

"Miss Marks Is Dead"

Shirley Swartz

PATTY STARED at the evening paper again. There it was, just as it was five minutes ago. It was true then. The accident that Larry had seen was Miss Marks'. The paper did not say all the things that Larry had seen, just, "Miss Lucinda Marks, 25, popular teacher at Miss Nobbs' School for Girls, died today in a traffic accident on U. S. 40. There are no survivors."

Patty quickly went to the telephone, tears shining in her eyes.

"Hello, Buns . . .

"I have something to tell you, Buns.

"Oh, you read it in the paper. Honestly, Buns, it was awful. I wanted to be the first to tell you. Larry saw it on his way home. He said they were just taking her away in the ambulance and the car was just a shambles.

"I can see her right now, just like she was at the class picnic yesterday. It's funny, but you know how she always gave the 'honk'? Remember—yesterday she forgot to honk when she left, just as if she knew! Oh, Buns, it's simply awful!

"It doesn't seem possible that she's . . . I know what friends you two were. Everybody always said how great it was, since you'd never liked school. Jenny Lou said it was because you were 'twins,' but I told her, and she needs to be told, well. . . . I told her that you liked Miss Marks because she was the only person who had ever been interesting enough herself to make school interesting. And. . . .

"You know, it was funny how much you two looked alike, even acted alike. That was the first thing everyone said when she started in at Nobbs' this year. You two could have been sisters. . . .

"We *all* will miss her like crazy. She's the nicest person we've ever had on the faculty. Listen, Buns, she didn't suffer. The car

rolled and threw her out. Crushed her skull before she could realize what had happened. Her arms and one leg were torn off after . . .

"Buns . . . Buns . . . She hung up."

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Christena Bundy put the telephone receiver slowly into its cradle, walked into the bathroom, and became very ill. She clung weakly to the wash basin, her mouth burning and acrid. Looking into the mirror, she remembered the first day of the school year at Miss Nobbs' School for Girls. She had walked into her Analytic Geometry class, looked at the new math teacher, and felt as if she were looking into a mirror. Lucy Marks' warm, brown eyes showed recognition; both of them had stared at each other. That was the start of it all.

Christena went back into her room and, sitting down on the bed, took a hidden package of cigarettes from a drawer, and lighted one of the white cylinders. This was the last pack of cigarettes that Lucy had ever given her. She had never smoked before knowing Lucy, and she really did not like it much. There were, after all, so many things that Lucy had taught her that she wished she had never learned.

The smoke from the cigarette curled gently above Christena's head, making airy loops and irregular circles. Suddenly Lucy Marks' face appeared in the smoky haze—smiling, taunting, angry, crying, pleading. All the poses she had ever used. Christena was glad that Lucy had not persuaded her to go driving with her today. She would have been lying, just like Lucy, with her head smashed and arms and legs lying all over the highway, the car they always used crumpled in a tinny heap.

She knew her mother had wondered. She had even heard her talking to her father. "It isn't normal, I tell you, Harold. It just isn't natural. Something is going on."

"You old fool," she had said silently to her mother, many times. "Just like a parrot, 'Where've you been. Where've you been. Where've you been.'"

She could see her mother did not believe her when she made up excuses. "Lie" was stamped across her mother's eyes. Christena knew her mother hated her. She hated her mother, too. She never took her any place with her. At least, Lucy had taken her places. They had gone all the places that her mother would never take her. Lucy had love. . . .

The face in the smoke smiled, she seemed to be saying, "No one will ever know. Just you and I." Christena had heard that so many times. Now no one would know. Not anyone, Lucy could never tell.

Christena smiled as she ground the cigarette out in the ash tray. "I don't give a damn," she said to herself. That was what Lucy had always said was the best policy. The smoke and its picture dissolved and Christena crushed the cigarette package and threw it into the waste basket.

Jenny Lou Kincaid walked into the library and casually announced to her mother, "Miss Marks got killed."

Her mother looked up from the book she was reading and said, "Really? How?"

"Car accident. Tried to pass another car on the wrong side and hit a concrete something-or-other at the side of the road. Arms and legs cut off. Head smacked in."

"Dear! Who was she now?"

"Oh . . . my math teacher."

"Weren't you having some trouble or other in math?"

