

Aunt Rita

My aunt Rita's third stroke had been worse than both the others put together. After the first, the mild one, two summers ago, she'd gone straight back to work, at Sears at the mall. She'd been manager of the Auto Center, and no one she worked with seemed to care that her mouth looked strange, as if she'd just come back from the dentist, or that her speech was slurred, so that she talked like a drunkard. Their attitude had been, "Now you fit in around here." When customers came into the bays and encountered her, and stared at her, they never did it for long. A mechanic was always nearby, with a tire iron or a wrench.

Rita could have gone on like that until her retirement. In features, and with the color she tinted her hair, which had been reddish-blond to begin with, before it grayed, she resembled the mother on the tv show of *Bewitched*, although she was a little shorter and slighter. Reruns were always turning up on cable; the people she worked with got a kick out of calling her Agnes, or Mrs. Moorehead, or Endora. After the first stroke, she played this up. She often wore, with her gold Sears jacket, long loose blouses and tight pants, or caftan-style dresses, and lots of makeup.

The second stroke, last winter, drew a line down her body, leaving half of it paralyzed. She had missed going into the world every day, but had not become bitter. She was still entitled to her discount, and bought herself a wide-screen t.v. and a brown leatherette Sears recliner. People visited her. She and her husband, my uncle Ray, had been married for forty-one years. They did not have children. They lived in a red-

shingled ranch near the highway, on which the mortgage was paid off a long time ago. It was the only place they ever lived in together.

The moment we knew my aunt had died was when the priest who had come to attend her bowed over her and made the sign of the cross on her forehead. People in the parish called him "Father Jeff." He was young and athletic, and wore the thin stole of his office in a loose, jaunty way across his shoulders. As he bent over Rita, one end of the stole fell lightly across her face, and just lay there in a silky fold.

Death, for a moment, was something that had entered the room. We sensed but couldn't see it, like a dark sheet hung to dry outdoors in darkness. My sister, Paula, started crying. Ray looked away from the bed with a terrible expression, and said, in a voice that was probably louder than he meant it, "Oh Rita! Oh no! Oh shit!"

"She was only sixty-two, but she was ready," said my mom.

Ready for what? To slip out the back door like this? She hadn't even opened her eyes.

"Ray." My dad went over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. Uncle Ray was head of the road crew. Unlike Dad, who was a salesman for a wire factory outside town, Ray was weathered-looking and lean. He'd always seemed, to me, like a part of the elements.

Last year, on the night that followed the second stroke, he left the hospital and went out to the D.P.W. yard. He unlocked the gate with his key and came out on a John Deere front-end loader. He drove it into town, to the park, knocking down on his way a mailbox, a litter basket, and a section of the park's new fence. Everything had been covered with snow, but Ray knew where the flower beds were, and drove through them

all. When my dad picked him up at the police station, all Ray said was, "If they try to press charges against me, I'm going back in, and I'm taking a couple of trees." The gouges he had put into the trunk of a big silver beech were deep, and were likely to stay there forever.

After the third stroke, when someone from the crew asked Ray to hand in his keys for a while, he did it without putting up a fight. Mostly he'd been here in the hospital, saying things like, "This time when I bring her home, I'll have to find someone to come and help out, especially with giving her a bath." He planned, and drew diagrams of, the ramp he would build off the deck in case Rita needed to use a wheelchair. He had wondered if the chair would have to be automatic, if she'd go to the bathroom in a plastic bag, and if, waking up from the stroke, she would remember him.

The priest had finished the prayers, and stood there and looked at us. He was famous in our parish for jogging every morning in orange or bright green sweats, on routes that always ended at someone's breakfast table, and for organizing bus trips, which my mom sometimes took, to high-stakes bingo games on an Indian reservation in Connecticut. He said, "If you want to be alone with your wife, Mr. Baird, we'll clear out."

"I want to go," said Ray. He went to the closet and found his coat and put it on, and fumbled with a sleeve. Dad helped him. Then Ray stared down at the buttons and couldn't seem to recall what they were for. My mom was a retired nurse. Long ago that morning around dawn, when it began to be clear that my aunt wouldn't live much longer, Mom had given Ray some Valium. It was now, at noon, kicking in.

