

“The Summer they Electrocuted the Rosenbergs”

by R.K. Nathan

Mom always has to be right. Even when someone forces her to admit that she's wrong, she still unearths a way to shine some happy light upon herself. As far as I can see, Dad just gave up answering back a few years back. Now he spends practically all his time at work. Sometimes he surprises us by coming home to eat dinner with us, cracking jokes from the same list that never changes, and sometimes he even takes us to the movies, when there's some film he wants to see. But when Mom is busy being right, he just stays away. So she can be right about him ignoring us because he's a *coward*, because he's a *doom-monger*, because he's a (whisper this one) *fake*... She can be right when she rails about our table being *spurned by its patriarch*. And this summer she gets to be right much more often, because for some reason summer camp has been taken off the menu and so I have to spend most of my time listening to her. I try to find reasons to stay longer in my room; she tries to break them all down.

“We have to go now, young lady!”

“Coming!” Closing my diary quickly, I push it back under the bed. Heaven help me if she ever found it and saw that I was no genius after all.

“But not quickly enough. Come quickly!” Then she has another thought and knows immediately she has to add it. “But never hurry.”

“I won't hurry, Mom.”

She loves to use up my holidays by taking me around to her friends' houses. I tell her to leave me behind, but she refuses. I hate it when she draws attention to my

still-tiny breasts and my not-so tiny zits like they were some kind of achievement. The slow blinks her friends send back at me seem kind of sympathetic. *Poor girl; takes after her daddy in the face and legs.* Mom loves to say that in as many words, always more or less presenting her own face and legs to them for comparison. God help Mom, I think, if her only daughter hadn't been such a slow developer.

Then I realise the only daughter is me, and the slow developing thing is kind of a cross. Laughing about it is supposed to be healthy, but it's also pretty screwed-up at the same time.

Her friends are mostly pretty too, in that magazine-left-in-the-shop-window kind of way, and they all wear their summer dresses without ever bothering to sideglance at all the mirrors they pass. Their breasts don't have to be *fleetingly glimpsed*; they can just be. Meanwhile Mom defines the whole world around us by where its mirrors happen to be placed.

As we line up in the little jam that always fills the on-ramp to the freeway, she turns the rearview toward herself and blows away a stray eyelash. A few seconds go by as she keeps staring. The mirror tells her things, I guess, like the one in Snow White. The traffic starts to move again.

"Where exactly are we going, Mom?"

"Today we're going to see Marguerite." The man in the Camaro beside us is honking his horn because Mum is halfway between lanes. She smiles grandly at him and stays right where she is. He keeps honking. "Remember she has a son your age?"

"Yeah, I remember." My voice is leaden. What was his name – Johnny or Donny? Only his hands moved quicker than his mouth. He forgot my name three times and told me I was frigid and a prick teaser. How could I be both, I asked him.

He shook his head at me the same way Mom often did. They learned that from the same place, I'm sure: the school of getting your own way. A year on I could just tell that he would probably be much the same but with more zits. His room would still stink of hormones and laziness. Boys who start out predictable get even more so.

Mom's friends always receive us, never vice versa. This is because their houses are a little bigger than ours; most of them live in Westchester County or Connecticut. They have gardens, terraces, dining rooms and an upstairs floor. Some even have gables. Mom's friends smirk at the idea and mention of Brooklyn, but usually quickly and only when Mom's in the bathroom. When we go to over their places for drinks or afternoon tea, I never ask these women questions, because they don't seem to like questions that much. They usually like to keep their dreams to themselves, but of course Mom won't let them get away with that. She makes them dust them off and share them. Actresses have to relive, maybe even recite, their great lines. Dancers have to move gracefully across a room for her. Writers have to talk about the torrents of ideas that still come to them when they least expect it. And they actually do these things for her – she's pretty persuasive, my Mom.

“Hi Marguerite!” Mom cries. “You're looking hysterically good, girl! Not since we were at Smith. What on earth have you not been eating!” Now she points at me and I fight back the automatic shudder this triggers. “See, your arms are getting like Sylvia's!”

Marguerite turns to give me the same blink as ever. “So good to see you, Sylvia.” Now she remembers something and warms up. “Oh, there's a surprise here for you, you know.”

A surprise. I look down so I don't have to respond to the salacious look

that's entering her eye. The shag pile carpet covers my toes. I can almost picture her beside me, grabbing my hip and trying to push Donny's leathery tongue past my tightly-shut lips. She could kiss the little slob herself, couldn't she, if it was all that necessary? "Hello, Mrs Bernstein. It's, uh, cool to get surprises. Mostly."

