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MOTHER'S DAY

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<https://evenpunkgirls.github.io/>

A LATE-MODEL RENTAL car pulled up in front of a big white house, and, from the driver's door stepped out a young woman in her twenties, who started both smiling and crying at the same time.

"What's wrong, honey?" spoke a young man about her age as he got out the passenger door.

I CAN REMEMBER everything about the moment. I can see the entire playground and all the kids—kids who usually kept their distance from me, and with good reason.

I was ten at the time, and had been living at the Bennington Street Home for Girls for about eight months when its director, Mrs. Falcona, came marching up to where I was standing against the fence. Which caused me to gaze out into the street. I often gazed, no matter where I was—looking for something better—or at least something different.

In the corner of my eyes, I saw the gaunt and perpetually crabby middle-aged woman put her hands on her hips, like she usually did whenever she was about to lecture me. Then, she said, "You ever hear of The Goodwin Foundation?"

"Nope," I told her, before crossing my arms.

"Look at me," she commanded.

Reluctantly, and with a loud sigh, I turned toward her.

"They help girls at risk all over the world," she continued. "That means you."

"Is there a point to this?"

"They're opening a community center up on Chelsea Street in a few weeks. The head of the foundation—Rudi Goodwin—will be there personally for the grand opening. And we've all been invited, even you."

"I don't wanna go."

“But you will. And you’ll be on your best behavior, young lady—or I’ll make your life hell.”

“It’s already hell!”

Angrily, the woman leaned down and shook my arms—and she howled, “You only think it’s hell! But it can be worse—much worse!”

MRS. FALCONA PERSONALLY took me to the new community center. Actually, she dragged me there by the hand, after discovering a hiding place I thought no one knew about—a place where I often hid, not only from the woman but from everything, including myself.

As we entered a large hall, I saw computers and books and athletic equipment, as well as lots of food and drinks. I also saw a bunch of girls I knew staring at me—while whispering to themselves with big smiles on their faces. They often did this. Individually, they were afraid of me, but in groups they made fun of me. And I wanted to run from it. So, I broke away from Mrs. Falcona, and rushed to the farthest corner of the room, where I crossed my arms, just as someone entered the room—a someone who would change everything.

Rudi Goodwin was a little over forty, with short brown hair and similarly colored eyes. She was also about average height, if not smaller. But still she was the tallest person I’ve ever seen. You couldn’t measure it in inches. It was the way she carried herself—the way she walked. She was in command of the whole fucking world, and I was just awed by this, no matter how hard I tried to pretend I wasn’t.

Everyone there was awed by her that day, kids and adults alike. Most of them rushed up to her and she greeted them warmly before giving a short speech about how we all had value and were special—something she

was out to prove.

I thought it was all bullshit, so I turned away from her, with my arms still crossed. Though I could still see her. I could also see that she was staring right at me—and smiling, and, as soon as she finished speaking, she started marching toward me.

Noticing this, Mrs. Falcona rushed over to the woman, and tried to get her to go in a different direction—any direction. But she would've had an easier time stopping a tornado, and it wasn't long before both women were in front of me.

"What's your name?" Rudi asked.

I didn't answer.

"I'd really like to introduce you to someone," interrupted Mrs. Falcona.

"I want you to introduce me to *her*," Rudi replied.

"Please," Mrs. Falcona whispered, while trying to pull the woman away.

"What's her name?" Rudi insisted, without budging at all—and, after a long drawn-out sigh, Mrs. Falcona finally told her.

"How would you like to have lunch with me tomorrow, Aimee?" Rudi went on.

This surprised me. It surprised me so much that I turned to the woman and mumbled, "What?"

"Ms. Goodwin, that's not a good idea," Mrs. Falcona pleaded.

"Why not?" Rudi demanded.

"She's a very troubled young girl," Mrs. Falcona softly replied.

"Obviously. Or she wouldn't be here."

"But she's not like the other girls."

"I can see that."

"She's insufferable! Been through countless foster

homes, and fights with everyone. She's also two years behind in school. That's when she goes. And she's already been in trouble with the law—for drinking, no less."

Rudi only smiled at this, which neither Mrs. Falcona nor I could understand.

"So, are we on for lunch?" Rudi asked.

"Is this how you get your kicks?" I barked. "Hanging around with poor little foundlings?"

"Foundlings? Where did you learn that word?"

"*Tom Jones*."

"You've read *Tom Jones*?"

"Sure."

"I sincerely doubt that," Mrs. Falcona interjected, with a condescending shake of her head.

"Have her ready at noon tomorrow," Rudi told the woman.

AFTER MY FIRST encounters with Rudi, for months she visited me at the home, with each visit no more than a few weeks apart. She also emailed me almost daily, and phoned, too—and made plans for future visits.