Jenny Lou hesitated, and then nodded her head. She then walked slowly from the room, humming softly. Her mother looked after her, wondering vaguely what was wrong with her daughter.

Jenny Lou went into the kitchen and fixed herself a 'Coke.' She thought momentarily that she should call someone and find out more about Miss Marks, but instead, she took her drink and went out onto the front porch. It was cool in the shade of the porch awning, and Jenny Lou sipped the Coke and thought how glad she was that graduation was the day after tomorrow.

Now she would graduate. It was nice to be sure of things. Tomorrow would have been a bad day, but everything would be fine now. It had been perfectly awful when Miss Marks had found out about the final. Jenny Lou reminded herself that it was her own fault for putting the crib sheet in the waste basket in Miss Marks' room. Still, if Miss Marks hadn't been so snoopy, she wouldn't have found it and then there wouldn't have been all the trouble.

Miss Marks should have known that she would not pass that Analyt course without a crib. Jenny Lou almost thought that Miss Marks did not want her to get out of high school. Jenny Lou visualized herself sitting in Miss Marks' class, still trying to pass, when she had grey hair. No, that crib was the only way. Today was the day that Miss Marks was going to speak to Miss Nobbs. She was probably on her way into town to tell Miss Nobbs when. . . .

Jenny Lou smiled to herself and finished her Coke.

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Mrs. Edward Sylvester read the death notice with a great deal of shock and more relief. Sistie would not have that woman any more now and Edward . . .

Had Edward? No, it was unthinkable! She'd never know now. Or was this the way to know definitely. Men are so foolish, Mrs. Sylvester reasoned. But Edward had always been so stable . . . until she had come to Miss Nobbs'.

Eddie Sylvester rearranged the folds of her dressing gown, popped another chocolate into her mouth, and refused to think about it any

more. A cold, a terrible summer cold, was enough to worry the life out of a person for one day.

But the newspaper lay there in her lap and the name of Lucinda Marks was printed on it, black and unforgettable. Edie Sylvester sighed shudderingly and resigned herself to thinking about that "awful woman."

She hated it so when everyone on the Mother's Council called her a "wonderful girl," and "such a good teacher." "Good teacher," yes, probably taught Edward a thing or two.

It was strange. She had always wanted Edward to get on the Board of Trustees at Nobbs', and then he had been elected the year that She came to Nobbs'. Of course, it *was* perfectly impossible to think that Edward would ever stoop to . . . well, "carrying on," with some dried-up old school teacher.

Still, it was strange that he seemed so co-operative now, so willing to take Sistie to school in the morning, getting up at that ungodly hour, and to pick her up in the evenings. He'd been gone in the evenings too much, too. "Trouble with the tax reports." What a foolish excuse. Men were so stupid, basically.

Then that one awful parent-teacher meeting. Oh God, how everyone persecuted her. The way that they looked at each other, it seemed, well . . . *no* one's imagination was that good. Even her's. But when she had called Edward "Ed." Then the blushes, and stammerings, and apologies and excuses. No wonder she had had one of her migraines. God, God, the trials of being a good, faithful wife. All twenty years of marriage, and then this was her thanks for all she had done for Edward.

As long as they had been married, she had never called Edward Sylvester—"Ed." And then to have that nervy little . . . No, it was simply unthinkable.

Edward was the only thing that had ever belonged to her. Her clothes, her home, her furnishings, even her coiffure she had never been able to call her own. First it was her parents, they had owned everything, then Edward. But she owned Edward. Even Sistie had always called herself "Daddy's little girl." Edward was hers, though. All hers . . . until this year, and then She had to come along and . . .

Now Edward was hers again. There was no Lucinda Marks any more.

Mrs. Edward Sylvester smiled as she heard her husband's voice in the lower hall. She arose from her bed of pain, went to the door, and called sweetly down to him, "Edward, darling, come here. I have something to show you."

* * *

Miss Emily Wilkes read the small announcement in the death notices in the evening paper. She brushed a wisp of white hair back into place and picked up the tatting on which she had been working

before the paper had been delivered. The thread pulled tighter and tighter, and finally Miss Emily returned the work to her lap and put a hand in front of her eyes.