"You'll see!" she cries, widening her eyes for me. It's not sympathy now. It's just relief that she's done the job she told herself she had to do.

"Sylvia's staying home and writing this summer. Instead of going to the camp with the others."

"That's great, Sylvia! You can show some of what you've been writing to your surprise. He just loves to read. Oh no, I've gone and given away that it's a boy!"

Whenever Dad says Marguerite used to be a chorus girl, Mom sniggers and tells him not to be mean. All Mom's friends are *artists*, you see. They all have to be to be considered before they can be dismissed.

"See," begins Mom, "Sylvia got this great opportunity to use what we know and to not make the same mistakes as we..."

"Mistakes?" Marguerite almost frowns. "I think luck has a great part..."

Mom's eyes and nostrils are already flaring against being contradicted. It looks like hard work for her eyelids to push up all that liner. "Oh of *course* it does, but all the changes in our times have made it so much more, uh, possible."

Marguerite nods silently instead of risking saying something else that might suggest that Mom is wrong. I used to love it when Mom conducted her friends like an orchestra, but now I want her to listen to herself a bit more. Marguerite goes to the table and gets us some drinks – vodka and tonic for Mom and a ginger ale for me.

“Who else is coming, Marguerite?”

“Lucy’s coming by. She also has a boy now, a stepson.”

“The new man had a boy already?”

“A boy? He’s seventeen, you know. She jumped straight to being mother of a teenager, practically a man already. They were just parking up a moment ago.”

Mom starts to clap her hands but stops before they made a sound. “Oh my, they’ll be fighting over the damsel.”

“Please, Mom!” I move closer to the window. Through the double glazing I can see a sliver of the lake, while from above me an icy finger curls out of the air conditioning ducts and taps my forehead, telling me that I really am crazy. The cold is pleasant; it makes me feel far away from all this. I see that the ducks are lazily following one another around, seemingly bored by their easy lives. A young boy without a shirt chases another and they are both yelling something stupid that echoes around the little park.

“You should’ve seen what she’s been writing. We went down to Big Sur at Easter and I gave her *The Bell Jar* as a present because I thought it was about time I should. And I told her as well.”

“You told her about us at Smith?”

“That’s right: about the class we took. About what it all meant.”

Driving around Big Sur, while Dad tried to find some pointless ball game on the radio, Mom told me all about my name and described what she called my genesis. I had no idea I had a genesis. Most people are just born; I had to be created. She explained in lots of words that I was created about the same time the Bell Jar book was being created. What was I supposed to say to that?

I thanked her. She got angry.

She made me read that book right away, sitting out on the terrace of the house we were staying in and when we came back to Brooklyn she made me start writing for myself. First I wrote something garbled about the “diamond smarts of the streets of New York” but really they didn’t mean anything to me. They were so full of people stealing space from one another that it felt like all the meaning had been squeezed out of them. I read the book by my namesake again and again about that poor girl who was struggling with all her myriad possibilities at once. Mom was so unlike that girl it was unreal. How could I take all her arguments seriously? Mom wrote poetry about her feelings and I’d never seen any of those feelings actually come out in real life; only faking a fake life there on the page.

“Sylvia Plath was your teacher that year, wasn’t she?”

“Four of us from that class are still friends – me, Marguerite, Lucy and Jane. And the children we had. Or acquired.”

Now Marguerite has a curious look circling inside her eye and I can feel hot breath on my neck. I swivel slowly. Donny (I remember now, I kept calling him Osmond) has braces now and is getting blockier. Death for a sixteen year old. It’s clear he’s going to be a chubby adult and more often than not his clammy hands will be stopped from roaming. Stopped dead, told to go home and touch himself instead. “Hi, Sylvia. We been expecting ya.” Behind him is a taller and quieter boy who right away seems a bit more intriguing. “Uh, this is Ricky.”

“Nice to meet you,” says Ricky. “I’ve heard, uh, you know, stuff. Good stuff.” His handshake is shy but still pretty firm. His dove-blue eyes are looking at my face instead of my breasts.

“Is this the surprise?” I ask quietly.

Marguerite understands these moments better than Mom. Her mouth is already making an extremely disappointed shape. “Whatever you prefer it to be,” she says, trying to sound vague.

Right then, something in Marguerite’s resigned tone makes me feel a little bolder. Sometimes I really do get to choose what I want, it seems. Sometimes I really do get to make the others react to me. I don’t always have to follow the leader. Or follow Mom. “And so I was the only one of your kids who got to be called Sylvia?”

