

When I was a college girl, I met a younger girl named Rita. At the time, I lived on campus, my first experience away from parents who raised their children in a bubble. I could easily compare said bubble to the inside of a snow globe: a house with a wrap-around porch, a station wagon parked in front, a pot roast in the crock pot, and mom- dressed in her Sunday's best-pruning the lilac bush.

I loved the dormitory. I think that shocked my mom. I was dating a boy named Mark Mason. He resided on the male wing of our floor, his window directly across the courtyard from mine. I deemed it romantic; he did not: "Why are you blowing kisses through the window? Just come down the hallway."

"I'm pretending I'm Rapunzel."

"Who's that?"

Mark was a handsome, popular student on a full baseball scholarship. He had a nasty knuckleball, was practical and focused, and learned from the hard-knocks. I couldn't believe he'd taken notice of me.

I perpetually toyed at the periphery of the popular group, hence avoiding the probability of rejection; not athletic or student council material, not particularly intellectual or curious, just careful. I was awestruck by exchange students who back-packed through Europe, sleeping in hostels hip to hip with strangers.

I excelled at the flute early on, mastering the tempo of the metronome atop my mom's baby grand piano, her piano hands draped upon the ivory. My intonation improved in group lessons. I tried to ignore the whispers of the girls hunched behind music stands. "Teacher's pet, nerd..."

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sleep-over, pizza and a movie...no, not her...maybe we should, *Rosemary's Baby* will freak her out!" Sometimes, the stinging in my eyes made my embouchure quiver, mistaken for vibrato.

I wrote poetry too. Flute and poems had dork written all over them, so they floated listlessly within the snow globe, until life shattered it, and then I clung to them as life preservers.

Mark drove an old Honda Civic, standard with a stick shift and a moon roof. Our first weekend road trip involved an oil change. His brother-in-law, known to tinker with cars, kept the baby running.

Rita was asleep on the couch when we arrived. Mark introduced me casually to the other kin, and they perked up with mischievous smiles. I didn't find out until much later that Mark's revolving door of girlfriends were on a need- to- know basis; so, no one ever knew anything.

I was the real deal.

Now Rita, Mark's niece, was in her own category. He tucked the blanket tightly around her. I learned it was a family tradition called 'mummified', one of a million stories I would hear over the years, some good, some bad.

He picked the stuffed bunny off the rug, and placed 'Tulip' at the gape of the girl's neck, and I smiled; *he'll be a good father*. I swore his sister read my mind. I sensed she harbored a twinge of jealousy, and I, in turn, was jealous of the girl. Human nature is weird.

Rita didn't budge, even as the song from Miami Vice drummed in the background, and cigarette smoke clouded ashtrays, and boys rough housed with their uncle, and beer bottles slammed on the coffee table-mid-story-about Rita's allergy medicine, and how it always knocked her out cold, and that was a good thing, for she could be snarky.

Mark and the brother-in-law eventually walked through the yard to the garage, the boys tagging along to watch greasy car stuff. Mark's sister began to fold huge piles of laundry 'that would wrinkle if left unattended'. She declined my offer to help; another thing I'd learn: his sisters had very specific ways of doing things.

So, I observed Rita. She had dark eyebrows with perfect natural arches, and eyelashes like daddy long- legs. Her cheekbones were high, and her nose was slender and narrow- symmetric with her lanky frame in a pubescent cocoon. Maybe she'd transform into a fashion model, but maybe she'd want something more.

The next day, she awakened Mark with tickles, and they laughed, revealing deep, matching dimples. According to folk tale, the first ancestor blessed with dimples lived in the mid eighteen-hundreds, in a tiny thatched cottage in County Galway, Ireland. Her name was Maeve, a lass brow-beaten by a mother-in-law who lived under the same roof.

The Great Potato Famine forced Maeve to leave her dowry behind. She kissed the seashore goodbye, her only refuge, and cried for the cattle decayed. She and her groom settled into Boston, where prejudice and poverty were famine of a different beast, and the dimples drowned into bottles of hard liquor.

