The First Martyr

"Boom-boom! Gee, it's great to be crazy!"

The words of the song repeat in my head as I walk hurriedly beside the split-rail fence in David Zelinski's back yard. The air of this late October Saturday morning is tingly and cool against my face, but sharp points of sunlight already warm the wet leaves under my sneakers and light the dew on the fence row. I can picture the singer, nine-year-old Frances, perched at her favorite spot on David's fence, her high pitched warble ringing out: "Boom-boom!"

Today is Frances Rose Xavier's birthday, and since she is nine, she is two years older than me, Stacey Anne Bennet. She is only one year ahead in school, because I started school early and Frances started late. Frances has taught me her crazy song. I think it's a joke but she is very serious. Frances is always serious. She doesn't look at me when she talks and I have the feeling that she is seeing something I can't see. Frances knows things, because she is older. Does she think I'm crazy, too?

I continue my short-cut through the neighborhood, picking my way across Chizeselski's orchard, still thinking of Frances. The air is full of the damp cidery smell of fallen apples and I'm careful where I step in my newly-washed keds.

I spot part of a worm sticking out of a half-rotten apple and it makes my stomach turn. I remember Frances' other favorite song:

"Nobody likes me, everybody hates me, I think I'll go eat worms."

I don't like the thought of eating worms and I try not to look too closely at the apples on the ground. Frances also sings this song on David's fence. Ten-year-old David and his little brother Chris are the only boys in our girl-dominated, all-Catholic neighborhood. Frances says boys are dumb. Frances sings the worm-song until the dumb-boy David comes out of his house and tells her to get off his fence. Then Frances sings louder: "Nobody likes me, everybody hates me!"

I have a special reason for my lone walk this morning. Susan Kozinski's mother is picking me up at the corner of Catalpa Street and Western Avenue, to take me to our Girl-Scout meeting. Susan lives in a different neighborhood, with Protestant kids. Frances says that Protestant kids don't even know who the Blessed Virgin Mother Mary is; they think she's just somebody famous like a movie star, like Marilyn Monroe. I know what Marilyn Monroe looks like because I saw her picture on a movie poster once, and she doesn't look at all like the mother of baby Jesus. I wonder if Protestant kids pray to Marilyn Monroe.

Now I am crossing Frances' back yard, and as I round the corner of the garage I see her standing in the gravel drive with her little sister Ruthie and the three-year-old twins, Esther and Beth. The twins are giggling and playing with a little blond bundle of wagging fur. Frances notices me and shouts, "Stacey! Come and see! Come and see my birthday present!"

I quickly join their circle and bend down for a closer look, noticing as I stroke the soft fur that the puppy is the same tawny color as my own braids. "Hi puppy!" I say, receiving a big wet lick on my face. The puppy wags his tail and licks me again.

As I straighten up, Frances is talking excitedly. "The puppy's name is Stephen," she says, staring with wide-eyed intensity at something over my shoulder. "I named him myself, after St. Stephen, the first martyr."

Frances is very animated for Frances; she is telling me the whole story of how the puppy was a birthday surprise this morning at breakfast, still focusing all the while on some unseen point past my shoulder. I don't think St. Stephen is a good name for a dog, but I don't say this to Frances, because it is her dog, and her birthday. Besides, the saints and martyrs are important to Frances. There are eight children in her family and all of them are named after saints. Frances got the best name, because she is oldest: Frances Xavier,
first and last both the same as the real saint.

I look at Ruthie, standing half-behind her older sister, and she gives me a shy smile. Ruthie is only a month younger than myself but a year behind me in school, and small for her age. I understand how it feels to be the second child, and I wonder if she too, tries to be like her older sister but just can’t do it. Ruthie got run over by a car once, in her own driveway, with their own station-wagon, when her mother was backing out of the driveway. There were seven small heads in the station-wagon, not eight, but nobody noticed because Ruthie is little and quiet and nobody counted. But it was in the spring and the gravel drive was soggy from rain and the tires squished Ruthie down into the mud and she wasn’t hurt. I think how scary it must feel to get run over by a car and wonder what it’s like to have too many children to count.

At this moment, my thoughts are interrupted by Mrs. Xavier bustling from the house with babes in arms, herding a flock of small children toward the station-wagon.

“Frances! Ruthie!” she calls, “Bring the twins, put the puppy in the breeze-way, and get in the car! We need to go!”

Frances is not having a real party for her birthday; they are going to visit her grandmother instead. Mrs. Xavier’s harried voice reminds me that I should be on my way as well. I wave good-bye and hurry on to Catalpa Street. It is only a half-block to the corner of Western Avenue and the wind is picking up, changing the patterns of sunlight and ruffling the dry leaves from the trees. I walk fast now, unsure of the time and wishing I had remembered to wear my Cinderella watch. Nearing the end of the street, I look for Mrs. Kozinski’s blue sedan, but see only the fast-moving traffic on the divided highway of Western Avenue. As I slow my pace, something brushes against the back of my leg and I turn to see what it is.