Miss Emily could not hold a grudge, no matter what had been done to her, and she felt pity for the young teacher. She had been young, as Miss Emily had been reminded many times.. A very brilliant young woman. Lovely, too. Miss Emily shook her head slowly as she remembered all the things that Miss Nobbs told her that Miss Marks had said.

All that had happened seemed to be so long ago. Miss Emily thought that this, her first year in retirement, had been a long one. All the angry words of last fall returned to Miss Emily's ears and made her head ache.

"She's too old." ". . . give the children a chance . . ." "out-lived her usefulness." "Outmoded methods," "Children haven't learned a thing for years."

That was not true. She had always given all the girls as much knowledge of mathematics as any text that had ever been printed. They liked her, and she liked them. She had never flunked anyone, even though she knew some of them would never have passed if she had not looked through the wrong side of her glasses.

Sixty-seven wasn't so old. Miss Emily did not feel old. Maybe with the young teacher gone. . . .

Miss Emily smiled and picked up her tating again. She must remember to call Miss Nobbs the first thing in the morning.

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The last rays of the early summer's sun were fading into the shadows on the stack of letters on Miss D. Helen Nobbs' desk. Miss Nobbs locked the door of her study and turned on her desk lamp. She did not feel as if she were really prying, she felt it her duty to inspect the late Miss Marks' letters and to discover if there was anyone to whom she could send condolences.

The short notice in the paper had read "no survivors," but surely there must be someone. Miss Marks had been a very solitary person though, Miss Nobbs recalled. None of the faculty had been close to her. In fact, the students had been her most constant companions. The little Bundy girl especially had worshipped Miss Marks.

Miss Nobbs sighed and untied the tidy bundle of letters that she had found in Miss Marks' bureau. The first one was addressed to "Lucy Marks" at the school. Miss Nobbs had not seen Miss Marks take much mail from her private box, but then, Miss Marks did not confide in any of the staff.

The first letter was from a young man named "Jack" and begged "Lucy darling" to marry him. It was dated at the opening of the school term. Miss Nobbs felt very guilty, but she reminded herself

that Miss Marks would probably appreciate someone's writing to her dear ones.

The second was from "Jack" also. It was dated two weeks later, and contained many references to "Buns," who Miss Nobbs deduced must be Christena Bundy. Again the young man asked "Lucy" to marry him. Miss Nobbs smiled when the young man made allusion to "frustrated school teachers in a damned nunnery for females." Obviously Miss Marks had refused him. Near the end of the letter there was a passage alluding to her as "Delilah," and Miss Nobbs blushed angrily, for she had always guarded the inappropriate name from being known, even to her staff.

The third letter was short. It was from the same man again, and dated only several days after the second letter. All that letter said was that Jack was leaving for South America and would never see Miss Marks again. There was one sentence that puzzled Miss Nobbs considerably. It read, "You'd better leave, Lucy, before someone finds you out for the phony you are, as I have."

The sentence made no sense to Miss Nobbs at all. She could not imagine what the young man meant. Miss Marks had been such a fine young person. It was strange too that he should change his mind that way when he had wanted to marry her so.

Miss Nobbs cleaned her glasses and picked up the fourth letter in the stack. This could not have been Miss Marks'. It was addressed to a "Miss Lucille Marcus." But the address was the school's. The greeting read "My dearest daughter." Miss Nobbs stopped. The paper had said that there were no survivors and when Miss Marks had applied for the position, her references had said "Parents deceased." Miss Nobbs felt one of her headaches coming on.

The letter read:

"My dearest daughter,

"I know you have asked us not to write to you at your school, but now I have to. Your papa is very ill, like the last time. Doctor Rosenbloom says he won't live the week. He calls for you all the time in his delirium.

"I could not tell him that you said for us never to write to you again. He don't understand that you are a young lady now. It is a good feeling to me that you can get a job in a fancy big school with all those high-class people.

"In your letter you said you would never come home again, but please, Lulu. Papa is dying, and the only thing in the world that he wants is to see you again. Get leave of absence. Please come home and make Papa happy, for you . . ."

Miss Marks had never asked for leave of absence. She had even stayed at the school during Christmas vacation. Miss Nobbs definitely had one of her headaches. She turned out the lights, leaving the letters on the desk, and went up to her room to prepare a memorial service for Miss Lucinda Marks . . . or was it Miss Lucille Marcus.