Rita turned to me. "I'm Rita. Who are you?"

I curtsyed. "I'm Therese. I hear you always rode your bike up to the baseball field to root your uncle on."

"I'm his biggest fan."

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“Me too.”

She leaned her head on her uncle’s shoulder, and her brothers raced in. “I’m used to sharing.”

Big brown eyes like steaming mocha, she was an old soul, and I was drawn to her as if she’d lived many lives.

She sprang into action: beer bottles clanking, ashtrays emptied, Windex sprayed on the glass coffee table-demonstrative circular motions with paper towels until sparkly-the garbage tossed in the alley trash can, cereal bowls filled for brothers yawning with bed head.

She wiped her brow of sweat, and the coffee pot spit and hissed as her parents slept soundly afloat their waterbed, the only air conditioner unit in the house propped in their bedroom window frame.

Did I take coffee with cream and sugar?

“Cream, and how do you not leave smudges on glass?”

“Elbow grease, and how do you not like sugar?”

“A girl’s curves are time stamped.”

Mark and I became inseparable. We’d return there after baseball games at colleges by the Chicago lake shore, where major league scouts pointed radar guns at the pitching mound: University of Chicago, Loyola, DePaul, Northwestern, Roosevelt.

The brother-in-law would grill the best barbecue ribs on the planet, and I’d hold the platter, and he’d whisper that pickle juice-the sweet kind-was the secret to the sauce.

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In summer, 80's music filtered from the transistor radio. Rita and I would lay in the yard on lawn chairs frayed at the edges. We'd run under the oscillating sprinkler, and reapply Johnson's baby oil. We'd sing along with Bananarama. Sometimes she'd reach out for my hand, and we'd walk like Egyptians. She'd giggle, and her teeth were white and straight. Her skin would turn an olive shade in the sun, because way back when, Vikings pulled into the shores of Ireland, and fornicated.

I'd blister with sunburn, and she'd rub calamine lotion on my shoulders. The boys would toss the pig-skin around, and they'd run through the gang-way to complete the pass. "Uncle Mark, your arm is golden!"

We'd sit on the porch steps, and at the banister lilies of the valley grew wild and fragrant. Rita tamed my hair-damaged from an experimental perm gone bad- into a French braid. We'd have spelling bees, and she'd blush when victorious. She'd comment on the sherbet colors of the sunset, pointing through the moonroof as we drove for Rainbow ice cream cones. I'd light a Marlboro, and smoke rings drifted toward the moon, as if to mimic Saturn. "Rita, spell hue."

Time segued into Rita out too late, even by loose standards, so a curfew, and then grounding, to no avail. She'd sneak out her bedroom window, athletic like her uncle, one of many talents that could've propelled her.

She stole cigarettes and booze, and nickel bags hidden in the garage. At fourteen, she fell in love with a boy of sixteen. He lived in the garden apartment of his grandmother's three-flat, and this rendered too much alone time.

And then a trip to the clinic, before it could be real.

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“How’s Rita?” we’d ask.

“In bed.”

Her soulful eyes clouded as drug use progressed. Petty crimes followed, then truancy, then dropping out of high school, violent arguments and police to the house. “Do as I say, not as I do! Fucking hypocrites.”

She scrubbed attic luggage clean, and moved in with the boyfriend who’d acquired a job delivering pizzas, but his car conked out, so nothing lasted.

“Where’s Rita?” Mark would ask.

“In bed. She wants to be left alone.”

He’d scoff. “So, that’s it?”

He and I stayed on campus; graduation looming, internships secured, resume’ writing and term papers. Mark, the captain of varsity, prepared himself for the southern baseball trip, a last opportunity for exposure. They’d go on to win the NAIA Championship.

The major league draft list was stacked, and Mark’s name hovered somewhere toward the bottom. Neighborhood sports writers speculated the torn ligament in his ankle mid-season had affected his stride, hindering the end result.

