

Billie

Kiki Eglinton

Billie was a favorite aunt. Six years younger than my mother and the youngest of three daughters, she was named Wilmina Malbie, the closest approximation to William Maltbie, the son my grandfather was not to have.

Billie seemed to excel in everything she touched: in academics and her social life, she was a true southern belle. What neither she nor her sisters could achieve, though, was her father's full approval. The perfection he demanded could never be fully delivered.

Billie's beaux were endlessly exciting and my brother and I would vote, as they came and went, for which one we thought was the most handsome or, more important, which liked *us* best.

As we moved from Ohio to Illinois to New Jersey, Billie would be the visitor I most anticipated. She was beautiful, lively, very intelligent, and through my youthful eyes, she led a life close to stardom. Plus all that, she taught us new card games on each visit. A graduate of Wilson College, she went to join her older sister and brother-in-law in China as Presbyterian missionaries to teach the mission children. That she was running away from a failed romance and took her broken heart with her was the part of the story I always liked best.

When she returned from China, she attended Union Theological Seminary, taught college in Greensboro, NC, worked for United Church Women, the World Student Service Fund, and during World War II she worked in Geneva, Switzerland with World Student Relief. She earned a Masters of Divinity from Yale Divinity School and when the Presbyterians finally ordained women, she was the fifth in line. She shared a pulpit with an Episcopal priest in a combined congregation in Indian Hill, Ohio. She was the first woman to be invited to give the prayer in the United States Senate, and she received an honorary doctorate from her alma mater, Wilson College.

Billie's professional career ended with her retirement from the National Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia as the Director of Student Loans and Scholarships. Every position she left was filled by a man at a considerably higher salary.

Having never married, despite the lineup of suitors, a week before her retirement Billie married a former beau she had met in China, but had then spurned. He subsequently married, but when his wife died, somehow he knew how to find Billie and invited her to visit him in Florida. Her courtship and love affair with Maxcy, at age sixty-five, was as romantic as that of a twenty year old!

Somewhere along in my adolescence, I made a conscious decision that I wanted to emulate the career path and professional achievements of my aunt combined with the graciousness, hospitality, and social ease of my mother. What a tall order!

After my parents' divorce, when I was thirteen, my mother and I moved into an apartment in New York City that we shared with Billie. Although I was away at boarding school much of that time, I began to be aware of Billie's perfectionist standards – those that she had resisted from her father, but which seeped into her life just as rain seeps into the ground.

"You're on the basketball team? Why I never considered you very athletic," she countered when I burst forth with my good news. And when the progressive school I attended stressed extensive comments on individual development over grades, her observation to me was, "Well academics aren't your strength, so this is probably a good system for average students."

I sought Billie's approval and admiration just as she surely must have sought her father's. She was my adored aunt.

Billie tutored me to help me pass my college boards and through her academic contacts, I'm sure she helped in my college acceptance. I know she cared. We spent lots of time together actually, but because Billie was who she was, our outings were educational or cultural and somehow I felt measured by my attentiveness and retention of information. I guess she had hope that she could challenge me to be better. She worried about my religious life when I became a Quaker, and buried in a file she had built in preparation for my mother's memorial service that she shared with me was a letter she had written to my cousin referring to my children: "For all I know," she wrote, "Kiki's children are pagans." I was so pained by what I read that I couldn't even discuss it with her for a very long time. How little she had actually tried to find out; how little she knew of me or of them. Once again, we were being held up to her defined standards.

It is now a joke, so characteristic was it of Billie, but at the time I was devastated. I sent her a copy of a newsletter I had written (a new

responsibility in a new job), because it contained an article about my appointment as the executive director of the New York City Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers. I thought she would be proud.

Maybe she was, but she returned it without comment red-lined with corrections.

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