"Could you wait a minute, please, Uncle Ray?" said Paula. She had stepped

toward the window. Paula was a hairdresser, and older than me by four years. We had never seen anyone in our family die before, and it suddenly stopped bothering me that when she talked, no matter what she said or who she said it to, it sounded as if she held, near the back of your head, a pair of scissors, and you couldn't figure out where the points were.

"Suzy?" said Ray. "Did I come here in my own car?"

"Dad drove you," I said.

"Does it look like snow?"

"You're not going to work, Ray," said Dad.

"Well, anything I don't have to plow, I don't care about," said Ray.

There was trouble at work. A couple of weeks ago, he placed an ad for extra drivers in our town's newspaper. So many applicants showed up at the D.P.W. yard, with plow blades on trucks, Jeeps, and even some vans, there had nearly been a riot. The police came, and so did the county commissioner, who seemed to Ray like he was having a nervous breakdown. He stormed around in the shed, thinking up new ways to say, "It looks like a war zone out here, and you should have done this quiet, and I want to have you fired." They'd sent everyone home.

Maybe it wouldn't snow this year at all. I wondered if somewhere in the valley, someone had looked at the fog today, and at the light gray sheet of the sky, then sat down anyway at a kitchen table, and wrote on cardboard, with a child's black crayon, "I will plow for food."

"Mom," whispered Paula. "Uncle Ray is completely out of it."

"You'd better open the window now," said Mom.

With a little grunt, Paula flung it open as far as it would go, and I wished I were someone who could believe, like my parents and Uncle Ray and a couple of my sisters, that the soul of Aunt Rita was rising that moment and soaring to God.

The hospital was at the top of a hill, with woods all around. We could see through gaps in the trees the fuzzy lights of the downtown shops, and the roof of the boarded-up movie theater, where the marquee said, "For Rent or Lease," as if that were the name of a movie. The ovens were on at the cereal mill, and the air smelled of toasted, burned grains. When the wind blew, the leaves of the oak tree outside the window skittered lightly, like bits of tin. I thought about what it would be like to turn the corner of Rita's street, and drive by her house and not see her in her chair, with light from the television flickering in different colors, but mostly blue.

The school where I teach the fourth grade is in her neighborhood. Sometimes I stopped to see her, sometimes not. The substitute teacher with my class, at that moment, was a man in his twenties who had once played professional hockey. His right foot had been shattered; he walked with a cane. He was easy-going and handsome. I hoped that my students were in chaos with him, and were zooming around throwing tantrums, as unpredictable in my absence as twenty pucks. I hoped that at the end of the day he'd go to the office and say, "Never call me, because I'm never coming back."

When it was time to leave the room, I had the sense that we were moving very slowly, as if standing in something heavy, like mud or wet cement. Wherever we put down our feet in the simple act of walking, there was more of it.

My mom had started thinking ahead to the funeral, and she said, as we waited for the elevator, "Does anyone know if Rita mentioned those balloons?" She sounded so

much like Paula, I had to look, to make sure I knew who was talking.

"She didn't mention *anything*," I said. Around the time of the second stroke, Rita saw a funeral she admired, in a movie: at the cemetery, a crowd of mourners carried white balloons on strings, then let them go all at once, and the sky had filled.

But she must have changed her mind about this. The wife of one of her old mechanics had died not long ago. Perhaps the movie my aunt had seen took place in a town near a desert, or on the Plains. When they tried it here, at the woman's funeral, all the balloons went into trees, and remained in the branches like wingless birds.

Jerry was in our kitchen, making supper of hamburgers, frozen fries, and canned corn. He was watching the small tv on the counter and drinking a beer. Every time I walked between him and the set, he said, "You're making a better door than a window, honey." Or he craned his neck to see around me. He drives a truck for UPS. Our son had left for the University of Rhode Island two and half months ago, and the moment we came back from driving him there, Jerry started going around the house with his pants off. It didn't surprise me that he was wearing all his clothes now. The house was warm, but he still had on that brown uniform, with the jacket zipped all the way up.

"Suzy? You want a beer?"

"I'm not drinking."

"Neither am I." He slid a cookie sheet of Wonder Bread rolls, buttered on both sides, into the oven. "I have to tell you something," he said, and sighed. "I've been thinking about this all day. The first one to go should be me. Then you and Chris can sit around and talk about me, and order pizza, like when Moo-Moo died."

"When we put her to sleep, you mean."

"She was *blind*. She was the oldest cat we ever knew, and something was wrong with every one of her organs."

