

Secretly Sistering Rita Mae

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I'm not much like my mother. As far as I can determine, her philosophy of life is founded on an unswerving belief in the Law of Conservation of Guilt: whatever form it may take, there's only so much to go around. The upshot of this is that once she has distributed blame--efficiently, and with a short, knowing sigh--she figures she's in the clear. I'll give her this: she sleeps soundly at night, every night. But I refuse to accept her skewed verdicts when I'm clearly a victim of circumstance.

I've just learned that I am now responsible for introducing one happy little ray of sunshine per month, minimum, into the lucky life of Rita Mae Beaudette. I have the Secret Sisters of First Methodist to thank for this honor, and my mother.

"No one signed you up but you," Mother states. She is peeling potatoes at the sink, letting the thin skins slip off under a full stream of cold running water. Her small fat hands are pink and raw. I lean across her and turn off the spigot.

"No one signed me up but me, but I can't be held responsible for that when I thought I was signing the attendance sheet. God forbid you should get credit for one less guest."

She is plopping the naked potato into the pot where other naked potatoes cluster around a pale, naked chicken. "It said--right at the top--it said, 'Secret Sister Sign-up.' How could they possibly make it more clear to you? Mrs. Bell announced it for five minutes, told all about how you should only sign up if you'll remember to do something thoughtful for your assigned Sister at least once a month. If you call Mrs. Bell to cancel now, you will kill me with shame." Mother puts her freckled face up to mine as she spits out the words. People have called my mother jolly--she has a slight German accent, and her laugh has the warm, gritty texture of pouring sand--but I know that she can be a tenacious woman when it comes to her reputation.

Which is why she had forced me to accompany her to the First Methodist Ladies' Summer Brunch in the first place: the woman who brings the most guests to First Methodist Ladies' events during the year will win a ceramic and wire mobile of dangling angels at the Ladies' Annual Christmas Program. It isn't the angels my mother covets so much as the unspeakable glory.

"You have my word that people do not die of shame," I say. "Anyway, I didn't hear the announcement, I heard nothing but Mrs. Raymond during the entire lunch. At least three times, just during the fruit salad, she patted my hand and screeched, 'Theresa dear, what exactly is environmental studies?'"

"Mrs. Raymond's voice," Mother says, "is not *half* that high or *one-fourth* that grating, and it's extremely disrespectful of you to make fun of an old deaf lady when she was just being interested in you." She is rummaging in the refrigerator for carrots, for celery; she produces a huge round white onion, and it rumbles across the countertop like distant thunder. "It might do *you* some good to be interested in someone else for a change." Her eyebrows lift significantly, scattering the freckles on her forehead.

"Rita Mae Beaudette," I say, studying the powder blue envelope in which my Secret Sister assignment came. It has my name on it in Mrs. Bell's round, cheerful handwriting but is addressed to my parents' house. Two years since I've moved out, and my mother still enters my name under hers in the church directory. "Rita Mae Beaudette, that's just beautiful."

"Don't you start on Rita Mae Beaudette. She is a fine woman, a lovely woman who has certainly--"

I pick up the envelope and exit out the back screen door amid Mother's rantings, skip down the two patio steps to my bike. The lock has rusted in the recent spell of rain, and I strain to force the combination. As far as I'm concerned the issue is closed. Rita Mae Beaudette is a fatuous woman with pastel-painted eyelids who wears her yellow hair in a flip fifteen years too young for her tanned, aging face; she is the sort of person who peaked in high school, exactly the sort with whom I have nothing in common. The lock finally gives, and I coil the chain around the handlebars.

Furthermore, I tell myself as I bike down Hawthorne beneath trees turning yellow, I am thinking of Rita Mae's feelings here as much as my own. The Rita Maes of this world never choose to associate with the Theresa Parksons any more than I do with them--the difference being that the Rita Maes acquiesce when forced to by organizations like the First Method-

ist Ladies' Fellowship. Therefore I will call Mrs. Bell tomorrow and ask her to remove my name from the Secret Sisters list.

But early the next day, while I'm still in my bathrobe scraping toast, a delivery boy from Elly's House of Flowers knocks at my door.

"Flowers for Theresa Parkson," he says. He turns his head and sneezes twice as he holds out a bushy bouquet of daisies swathed in green tissue paper.

"Gesundheit," I say, and I take the daisies and close the door.

