

Topsy

by Laura Weddle

Wilma sat in a rickety old wooden rocker by the window, listening to its rhythmic *skreek, skreek, skreek* as she moved back and forth. Sounds like the rocker Lilly and I used to play school in, she thought, when she was five and I was nine. Just the two of us, teacher and student. The two of us against the world.

Rain trickled down the window pane, distorting trees, houses, cars and the few people who had ventured outside. Wilma held a cigarette in her fingers and let the ash grow until it burned them. Not because she wanted to feel pain. She didn't. But because memories sometimes made her forget her presence in the here and now. She crushed out the stub and dropped it into an overflowing ash tray.

A child walked by on the street below her window. A black child, a little girl holding a carefully wrapped doll in her arms. A soggy gray kitten, ears and tail drooping, crossed the sidewalk. The child stopped and watched it. A young woman, a few steps ahead of the child, paused and shifted two grocery sacks on her hips. She turned and spoke to the child. Although the wind and rain muffled the sound of the woman's voice, her expression suggested impatience born of worry and fatigue.

I know where you're coming from lady, Wilma thought. Hang in there. Been there; done that. You got lotsa company. Some a lot younger and worse off than you. This too shall pass away. "We don't know what's comin' tomorrow—maybe it's trouble and sorrow, but we'll travel along singin' our song, side by . . ." If we did know it'd probably drive us crazy.

Wilma's eyes returned to the child, who had pulled the doll even closer. Topsy, she thought. That doll's name might be Topsy.

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Memories flooded Wilma's mind of the Christmas morning years ago when Santa had left Lilly a black doll under the tree. Daddy had bought it at the neighborhood grocery store. He'd had to wait until Christmas Eve to shop after he'd sold his share of the tobacco crop at the warehouse in Lancaster.

Mama'd been angry when she saw it.

"Why'd he get her a doll like that?" she asked Wilma, after he'd gone to the barn to milk.

"Daddy said it was the only one they had left."

Wilma had carried a blue pottery bowl to the back of the stove. She took the top

off a gray kettle, poured thick brown soup beans from it into the bowl and set it on the table.

"Besides, Lilly loves it just the same as if it was white." She set a milk pitcher beside the beans and got glasses out of the kitchen cabinet.

It wasn't that Mama was a bigot, Wilma thought. It was just that there was such a sharp dividing line back then. Mama didn't even know the "n"-word was wrong. It was the only word there was.

"I told her about a little slave girl named Topsy in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and that's why she named it that," Wilma said.

Lilly had carried Topsy everywhere.

We made clothes for it out of old scraps of feed sacks. Made us a play house under that big old maple tree. It's gone now. Lightning struck it right after I left home and burned it to the ground. Shame. We had a lot of fun under that old tree.

I'd always be the big sister and Lilly'd be Topsy's mother. Funny the way things turned out. *Lilly wanting to be the mother. Billy took care of that little detail for me when I was sixteen. Let me show you around the church. My daddy won't care. He's the preacher. Come on over here and lay down by me on these choir robes.*

Sometimes, all these years later, she thought she could still feel his warm breath on her neck. Hear his ragged breathing that she took to be a sign of his love for her, as strong as hers for him. Billy'd go on to college and be a preacher, like his daddy. She'd be a perfect wife, and they'd live happily ever after.

Idiotic me, little Hester Prynne. Everything but a big letter A.

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Wilma's laugh dissolved into a coughing spell. She pulled her sweater closer around her. The sight of the rain raised chill bumps on her arms. She glanced at the clock and back to the scene outside her window. The wind was stronger now. Leaves blew wildly on their branches. Some hit the window, making little whipping sounds, like the sting of a switch on bare skin. A line from a poem she'd memorized in school came to her and she said it aloud. "Oh lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud. I fall upon the thorns of life. I bleed."

I dread to go out in that, she thought. Would anybody even care if I didn't show up? Probably not. Only if I didn't keep the appointment. Not because they care about me. Because of the money. Got to fill up the time. If I'm not there somebody else needs to be. Money makes the world go round. First chemo, then radiation, the doctor had said. Or was it the other way around? "Life gets complicated when you get past eighteen, but the class of . . ." She hummed a little snatch of the Statler Brothers song before her mind wandered back to Lilly and Topsy.

