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Queen for a Day

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Queen for a Day by Kimberly Carlson

We left behind smog, freeways that merged and overlapped, paved roads with concrete sidewalks, yards with no gardens or jackrabbits. We left behind dads, grandmas, aunts, and cousins. We left behind my favorite aunt, Rita. My favorite partly because she loved me, partly because I felt sorry for her, partly because she was a dreamer and had been glamorous.

She moved from the hills of Tennessee and headed out to California looking for love. She dyed her hair to match Marilyn Monroe's. Her complexion then was porcelain white, her lips full, her eyes perfectly placed, dazzling with light. Her curvaceous figure begged to be touched. As a child I'd close my eyes and imagine her as she had been back then, laughing and smoking cigarettes, while men asked to cut off locks of her hair.

She died in her fifties from a drug overdose, maybe it was a heart attack. She wasn't found for days. After not answering phone calls, my Aunt Jesse had to crawl through her bedroom window, breaking through the tin foil Rita used to block out any sunlight so she could sleep late into the day, and there Rita lay stiff on her bed. There was an ashtray of cigarette butts on her nightstand. In the kitchen her drugs sat nicely placed like some might display salt and pepper and cinnamon oregano. She had to take her meds with food at exact times of the day, except for particular nights she couldn't sleep and needed to take more. This happened often.

I never knew the Jones beauty. Other than through photographs, my image of her holds a woman with Thorazine purple skin, a swollen belly, looking more pregnant than fat, her hair dyed copper, or sometimes the platinum blonde from her glamour days. Her right hand shaped into a claw from falling and passing out on a floor heater, as if mistaken for a dangerous animal who needed its nails removed, but she had always been the prey, the snow white bunny, the newly born kitten.

I am told her daddy used to chase her around with a knife because she snuck into his hidden stash of watermelons to steal one to break open and eat. He was selfish and he was saving the melons to sell. I am told she loved her first husband but he died. I am told she never recovered and that her children were taken away, and she never recovered from that either, and was sent to a psychiatric ward and was raped by a counselor. And later, when the doctors discovered that she was pregnant, the baby was taken too.

Already the sleeping pills and Thorazine had claimed territory, though she tried to fight their need back. She married again and had another child. Her sisters thought she was recovering. And she had yet another child. One day she rocked her baby Rose to sleep, singing “may the circle be unbroken in the sky, Lord, in the sky.” Rose wore a cotton gown. It had purple flowers floating on a shockingly white background. Maybe there was a stain from her formula. Her mom rocked her as I hope Grandma had rocked Rita when she was an infant, soothingly, the repetitive motion of generations feeding her little soul, for Baby Rose had been loved. I was told she was beautiful, like her momma. A perfect baby. But Aunt Rita must have taken too many sleeping pills. She must have. For when she finally came to, Baby Rose was cold dead, smothered in the warmth of a drugged mother. Her husband divorced her and took Brian their son. Rita never recovered. Nope. Some pain is too big for our fragile hearts.

When my son Elias was born I swore I’d never sleep with him. If Baby Rose could die. If sweet Aunt Rita’s heart could be ripped to shreds, what would keep me from that pain?

The problem was Elias wouldn’t sleep without me. I swaddled him. Rocking, I nursed him to sleep. Barely breathing, I’d stand and lean down to set him in the bassinet that I kept by my bed. I’d ease my hand away with each breath. Sometimes instantly, sometime eight minutes into having made it to my bed next to him, he’d wake with a start. Steve, my husband, would leave the bed. I’d wear long pajamas I’d have one pillow to prop my arm and no blankets and I’d place Elias in the crook of my arm. I slept like that for a year until I felt safe adding a blanket. How many nights did I wake with a start fearing I let myself fall too deeply asleep as he lay on my belly, waking him to know that he was a still alive? There were days I thought I might go crazy for want of sleep. I’d fantasize being in a hotel room alone, taking just one Ambien and sleeping.

I am sorry that Rita never met Elias, she’d have loved playing Monopoly and Yahtzee with him. She’d have let him quiz her about the different galaxies and state capitals. She’d have adored my daughter, Anika. Rita would have spent time reading to her, holding her babies. Time and love she would have given them.

This generation wouldn’t have teased her about her crooked orange lipstick and dented felt hats. Her purple skin. Or ask her how much she earned selling her plasma. I would have made my children revere her.

She loved to have me sing to her and she thought I was pretty. She hung my picture next to hers in her hallway. This made me feel special for she was almost a star to me, one that had fallen. I was in awe that she got to go to the Oscars. She won the prize for being awarded “Queen for a Day” from the television show bearing that name. The queen was awarded for sharing the saddest most pathetic story for that episode. Rita won. I imagined her as if royalty sitting among stars like Jimmy Stewart, Clark Gable, Sophia Loren and even Grace Kelley, but we know that didn’t happen. She sat in the rafters, looking almost elegant, probably feeling worthless.

She died when I lived in Nashville. I flew into the Reno airport for a family ski trip to Tahoe. When I saw my mother walking toward me, I knew instantly something was wrong. She tried to greet me with a smile, but it was crooked, drawn by pain. Someone died. I felt it. I thought I could turn around to the moment before when everyone I loved was alive and well. I saw my brother Tommy’s face who had recently taken up rock climbing. I saw my brother, Kenny who was partying, possibly drinking and driving. We met. She placed her arms around me. Without a word we were both crying. “Rita died,” she said. And in that instant, that one moment, I felt not grief, but relief. I was so happy my brothers were safe, thanking God that at least they hadn’t died. The relief went so deep that I didn’t feel the need to go to her funeral.

She was buried in grandma’s plot. Grandma was still alive. The gravedigger dug deep and would later place grandma on top. Grandma didn’t know this. No one told her. No one told her her daughter died. Dementia had already set in and Grandma had lost one child, Bernita. She swore she’d never outlive another child. Bernita died young. Too fucking innocent and young.

I never met Nita, as she was called. I used to believe that her death was a relation to my sadness. Maybe it is. Like her I was looking for a reason for my sadness, the hollow in me that couldn’t be filled. She went missing when Mom was pregnant with me. Her body wasn’t found for six months. She had gone to the desert to pray. She was religious and all she had was her Bible. No food, no journal, no water—only her Bible. Her VW Bug got stuck in the loose hot sand, and she tried to walk out. Maybe praying all the way. “Please God, Please, I am sorry. I repent. I will not see him anymore. I swear I didn’t know he was married. You know that God. You know my heart. Please forgive me. And I promise to stop being so vain. This is a sin too. I don’t want to model anymore. I will be fine being average. Maybe I’ll be a nurse, or a teacher.” She prayed until the 120 degree heat made her fall and die. Dad and Mom went to that desert to find her. They never did. Six months later she was found

farther away from her bug than anyone thought possible. A fourth of a mile from the ranger's station. Had her prayers stopped? Did God get interrupted with something more pressing? She had only to walk fifty more steps.

My mother mourned while carrying me, her little sister who had dreams of loving a man who was married, of being a model even though she had bad skin and lopsided breasts. And I guess deep inside my mother's belly, I mourned her too, felt the sadness as each cell came into existence, creating the life that my mother named, Kimberly Sue. I was often called princess.