For a moment I am at a loss. Daisies don't seem to belong here; my ex-roommate Rochelle and her furniture moved in with her boyfriend George over the summer, and the place is still a bit bare. I can't even find a vase. Finally I take a large Mason jar from under the sink and fill it with water and manage to stuff every last living daisy into it. The daisies have bright yellow and white and butterscotch heads composed of a million fussy little petals thrusting every which way, and the golden-green centers look back at me and my apartment without a trace of apology. I open the envelope stapled to the green tissue paper: "Have a happy day! From your Secret Sister."

Have a happy day. Great. I wad up the note and throw it toward the wastebasket, missing by two feet. My mother is going to be terribly smug about this. I stand with my hands on my hips, frowning at the daisies, and wonder who, in her eagerness to be attentive, has sentenced me to forced Secret Sisterhood. The whole thing puts me in a terrible mood, and by the time I return to scraping toast I am muttering to the knife.

That day I think of Rita Mae Beaudette every time I look at the daisies; it's not unlike being nagged by my mother. Finally I resign myself to regarding this as one of those things you have to go through that will soon be over, like having your teeth cleaned. So the next morning I visit with Mrs. Bell and compile a one-page dossier on Rita Mae Beaudette and her splendid little family.

Actually, "splendid" is not the word for Rita Mae's family just now. Rita Mae is in the middle of being divorced by her husband, who after sixteen years left her for his boss (a real *vamp*, Mrs. Bell said, a corporate climbing *hussy*), and her children (ages 14, 11, 5) are responding to things no better than your average children.

What else does she expect, though? Rita Mae (I could have guessed this) married the quarterback of the football team straight out of high school and stayed home and made pot roast once a week and joined the Ladies' Fellowship. Live and let live, I truly believe that, but the fact is that most people can't pick a major when they're eighteen, let alone a

spouse. I find my Rita Mae information strangely distracting when I try to study that night; I keep thinking back and replanning her life, starting with not letting her get married until she's done a stint in the Peace Corps.

The next day Rochelle comes over for lunch, and I tell her about the Secret Sisters of First Methodist.

"No way," she says. Rochelle never believes anything. Or rather, she believes everything but with the greatest reluctance. "That's too much. And you're actually going through with it?"

"Too late to back out." I nod toward the daisies. I still haven't told my mother. The daisies are withering, but I haven't bothered tossing them yet because they still smell all right.

"Ghastly," Rochelle says. She is eating her lettuce salad in great mouthfuls, like a starving person. She is the thinnest non-dieting woman I know, tall and bony, and I wonder if her bones ever poke George in the middle of the night. "I always hated daisies," she says. "George gave me roses once. It was so romantic I could hardly believe it."

I stab at my lettuce and take a vicious bite. Rochelle looks at me in surprise, and I shrug.

I remember what she said about roses that afternoon, however. I'm at Four Seasons Florist on 12th and Grange, not having thought of a better idea. On my income I can send about twelve chrysanthemum blossoms or three roses, and finally I decide, what the heck, send the roses. Old Rita Mae probably hasn't gotten roses in a good long while. I order sweetheart-pink rosebuds, and when the saleswoman brings me a small white and pink card I print in block letters, "RITA MAE. YOUR S.S."

That Sunday my mother mentions Rita Mae's roses. I still have Sunday lunches at home, to quell my mother's fears that the family is falling apart since my brother married and I moved out. The only one still at home is Annie, who's fifteen. Annie and I have little in common. She started dating last year and she tells Mother everything.

"So you made your Secret Sister very happy this week," Mother says pointedly, scooping up mashed potatoes and dumping them on my plate without asking. "Isn't that what you said?" She nudges my father, who is chewing silently. "He said today at church he overheard Rita Mae telling Mrs. Bell and Wanda Samuelson about how she hasn't seen such lovely roses ever. Of course, if it was mums or daisies you could have sent more."

(There is no point in telling my mother anything, since she always finds out eventually on her own. Which leads me to believe that Annie is none too bright for spilling her guts all the time.)

"I'm certain she doesn't spend much in the way of extras these days, with that husband gone. Poor thing, deserted in the prime of her life. Now aren't you glad you--"

"She ought to get a job," I say, having swallowed my turkey. (Rochelle has presented some very compelling arguments about vegetarianism, but I am still considering.) "Why didn't she change her name back after the divorce?"

"Isn't that Crystal Lynn's mom?" Annie says. "What a totally ridiculous name."

