontario. It was a spring day in 1965, with the promise of a hot, humid, and happy summer just around the corner. Students were anxious for the school year to end the following month; few of their minds were on the start of school again the following September, which would be in the heart of the harvest time in the farming community. That day a mother was headed into town with her young daughter and baby son with her in the family car. Turning off the back road where the family farm was located, dust rose in the wafts of warm air behind the car as it proceeded down the country road. When she drove past the one-room yellow-brick schoolhouse on the next concession road, the mother glanced at it and thought of her 8-year son who was inside, no doubt waiting impatiently for the school day to end. "That's where you will be going to school in September," the mother reminded her young daughter, who was sitting in the passenger seat of the sedan. "You will be starting Grade 1; won't that be exciting?" The young girl shook her head slightly back and forth. "No, I won't, Mom," she said quietly but with conviction, "I won't ever be going to that school." The mother replied impatiently, "Of course, you will! Why would you say such a silly thing? Honestly!" The mother's attention was brought back to the road ahead as the family sedan leisurely entered the town limits of Hensall from a westerly direction.

At the same time, a young farmer was driving in his own vehicle well above the posted speed limit. He was impatient to get where he was going. He pressed the gas pedal further

downward, as he approached the town of Hensall from the north.

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The young girl sat perched expectantly on the edge of the front seat of the car. Her mother often told her that she was getting to be a big girl, what with starting school in the fall. Her mother had begun to expect the girl to do more chores in the house and to accept more responsibility. As evidence of becoming older and being more responsible, today the girl's mother would be allowing her to go to the post office to mail some letters all by herself. The girl's mother and baby brother would be able to wait in the car, instead of accompanying her to the post office as was the normal procedure.

As the girl's mother slowly glided the car into an available parking space across the street from the post office, her daughter started to feel a sense of awesome responsibility. Her mother checked in her rear-view mirror and looked ahead as well to ensure no vehicles were in sight. She then gave the girl permission to get out of the car. Grasping the letters to be mailed in her hand, the girl started to walk across the street. The post office was just a few steps away.

At that same moment, the young farmer in his speeding vehicle came around the corner. The little girl was halfway across the street. The young man, either due to being distracted by his mission at hand, or as a result of the high speed of his vehicle, did not slow down his vehicle sufficiently.

Time seemed to stand still as the careening vehicle bore down on the little girl in its path, her horrified mother watching from the driver's seat of the family sedan, white fingers gripping the steering wheel. There was no time to react, no time to think.

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It was the talk of the town that day and for weeks afterward. How had that little gal managed to find an almost superhuman burst of energy to enable her to sprint across the

remaining space to the sidewalk outside the post office? It was a miracle that the girl just barely escaped being hit by the young farmer's speeding and virtually out-of-control metal machine! It was ascertained that the young farmer was on his way to the local hotel for his customary after-work libations. There was talk that he had been drinking even before he entered the town of Hensall. That young farmer was charged with reckless driving and served a jail sentence that was particularly harsh for the times, considering that drinking in the farming community and driving over the speed limit were common occurrences. The little girl achieved a level of celebrity for her escape from the wheels of the vehicle that had borne down on her, and for miraculously cheating death when it was so close at hand.

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Sadly, that was not how it happened, what I have just written above is not true, the part about the outcome of that fateful day. It is what I wish had transpired for my special, little cousin. She had been christened Kimberly but was usually called Kim or Kimmie by family, friends, and relatives. As I recall, I always called her 'Kimmie'. I wanted to give Kimmie a second chance. To write a different ending to the story of her brief life. To ensure that her life had not been in vain. To right a wrong. To remember Kimmie and hopefully allow her to have a second life through this recollection.

Kimmie had been one of my favourite cousins. She was adorable, full of life, and fun-loving. I recall that the winter before Kimmie was killed by the young farmer's speeding vehicle, I was allowed to stay overnight at her home for the first time. Kimmie, her older brother, younger brother, and I played hide-and-seek in the house. Kimmie was always full of fun, and sometimes impish in nature, perhaps a bit of a risk-taker. At a certain point when the four of us were playing hide-and-seek, Kimmie had decided to shed some of her clothes and then hid behind an armchair not far from where I was hiding. When her mother discovered that Kimmie was playing hide-and-seek whilst partially naked, she scolded her. I can still see Kimmie in my

mind's eye, hiding not far from me behind the armchair in the living room, whilst her mother took her to task and said it was a shameful act for a young girl to do. Despite the scolding, I remember Kimmie looking across at me where I was hiding, a merry glint in her eye. It was clear that she had spirit and spunk. I remember wondering if my aunt's reaction would have been the same if one of her sons had shed some of their clothes.

Our family often went to Kimmie's family's home at Christmas time. The Christmas after Kimmie's death, we went again to visit her parents and brothers. It was overwhelmingly apparent to me even at the age of seven, that there was a proverbial elephant in the room. Although never expressly indicated to my sisters and me by our parents, there was a feeling that Kimmie's death was not to be talked about. More likely, it was inferred to let sleeping dogs lie; to not cause any more pain to Kimmie's bereaved and grieving family. That Christmas at Kimmie's home, the entire place seemed to still hold her close, and in my mind, my cousin was as present as if she had never departed.

