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Faldas

Rosanna

DEAR ROSANNA,

I struggled, *Querida*, with calling you “Dear.” Do I like you? I haven’t seen you for years outside your Facebook posts, always missing your father. Well, not always. You post lots of animals. Dogs. Some posts about diabetes. And then a picture of your father, dandling a grandchild on his knee, or cooing at a baby, or singing. *Feliz cumple, Pa!* I don’t like these posts, Rosanna, so perhaps I don’t like you either. Did I like you when we were little? Perhaps even when we were sharing the same neighborhood and friends and culture, I didn’t.

What I do recall is that I was never able to read you. I could never know what you were thinking. And this has always been my ability. I don’t mean some childish fantasy of telepathic powers that let you see someone else’s thoughts. I mean I have always been good at knowing what people were thinking. Not word for word, of course, but the overall feeling. When Helena looked at someone’s new shoes? She was envious and wished they would get scratched right away. When Doña Marchesi, the midwife, looked at Marcela Mio’s slightly short skirt? She was thinking Marcela was already a whore, even if she was only 12. I knew that was what Doña Marchesi was thinking, and just to go one step further, I knew that she knew that I knew. She was good at reading people’s thoughts too. We would lock eyes, silently telling each other, *I know*.

Doña Marchesi hated me. As long as I can remember she could see my thoughts, as I saw those of others, and she hated me for them. Had she hated me since I was born? She was the first person I ever laid eyes on: It was her who yanked me from my mother's womb. When my mother first told me this, I had a wild vision of Doña Marchesi pulling me out, umbilical cord still attached, and holding me up and glaring at me, instantly knowing I was trouble. I know she saw me as a devilish being. I wonder if she considered killing me right away, to save the world from having to contain everything I would become. That would have been a temptation for her.

She pulled her son away from me when I came on stage during the school nativity play. Do you remember that play, Rosanna? You were just a villager. Such an unremarkable role they gave you! I wanted, of course, to be cast as Mary, but I knew it would be a hard sell. The whole not-having-a-vagina thing. Nevertheless, I tried. There was even a moment when I thought I might pull it off. At the first rehearsal, they still hadn't picked a Mary, and I talked them into letting me fill in on a temporary basis, while they were deciding. As I put on Mary's white veil, I thought, *now they will see me, and they will realize this role simply cannot be played by anyone else*. Your father was there. He saw me playing Mary and smiled at me. But then Doña Marchesi intervened: She talked a whole bunch of shit about me, and they gave the role to Susana Jimenez.

This didn't bother me too much, though, because Susana was my friend. My rationale was: if Mary couldn't be mine, she should go to someone I liked. Susana fit the bill. The problem was, who was I going to be, if not Mary? Susana and I sat down

and examined a postcard of the nativity. She asked me: Which of these do you like? We considered all the characters one by one. Or specifically, all the female characters and also Gabriel the Archangel.

There was an attractive theatrical aspect to Gabriel's costume. Additionally, he would either descend from heaven on ropes, or be perched on some sort of platform, floating over everyone else, either of which was desirable. The downside was, whoever played Gabriel would have to provide the technical means of elevation, and I knew my father wouldn't help.

And then, right in the front lower corner of the postcard, I saw them: the three kings! They were wearing long robes that looked like luxurious dresses! They were wearing jewelry, a lot of it! And one of them was wearing a turban! Perfection!

I knew that if I showed interest, Doña Marchesi would make them give it to someone else, so I formed a plan. None of the boys would choose to be the kings—they were too feminine. So what I would do was nothing. I wouldn't ask for them either. I would let those roles go unfilled. I would hold back until playing a king would be a favor I was doing.

I waited. And, while I waited, I started preparing everything. Then on December 21st, at the rehearsal, someone screamed, "We don't have the three kings!" And I rose, to save the day.

"I can do it," I said. "I don't have enough time to work on the costume, but I will put together whatever I can." They all thanked me. All except Doña Marchesi. She saw through my scam, but it was too late for her to do anything. She had to eat it. She looked at me and her eyes were singing: *I know what you are*

doing, little bitch. I looked the other way, then rushed home to add more rhinestones to my turban.

The day of the nativity scene, I was even glad I hadn't got Mary. So boring, all in white. Instead, I made my great entrance, wearing a cape, with glitter all over. When Doña Marchesi saw me, she pulled her child away and I saw her talking to him right below the stage. I couldn't hear her words, but I knew she was telling him: "Don't go near that little devil or you will become like him." I knew that's what she was saying.