Mark opted against the long shot. He didn’t have the luxury to exist as a nomad. He hopped off the bus, and grieved.

Plan B met him curbside. In the back of his mind, it would forever remain the consolation prize.

Rita attended our children's birthday parties, on her good days. She'd cut the cake in perfect squares, she'd clear the table of plastic forks and Thomas the Train cake plates, even play with the marionettes under the direction of Pauline the Puppeteer. "Marionettes date all the way back to ancient Egypt. When the pharaohs died and were mummified, the marionettes-so beloved-were placed in the tombs." She summoned the children to come hither. "Copy Rita. Her manipulation of the strings takes skill and coordination. Look at the legs go. As if she ruled the stage in a different life!"

When people gathered for the opening of gifts, Rita grabbed a hefty bag to pitch the wrapping paper. I'd watch her elated by the newest craze in electronic toys, and she'd read the directions to get them going. She'd glance at her teen-age half -sister, cradling a newborn named Britney. The half-sister loved Britney Spears.

At Christmas time, I'd surprise Rita with an opal ring or bracelet, and her bottom lip would tremble. "I don't deserve __"

"Who does?"

Her bad days amped up, and Mark and I were not involved in any of it. Family squabbles, his rising career, and me a mom who juggled work schedule with packing the kids up for school and baseball, travel volleyball and horse- riding lessons.

I had this idea that someday I'd write a best-selling novel, ridiculous. Anyway, the first thing I'd do is send a limousine to gather Rita, suitcase and all. We'd heard she moved into a run-down trailer park with drug addicts: black eyes and promiscuity, track marks and medics injecting naloxone, bed bugs and her name in the police blotter. I'd shake my head and say to Mark, "No way is that real."

Mark would put the bucket of baseballs in the trunk, unzip his coaching jacket, and pull onto the street from the field. He'd look in the rear-view mirror to address our son, and his eyes flickered with a sadness buried long ago. "Mikey, what'd I tell you about throwing the curve ball? You're going to hurt your elbow. Next year." Nods of innate understanding ensued, including our daughter Grace, with the dirty dimpled knees, and the widow's peak, like me, absorbing everything like a sponge.

At the family Christmas Eve party, a year when Facebook popularized, the cell phone was passed in the round and we all gawked at Rita, gone viral, in a fist fight with another girl. The 'tough thing' pushed Rita into a mud puddle and pulled her bleached blonde hair by the roots. Rita's eyes were wild, and her grimace exposed rotted teeth. Her cousins opined:

"Shit, the blonde hair makes her skin look jaundice."

"She found some gray hairs, and went nuts."

Her youngest brother rationalized. "She's been diagnosed with bipolar. That explains a lot. After all, it is in the family."

Glances were passed in the round. “It is?”

So, the fancy chauffeur would pull in, adding class to the trailer park. He’d open the passenger door, and as instructed, present Rita with an opal in a velvet box. Off she’d go, amidst thunderous clapping: not to a state funded rehab-no, no, that had failed miserably in the past.

We all tried, right?

Give her our hard- earned money, so she can buy crack?

We could buy her groceries.

She doesn’t eat!

This time we’d have money for her airplane ticket, first class, and a California rehab, you know, where fashion models go: keratin treatments and manicures, body wraps and facials, group therapy and the ultimate coming to Jesus. *God grant me the serenity...*

She’d swim in the pool facing the ocean, rehearsing her apologies, but deserving of a few. She’d compare the sunset to the opal at her finger. “H...u...e.”

The next morning, she’d awake to black tea and quiche, look at her reflection in the vanity mirror, and declare a metamorphosis!

God, how easily our imagination gets away from us.

Mark and I relocated to Sin City on his job transfer; an International Director of a company that designed and sold video monitors for gambling machines, time to be in the hub.

I accompanied him to a business trip in Barcelona, courtesy of the company; sales were good, and it was our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary.