During these, she would take me to exotic restaurants all over the city—restaurants I never imagined even imagining, and afterward we'd usually take long walks—along the Freedom Trail in downtown Boston or on the beaches of Nahant, where she'd ask me all sorts of questions, as if she were actually interested in me and my life.

I tried hard to discourage this interest, in spite of growing more and more attached to her—or maybe it was because of it. Sometimes I'd ignore her completely, and other times I'd be rude and belligerent. But she kept coming, and it wasn't long before I started counting the days till she did.

Then, one morning Mrs. Falcona summoned me to

her office, where Rudi was waiting in a chair next to the woman's desk, with a big grin on her face.

"I have some good news for you, Aimee," Mrs. Falcona proclaimed.

"You've been fired?" I replied.

The woman sneered at this. But what I really noticed was Rudi, who was hiding her smile underneath her hand.

"No," Mrs. Falcona growled, while trying to control her temper. "Ms. Goodwin has just adopted you."

"I don't want to be adopted!" I lied, before turning away from both women and crossing my arms.

"You don't want to have a family and live in a nice house?"

"No!"

"Well, fortunately for you, you don't have a choice."

Furiously, I spun toward Rudi and hollered, "I hate you!"

But she saw right through me, just like she always did—and she said, "Why don't we get you packed."

Within an hour, the two of us—along with a plastic bag of all my belongings—were at Logan Airport, which was only a short distance from the home. And, about an hour after that, I was on my first airplane—to New Jersey.

"As soon as I can," I told Rudi, as soon as my ears stopped popping, "I'm running away. Just so you know right now."

"That's exactly what I would do," she matter-of-factly remarked. "I ran away a lot when I was your age. You have no idea how much you remind me of myself."

"Bullshit."

"It's true," she insisted, not the least bit upset by my language. "It was obvious the moment I saw you. I was

so much like you—and not just because I didn't have a real family or that I lived in a place not that different from East Boston. I was also bitter and hated the world, much like you. And I did lots of bad things, too. Even worse than you."

"Yeah, sure."

Rudi responded to this by reaching into her purse, for a worn black key chain—one without keys, and she said, "Do you know what this is?"

"A key chain," I exclaimed, with unrestrained contempt.

"It's sobriety," she retorted. "It means I've been clean for a long time. Though truthfully drugs were only the tip of my problems when I was young. I was slowly destroying myself, and only didn't because of the love of complete strangers. That's why I do all this, Aimee. Not just adopting you, but all my work with the foundation. It has nothing to do with 'kicks.' I'm simply paying a debt I'll never pay off in full."

I didn't believe her, and didn't say another word to her until we were in front of a huge three-story white house about twenty miles from New York City.

"This is where I'm gonna live?" I gasped, while looking up at the mansion-like place with eyes that I'm sure were as wide as moons.

"This is your house," Rudi told me. "It's as much yours as mine."

"It's so . . ."

"I thought the same exact thing the first time I saw it. You'll get used to it, though. It's much warmer inside."

She then took my hand and led me into the house, where we were greeted in the hallway by a tall elderly black woman.

"This is Aunt Elizabeth," Rudi said proudly.

"*Aunt?*" I muttered.

"*Aunt,*" Rudi replied, before lovingly putting her arm around the woman, who responded in kind. The woman also smiled at me. She smiled at me as if she really were my aunt.

"We're one big family here," Rudi continued. "Not always one big happy family, but we're always a family."

Rudi afterward took me into the nearby living room and introduced me to my new sisters, who seemed as nervous about me as I was of them.

The first one I met was Kamcha—a 19-year-old Roma girl Rudi long ago had rescued from the streets of Prague. Kamcha was then a junior at Princeton, studying so she could one day join Rudi at the foundation, and she came home just to meet me. Also visiting from college was Alea, who was a freshman at Georgetown. She was originally from Yemen, where she had been married at the age of six—and had only escaped her "husband" and a life of near slavery because of Rudi. Then, I met Lynette, who was 16 and from Compton. When Rudi came across her she was a prostitute, and hadn't been to school in years. But now she was a straight-A student who would eventually graduate at the top of her class before heading off to MIT. Finally, I met Vicki, who was a pretty blonde girl my age. She was also Rudi's only naturally born child—and I took an instant dislike to her, especially when I saw her sneer at me. I disliked her so much that I marched right up to her and growled, "You got a problem?"

Vicki smirked at this, and said to her mother: "She talks funny, Ma."

"That's how they speak in Boston," Rudi explained. "She probably thinks you speak funny."

"You're gonna speak real funny," I barked, as I lifted

my fist to Vicki's face—"after I give you a big fat lip."