After that, I would try to get close to him on purpose, and watch him run to the other side of the room, or playground, or whatever. I can't lie, I liked being demonized. At least I was *something*. I was someone who would be remembered. Someone extraordinary, fierce! I loved attention, even if it was attention that caused most of the pain I suffered.

So, as I said, I always had a good sense of other people's thoughts. Not yours, though. You were one of those I could never figure out. Later in life, I figured out that those I couldn't read were usually either the most vicious or the most compassionate people. Which are you, I wonder? Life pulled us apart, and we had never really been close, so I never got to find out. Not that I care, not that it's some kind of "unfinished business," not that I really give a shit about your soul, Rosanna. It's only because I hate carelessness that I had a hard time calling you "Dear." I ask myself, how can I call you "dear" if you have never been dear to me? I should bring this to my next therapy session.

Yes, therapy. I should tell you that therapy has been fundamental in finding the courage to write this letter. I am sure it will take much more courage to send it: perhaps another 10

years of sitting in front of my therapist Jianna, putting up with her saying, “What I am hearing here is . . .” before she repeats what I just said, which she does every time I say something that shocks her. She thinks I don’t know that she is shaken by some of the information I vomit up in our sessions. But as I told you: I know with most people, I know what they think. Jianna’s not the exception. You are.

Getting to the point, Rosanna: Your father raped me.

It started at age 6 and it continued for years. He sexually abused me for the rest of my childhood and adolescence.



Before moving into the neighborhood, my mother and I had lived in a very old home. Well, we didn’t live in a home, we lived in a single big room with walls that were damp and without plaster. It had a very particular smell. I always thought it was the smell of poverty because Mami would perfume us heavily before leaving, saying “you smell like the house.” Mami never thought she belonged there. Neither did I.

I am not saying I hated it. It just didn’t feel like our habitat. Mami always led me to believe we were meant to be glorious and I fully bought it. Always.

Outside, there was a palm tree, which nowadays I question: Why was there a palm tree? We did not live in Caribbean weather. We had hot summers, sure, but a palm tree? So tall! I always wanted to climb it. During the day, when she was busy, Mom would sit me under the palm tree with a half watermelon

and a spoon and the heat around me. I would eat so much that I would fall asleep with my legs open, holding in the middle the green bowl, now emptied of its rich pink insides. Eyes closed with the spoon still in my hand.

At night, we would sit under it together, looking at the stars. I mean, not always. But sometimes. Other times, depending on how Mom's pill had kicked in, we might go outside to meet with the neighbors, drinking beers and smoking cigarettes on the sidewalk. Although there was not really a difference between the street and the sidewalk, or the sidewalk and the floor of the house. It was all dirt. I guess those boundaries were imaginary.

The other possibility was that Mami would stay inside crying. So I loved it when she invited me out: If we were outside, it meant she was not just inconsolably sobbing in her bed. Instead we were under the palm tree, trying to identify stars and, more importantly, UFOs. Back then there was a whole craze about spaceships, which were spotted all over our area. So we tried to spot them too. You are a bit younger than me, but I'm sure you remember.

Where did we cook? I don't think we had a kitchen. It was everything together. Just a big room where we slept and cooked and dreamed. What I do know is there was no bathroom. We had to go out the back to use a rundown outhouse that smelled like—well, an outhouse. Mami would heat water and we would take showers in a big tin washing-up bowl, throwing the precious water over ourselves little by little with a cup, always eyeballing what was left because if you used too much too early you would have nothing to wash off the soap, and then you would itch during the night.

You might ask where my father was. We all did. Not loudly, since my mom was sensitive to the question.

Short answer: I don't think anybody knew. Some said he was doing business in the north, some said he was hiding from the military because he was a stern Peronista and they were looking for him to kill him. Whatever the reason, he just wasn't there. The cash he might have earned was not there either, nor, most importantly, the security and warmth a father brings to the home.

Even when he came back, later on, he just lacked all of that. Though he had shown up magically and unharmed out of nowhere, with no explanation given about his whereabouts for the previous couple years, he was still mostly no more than a body that slept and ate with us.

I think your dad knew that. I think he was very aware of the fact that Tito was not present, even when he eventually was. Not his money, not his protection. I think he was also very conscious of my mother's issues. And there was one other thing he knew: I was a girl. He understood my femininity as normal, and used that, too.

I remember the first time he laid eyes on me: I saw it, I saw he would give me that thing everyone else was denying me. He saw me as I was, and I didn't have to explain how I felt inside because for him it was visible.

He saw I was Cecilia. He saved my life and ruined it forever.

