

Prologue



Silver Nightingale Alone: 1928

What an exquisite corpse she made!

Certainly, an indelicate thought to have at someone's wake, but if you knew the lovely departed like the others who'd come to pay their respects to her that afternoon, you'd understand she would have expected the compliment. It was Elinor Wylie, after all, someone who for decades coolly dominated any room with her classical bronze-haired beauty. Laid out in a shimmering silver dress by Paul Poiret, Elinor's slender body was hugged by the ornamental design. She'd loved the way the added weight of the numerous cut crystals and silver jewels sewn onto the bodice pressed against her, an aspect that made her dub the couture dress "coat of mail" for the way its silver scales resembled seventeenth-century body armor. And in many ways, she was like a lithe silver soldier lying there— battle weary, stoic, vengeful.

It was an intimate memorial. Elinor's ever-pragmatic mother, Anne Hoyt, exhausted from a lifetime of dealing with an invasive press corps hunting her scandal-prone daughter, chose to hold the service in the apartment where Elinor had died, though it may not have been the best idea by the shell-shocked look of her third husband, William Rose Benét. Helplessly, the editor

and poet had watched the life of his beloved muse drain from her body. Every wife after Elinor claimed Bill never truly recovered. (The wife before Elinor had died of cancer so, honestly, Bill didn't have a great track record with spouses.) Whispers in the room recounted Elinor and Bill's last moments. She'd told him that she felt faint, and he'd sprinted for a glass of water, returning to find her looking at him with unseeing eyes as he tried to push the glass into her hand.

"Is that all it is?" she'd asked him as the stroke knocked her to the floor.

Despite the small gathering of family and close friends, there was serious literary clout within the room including her publisher, Blanche Knopf, poet Edna St. Vincent Millay, and composer Douglas Moore. Standing by the casket as she choked back tears, ginger-haired Millay quietly read a sonnet that Wylie had written two years earlier that seemed to predict her early demise.

*Musa of the sea-blue eyes,
Silver nightingale alone
In a little coffin life;
A stone beneath a stone.
She, whose song we loved the best,
Is voiceless in a sudden night:
On your light limbs, O loveliest,
May the dust be light!*

Even witnesses like Irish writer Mary Colum, who was not a fan of Wylie's narcissistic antics, reacted strongly to seeing her corpse. "I could not look at her dead body without giving way," Colum remembered in her memoir. "I wept openly as I knelt before her, for something had passed away from the earth, spirit, and fire, and a sort of emotional power hard to qualify." Upon leaving the service the sensitive Moore, looking obviously distraught, was one of the first guests to comment publicly on how ravishing Dead Elinor was. "I have just come from Elinor Wylie's

funeral,” he announced to friends as he passed their table in a restaurant in explanation for his appearance. “The drawn lines had all gone from her face. She looked younger and more beautiful than I had ever seen her.” *Yes, heads nodded knowingly, so Wyliesque! Such ethereal beauty, such a shocking end.*

Elinor’s sudden death caught most of the world off guard. *Time* magazine mourned the loss of the 42-year-old “famed poetess and novelist” and the banners of the largest city newspapers paid tribute to her talent in their remembrances. Smalltown papers across America covered, too: “Death Comes to Elinor Wylie” from Logansport, Indiana; “Novelist Dies of Bad Stroke” from Ogden, Utah; and “Stroke Kills Elinor Wylie” made front-page news in Syracuse, New York. After nearly twenty years in the spotlight, her life had become a real-life soap opera, and its followers had lost their leading lady. The scandals, dramas, and the rising arc of her literary profession would be storylines cut short. First as a runaway wife that even President Taft couldn’t find, then finding international fame as half of the “Capital Elopers” romantic duo for ten years, Wylie had shaken herself off and moved on. Over the seven-year span of her career, she proved herself a prolific novelist and poet, beginning with the success of one of her early poems, “Beauty” in 1921. With four novels and four books of poetry, she also was a frequent contributor to *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair*. The poet who never called herself a feminist would be nonetheless resurrected in the 1980s as a first-wave symbol of feminism, a title she would have detested.

Sounding dazed by the impact of Elinor’s death in an article for *The New Republic* in 1928, her friend and colleague Edmund Wilson described the loss as feeling like, “When such a spirit

goes from its house, we do not feel in the departure any pathos. But in its absence, we find ourselves blank: we do not for a time know whom to look to nor where to turn.”

How Elinor loved those tributes along with the reactions to her lifeless body that December day, the lamenting by those who didn't care for her, the tears and grief by those who did, and the circular ramblings of Bill to whom she'd asked a question the fool could never answer. As she lay in her coffin, gleaming in her jeweled silver designer dress, as serene as a sleeping princess, Elinor Wylie's eyes thankfully were closed. Because, as many of those gathering around her knew firsthand, when those restless eyes snapped open, you'd better be ready for her.

The spirit had not yet gone from its house.