Sensing the criticism in my voice, Mom sniffs at me, “I was the only one brave enough to consider us an epoch. To mark it with a child of mine.”

“Wouldn’t it have been better to write a book?” I ask her. I can feel that I am overstepping the bounds she has always laid down for me so painstakingly, while still demanding that I break other people’s rules. I can feel that I’m angering her, and I absolutely love the thrill this is giving me.

“Who says I didn’t? Books get published or they don’t. They still have to be written. You should just concentrate on writing your own.”

But I knew I wasn’t going to write a book. Not this year and certainly not a book like *The Bell Jar*. Summers weren’t sultry and queer to me; they were long and desperate, full of wrong turns and dead hours and lying dreams. But the Rosenbergs still got electrocuted every time I read that book, as did Sylvia’s alter ego. It was jerky, unkempt. I had the idea that Mom would have been happier if it was me down on the chair, succumbing to some kind of treatment that at least showed I was special to begin with. Mom would never have wanted to be electrocuted herself, but if it could be her daughter who was artistic and wayward and doomed, then that

might be some kind of a divine and liveable result.

“What was she like as a teacher?” I ask. I can smell that the boys have been sneaking some vodka into their ginger ale, or maybe that was Marguerite. All the breath around me is sour and flammable.

“Pretty lousy actually,” says Marguerite without stopping to think.

Now Mom bursts to life again, defending her own version of the universe. “Her writing was absolutely extraordinary!” she exclaims. And she is right the way she is always right. Marguerite and Lucy nod a little at what she is saying, perhaps at what she is upholding too. But I can’t help wondering if that extraordinary writing that by chance she got so close to learning from has told her to go and outrun her ordinariness by just passing the hot potato on to me. It’s my responsibility now, not hers. Mom sighs, looking for an amazing thing to say. Everyone is listening to her. “Her life was tragic. Well, it was!”

Most of the ducks are back out on the water, bobbing towards the bridge, where the two kids have stopped running and are ready to start throwing stones. I have never wanted a brother, but sometimes start to thinking that maybe a brother would have served a purpose.

“Can you get me some more ginger ale?” I ask Ricky, turning my shoulder towards Donny and squeezing him out of our little corner. Ricky still comes across as a touch shy and studious, like me, it’s true, but a girl can get away with it if she knows when to sugar her voice and when to stay quiet.

“Sure.” He takes my glass and goes to fill it, more eager to please than anyone I have seen since school finished three weeks ago. That look of acquiescence is like what Dad used to give me years ago, when he was the big bear letting his little

Goldilocks have something her own way. It's something I have to win back, but the evidence at least suggests it isn't gone from the world entirely.

"Let's go listen to some music, guys," says Donny. He has home-field advantage; the record player is in the corner of his grotty room upstairs, with Kiss and Farrah Fawcett all over the walls and scads of wadded tissues under the bed.

"You go, we'll catch you up later," I nod, turning to Ricky, who's coming back with my drink. "First I'd like to go out to the lake for a while. Let's leave our moms to talk about the other Sylvia again. Or whatever they want."

"Okay," says Ricky, handing me the glass.

"But..." begins Donny, outflanked and betrayed. He can see the shape of failure already, when usually his great advantage is that failure is something he refuses to picture, however deserved it may be.

"Later, Donny, later. Pick out some cool LPs for us. Not that Rick Wakeman thing you played last year! It was dreck! Bye Mom, bye Marguerite, bye Lucy!"

I carry the glass of ginger ale in one hand as I haul open the sliding glass door with the other. The ice cubes clink against the rim of the glass. Hot air rushes in and Ricky follows me close behind, holding a glass of his own, stiffened with vodka. I close the door behind us and look back in to see Mom staring at me through the glass. It's not surprise I can see in her eyes, not really, but suddenly it's like there's an angle she forgot to consider somewhere. She is trying to retrace the landscape she knew so well this morning and some details are missing from it.

Mom still knows she's right, of course, but I think she sees now that getting me to think so too might just be getting that little bit harder all the time. And if she stops being able to convince me just like that, she might just have to work at

convincing the others as well.

Life might just crumble. And boys might just start to like me, after all.

Ricky touches my elbow and, sparking against one another, we walk dreamily over towards the bridge, where the two younger boys see us coming and run off to find a patch of the little park that's all for them and what they want from life. The ducks, on the other hand, leave the bridge and make straight for us, gliding hopefully across the peaceful lake, cutting deeply into its mirror image of the sky with the cleanest V-shaped wake I have ever seen.

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