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One night after supper Lilly'd been playing with Topsy in the kitchen. Mama and Daddy were sitting by the Warm Morning stove in the front room. Daddy was always tired after the long days in the fields, walking behind a plow, cutting tobacco and spearing it onto sharp sticks, doing any one of a thousand other year-round tasks. So bed time came early. Sometimes it would still be light outside.

Wilma remembered how restless she'd been at those times. How she'd look out the window and see cows and horses, even people still moving about. She and Lilly didn't talk much then. They knew better than to keep Daddy awake. Sometimes they

read before it got too dark to see. Titles of some of Wilma's favorite books floated up. *The Sword in the Mountains*. Short scenes from *Silas Marner* and *Les Miserables* in her third grade reader. Stories about the Civil War, and characters like Eppie and Cosette skittered through her mind like mice in the cellar.

Lilly had come into their room one night and crawled up on the bed beside Wilma. She usually pulled up the covers and tucked her doll in beside her, but tonight she was alone.

"Where's Topsy?" Wilma asked.

"She was cold, so I found her a good place to sleep," Lilly answered.

I guess I was so anxious to get back to my book, I didn't think to ask her where she'd put Topsy, Wilma thought.

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She pulled a tissue out of a box on the table beside her and held it to her mouth, coughing into it, trying to catch her breath. I've got to cut back on these cigarettes, she thought. Seems pretty silly to try to stop now, though.

The clinic doctor had seemed distracted when he told her she ought to stop smoking. Maybe it was the room full of patients waiting in line to see him. This was a free clinic.

"The damage is already done," he had said, not pulling any punches. "But it might make your breathing a little easier when we start the treatments."

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The time for getting up in the morning back in their childhood was as early as bedtime the night before. When it was cold and dark outside, Wilma had hated leaving the warm covers to go into the kitchen for breakfast.

She shivered at the thought of it, even after all these years, and pulled her sweater sleeves down over her hands. The heat in her third floor walkup was never quite warm enough in winter, and in summer she roasted. Chicago was as cold as a witch's tit, but this apartment was what she could afford on her waitress salary, and anyway, she was used to it.

Why'd I ever come to Chicago in the first place, she wondered.

Because of Allen, of course. Said he had a good job up here and we'd make it just fine. How could I resist that coal black hair and those icy blue eyes? You'd think I would have learned, after Billy. Maybe I was just born under a dark star. Or maybe not. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings." You had an answer for everything, didn't you, Mr. Will?

When Allen pulled out after a year, he'd taken a piece of her soul with him. Along with what little savings she'd managed to put away. Even the little gold locket with their pictures that Lilly'd given her when she left home. Thieving bastard.

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Mama's screams before daylight had terrified Wilma and Lilly.

"John, John, come in here!" The panic in Mama's voice made her words hard to understand. "They's a rat that's crawled up in the oven and burned up, and I can't get it out." The rest of what she said was lost in her screams.

Wilma and Lilly were right behind Daddy as they all ran for the kitchen. There was Mama on the floor in front of the stove, waving a dish towel, trying without success to dispel the acrid, black smoke pouring out of the oven.

“Get it out,” she yelled, “before it sets the house on fire.”

Grabbing the towel, Daddy dropped to the floor, opened the oven door and stuck his hand inside. With the dish towel for protection, he pulled out a charred object and slung it across the room. The reeking, blackened, smoky thing landed on a chair beside the back door.

The instant she saw it, Lilly recognized Topsy. She ran to the chair and tried to lift her doll, but the melting rubber and hot singed hair made it impossible. She fell down in front of the chair and tried to encircle its seat with her arms.

“Topsy’s burnt up—she’s all burnt up,” Lilly sobbed, over and over, until all she could manage were gasps and hiccups.

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I wonder how much of that day Lilly remembers, Wilma thought.

