

12-10-96

## Robin

The new boy was "different." He was the only new boy to enter my fifth-grade class in the middle the fall semester. Fifth grade students belong to an age group that is not known for its ready acceptance of anything new and different. He came from another part of the country and had an accent which set him apart from the rest of the class. His appearance set him apart, too: he was tall and thin with sparse colorless hair carefully combed with the kind of hair dressing popular among boys and men in the late twenties. (I think that must have been before "a little dab will do you.") His limp, generously cut gray pants were bunched around his waist with a leather belt; his somewhat rumpled white shirt hung from his shoulders as though he hadn't yet grown into an older brother's clothes. He was quiet, shy, and always hanging silently on the edges of the class no matter what we were doing. I can believe now that he needed desperately to belong and was offering himself with diffidence for whatever niche he could fill in our class. We, of course, didn't see his need. I had heard that children were cruel; I didn't see that we were being cruel to him: we simply did not *see* him. I certainly never saw anyone being intentionally cruel to him, although he may very well have seen our treatment differently. We simply didn't see him. Or, at any rate, I didn't.

His name, Robin Joyce, was not at all in his favor. I'd never heard of *Robin* as a name.

One day during our music class, he volunteered, with considerable diffidence, to sing a song when the teacher said she needed someone to sing in a school assembly. The next day he handed her a piece of sheet music and faced the class. The song was Ethelbert Nevin's "Trees." He sang it in a clear treble voice. But, horror of horrors, the poem "Trees" was written by Joyce Kilmer. JOYCE! There was that name again. Any relation to Robin Joyce? And he sang about those *robins* nesting in the tree. Doom. I knew he was hopeless.

Miss Doviellu Bullion, the auditorium teacher, was pleased with what she heard. She decided that a student singer should be accompanied by a student pianist. No one volunteered, but she knew that I was studying piano and could read music. She insisted that I read through the music a couple of times and then accompany Robin in a repeat of the song. I was far from pleased. I was a very shy child and intensely disliked performing before anyone, especially my peers. I didn't have the foresight (or dishonesty) to play wrong notes and stumble about.

Robin and I became a performing pair. Time and again during the year, he was asked to sing. It was always assumed, of course, that I would accompany him. He knew only the one song. What could I do? I don't think I was ever overtly rude to Robin, but I certainly never had anything to say to him. I was too polite to tell him what I thought of "Trees." By January *trees* was a five-letter word in my vocabulary, worse than any other word I knew. It could be that the rest of the class felt differently about Robin and "Trees"; at least I don't remember being teased about him, but I could *feel* my friends rolling their eyes and exchanging glances whenever the song title or Robin's name came up.

As suddenly as he had appeared in our class in the fall, in the spring he disappeared. Several times Miss Bullion regretted that she couldn't call on Robin and me to "render" trees for an assembly or a visiting dignitary, but my life suddenly felt lighter and happier. I could now forget Robin and his song. Over the years, however, I've wondered about Robin. Did he ever get to stay in a school long enough to be accepted by his peers?

I suppose he had a lovely treble voice, and, who knows, when his voice changed, maybe he was fortunate enough to be gifted with a beautiful tenor voice. If he did, I hope he was able to enlarge his repertoire. If he prospered as a singer, I hope I would have noticed such a name in the newspaper, but I never read about him. Perhaps he changed his name.

### Trees

I think that I shall never see  
A poem lovely as a tree,  
A tree whose hungry mouth is pressed  
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast,  
A tree that looks at God all day  
And lifts its leafy arms to pray.  
A tree that may in summer wear  
A nest of robins in her hair,  
Upon whose bosom snow has lain,  
Who intimately lives with rain,  
Poems are made by fools like me,  
But only God can make a tree.

Joyce Kilmer