After dinner, I played games with Kimmie's brothers upstairs in their family home. I noticed that the door to Kimmie's bedroom was closed; I was sure she must still be there! Later, we went downstairs to the kitchen, where our parents were sitting at the table having an after-dinner chat. Despite knowing better, I walked up to my aunt and asked: "Where's Kimmie? Can I go see her? Can I see inside her room?" I recall there was a look of pain and grief in my aunt's eyes, but she took me by the hand and told me that Kimmie was in Heaven now. My aunt then told me that she would take me to Kimmie's room, to show me that she wasn't there.

We went upstairs and my aunt opened the door to my cousin's room. It looked exactly the way I remembered it from the previous winter. In fact, it looked like nothing had changed, and that my cousin was expected to return to that room: it seemed to be waiting for her to come back from a brief absence. I walked around Kimmie's bedroom, touching items that reminded me of her, that had been important to her: toys and books. It seemed to me that my

aunt was glad that I had mentioned her daughter's name, and that I had wanted to see Kimmie's room. Perhaps it was a relief, maybe even a blessing in disguise, for my aunt to have someone talk about her daughter again. When my aunt and I left Kimmie's bedroom, I remember her softly closing the door, as if not to disturb the peace of that place.

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In the ensuing years, I would sometimes think of my cousin, Kimmie. As I became older, I began to think of her more as 'Kim' than 'Kimmie'. If she had lived, no doubt that pet name would have fallen by the wayside. The memory of Kim would arise in my thoughts over the years. However, at family reunions and get-togethers with our relations, talking about her seemed to be a closed subject. This was no doubt to spare Kim's family and particularly her mother any further grief. I do recall that sometimes my sisters and I discussed Kim, and her brief life and untimely death. Occasionally, my mother would say how difficult Kim's death had been on her mother, that it had changed her outlook on life. My mother said that her younger sister, Kim's mother, was never the same after the death of her daughter. Nonetheless, my aunt soldiered on because that was expected, and the only recourse.

Although living overseas for many years as an international educator, I would always return for summer and sometimes Christmas visits to Canada to see family and friends. Unfortunately, due to limited time on holidays, I did not see my relatives very often, and sometimes years would go by without a visit to my cousins with whom I had always been closest. In part due to the pandemic, I was not in Canada for a duration of four years, which further distanced me not only from my family but from my relatives. I had purchased a duplex in my hometown of Clinton years before as an investment and rented it out. This past year, when one side of the duplex became vacant, I decided the time had come to begin using it as a holiday residence. One of my cousins, a stellar hostess, arranged a get-together at her home and invited those cousins and relatives with whom I had always been most closely connected in

years past. Two of my sisters and I arrived that day, looking forward to the special occasion. Unfortunately, Kim's brothers and I had not kept in touch over the years, and they were not present at the get-together. In the intervening years, Kim's parents had passed away, as had my own.

It was as if no time had passed. My cousins, other relatives, and I had a wonderful afternoon with many reminiscences, accompanied by much laughter. Then Kim's name was mentioned, and it opened up memories and the need to talk about her. I referred to my mother's recollection of Kim telling her mother she would never go to that one-room schoolhouse near their farm. *Why had my cousin said that to her mother, did she have a premonition?* We will never know. One of my older male cousins, whom I had always looked up to and admired, shared with us that many years before when he had started a new job, his father had told him after the first day of work something that had been disturbing to him. My uncle told my cousin that one of his co-workers was the man who years earlier had been speeding down the street in Hensall and struck Kim with his vehicle. At the time it had made my cousin wonder if he should quit his job. My cousin also mentioned that he had heard that when Kim had been hit by the young farmer's vehicle, it was with such speed and force that she had been propelled into the air and ended up landing in the main street, half a block away.

One would have thought that no one, especially a small child, could live more than a few minutes after such a horrible accident or would have been killed instantly. I shared with my cousins a memory of mine that my mother had once told me and my sisters. Although Kim was so critically injured after the impact, she was still alive in the ambulance on the way to the hospital in London. At the hospital, a doctor informed Kim's parents that their daughter was a real fighter: although unconscious, she was clinging to life and was doing her best to remain alive. Unfortunately, due to the severity of her injuries, my cousin succumbed to her injuries within hours of being admitted to the critical care unit at the hospital.

As my cousins and I shared memories about our cousin, Kim, at the get-together it was clear to me that there was still unfinished business. There was still so much pain amongst us as a group at the unnecessary loss of a young life that had been so abruptly ended. We never had the opportunity to see our cousin grow up, start an adult life, marry, and have children and grandchildren, and age along with the rest of us. We wondered why the young farmer who had been speeding and possibly drinking beforehand was never charged, why there had never been any retribution for him and his act. One of my cousins recalled that the man who accidentally killed Kim would sometimes appear at community functions, and Kim's parents would have to leave because it was too painful to see him. That man who took away our young cousin's life has lived six decades longer than she did; apparently, he is still alive, a very old man now.

Life is not fair: it is one of the essential and unfortunate realities of our world. Kim cannot be brought back to life, but it is my intention with this memoir to pay homage to a beautiful and bright young girl and to keep alive her memory; and the knowledge that in tribute to her, my treasured cousin will live on not only in our memories but also in the pages of this remembrance.