"It is a bit much, maybe." My mother puts some more peas on my father's place. I watch as one pea rolls off and hits his water glass. "Is she a nice girl?"

"How should I know? She's a grade below me. She's a geek, though."

"You said you didn't know her," I say.

"I don't, but she looks like someone *you'd* have hung out with in ninth grade. You know, the sort who never gets a real haircut, and thinks it proves something."

Fortunately I am above responding. My sister, I can see, is going to peak in high school just like Rita Mae: four years of glory, of trend-setting and dates with basketball players, and then it's hello Kmart for the rest of her life. It's comforting to imagine that the fluff genes may be recessive; perhaps if Annie ever has children I'll be able to communicate with them.

By the time the semester is well underway, the over-zealous Sister who has my name has sent a small, strangely wrinkled, globular cactus, on the needles of which she has impaled a gift certificate to Little Caesar's Pizza signed with a question mark. Naturally I am glad for this--my father pays the rent but I buy my own food--and I order the pizza late one night while working on a paper for Philosophy of Nature. The cactus itself is rather curious, with one white blossom nestled among the broad yellow spines. I appreciate the fact that it can survive with very few ministrations from me, and I perch it on my bathroom sink next to the soap dish, where the sun will reach it.

It is not incumbent upon me to exhibit this same Sisterly zeal, however, and with three papers due before midterms, it's impossible as well. In fact, I forget completely about Rita Mae until the morning of October 4. It is breakfast, and I'm reviewing my date book when the red ink on the next page draws my eye. "R.M.B. birthday," it says. At first I cannot remember who R.M.B. is; then I drop my spoon into my bran flakes

and splatter milk on my nightshirt. The Methodist Ladies make a big hairy deal out of their Sisters' birthdays, if my mother is anything to go by. She usually is.

Flowers are the easiest way out and therefore too obvious. Mother, I think, what would my mother do? Probably send a little stuffed bear clutching a little stuffed heart that says, "Luv." That eliminates that. Candy is typical but a definite possibility. Balloons. I decide against balloons while I'm getting dressed. Her youngest kid would probably pop them; she's a terrorist in Sunday School, according to Mrs. Bell.

No, it comes to me in Environmental Economics, in the middle of a lecture on toxic waste dumps in the Midwest: doughnuts. Fancy doughnuts. That will not only be a festive birthday surprise but will solve the problem of what to feed the kids for breakfast. I am mildly pleased by this revelation; even if the whole Secret Sister thing is too damn sappy for words, I like being good at what I do. I tell Rochelle my plans because I need her help, and she tells me (her brown eyes shining painfully) that she hasn't had a doughnut in two years. Too much refined sugar.

The next morning at 7:30 a.m. I borrow my mother's car and drive to the bakery, where I choose a dazzling variety of doughnuts: two chocolate-frosted long-johns stuffed with French cream, several raised doughnuts twisted and glazed, one each of the blueberry and chocolate-chip cake doughnuts, three Danish pastries dripping with cherries and cream cheese, and two cake doughnuts dunked in white frosting and multi-colored sprinkles. The doughnut woman (I am struck by her similarity to the flower shop woman, with her short black hair and puffy eyes) sticks a red plastic Happy Birthday sign in one of the doughnuts and slides the box into a clear plastic bag. I am growing more and more pleased with myself: I am fulfilling my obligation in a timely fashion with creativity, and all for under six dollars.

Then I pick up Rochelle and drive to the corner of 29th and Phillips and watch as she runs down the block through falling leaves to a big white house with peeling blue trim. She lays the box of doughnuts and the card beneath the mailbox, rings the doorbell and dashes back. She laughs when she sees that I've scrunched down behind the wheel just in case, and I'm laughing too because there's a leaf caught in her hair.

The next evening, as a reward for getting Rita Mae out of the way and for handing a paper in early, I buy a rebuilt rocker from Second Chances. I rock steadily in my new used chair and enjoy the paper, peruse the obituaries and births, while I wait for Eddie Wadel to show up. Eddie Wadel is a freshman environmental studies major who has impressed me

by his mature focus on goals, even in this his first year. I may be three years older, but maturity is relative (I thought this through very carefully the day I met Eddie in our advisor's office); therefore, I would have no objections if a romantic relationship should develop. Actually--and I do not apologize if a bit of cynicism creeps in here--it's unlikely that Eddie thinks of me as anything but an Environmental Honors Senior. He is coming over to ask my advice on taking a seminar next semester that I once took, Crisis and Resolution.