His bottle of Molson was nearly empty. I took it to the sink and poured the rest of it out. "I'm not dying," I said.

"Thanks, babe." The phone rang. As Jerry went to answer it, he tilted sideways. His shoulder brushed the side of our hutch, and all the dishes rattled. It was Chris.

"I'm making dinner, and I'm standing here watching a rerun of *Roseanne*, which I think I never saw," Jerry told him. Then he said, "Burgers." Then he covered the mouthpiece with his hand and looked at me. "He doesn't know Rita died."

"Tell him."

But Jerry passed the phone to me and went to the refrigerator and took out another beer and opened it. He drank nearly half of it at once, tipping back his head. I was supposed to be good at explaining things to people a lot younger than me, but I had never told Chris before that someone had died. If I said, "Rita died today," or, "Rita's dead, Chris," it might happen that a wave of great feeling rose inside me. I'd be as clumsy as a bladder, and start giggling and crying both at once.

"Why did Dad give you the phone before he finished talking?" said Chris.

"We miss you," I said. There was a pause.

"Mom? Did Rita die?"

I nodded at the phone. All I had to do was hear his voice, and everything came back from our old world, from the place inside where I was someone's mother. There was a part of my body that would always be ready, like a system in the state of alert, to

go after him, and pluck him from harm by the tail of the shirt. I still had an ear that listened at night for the sound of a ladder pressed up to his bedroom window, and an eye to peer into the room, as rapt as an eye in a telescope, watching for the sight of a kidnapper, who would creep toward my baby with a bag on his arm. Just before Chris left home, he grew his hair; he wore it pulled back in an elastic. If he were here, I'd lift up the ponytail and kiss him at the nape of the neck, if he let me. Then I'd tell him, Eat three meals a day. Be careful of everything. Go to the library, if you know where it is yet. Never take cocaine. Never take pills unless they come from a prescription for something you are sick from. Do not die before us, and sleep well tonight, like a caterpillar.

Rita died on a Thursday, and would be waked the next day, and buried on Saturday. It fell to me to go to the funeral home as the first to see her laid out. Paula said she had evening appointments that could not be canceled. Ray was in bad shape; my parents wouldn't leave him alone. They were spending the night at his house.

Veechy's Funeral Home was in the center of town: a three-story white Victorian with dark trim and shutters. Its roof was like a high, stern forehead. There were juniper bushes, deeply fragrant, along the walk to the front door. A sign on a side door said, "Deliveries."

Sharon Veechy let me in. I knew her, and we hugged. On either side of the hall ahead were sitting rooms; to my left was a set of stairs. The door at the landing was closed, but I could smell embalming fluid, which was something I never noticed at the wakes of people I wasn't related to. The smell was similar to chlorine, but I knew right

away I had a problem. My legs were wobbly, and I thought, Oh, so this is why people like to have so many flowers.

It took me a minute to understand that the person in the doorway of one of the sitting rooms was my sister. She wore a gray apron, like an x-ray apron without the lead; it went nearly to her ankles. "Did you just set it, or did you give her a perm?" said Sharon.

"I just set it," said Paula.

Then everything I was looking at began to lose edges, and turn as gray as that apron. I tried to tell Paula that I was going to faint, but I blinked out very quickly. It felt like falling through the air, just like snow. When I came to, an instant later, Sharon was propping me against the wall.

"Get her a glass of water," said Paula, and I said, "Please don't." Anything I put into my mouth here might taste like that smell. My spine started feeling like a spine again. Paula took off the apron, dropped it on the floor, stepped over it, saw that I was all right, and slapped me on the arm and said, "I was planning to be gone before you got here."

"She thinks your mother will hate Rita's hair if she knew Paula did it, but she'll love it if she thought it was someone else," said Sharon. "Paula did her makeup, too. If you ask me, it's just as well. She saved your uncle some money, not that he'll know."

"I won't tell," I said.

Sharon's husband, Bobo, came down. He wore jeans and a tight black t-shirt that said, "Springsteen is still the Boss." He'd taken a shower, and his hair was wet. "How's it going?"

"My sister fainted," said Paula.

"It happens," said Bobo. "You want a brandy?"

I shook my head. "Don't move for one second, Bo," said Paula. She reached for the back of his shirt and pulled away a tiny child's white sock. We heard a soft buzz of mild static.

