

Living For Rose

I was jealous of my sister Rose. We were at Burger Barn on a Friday night and she was sinking her teeth into a double cheeseburger, sauce dripping down her chin, and still the most beautiful person I had ever seen. I slurped on my chocolate shake.

“Mind your manners,” said Mom, pursing her lips.

“Aw, Mom it’s my birthday,” I protested. “Can’t I slurp just this once?”

Mom and I were sweating profusely in the sticky, syrupy heat, but Rose glowed with tropical heat, all bronzed and tanned. She delicately dipped a handful of salty fries into some ketchup.

“Yeah Mom, let her slurp.”

I couldn’t even hate my sister for being perfect. She was pleasant *all* the time.

Lately, we were the most opposite we had ever been. She was like the golden princess in some idealistic fairytale, and I was the villain, the dream crusher.

One time, Rose’s football player boyfriend Raff, short for Rafferty, picked us up in his dad’s shiny convertible and took us to Newpoint Beach. I had invited my best friend Ernie to come along.

When we got there, we clambered out of the car and lay together along the champagne-shimmer sand, heat radiating onto our skin. The sky was like shiny hard candy. I wanted to crack off a piece of it and taste the sweet blue. I refused to understand how Rose could look the way she did. We had the same genetics, didn’t we? She had a taut, flat stomach and breasts like round pomegranates. I felt like a whale beside her as she waved her coral pink nails at me.

I closed my eyes and imagined that I lived at the murky bottom of the ocean, buried in sludgy muck and fish bones. In my dream, I was a whale that washed up on the shore. It took ten people to push me back into the glassy waves where I was weighed down by my jealousy, weighted so heavily I had forgotten who I was without it.

We savored raspberry fudge ice cream while sitting on the edge of the dock, all of us except for Rose. She was on a new diet. Raff had his arm around her waist, the purplish veins stretched over his sun-kissed skin. He was handsome enough to be on the cover of Vogue, wind feathering through his floppy chestnut-colored hair. They had already planned every moment of their future together, even though they were just in high school. Rose planned to go to law school in New England just like mom, and marry Rafe after four years of college. Ernie and I were off to the side, our bare feet soaking up the milk-white foam, and I stared at his freckles, illuminated by the ethereal sunglow. I wanted to sprinkle them on the ground like apple seeds.

I thought about last Christmas. I received some nice gifts, a few books, clothes, and a new cover for my computer. Mom had made us wear matching red sweaters that she found in the clearance aisle at the department store. Dad snapped pictures of us, with his fancy camera, all of us smiling through gritted teeth. Red was Rose's best color, but I looked like an angry tomato on the holiday cards. But never had I been so envious as I was when I saw Rose unwrap a gold locket in the shape of a heart. I wanted it more than anything. It even had her initials engraved on the back so the world could know it belonged to her. After a couple of months, I got so tired of seeing her wear it at her throat everyday like a trophy, so I stole it and sold it to Sally Reed for fifty bucks behind the lockers.

As I was sitting with Ernie, watching Rose be everything I wasn't but longed to be, I thought maybe I could have it all too. I turned to him and our eyes melted together. For a moment, it felt like I mattered, like I was finally being seen. I had never let anyone touch me before, except for Rick Daniels. I hadn't asked him to touch me, but I let him anyway. He wasn't as gentle as I wanted him to be, and he left a mark on my shoulder where his fingers scraped, but I didn't tell him to stop, because it didn't occur to me that I could. Ernie was much softer as he traced my collarbone and smoothed over my chest. It was more intimate, because we had known each other since we were babies. When he told me he loved me, I almost expected it, because it had been building up between us for years. It didn't feel the way people told me it was supposed to feel, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

For the rest of the summer, Rose and Mom stressed over college, Dad spent all his time fixing up the old pickup truck in the garage, and I was working at Burger Barn with Ernie almost every day, only to spend my weekly paycheck on sweets. I dyed the tips of my hair purple. Mom and Dad sent me to my room, but then they forgot because Rose got into Harvard and everything after that was a celebration. I tried to stay out of the house as much as possible, because everything was a reminder of how much of a failure I was.

A lot of the time, Ernie and I went to Brimly Tower and sat at the edge looking down at the rows of suburbia. It always smelled of petrichor.

Our house was pastel blue, and I had a clear view of the only place I had ever known. I had a view of all the people down there too. The more I looked, the more similar they became, like paper dolls sliding across cardboard cutouts.

We talked about nothing at all, and once we tried carving our names into the metal railing with Ernie's pocket knife but then my name came out all smudged. I felt a thrill every time I stepped a little too close to the edge. I would never have jumped, but I imagined that I could. I imagined that I would plummet to the bottom, my lungs filling with cold air, before hitting the ground, and I would finally know the secret of what happens to us when we die.

Then, just when I thought my life couldn't be more dull, something happened that rocked our steady boat. I had been at Thompson Square for almost the whole day, wasting time. When I came home, I heard screaming, which was a rarity in my family. Mom had found the pregnancy test in Rose's purse. *Positive.*

I almost laughed out loud. This didn't happen to people like Rose. I felt happy, because for once in my life, Rose was the glitch in our carefully planned existence, and I was the good one. My purple hair and angsty behavior was one thing, but Rose getting pregnant, when she was about to leave for college, was different territory.

That night Rose lay awake in our room till past midnight. I waited for her to drift off, but she kept shifting around. Then, she started to cry, her face smushed into the cotton sheets. I hated that.

"What are you going to do?" I asked her.

For once, Rose had nothing to say. She didn't know what to do.

"I wish I was you," she whispered.

"What?"

"I wish I was smart and unique and real, like you are."

“You’re perfect,” I said, “Why would you want to be like me?”

“That’s the problem, I’m perfect. I can only ever be perfect.”

I knew nothing I could say or do would make it better. I knew I would never not be jealous of my sister. What I did know was that I loved her, underneath all the accumulated hurt. I climbed into bed beside Rose and wrapped my arms around her thin shoulders. Her breath was fluttery and butter-soft against my cheek.

I watched Rose and Raff drive away a few weeks later, her gold hair cascading over her shoulders, glistening in the rearview mirror. He had found an apartment for the two of them two hours away, and they were going to try to make it work. Mom and Dad had begged them not to go.

As I watched Rose fade into the distance, I knew I was going to miss her. I would miss hearing her snore like a purring cat. I would miss her smile and effortless shimmer. She was giving up everything to follow a different dream than the one she’d imagined. In a way, mom was giving up her dream too. She had wanted Rose to be a lawyer; to see her succeed.

After the car had dissolved into the distance, Ernie and I went back to Brimley Tower and we pointed out all the places we knew by heart, as if they were tattoos etched on our skin. There was the old playground where I had first learned to walk, the duck pond where I first met Ernie, and the skate park just outside of our neighborhood where I scraped my knee trying to learn how to ride a bike. Maybe we were just like the people we made fun of from above. Maybe we would grow up to live in cookie-cutter

condos, and drive waxy sports cars, marry the right person, and work in brightly lit offices. Maybe.

I looked over at Ernie and my lips pressed into a tight smile. I think he understood everything I was thinking.

“What’re you doing tomorrow?” he asked me.