I look through Accidents, then scan the Hospital Report. One line catches my eye: "Admitted to Sioux Valley Hospital: Alexandra Beaudette, Sioux Falls." I reach for my date book (Rita Mae's dossier is at the back), but before I even look I know that it's the right name; there are few Beaudette's in the area, only three listings in the phone book. Before I've had a chance to think things through I have dialed my mother.

"What happened to Rita Mae's youngest?" I ask when she says hello in her telephone voice.

"What?"

"It's in the paper," I say. "She went into the hospital yesterday." My mother, I am well aware, does not read the paper, which perhaps explains her reluctance to recycle it: how can she apply the recycling principle to something she hasn't used the first time?

"I haven't heard anything," she says frostily.

"Call Mrs. Bell and *ask*. Or call Rita Mae," I say. "Just act concerned, don't mention my name." I hang up. There's a knock at my front door, and when I open it Eddie says hello.

"Hello, come in, come in," I say. Ordinarily I would not smile so frantically, especially at someone as loose and unself-conscious as Eddie. But when I'm preoccupied I have less control over the manifestations of my hormones. Eddie has beautiful green eyes; they light on the objects in the room carelessly.

But as I work myself into a niche in the bean bag chair (Eddie has chosen the rocker, his knees high as he pushes steadily against the floor), I relax. Probably Alexandra has had a tonsillectomy or some other child's trouble. I ask Eddie if he drinks milk or mineral water or pop, and we are embarking on a discussion of the merits of two professors when the phone rings.

"Rita Mae's not at home," my mother says. Her voice is warmer, more gravely, now that she knows more. "But Mrs. Bell has been with her at the hospital." She pauses.

"What already?" I say. Eddie starts. I smile for him briefly, then turn my back. "What happened, Mother?"

"Alexandra went into a--a diabetic fit, whatever they call it, keto-acidity or something, yesterday morning after she got to kindergarten. Of course Rita Mae hadn't even known she was diabetic."

"She's *diabetic*?"

"She asked to go to the bathroom five times during the first hour of kindergarten, Mrs. Bell said, and the teacher's aid thought it was because of all the water she insisted on drinking and got mad. But then she fell off the storytime bench and threw up. They called the ambulance, and Rita Mae met them at the hospital. Mrs. Bell said Rita Mae said the poor little thing was limp as a noodle and sheet-white. Of course, they fixed her with insulin, and now she must stay in for another few days to settle."

My lips are cold and bloodless. I hear the rocker creak as Eddie stands, and I wish he'd go away because I feel a hiccup coming on.

"She's really diabetic? But she's okay now, right? What could have--how could this happen?" I don't know why I ask this; I know enough about diabetics to know that nothing *causes* it, nothing like doughnuts, anyway. Of course something does cause it, but certainly not doughnuts.

"I don't know. Maybe she ate too much sugar."

I snap, "Mother, that is the stupidest thing you've ever said. In juvenile onset diabetes, your pancreas simply stops producing enough insulin for some reason, anyone knows that. I have to go."

"Well, I don't see why you ask, if you're only going to--"

I hang up without saying goodbye. Eddie turns me around and looks down at me, his green eyes wide. He looks so young.

"Theresa, are you okay?" he asks.

But I don't know how to explain because I don't know why I am wracked with whatever it is that's wracking me. Doughnuts had nothing to do with any of it, I am sure, and anyway I couldn't have known if even Rita Mae hadn't known. I think of Rita Mae, ex-cheerleader and ex-wife, holding someone limp as a noodle, and I close my mouth tight just as the first hiccup squeezes my esophagus. I haven't cried in years, and in those situations where anyone else might cry I instead get a severe case of dry hiccups, with maybe one or two painfully small tears. I must look more upset than ridiculous, however, because Eddie puts an arm around me awkwardly and leads me to the bean bag chair. He crouches on the floor and holds my hand, and when the hiccups don't subside he goes to the kitchen and brings back a tumbler of water.

"Your sister?" he asks, holding out the glass. I shake my head and try to swallow water, but as always I hiccup at the wrong time and start choking. Eddie pats me on the back. "Your mother? A relative? A close friend?" I shake my head no, no, no, hiccuping violently and hugging my stomach with both arms. The two tears are working their way out of the corners of my eyes and I put my head on my knees.

Eddie gets up and answers the phone even though I haven't heard it ring. "She can't come to the phone right now," he says. "May I take a message? Yes. Sure, she'll call back."