"Goddamn dryer." Bobo stood there holding the sock in his big hand. Sharon said, "It's because you grab everything out at once, and you never pay attention to what you're doing."

"That happens to us," I said. "I bought Jerry a pair of those slinky men's briefs, and one time he went to work with them stuck on the back of his sweater, and no one told him. Or maybe no one saw them. He had his jacket on, too. They fell off on a guy's front porch, and the guy thought it was part of his delivery."

"What did he do?" said Bobo.

"He put them in his pocket," I said. "Then he came home and screamed about it, so I sent him to the store to buy some Cling-Free."

"I can't believe you're talking about something so minor at a time like this," said Paula, and I looked at her. I really thought, for a second, that I was going to kick her.

But I just said, "You weren't going to tell me you did her *hair*."

"You sound so exactly like me and my sister, you could be us," said Sharon.

"I didn't even ask you how your baby is," I said.

"Don't. He's teething. He looks at us like he wants to eat us."

Bobo said, "Is Ray making out all right? I ran into some guys from his crew this afternoon. They think he might go off a little nuts."

"He'd like to, but he's too tired," Paula said.

"Well, I just want to say, your aunt was a real nice lady," said Bobo.

Sharon said, "Every time me and Bobo go to Sears, we wish she was still there."

Then the Veechys went quietly away, and Paula and I went into the room where Rita lay on cushions in an open casket. She looked like a replica of herself, like a mask of Aunt Rita asleep, as if the strokes had never happened. She wore a long, bright, blue and green paisley silk dress, with yellow designs here and there in the shape of diamonds.

Paula's touch had been a light one. Rita's hair was its usual orange-red. It didn't look lacquered or brittle now, just soft. Her eye shadow was as green as finger-paint, but there wasn't a lot of it, and it matched the dress absolutely. There was a little mascara, some blush, and pinkish lipstick as light as Chapstick. She held rosary beads. She wore her wedding ring, and, around her neck, her thin gold chain, which was strange. After the first stroke, Rita took to wearing flashy rings, and loopy, jangly bracelets, and earrings so heavy it had looked as if, when the wind blew, she'd fall backward.

"Where's her jewelry?" I said.

"I think she was sick of all that. She must have felt like she was walking around like a cow wearing cow bells."

"You did a great job," I said.

"Thanks," said Paula. They hadn't set up the kneeler at the side of the coffin, so we just stood there. They were walking around upstairs. A teakettle whistled; a telephone rang. The radiator came on, and started clanging, then hissing lightly. Paula stared at Rita from different angles, in the different slants of lamplight and shadows. It

was starting to feel normal to me that the thing I heard most was the same thing I'd heard at the hospital: Rita's stillness.

I stepped closer to Paula, and our hips touched, and the sides of our arms. I would miss her: my aunt who had never been unkind to me on purpose, who had lived in a little red house, who looked, in death, as if she'd put herself under a spell.

I promised myself I would never forget her. I told myself it didn't matter that she died like a woman behind a curtain, and gave no sign, as we watched, of what was happening with her. I wished she could have handed me information, as a runner hands the next one a baton. I hoped she knew, if Ray was himself, and if my parents weren't guarding him like their hostage, he'd be out in the streets on a plow, or a crane or a steam shovel, or that loader, letting everyone know his feelings.

"Go well, Aunt Rita," I was telling her.

On the other side of the sitting room window, the fog was growing thick, like fog at a seaside. She had wanted to buy an ocean cottage for her and Ray's retirement. After the first stroke, she stopped talking about it.

One of the kids in my class, a boy who rarely talked and was maybe a little autistic, drew a picture for a lesson we were in about life in the ocean, but he drew his ocean as the background of the world. He put the circle of Earth near the bottom. His ocean was the sky, filled with stars as well as fishes. I gave him an A for it, the first one he ever got, in anything. I told him I was in awe of his imagination.

Maybe he had a point. Maybe somewhere, out past the planets and constellations, invisible ships float slowly away, and they carry, safely and calmly, whatever it is that

people turn into. Maybe Rita, tonight, was on board one. I tried to not resent her for not being able to send news of what she saw, or what she was.

"Don't look at me for a minute," Paula whispered.

"Are you going to fuss with her hair?"

"No. If I did, I'd wreck it."

"OK," I said, then I glanced at her sideways. Her head was bowed, and her lips moved, but I couldn't make out any words.