“Stephen!” I exclaim, startled to see the puppy there. “No!” I say sternly, “Go home!” Why is he here? My mind races; how did he follow me? How did he get out? Stephen runs in a circle around me, then crouches on his front paws, looking up expectantly, tail wagging. “No!” I say again, louder this time, stomping my foot. “Stephen, go home!”

Stephen thinks I am playing, he is only a puppy; he doesn’t understand. Stephen barks and runs a wider circle around me, into the street. It happens so fast before I can think; the wheel of a passing car catches the puppy and rolls him into the far lane. “Stephen!” I cry, hands to my face. Stephen is moving, trying to stand up. Cars are swerving around him, missing him. I hesitate, watching the rapid traffic and the struggling puppy. My mother has told me never to cross Western Avenue, it is too dangerous. But the puppy is still alive, maybe Stephen will be okay. If only he could make it to the grassy middle of the highway...Unclear of what to do, I look for a break between the whizzing cars, when a large semi-truck passes in the far lane. My view is blocked briefly by cars in the near lane, but I know Stephen has been hit by the heavy wheels, and there is no soft mud to cushion him, only the hard pavement underneath. I see the puppy now, and he is not moving.

Mrs. Kozinski is still not here. I don’t know how much time I have, I don’t know if I should wait like my mother said, or do something. My stomach feels sick again, worse than the worm-apple. I have to do something. I remember Mr. Xavier’s truck in the driveway; maybe he is home. I run all the way back to Xavier’s house, braid flying, up the gravel drive to the back door. My breath is coming in short gasps as I pound on the back door. Mr. Xavier comes to the door and I hear myself telling him about the puppy in a high, shaky voice. He grabs his keys and helps me into his truck, and the only thing he says to me is, “Where?”

We can see lights flashing at the end of Catalpa Street and a police car stopping. Everything is confusing when we reach Western Avenue. The policeman is stopping traffic; Mr. Xavier parks the truck at the side of the road. Mrs. Kozinski arrives as I’m climbing out of the truck, and in a daze, I walk over and get into her car. As we pull away, I turn to see Mr. Xavier and the policeman lifting Stephen into the squad car. Susan asks, “What’s going on?” but no words will
come out of my mouth.

When I am back home, after the Girl Scout meeting, I am afraid to ask about Stephen, but I want to know. I'm sitting at the kitchen table, staring at my liverwurst sandwich. Liverwurst looks like mushed-up worms. I'm not hungry. My sister Sarah looks at me and says, "Frances' puppy died."

The sandwich is all blurry. I look down at my blurry hands and wish I had long pretty fingers like Sarah. But you can't change anything by wishing.

"Do you want to go see Frances?" my mother asks.

I'm scared to see Frances now, but I nod my head, yes.

I walk with my mother past David's fence and through the orchard. The day is warmer now and I feel too warm in my sweater. I think I will have to go to confession now and tell the priest that I killed something; that I killed my friend's dog. To kill is a mortal sin. I will have to say many rosaries to the Blessed Virgin Mother.

Frances' mother opens the door when my mother knocks, and we are invited in. We step into the kitchen and Mrs. Xavier says it's nice of us to come and tells me I can go up and see Frances if I want. The kitchen smells like linoleum and steamed cabbage and I hear Mrs. Xavier offer my mother some hot tea as I start up the narrow stairs to Frances' room. I wonder what my mother will talk about with Mrs. Xavier because they usually just comment on the weather when they see each other at mass.

Frances is lying on her bed with her hands behind her head, staring at the ceiling. Her upturned eyes are glistening, watery, and I think maybe she has been crying. I think she must hate me now. She doesn't look at me, she just says, "hmmm," very slowly, like she is thinking. I sit cautiously on the edge of the bed, still too warm in my sweater, and look down at my hands. They are blurry again and there is a lump in my throat, choking me. I am a murderer. How can Frances ever forgive me? How can I ever...

"It was meant to be."

I turn and look at Frances, and her eyes are focused on the wall above my head.

"It was meant to be," she repeats solemnly, "I always knew someone in our family would be a martyr someday, and Stephen was the first, the first martyr."

After a painful moment, I ask, "Are you mad at me?"

Frances doesn't answer my question. She continues talking in her solemn voice, "I always knew my family was special. We are Xaviers. Stephen was not an ordinary puppy. St. Stephen Xavier. He was chosen. It's an honor to be a martyr."

Walking home with my mother, there is only silence and the rustle of leaves. The earthen smell under the leaves that usually makes me feel comfortable and content instead makes me shivery, even though I am warm. Somehow, the earth has changed, full of secrets I can't understand. The apples in the orchard look the same, but I know that nothing is the same as before. The first martyr. I hope Stephen is the last. Martyrs don't have to eat worms. The worms will eat them instead.

by Susie Russell