Life had been getting really hard for me at that moment. Questions were starting to come from everywhere. Questions about me. And your dad had an answer.

I always felt like an outsider. I had an extreme sense of not belonging to any group or place. I remember thinking that when I started school, then I would find a tribe. But at school, the other kids were very clear: *You are weird, you have no aptitudes for anything, and you can't hang out with us.* The only games I might have been good at playing were girls' games, and for some mysterious reason the girls would not allow me to do that, so it was mostly just me, playing by myself.

I don't want to sound like that was necessarily terrible. I loved going to school anyways. I was even happy that my family didn't have the money (yours didn't either, Rosanna) for the private school, "The Calvary." "The Calvary" was run by nuns, and somehow I always knew that the religious and I would not get along. Also, the children at Calvary had to wear pants for the boys or skirts for the girls, but at the local school we got a different uniform. Everyone, boys and girls, had to wear these little white tunics that were almost, dare I say it, angelic! When I put on one of these white outfits for the first time, I felt like I was wearing my first fully sanctioned dress.

Most of the boys wore trousers under it, but not me! Mami never dressed me, so I would put on little shorts, so short that when the tunic was over them you could not see them at all. I was basically wearing a short dress, showing off my legs, and I loved it. As you are aware, I have amazing legs. Your father loved my legs.

So beginning school, starting classes, was a hopeful and exciting time for me. After a couple of weeks, though, I went through a shocking awakening.

I always walked by myself all the way to school. It was a long way, but walking in a mini-dress was a treat! I remember that day I was also carrying a flower. A red carnation. I don't know why. Probably from the cemetery. We usually spent the weekends at my grandma's, and we'd go to the Baptist Church to see people being submerged in the water to be reborn with Jesus in their hearts (I was always afraid someone would drown and really get close to Jesus all of a sudden) and then after, we'd go to the cemetery to clean all our dead relatives' *tumbes* and put flowers on them. It was a very vibrant activity. So probably Mami had taken some flowers from the dead.

In any case, that day she gave me a red carnation to bring to the teacher. Which was unusual, but my mom was rarely usual, and I didn't question it. I was carrying the flower and my little briefcase. You had to have a briefcase to go to school, and they were all the same. There were no backpacks then, and I hated this briefcase because it wasn't feminine. If the tunics we wore made everyone a bit feminine, the briefcases made us all a bit masculine. Basically, it was ruining my outfit! It was a warm day and I walked all the way to school holding the flower and briefcase. I stopped to rest several times under trees so I wouldn't sweat and ruin my little dress before I made it to school.

As soon as I crossed the doorway, I saw the other children already lined up outside classrooms. Every day before class we had to form two lines, the girls against the wall and the boys next to them. Each line had to run from short to tall, and we had to

stretch our right arms out, so as to almost touch the shoulder of the kid in front of us. I was late (too many stops under trees!) and I would have to break the line up. I hurried over, but then one of the secretaries called out my name. Caught! Clearly, I thought, I was going to be reprimanded.

I decided to play dumb, and I sweetly asked the secretary why she was stopping me. But she didn't reprimand me. Instead, she told me to go to the principal's office. This was much worse! It was only the second week of school, but it was already clear that if you got called to the principal's office then it meant some shit went wrong. So technically this was a scary announcement. On the other hand, that was already my specialty, dealing with shit going wrong. So I didn't let the secretary see me flinch. I just turned and sashayed off down the hallway.

I can still clearly see the hallways of School 290. Such a beautiful building. All the classrooms arranged around a breathtaking courtyard full of roses, open to the sky, where we would all start the day chanting to the Argentinian flag. Oh, the windows! The light! I walked towards whatever lay ahead through public splendor.

The hand in which I was holding the flower, my left hand, was sweaty, not from nervousness (though I was nervous) but because it had been clasping the flower for so long. I couldn't change hands, though: at that time I had a compulsion to only hold my hated little briefcase with my right hand, so the flower had to be in the left. This was just the beginning of my obsession with symmetry, one of many things in my life that only got worse through the years.

I walked to the office and the receptionist was waiting for me. She helped me open the thick wooden door. When it was fully open I gasped. Mami was there. My first thought was that she was giving me up to another family. I felt relief and sadness at the same time. I loved her, but I already knew at that age we were not a good match. I hoped they would send me to a rich family. I didn't care if they were bad people, just as long as they were rich!

Mami was sitting next to the principal, and next to her was Senorita Mabel, my teacher. I wondered if I should give her the carnation, but this didn't seem the right moment. Poised on each side of this central trio were two more women, making five of them in total.

