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Family

One night my Aunt Rita set fire to her house. She got out and her oldest daughter got out, but her two babies did not.

The family gathered around, but no one stopped drinking.

As well as Rita could remember, she had been heating milk in a small saucepan on the stove, and she had dropped off to sleep at the kitchen table. It was late at night.

She does not remember having anything to drink that night.

My mother calls it an unfortunate accident.

My mother blames Rita's husband Jack for leaving six months before the fire. He said that it had become too painful for him to watch Rita drink herself to death. So he left.

That is the closest to love that I have seen between two people.

My mother looks like Rita. And she drinks the same way; but she never did get caught, at least not in the same way as Rita got caught. That is the difference between them, that Rita got caught and my mother did not.

My mother would tell me stories of the time when she and Rita were little girls, and of Rita's fondness for saying that you can get away with anything you can get away with.

Rita always said that her favorite thing was rain. The answers to similar questions would vary if she were asked about her favorite

color, favorite food, favorite animal. She would often combine the answers for that day into a scene and tell us stories of purple and yellow fish eating pale vanilla ice cream with bright red berries spooned through it, or pomegranates. It was the first game we would play whenever we saw her.

Rita said that rain was the very best thing because you could not hold it, and because it happened only when it happened; and because of this, she said, you always had to be prepared for it. Sometimes I would come across her standing and staring out of the kitchen window of her house, watching the gray clouds of the winter sky barely moving, waiting. She found something disturbing about artificial heat and air conditioning, and even in the wintertime she would leave the windows open to let in the outside and the weather. During rainstorms, she still would not close the windows; instead, she would move quickly about the house, moving things out of the way of the rain pushed by strong winds into the building.

My mother would mumble under her breath about Rita's craziness.

I could not see in Rita the same craziness that my mother saw. I saw the difference between them though. I saw Rita living her life the way she wanted to live it for that very day. I saw my mother holding herself in, keeping everything at a distance, securing her own measure of safety; I do not know what frightened her.

Sometimes, later, when I learned what things could hurt my mother and what things could not, I would cry out in anger that I hated her and that I really loved Rita, and that I wished that Rita was my mother and not her.

I was eleven, the same age as Rita's daughter Sarah, the year I wanted a fish. My mother said that I could not have a fish, that it would die too quickly. The fish was the one thing that I wanted right then, like Rita wanted the rain when she knew that it was coming and she would say that she could taste it in the air.

"A fish is not like any other thing," Rita told me. "A fish does not come to you; you have to catch it."

Rita understood about the fish the same way she understood about everything else. And she understood my mother, too.

Late one night, after the rest of the house was asleep, Rita woke both me and Sarah, and hushed us to be quiet, saying that she had a surprise for us and for us not to make a sound.

We dressed quickly and silently, and Rita crept with us out of the house and into the black night that was just beginning to chill that September. We coasted down the block in Rita's old station wagon until the sound of the engine starting could not wake anyone into worrying about us.

Rita drove us through town and toward the industrial areas where we did not go often, and certainly where no good mother would bring her children at night.

Rita stopped the car around the corner from an ice packing plant. The wall of the building facing the street was high and wide, and the blue-green color of the ocean at mid-morning. Rita began pulling cans of paint and brushes from beneath a blanket in the back of the car.

We had hardly spoken on the ride across town, both Sarah and me being content just to be with Rita, to be on this adventure, and being too tired to say much. Rita stopped unloading the painting equipment long enough to notice our questioning, sleepy faces.

"Why, your fish, Maggie. We're going to make your fish right here." She picked up a brush and dipped it into bright orange paint. "Come on, girls. Help me."

Together we painted the wall until our corner of it was covered with fish and seaweed and air bubbles, wide arcs of bright color: orange and green and blue, and all of it defying the blank stare of the buildings on the street where it sat. The three of us laughed like the children we were in between Rita's threats that we had better stay quiet if we didn't want the police to come and arrest us. We were splashed with different colors of paint and big smiles.

When we left that night, Rita's fish, the biggest fish and the one around which Sarah's and my fish hovered, smiled back at us, purple and yellow.

It was years before I found my way back to that building, years before I realized how important that night had been to me. By then

it had been repainted a terracotta color, and I imagined to myself that the fish had stayed for years and that only recently had the owners decided to recolor the wall. I still picture it.

Rita collected colors like other people collected coins or match books, and she spread them out around her.

One Christmas, Rita gave only purple gifts: earrings of silver and amethyst crystal, bright purple and black scarves, books with purple dust jackets; that year almost all of the food on our table was touched by blueberries, tingeing every dish with a bluish purple color.

Most people did not know Rita--that is to say, they did not know what she liked to receive as gifts. Rita did not fault anyone for this. How could someone package purple, or rain, or the mountains, she rationalized.

I think it sometimes saddened her that she appeared so differently outside to other people than she really was, but she never once said this.

She would save those gifts for months after the holidays or a birthday, and then she would give them to Sarah and me and sit for hours watching us play happily with whatever it might be.

One winter when I was still quite young, my mother became very ill, and Rita spent a lot of time at our house, helping with me and with all of the things my mother was not able to do then. One day, shopping at the market, following a list prepared by my mother which designated not only the items, but also which brands and the approximate prices which we should expect to pay for them, my aunt was stopped by an older woman carrying a clipboard holding many pieces of bright white paper. The woman asked Rita if she would take a moment to fill out a questionnaire, for which she would receive a free gift. My aunt winked secretly at me as she smiled at the woman, as though she and I shared some private thought, and said that of course she would. I watched all of the bright color and the fast movement of the market as she filled out the form. I wished that I had time to run to the car and take Rita's camera and catch all of the rushing sound; but we were done

shopping and leaving soon. I felt Rita nudge me. She lowered the paper to my eyes and pointed to the place where the question was typed "occupation" and she had written her response of "violinist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra." She held my hand firmly to help me keep from laughing aloud. The woman thanked her and gave her a sample package of laundry detergent without reading her responses.

