



# The Last of the Fairy Tales

Story and photos by Rachael Hanel



**T**he night of Lisa and Wendy Schonen's wake, Dad drives our powder blue boat of a Cadillac into Waseca, Mom in the passenger seat and me in the back. It's early evening, supper time. Street lights flicker on as the wan March sun goes to bed in the western sky. Dad trolls for a few minutes looking for a parking space; cars hug curbs continuously on the streets surrounding Kinder Home for Funerals. We find a spot a few blocks away and walk to the funeral home; dirty city snow crunches under our boots. At the front door, we tromp on the floor mat and wipe our feet. Dad goes through the heavy wooden door first, holding it open for me and Mom and a few people straggling in behind us.

Walt Kinder himself acts as door man; his funeral home is a one-man show. The indoor lights shine off his slicked-back, jet

black hair. Somehow he keeps his tan year-round, which leads Mom to whisper periodically that he must have Indian blood. Having Indian blood is not something people around here acknowledge, but the dark skin and black hair and high cheekbones of people we know tell the truth. Kinder's tan complements the gold he wears on his fingers and wrist and around his neck. He greets us with a muted nod, which Dad returns.

Dad, Mom and I move slowly through the mass of people in the foyer. Most everyone in town knew Lisa from her job at Main Street Café. And if they didn't know her, then they know her husband, Jim, a car salesman.

Lisa and Wendy died in a house fire a couple of days before. Lisa was just 24; Wendy was five. Dad had already been to Woodville Cemetery earlier in the day to dig the graves. He will bury them in the newer part of Woodville, down by the garage.

When we get to the guest book, Dad stops to sign our names. I reach around Dad to grab a visitation card, that piece of paper folded like so many others with a soft forest scene printed on front, Lisa and Wendy's obituaries inside, and Psalm 23 on the back. I enter the viewing room squarely sandwiched between Dad and Mom. I'm eight but quickly approaching Mom's height, though I come only up to the middle of Dad's barrel chest.

People fill the room. I've never seen Kinder's so crowded. They flow like sand into spaces among chairs covered with padded beige, and their feet planted into soft carpet. They speak quietly in groups of twos and threes, words mixing together to create one low hum. In their hands, they wring visitation cards and Kleenex into ersatz origami.

The air in funeral homes feels different than outside air. Tonight, a heaviness presses down, ghostly fingers dancing on my flesh. This palpable grief thickens the air; it's like an August day in a swamp. The bodies breaking down infuse the space with zinging, invisible currents of energy. Lisa and Wendy are breaking down physically, their cells starving and withering. But the living are giving something off, too, releasing grief out of their pores. I breathe that invisible weight into my nose

and mouth, and it travels down my chest like a rock and settles in my lungs. The charge in a funeral home is a magnetic pull that either repels people or draws them in. It draws me in.

At this wake, the charged air interferes with my hearing and vision, like the lightning that makes our AM car radio crackle. Voices start to grow faraway and dreamlike, including Dad's, as he glad-handed and chatted with others (*Do you know how the fire started? Have you talked to Jim? How's he doing? This is just a shame; they'd only been married a few months . . . Lisa was just the nicest thing and that daughter, gosh, what a cutie . . .*).

We inch our way forward. The processional filing toward the caskets moves slowly, and the line behind us soon weaves out of the visitation room, out of the foyer, out through Kinder's front door. I start to lose track of those around me. The caskets will not let me see others in the room. I see only Lisa and Wendy, the soft funeral home lights trying desperately to cast pink upon their pallid faces. I float forward, holding my gaze steady upon Lisa and Wendy. Dad and Mom fall away from my periphery. I sense them but cannot see them, as in my mind Lisa and Wendy become larger and larger until they take up the entire space in the

room. The three of us are the only ones here. It is just me, and death.

In the smaller casket, Wendy's blonde ringlets splay out on the white pillow. Walt's wife, Edie, has a flair for doing the hair and makeup for the dead. With Wendy, Edie had tried to recreate a princess. Wendy wears the flower girl dress she had worn at her mom's wedding to Jim.


After my few quiet moments in front of Wendy, I step to my right, in front of Lisa's casket. I come to within inches of her face, cock my head, and lean in. Death does not quell her beauty. Her hands are sculpted into a folded position on her stomach. Her wedding dress shimmers. She's a Victorian maiden, surrounded by the silky whites of the casket fabric. I do not smell death. I smell only sweetness from nearby bouquets. Her face is waxy and flat, but still she radiates a hint of beauty, like in the days I remember her alive.

\* \* \*

There's not a mark upon Lisa or Wendy. They died of smoke inhalation rather than burns. It's as if God Himself did not want to mar his perfect creations or scar their skin. Lisa looks no different than pictures of Sleeping Beauty in my fairy-tale books. I want to believe that's who she is,

resting there quietly because she pricked her finger on a spindle.

Dad nudges me. I break from my reverie, look around and see that I'm holding up the line. I move on. As I walk out of the visitation room behind Mom and Dad, I turn around for a last look. That night the casket lids will close on much more than just the bodies of Lisa and Wendy. The reality of this world sinks into my psyche. A reality of canneries and factories, of women's perms and jeans too tight for their fleshy hips, of people driving the same paths day after day. A reality of death.

In this version of Sleeping Beauty, with Lisa playing lead, there's no "And they lived happily ever after." Waseca is no fairy-tale land, the west end of town marked by the trailer court and ugly steel rail tracks and gas stations. I have seen beauty die. It's right here in front of me. I had a notion that beauty could protect one from death, as it did in fairy tales. But now I know that fairy tales were just an escape into a world that does not exist. I think it's around this time that I put the fairy tales away. 

*Rachael Hanel is a freelance writer and college instructor who lives in Madison Lake, Minn. This is an excerpt from her memoir-in-progress, *We'll Be the Last Ones to Let You Down*.*



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