The principal told me that these other two women were a psychiatrist and a psychologist.

They were all smiling and acting nice except for Mami, who was already crying. I began to realize I wasn't being given away.

The principal got up and walked behind the line of women, leaving her seat empty. There was something hanging on one of the walls, one of those pieces of fabric with a map or something on it that you could pull down or roll up. She pulled it down. It did have a map on it, but over the map they had stuck two drawings.

Perhaps, I pondered, there had been another restructuring of the country, since the army had taken over the government, and it was going to be explained to me that we now lived in a different province. I looked at the drawings. They were weird; I couldn't understand them at all.

As an adult, now, I see them clearly, and I know what they were intended to schematize. But at the time I was only five or six. I had no idea what I was supposed to be seeing. So they had to explain them to me.

They told me that one was a penis and that the other one was a vagina. I nodded, pretending I understood.

Then, the psychologist on the left stood up and walked over, slowly, and squatted down in front of me. Her ass almost touched the floor. She gently tapped herself between the legs and told me: "This is where these parts are. I have that one, the vagina."

Then she stood back up. What I had now learnt was her vagina hovered right in front of my face. For a moment I got distracted and looked down at her high heels. They were beautiful, patent leather, shiny and black, with her wide pants draping stylishly over them. Then I raised my head. My eyes travelled up, over her vagina area, all the way to her face.

She smiled again and pointed to one of the pictures pinned on the maps unrolled behind the line of women. It looked like one of the half watermelons Mami opened up for me, with a spoon on either side. She repeated the word, pronouncing it syllable by syllable. *VA. GI. NA.*

I frowned. She slowly walked around and stood behind me. I bent my knees and let my briefcase rest on the floor. Now my left hand was free! I switched the flower over into it, and uncurled my sweaty right palm. The psychologist touched my shoulder gently with her left hand, and pointed to the other drawing with her right. She said, "That is a penis. Unlike my vagina, it comes out of the body."

I looked at her and said: “Aaaaaahhhhh.” Then I looked at Mami. She was still crying, making a soft noise. All her tears were collecting in the pool of her frenulum, above her half-open lips, and mixing with the soft clear mucus dribbling from her nose.

The principal must have followed my gaze, because she turned away from the map, hurried over to her purse, and pulled out a small handkerchief embroidered with lace. She offered it to Mami, who took it, but instead of blowing her nose she just patted at it, in total denial of the sheer amount of fluid coming from her face.

Meanwhile, the psychiatrist was behaving strangely. She almost stood up, stopped herself before becoming fully upright, crossed one of her legs under the other, folded it below her butt, sat back down again, and took hold of the hem of her skirt. I could hear the sound of her acrylic pantyhose rubbing together. I thought for a second she was going to show me what she had between her legs. Instead she carefully pulled her skirt down over her knees, gently gestured at the pictures, and asked me: “What do you have?”

Was this a trick question? Although I was aware that historically I had had much better results from lying than the truth, I had a feeling I wouldn’t get away with that here. But I was also unsure. What *did* I have? I thought for a minute and looked at the figures. I even took a step back, thinking perhaps if I got some extra distance, things would shape up differently. But they stayed the same.

I would have to come clean. After all, I reasoned, Mami had seen me bathing in the big zinc washtub with side handles we used as a bath. She would bring me boiling water to make the

cold water we got from the manual well pump warmer and more enjoyable. I had seen her peeking at my body under the water. She, at least, definitely knew what I had.

I took a long breath and without looking at any of them I signaled the penis and said, "I believe it looks more like that one, but I could be wrong . . ."

The psychologist, who was standing next to me, went down on her knees. I heard her bones touching the floor and I looked at her face, which at this point was right in front of mine, and for some reason I teared up. I was not scared, but somehow I knew a bad revelation was coming.

She said, "Don't cry, little one. You have a penis and that makes you a boy. Now, let me ask you, where do boys go to pee and poo?"

Where did boys go to pee and poo? I responded, "To the bathroom."

She smiled quickly and raised one of her eyebrows. "To which bathroom?"

"To the boys' bathroom," I whispered.

"So, then, let me ask you," she said, standing up and hitting her knees to remove any dirt she might have collected while she was down by my face, "Why don't you do just as they do? Why do you go to the girls' bathroom if you have a penis like the other boys?"

Here I want to boast a little, Rosanna. Mami would be angry with me if she read this. She has always hated it when I praise myself. But I have to tell you, Rosanna, I have always been fast. I have always been able to figure things out in a second. Just as I had realized moments before that I couldn't lie when