Before I could even blink, Vicki grabbed my arm, and she effortlessly flipped me over her shoulder and onto the floor—and she grinned at me. Rudi also grinned a bit, before putting her hands on Vicki's shoulders and saying, "That wasn't very fair, honey. We haven't trained Aimee yet."

"Trained?" I uttered.

THE TRAINING CAME soon after dinner, when we all got into karate robes and Rudi taught us moves in the basement—with the sounds of the Ramones blasting off the walls.

"Every woman should be able to defend herself," she told me as she showed me how to properly throw a punch.

At this point, I really thought I had entered a mad-house, and I couldn't wait to leave it. I even told myself that I would do so that night—a night that began when Rudi led me and my bag of things up a big old-fashioned staircase. Eventually, we reached the second floor, and I stopped. I stopped and looked up at a portrait on the wall—of an elegant woman in her fifties with dirty blonde hair.

"Who's that?" I asked, while pointing at the painting.

"That was your grandmother," Rudi answered. "She actually adopted me. She was also the most wonderful woman there ever was."

"She doesn't look it. She looks like a prig."

"Prig? Where did you learn that word?"

"I don't know. A book, I guess."

"Well, she was a bit of a prig. But we all have dimension. Especially you."

Ignoring this, I glanced at the picture next to the

painting—a hand-drawn one set inside a plain black frame—of a handsome teenage boy with wavy hair.

“Who’s that?” I inquired, after pointing at him.

“That,” Rudi said, with a sudden burst of emotion, “that was my husband Tommy.”

“Where is he?”

“He died, long before you were born.”

Just then, Rudi no longer seemed so tall. She seemed like a scared little girl, just like I was—and she quickly dragged me away and into my new bedroom, which was big and beautiful, with lots of antique oak furniture and even more warmth—the kind you can both feel and smell. But what I really noticed was that there was only one bed. It angered me, too—even if I wasn’t planning on staying there.

“Vicki and I have to share that little bed?” I cried out, with my hands on my hips.

“Vicki’s room is upstairs,” Rudi replied.

“You, you mean this is all mine?” I mumbled in shock, having never had a room of my own.

“That’s right,” she said, before pointing to a nearby bureau and adding, “Why don’t you get into a nightgown. You’ll find one in the top drawer over there.”

“I don’t wear nightgowns,” I insisted.

“Humor me, just for tonight.

I sighed, but did what she asked—and afterward she tucked me into bed, prior to grabbing a large hardcover book off the nightstand and sitting next to me with it.

“What’s that?” I asked, while pointing at the book without looking at it.

“*Tom Jones*,” she replied.

“I told you,” I barked, as I turned from her and crossed my arms—“I already read it.”

She knew I was lying. She knew I hadn’t read any

book. Though she didn't let on. She simply told me: "I thought we might read it together. I haven't read it in such a long time. In fact, I had forgotten all about it until you mentioned it. It's such a beautiful book—way better than the movie. It's not even close. There's this incredible character in it—Sophia Western. She's smart and strong and doesn't let anyone stop her from getting what she wants, in spite of living in a time where women were not supposed to have any of these qualities. And you can be everything she was."

"I already read it!"

"All right. Maybe we'll start tomorrow."

Of course, I was certain there wouldn't be a tomorrow—and, once the house was dark and quiet, I got dressed and got my things together, and me and my plastic bag silently headed down the stairs. Though, as I approached the bottom, I heard a faint voice—Rudi's, and, once I reached the ground floor, I looked around and saw the faint light of a single lamp in the living room.

"Tommy?" Rudi mumbled, from somewhere unseen.

I wanted to run from this. I wanted to run right out the front door. But instead I walked to the threshold of the living room and saw a teary-eyed Rudi asleep on a couch, listening to an iPod with the black key chain clutched in her hand.

Against my will, I stepped inside the room and came up to her, and I noticed something. I noticed a wedding album on the coffee table—along with lots of photographs—photographs of a wild-looking punk girl marrying a boy much like the one whose picture I saw on the hallway wall, even if this boy was dying.

Strangely, I felt like crying—something I couldn't remember doing. Though I pulled myself together and sat

next to Rudi on the couch, and I took off her headphones, which were playing an old romantic song—one I would learn was from the late 1930s and called “Moonlight Serenade.”

I knew then I had been right—that what Rudi had told me on the plane was bullshit. She didn’t adopt me because she was paying a debt. She wasn’t returning the love she’d been given. She adopted me because she needed love. She needed all the love she could get. She needed me.

For the first time in my life someone not only wanted me but needed me, and it felt good. It felt so good that I couldn’t hold back anymore. I started smiling and crying at the same time, and I leaned down and gently kissed my mother’s forehead.

And I forgot all about running away.

the end