

# The Passing of Lois

by Susan Curry

*I open the newspaper at the obituaries, and a flood of memories arises. Joseph Whitmore, aged 93. He lived in the little town of Wirrim, Australia, population 700, all his life. He was a tradesman, a plumber I think, a private man whose death would have caused a mere blip on the radar of community life. My mind's eye recalls the customary black-edged notice in the grocer's window, and a few friends wearing black armbands in his honor. The hearse, followed by a dozen cars, processes slowly over the short distance from church to cemetery, their lights on to indicate a funeral party.*

I never laid eyes on Joseph. So it was not his death that jolted me, so much as a small comment in the brief notice: *loving husband of Vilma, loving father of Greta, and Lois (deceased)*. Deceased Lois, yes, I remember. A little girl of about eight, the unremarkable younger sister of Greta who was in my class at school. Quiet and shy in a family that kept themselves to themselves, neither girl took much of anyone's time or attention. So it is of interest to me why Lois' death is one of the most vivid memories I took away from childhood in that town.

I think it was the suddenness. One day she was there in the third grade, doing her sums, copying words from the blackboard, drinking her milk at recess, playing on the swings, riding her bike

home like any other nothing-special kid. But she made the headlines by dying unexpectedly overnight. Her mother said that Lois had had a bath that evening before playing tag outside with her sister. She'd complained of feeling cold at bedtime but had fallen asleep with a water bottle clutched to her chest. She was dead by morning. There were no suspicious circumstances.

I felt sorry for Lois. But if pressed, I would have to admit that I felt sorrier for myself. Life had, overnight, taken a sinister turn. My grandmother's warnings about the dangers of going to bed with wet hair now made sense, along with the admonition that if all ten toes were not meticulously dried after a bath, they would drop off. Mortal danger was everywhere. I wondered if I should continue to pray, "if I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." Surely it would tempt God to take me away, as he had taken Lois. I'd have given anything to know if Lois had uttered those words on that fateful night.

I already knew about violent death—seeing "Psycho" that year had put me on permanent shower duty—but this was a subtler, creeping fear. I'd never stayed at a hotel, so that might reduce a murderer's options. But it seemed imperative to peep around the shower curtain every five seconds, just in case.

At around the same time I'd read the ghost story of a young woman who is traveling on a train with a group of friends. They laugh about the possibility that one of them might disappear suddenly, permanently, and be erased from everyone's memory. The punch line of the story is, of course, that the woman does disappear as they are plunged into the pitch black of a tunnel,

and no one realizes she's gone from their midst. That story really shook me. How many people was I not remembering, and would I be next? I lost a lot of my tenth year lying sleepless because that seemed safer.

For a time, I retained a morbid fascination for Lois. I would ride past her silent house and expect to see her ghostly form playing tag with her sister, or gazing out the window, transparent against the light. But she never appeared. Life went on as usual. Her name was spoken less and less. And because I



*Sue at age 14, when Lois died.*

didn't die, because I saw the sunrise every morning, over time I overcame my fears of annihilation. I grew to be a teenager, left that town, and made a life of my own.

Lois' passing gradually took its place as part of my box of memories called "childhood," to be opened now and then, examined and put away. But coming across Joseph Whitmore's obituary quite by chance, out of the blue, in a land 7000 miles and a world away from my present life, brought to my attention for the first time an important piece of the story which the child in me completely missed. Lois died, feeling nothing. I grew up and got over it. Now I wonder if her loving father bore her loss in his heart for the next sixty years. ♦



**Sue Curry** was born in Melbourne, Australia and has lived in Davis for over forty years. She has imported, published and written books, all with an Australian theme. She recently retired from a separate career as a psychotherapist.

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