She pictured Lilly now, all grown up, teaching in a small college back home in Kentucky. Literature, of course. What else? Neither one of us could ever get enough of books. I still can’t. How else could I endure life’s slings and arrows? I’ve never even got to see Lilly teach. God, how I’d like to. I’ll go see her sometime. Maybe next spring. Maybe when the leaves come out and the wild flowers bloom. That’s when I’ll go.

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Her finger felt the sting of a burn. She stuck it into her mouth to cool it. How did that cigarette get in my hand, she wondered. I don’t remember lighting it.

She glanced at the clock. Two-thirty. Her appointment was at four. How was it that every day just seemed to slide into the next with her barely noticing? She walked to the kitchenette and found the cup she’d drunk from the night before. She rinsed it out and poured in two fingers of Southern Comfort from the half empty bottle on the counter. Mary Kate sent her a bottle every so often. The Liquor Locker she managed in Lexington gave her good discounts. Wilma smiled at the thought of her bright, overly serious, hard-working daughter. She musta got whatever little bit of good was in both Billy and me. Good thing she dodged the bad. I can hear her now: *Mama, don’t you drink this up too quick. Just sip along on it slow, and I’ll send you some more the next time it goes on sale.*

Wilma loved her daughter but they weren’t close. Billy had never acknowledged her and Wilma’d had to raise her as best she could. She had been little more than a baby herself at the time. Maybe she could have done a better job, but she didn’t know how. She’d managed to get Kate through high school and two years of business at the community college. Enough to fit her for a decent job.

Poor Billy, she thought. Being a preacher might have been a worse fate for him than mine was for me. His big dream was to travel and see the world, no matter what the cost. Instead, he had to settle for being a small time country pastor, his every move judged by his flock, not to mention the tight rein of his devout wife Celeste.

“To thine own self be true, and it must follow as the night the day . . .”

Oh, Billy, Billy.

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She carried the glass back to the window and sat down. She sipped the sweet liqueur and let her mind drift back to the day Topsy had burned. Seeing Lilly’s grief made

her search her mind for a solution. The answer came like a flash of lightning. She ran to Lilly and put her arms around her.

"I know what let's do, Lilly," she said. "Let's bury her. Let's give her a real nice funeral."

It took me a while to convince her, finally she gave in. Me, being a right smart older, she'd usually follow my lead. Course that wasn't always a good thing. I could think up some pretty mean things for us to do. Poor old Uncle Duke had to go hungry more than once when we stole his lunch out of the barn loft.

Wilma had made a dress for Topsy out of white tissue paper, and they'd fashioned a coffin out of an old shoe box from the back of their closet.

"Don't she look pretty, Lilly?" Wilma said. "Let's take her down in the field and put her under that tree where the violets come up every spring." They'd dug a hole under the bare branches of the walnut tree down in the pasture. The sun was shining and the air had a certain warmth to it, like the promise of an early spring. Cows in the next field eyed them curiously, but soon lost interest and turned back to their grazing.

Wilma and Lilly sang a few lines of "Shall We Gather at the River," and Wilma talked about what a good doll Topsy had been before her unfortunate accident. About how much Lilly loved her and how much she'd be missed.

Finally, the time came to place Topsy in her grave. Until then Lilly had done well with the ceremony. But when she saw Wilma lowering the covered shoe box into the hole, her crying came back louder than ever.

I couldn't think what to say to her, Wilma thought, but then I remembered the violets.

"Don't cry, Lilly," she'd said. She put her arms around Lilly and held her close. "Topsy's not gone." Her voice was soft, like a lullaby. "Next spring she'll come back as beautiful purple violets, right here under this tree. When you see the flowers, you'll know it's her."

The words were a balm to Lilly. She seemed to understand Wilma's meaning, and her crying stopped.

"I'll come back every year to see her," Lilly said.

It had been so long since she'd seen Lilly. Now they sent cards on birthdays and at Christmas, always enclosing short notes. Most of Lilly's ended with "I'm going to visit our tree again soon."

It was like a pledge between them.

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Wilma looked at the clock. Four fifteen. Time to go to the clinic. She was weaker now, and it was harder to make the trip. She had taken to using a cane, and that steadied her. She put on her coat and a plastic rain hat, and closed the door behind her.

That's when I'll go see her, she thought. Next spring when the violets bloom.