"That was a Rochelle," he says, and I start to laugh between hiccups. A Rochelle. Furthermore, she will be wondering who the hell the guy at my place is. I am not pretty when I hiccup, less so when I giggle convulsively at the same time--it has an earthquake effect on my whole body--but before he leaves an hour later, Eddie's eyes have changed and he has asked me out for Friday night.

In the next few days, I embrace the theory that a good working knowledge of diabetes will cause my unfounded guilt feelings to subside. I dig up a few interesting articles on recent findings: "What Causes Diabetes?" from *The Scientific American*, a couple of blurbs in *Time* and *Medical News*.

At first, the more I learn the more I'm concerned: the many blood tests, urine tests, and insulin shots make for a complex daily regime. I wonder if Rita Mae even knows what to cook, and although I'm sure the hospital dietician is perfectly competent, I buy a copy of *Cooking for the Diabetic Child* and give it to Rita Mae through Mrs. Bell.

For some reason, however, the guilt feelings--it may not even be guilt--continue to nag, and after a brief struggle with logic I cave in and send a perfectly useless stuffed kitty to the hospital, then a packet of ridiculous scratch-and-sniff flower stickers. At this my uneasiness does subside, and I begin to feel normal again.

In fact, better than normal.

And apparently, this better-than-normal feeling is addictive, because when Alexandra is released I send Tiffany, a paper doll with a ton of blonde paper hair and a wildly elaborate wardrobe, as a going-home present. Tiffany wears flat, pink ball gowns with sparkling scalloped skirts and gleaming ribbons and does nothing but dance with a smiling, very short-haired boy paper doll named Roger. According to Mrs. Bell, Tiffany is a big hit with Alexandra; she has been busy designing and cutting out swimsuits to give the glamorous, chesty Tiffany a little variety in activity. I'm

annoyed with myself for perpetrating female stereotypes but am a little pleased that she's pleased, and why not? Alexandra is having a rough time getting used to the insulin shots and needs a little distraction. I decide to keep my eyes out for an astronaut woman paper doll.

On my birthday, three weeks after Alexandra's diabetes onset, I arrive home from a Schumacher Distinguished Lecture, "Landfills: Our Future? Our Foe?" to discover a small flat parcel slid beneath my door. I have been expecting something; it would be uncharacteristic of my Sister to forget. (My mother, on the contrary, has heard nothing from her Secret Sister, and quite naturally she's disappointed. She suspects that her name is in the possession of Bernice Nitzbaum, who has been a notoriously negligent Sister in past years.)

I'm strangely anxious as I unwrap the package; I'd begun to hope she would stick to plants all year, which are a fairly safe bet, and not get around to sending hot pads with geese or pigs or little Scotties marching all over them. This gift is obviously a book, and when the last scrap of flowered paper falls away I smile in relief: *Letters to a Young Poet* by Rainer Maria Rilke. Strange, since I haven't written poetry in over five years. I gave it up because I'm a terrible poet and I believe terrible poets should not contribute to the raping of forests by writing reams of long, limping epic poems (the only kind I ever liked). She must have gotten this antiquated poetry information from Mrs. Bell, who is, I suspect, everyone's major source of information. Mrs. Bell hasn't got the time to be a Secret Sister; her duties as informant keep her busy.

I'm reading the book when Eddie arrives. He's early, which I find endearing, and I leave him in the living room while I change into jeans. We're going to a greasy hamburger place that Eddie says I will love, and I feel like I'm sneaking around because for lunch Rochelle and George took me to a small health-food cafe where we ate watercress-cucumber sandwiches. Rochelle insisted on paying, which was unusually sweet, and gave me a hand-knitted black and blue scarf.

When I re-enter the living room Eddie is engrossed in the Rilke book. "You're really getting some decent stuff from this lady," he says. "Can I join next time? I could be a Secret Brother. Of course that's not alliterative." He replaces the book and stands to go. I tug the curly hair over his forehead.

"You'd be the Only Brother, Eddie," I say.

My birthday lasts for two days because the next night I must have supper with my family, a traditional birthday supper of ham smothered in my mother's sweet-sour chunky golden pineapple sauce. Over the birthday

cake my mother asks what I have received from my Secret Sister, and when I tell her, she wrinkles her nose.

"Better for you than for me," she says. "I didn't know you still wrote poetry."

