

“What are you doing?” Rita asked as she put on her coat, ready to go grocery shopping. “I thought you said you were coming with me.”

Rikki sat at the kitchen table. “I’m almost done.” She scribbled out a final sentence, as a look of pleasure swept across her face.

“That must be some letter,” Rita huffed. “Who are you writing to?”

Rikki held up the legal pad. “This isn’t a letter. It’s a short story.”

“Well, excuse *me*,” Rita snapped sarcastically, hands on her hips, winter coat wide open. “My mistake. So, are we going or not?”

“Yes,” Rikki said as she marched off in her slippers to the bedroom. “I need to change my shoes. I’ll just be a moment.”

When Rikki returned, coat in hand, Rita was sitting at the kitchen table reading. She looked up as her granddaughter approached. Rikki was suddenly unnerved. There was a look in Rita’s eyes she hadn’t seen before. A look she didn’t understand. She readied herself for the criticism. To be mocked. Her adrenaline surged as she prepared to defend herself.

Rita smiled as she held the yellow pad. “This is good. Where’d you come up with the idea?”

Rikki rushed forward and grabbed the pad. “It’s not done yet.”

“Oh, but it’s very good. I’d like to read more.”

Rikki suddenly felt ill. “It’s only a first draft.”

“I didn’t know you could write.” Rita opened her purse and searched through it. “Why didn’t I know this?”

Rikki shrugged her shoulders. “There’s really nothing to know. It’s a writing contest. The winner gets a scholarship. No big deal. I probably won’t win.”

Rita pulled out a Salem 100 and gently tapped it on the table.

“Please don’t light that. Please,” Rikki begged.

Rita tried to squeeze the cigarette back into the pack. “Damn,” she said as the cigarette broke in half. “Rikki, these are expensive. Now look what you made me do.”

“One less nail in the coffin,” Rikki muttered.

“Why didn’t you tell me about this short story?” Rita asked. “Am I that older woman?”

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"It's not about you," Rikki clarified.

"Well, that isn't very flattering. I'm thinking I'd make an interesting character." Rita slid out of her coat and let it drop to the back of the chair. "So, what's it about?"

"A journey," Rikki offered. "A young girl goes off to find herself."

Rita broke into a broad smile. "Oh, well, that makes sense."

Rikki pulled out a chair and sat down. "She travels to a place she's never been before and all sorts of wonderful things happen to her."

"Like *Alice in Wonderland*? *The Wizard of Oz*?"

"Kind of..."

And despite Rikki's request, Rita took out another cigarette and this time she lit it, inhaling deeply before exhaling up toward the ceiling. "Honey, it's been done before and by far better writers."

"I suppose," Rikki said as she clutched the short story to her chest.

"You know, you remind me of your mother right now." Rita took another drag as she eyed her granddaughter. "She thought she had this great talent. She attended Music and Art High School in Manhattan. I didn't want her to go. It was so silly. No one can earn a living as a painter, unless of course they're painting the outside of your house. And then she got that scholarship to Cranbrook's Academy of Art. Spending her day dreaming impossible dreams. I think of that and wonder what might have happened if she'd been an administrative assistant or a bookkeeper. Something practical. Logical. She might still be alive." Rita shifted her focus to her right index finger and a chipped nail.

"At least she was happy," Rikki said, bringing her back to the conversation.

"Happy? You think she was happy?" Rita shook her head to the contrary. "She wanted to live in Europe. Study in Paris. She'd often say, '*If I had studied overseas, I'm certain I could have become a marvelous portrait painter.*'"

"Why didn't she go to Paris?"

Rita put her cigarette out, smashing it into the ashtray with a twist. "Because people like us don't go to Paris. We don't do anything"

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