We meandered along the Ramblas, sipped wine and ate olives at outside cafés, even sat for a caricature. We took a bus tour, and visited La Sagrada Familia Basilica, designed in 1882 by Antoni Gaudi'. To modern day, construction was still under way, in accordance with his vision. Upon its completion, there would be eighteen spires: twelve for the apostles, four for the Evangelists, one for the Virgin Mary, and seated at the highest, the spire for Jesus Christ. We walked up the skinny stairways and whispered prayers; maybe the higher they were, the closer they'd be to an answer. We descended in elevators, and I was humbled. We are so small, but not to Him.

We took long walks down the narrow, shaded corridors of Barcelona, and cubbyholes displayed shops of ceramic and porcelain and silk. We bought bottles of red wine, delighted with the prices. In the hot tub, on the roof of our private hotel suite, we toasted to health and prosperity, but Mark's ankle throbbed with early arthritis and this always took him a-back.

Balmy winds drifted off the Mediterranean shores, and distant sailboats flickered like sky lanterns. We listened to romantic Spanish music, and the bells of The Basilica Santa Maria del Mar tolled.

The extended family had become something of a crumbled grape vine, and through it we heard Rita spent days in the hospital for a heroin overdose. Would we have jumped on a plane to Chicago? Well, why weren't we told sooner? Maybe because it wasn't the first time, so why would it be the last?

In the ICU, the broken vine of people drooped over the broken girl. The track marks on her arms and the hum of everything electric brought them back to the days of mosquito bites and fireflies.

Rita was put on life support. Tubes pushed oxygen, prompting involuntary movements and false hope. The family was approached about donating her body to science at a nearby research hospital. It would then solicit free cremation. They declined. The body-battered and bruised-had gone through enough. And, anyway, it led to terrible imaginings, what would be done to it for this and for that?

She died within seconds of the plug being pulled.

A funeral mass was scheduled at a Catholic church, charity, just tip the altar boys. She would've been grateful, she believed in Jesus. *Eternal rest, grant unto them__*

The family pitched in for cremation, and the half-sister requested Rita's ashes. I wondered if the ashes glimmered with crushed opals.

"Don't be morbid," Mark said. "And anyway, she pawned all the jewelry."

"She wouldn't do that."

"Therese, how are you so gullible, after all this time?"

"I'd prefer to think of the glass half full."

"I've never been able to do that."

“I’m aware.”

Addiction has those long tentacles, probably reaching back to the thatched cottages at the shores of Galway Bay, where sprawling farms of emerald green absorbed the drizzle of the day upon cattle and horse, hen house and Glen Terrier.

Tavern music of flute and whistle cascaded down cobblestone sidewalks, like a pied piper, luring distant kin that could not seem to ditch the black clouds. Unlike oil and water, drink and blood were miscible in the veins, and took off, like the rapid footwork of a jig.

A genetic disease, or a choice?

I sit in solitude and feel her presence. There’s a weightlessness, a pulsating of my soul that taps at my skin. Send me a sign, Rita, so I know you’re okay.

I open my eyes and look down, and on the rug is the blue medal with the white angel. It had been packed away in our move, but how it got there, well, I know it’s supernatural. Here on earth, we seek proof in grandiosity, and in it we are defeated. The profound is in all that is small.

I drive, and in the valley the black mountains meet low smoky clouds. *Cruel Summer* plays on the radio. I reach and touch my pony tail. I never do that, and the hair on my neck stands up. I know she is with me, braiding my hair on the porch of her new life.

I pick up my flute and play ‘The Hustle’ upon arrival home. Mark had said long ago: “It’s hot if you’re good at it.” The neighbors yell now from their yards, “Wow, you’re really awesome. You play by ear?”.

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“Yes. I used to play this for someone,” and I laugh weakly, “in another life.”

I am assured Rita is perfect, and settling in where He prepared a place for her. I know she smiles down on me, her dimples in her cheeks, and I can hear her. “We are transformed here, and prayers are heard from earth, no matter how low you are. Aunt Therese, wait until you see the colors of the sky here. Spell hue.”

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