We brought home everything my mother had asked for, but we did not say anything about the woman in the store.

Rita would take pictures of everything. She said that it was because she had such a poor memory, that she needed photographs to remind her of where she had been and what she had done.

Rita found it hard to discard anything. She kept drawers of string because she liked the lines the string made, some straight, some wrinkled from being pulled from the top of a bag-package of sugar or cat food.

At the same time, Rita told me that the only way to avoid loss was to regularly discard things.

For years, she took photographs of things before she gave them away. She said that this way she still had the things, but she could keep more things this way, and they were easier to store in flat boxes underneath her bed.

Rita rarely sat, as though she was always on the verge of going somewhere other than where she was, which was usually the case. Afternoons after school, she would feed us different things, bread she had made from scratch, heavy and dark, colored with bits of red or black berries, orange strings of carrot or green zucchini, seedy with dark figs. We would drink nonfat milk from heavy, strangely shaped coffee mugs decorated with flowers I could not name in dark oranges and purples and blues, made by a woman friend of hers, the milk always looking like blue water to me even after I learned to like the extra cold thinness of it.

She would eat standing up against the kitchen counter, asking me about my day at school, asking Sarah about a project that was due and could we work on it together. I would always feel a little

strange sitting at the table with my food in front of me, even when I held it on my lap rather than setting it on the table, and even though Sarah sat at the table with me. I felt awkward and very small. I felt like Rita could leave the room or the house too quickly and I would not be able to catch her, and this discomforted me.

One day, my mother caught me standing at the refrigerator, eating purple-red grapes from a bowl, one at a time. I was thinking, about something.

"Maggie," she began, "why are you standing there with the door open, letting all the cold air out? Why don't you take the bowl to the table or take some out of the bowl for yourself? Don't you sit down to eat anymore?"

I was old enough by then to know not to share with her what I was beginning to see, that I was taking on more of Rita's way of being than my mother would ever want to see.

I shut the door and left the room, and left her standing there.

Rita was always making something out of things that no one else ever saw anything in. The day the wind knocked a print from where it was leaning against a wall in the hallway, Rita picked up the broken glass from the floor and piled it on a small table and made it seem beautiful to me in its clean clear bright light.

Rita said that our family was cursed with seeing the possibility in everything.

Well, at least Rita and I were so blessed.

My mother thought that Rita was crazy for deciding to have a baby when she was thirty-seven. That was the year that Sarah and I had turned fifteen years. That was the year my mother really began to worry about me.

That was the year I began to worry about myself. I was losing touch with my voice; I could not remember whether I had said something or whether I had only been thinking it very strongly and thought I had said it out loud.

I was beginning to look more and more like Rita, even more than Sarah did. My hair was becoming darker and fuller and longer, and even my eyes were darkening. People sometimes mismatched

us when the four of us were together, giving Sarah to my mother and pairing me with Rita. Even then, I sometimes still pretended that Sarah and I had been misplaced one for the other at our births.

That was probably the year when I first began to worry about Rita, too. All my life I had been told stories about her craziness, but I had only seen what I had seen, and I could not see beyond this.

Now I was noticing her sudden disappearances, the times when Sarah would stay at our house for days, sleeping in the twin bed in my room, and she would tell me that she did not know where her mother was.

Everything I saw in Rita made me feel less lonely and less alone. When I did not see her, I missed her more than the sun.

My mother thought that Jack was crazy for letting Rita have a baby. She said that he could have stopped her. I knew that he could not have stopped her.

The year of the fire, I was helping Rita take care of her twin boys. Sarah was at band practice and the house was empty with just us in it.

Rita reached out for my hand as I was in mid-motion from the counter to the kitchen table, preparing dinner for their family. Her eyes were steel-gray and dark, and the light from the overhead light caught in the lines of her face and made each of the lines deeper and older. She was very still.

"Maggie," she said quietly, "I can't tell any longer whether it's all falling into place or if it's crumbling apart. There's such a small space between the two."

I looked back at her with an expression that said that I understood what she was saying, and that I understood that there was no answer to her words.

That was the only time between us when I felt that she imagined that I was only trying to make her think I was listening to her, that I only wanted her to think that I really understood, that somewhere along the line I had learned to do that with her.

I knew there would be no convincing her. I hoped it was just

that day, the weather, the time of day, that crept between us right then.

That was the first time in my life when I consciously realized that I had been younger earlier.

After the fire, my mother kept me away from Rita, and with what she felt was good reason. Sarah was placed by the courts into the care of my parents until she was to reach majority.

There was a period of time when I was able to keep in touch with Rita through letters, but she moved more often than I could keep up with her, often taking Sarah with her once Sarah was released back into her custody.

The last time I heard from her, she and Sarah were living in Texas in a house with many windows and an aquarium. She said that she was sure that I would like it there.

For years, my eyes were drawn toward Texas license plates on the cars on the highways. I would speed up alongside the car and search for Rita's face through the glass. So many cars from Texas.

When I was seven, Rita took the glasses from her face and held them under the faucet at the kitchen sink. The water ran over the lenses and collected in small drops across the glass.

She put the glasses up to my eyes and had me look through them. Rain.