"When I have time," I say. As a matter of fact, I had time last night after Eddie went home.

And then my family hands me presents: a simulated-leather wallet from Annie; a huge package my brother and his wife mailed that turns out to be a green pleated lamp shade; and a floor lamp from my parents, to go with the shade. My father also gives me a glass cookie jar containing one silver dollar for every year of my life, and my mother gives me a set of startlingly yellow kitchen towels sprinkled liberally with country-blue geese.

"You have such a *dark* little kitchen," she says, and I agree that the towels are certainly bright, and wonder privately if I should ask Mrs. Bell to have a chat with my mother.

As it happens, Mother has visited with Mrs. Bell *and* Rita Mae herself only yesterday evening, and at Rita Mae's too, so as she clears the table she tells me the latest news. I stand at the dishwasher, and her voice waxes and wanes as she comes and goes from the dining room to the kitchen.

"Rita Mae's oldest was caught smoking in the boys' bathroom with three boys," she says. "She was skipping English at the time--this was all yesterday. The day before that, Rita Mae's boy beat up another boy for throwing chalk in his face. Poor Rita Mae. Between her new job at Fabulous Fabrics and getting Alexandra to take her insulin shots, she doesn't need more trouble. I don't know why she must take on the cake sale. She'll have only herself to blame, if it's too much." My mother clucks in sympathy. She sets a gravy boat in the sink. "Wash this separately. Why wouldn't you bring Eddie tonight? We ought to meet Eddie."

I say, "Next week probably. He's home for the weekend. Was Alexandra playing with that paper doll when you were visiting?"

My mother pauses, then remembers what I am referring to. "She was watching TV, but there were paper doll clothes thrown everywhere. She's certainly hard on her things, loves them to death. Not like you." Mother has gone for the glasses, and she calls back, "You were so careful, you wanted everything to last forever. I hated to buy you chocolate Easter bunnies because you saved them until the ears crumbled, and then Annie would cry and cry because her Easter bunny was long gone." I do recall, now that I think about it, that my teddy bears always had their full coat of

rich brown fur, while my sister's were plagued with bare, scratchy patches.

"Tell me what she needs," I say when Mother returns clinking two glasses in each hand. "For future reference. I'm running out of ideas."

Mother's freckles furrow together over her light blue eyes. "Come with me tomorrow night," she says finally. "See for yourself what she needs."

I sigh. Midterms are next week and I am drowning in a sea of text; I don't have time for a reconnaissance mission. "Mother, I am her *Secret Sister*. *Secret*."

"Phsh. She'd never guess, never; everyone at church visited them in the hospital, and anyway I'm taking a Bundt cake over tomorrow. Mrs. Bell said Rita Mae hasn't baked a thing since Alexandra's diabetes, and it is my opinion the other two children are going to resent this. So what will she suspect if I bring my daughter along? We can be on the way to a movie, to shopping, whatever."

Shopping, maybe. If Rita Mae Beaudette can envision me going to a movie with my mother then she is blessed with more imagination than I give her credit for. I agree, finally, to go to Rita Mae's the next night as long as it only takes 15 minutes. My mother smiles in triumph. It's been a long time since I did anything her way.

It's dark by the time Mother and I are standing on Rita Mae's front porch, and when we breathe white streams flow from our mouths and hang in the air before fading. Rita Mae's oldest answers the door, a narrow-shouldered, sullen girl with dull blonde hair and wide eyes; she cracks her gum as she gives me the once-over, then yells, "Ma! For you." We enter the foyer after her, even though she has not asked us in.

Rita Mae appears, apologizing profusely for the mess and for her daughter who is in one of those stages--all in a bright, lilting voice. I haven't seen her since the Methodist Ladies' Summer Brunch, and I'm shocked to realize that Rita Mae is still Rita Mae. Somehow she had changed in my mind's eye: her hair had softened, her make-up faded, her sharp features yielded to gentleness and strength. None of this, of course, has happened. Her green eyes are pale beneath wide sweeps of blue, and they seem to blink all the more under their burden of heavy black lashes. I say hello levelly and she nods, smiling, and I know she's trying to remember my name.

"Come in, sit for a minute." She swiftly clears the couch of coats and shoes and papers and plastic guns. "It's such a mess, now that I'm working," she says apologetically. In spite of my disappointment, I feel a

quick stab in my stomach: is there anything in her life right now that doesn't demand an apology? The overhead light isn't bright enough, and its yellowish cast gives the illusion of constantly dimming.

"Turn that *down*," she calls sharply to the next room, and the glare of the television lowers a fraction. My mother holds out the German chocolate Bundt cake before joining me on the couch. "A sample one, for your family. It comes with a lemon filling."

"For us? How lovely!" Rita Mae exclaims. She lifts the cake from my mother's hands and sits across from us, balancing the cake on her knees gingerly. "Thank you, you really shouldn't have. I'm sure it won't last five minutes around Donny. Is this what you'll bring to the sale? You and Mrs. Bell and Clare Anderson, you're really just cake experts." She's smiling for real now as she leans forward, smiling as if a cake sale alone were wonderful and absorbing enough to make up for everything else in her life.

They quickly forget that I'm there, so I look around the room and wait for a Secret Sister inspiration. A small thin girl who must be Alexandra enters the room and stands next to Rita Mae, jerks away when Rita Mae strokes her forehead. She is holding the tattered Tiffany and tries to steal a finger of frosting, which frightens me. I note with annoyance that my mother is barely able to suppress a knowing glance at the paper doll; her voice grows louder, warmer, and she laughs easily.

Suddenly Alexandra tears out of the room. She runs back with a shoe box full of paper clothes, settles herself smack in the middle of the worn rose carpeting, and begins dressing and undressing Tiffany, singing a tuneless song to herself. From time to time she looks at me shyly, belligerently, through the long brown stringy hair falling over her eyes.

Finally I clear my throat and ask, "What are you going to be for Halloween?" I'm wondering how scrupulously Rita Mae is going to have to police the trick-or-treating this year; I want to tell her to make Alexandra stay home.

"A *princess*," she says fiercely. A real humdinger of a Cinderella, I think, and reluctantly I cross the astronaut woman off the list in my head. Alexandra begins singing the words "a *prin-cess*, a *prin-cess*," over and over, and the longer she sings it in that yellow light that always seems to be fading, the more my stomach twists. By the time we rise to go I am steeling my throat, but a hiccup escapes anyway. I can tell my mother notices; she needs no urging to hurry.

We exit quickly, Rita Mae somehow managing to wave while balancing the Bundt cake up over her head out of Alexandra's reach, and

when we are settled in the car my mother says, "Well well, maybe you're not so stoic, maybe--"

"Just shut up," I say, hiccuping, and amazingly enough she does. I look away as she starts the car. I didn't mean to be harsh; I'm just wondering if it's the lighting that got to me or the thought of that thin little kid's pancreas just quitting or the way Rita Mae held that cake so carefully the whole time, as if it were an egg. My mother doesn't speak while she checks for oncoming traffic and backs out of the driveway; she doesn't speak as we head back to 26th, although I feel myself reflected in the corners of her eyes more than once, and she's silent through an entire red light at 26th and Minnesota. We turn left on green, and then she speaks.

"I know what your problem is," she says, changing lanes abruptly. I prepare to be blessed by her wisdom. I'm hiccuping too hard to bother rolling my eyes, but really there's no need. She knows me. She knows I'll be listening under protest. She says, "The whole thing is, you thought you were signing the attendance sheet; you never bargained for ending up with Rita Mae and those kids."

I draw a sharp breath, right in the line of a hiccup. This is as close as she will come to saying I was right all along. Mother says, "It's only another few months. Can you bear it another few months?"

But it isn't. Somewhere along the way, getting through another few months stopped mattering, and whatever it is that suddenly does matter is beyond my comprehension but it's making my throat hurt like hell. The tears that usually stop at two aren't stopping. I open my mouth to tell her but I can't speak; and anyway, she's only trying to make me feel better. Suddenly I want her to think she succeeded.

So instead I nod and swallow my hiccups and wipe the water off my face, and we talk about hot pads, balloons, African violets, those certain cooking utensils that every woman can use even if she's already got one: soup ladles and pie servers and a nice pancake-sized spatula. For some reason the thought of a spatula makes me cry again, so my mother moves us into a discussion of bathroom hand towels and decorative bath soaps. By the time she pulls up to my apartment, there are weightless snowflakes drifting in and out of the light of the street lamps, melting on the hood of the car. We sit there in the warm car for a few minutes, trying to come up with the perfect surprise for Rita Mae Beaudette and her lousy, messed-up life and depressing kids. I'm thinking maybe a wooden heart to hang in Rita Mae's kitchen. Mother says they have a good selection at Carsen's Designs.