

DOROTHY RICE

*Gray Is the New Black*

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*A Memoir of Self-Acceptance*

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Sometimes I hate my sisters for how they make me feel. Then I hate myself for being a peevish bitch. I love my sisters. They're my best friends. But I wasn't looking forward to dinner out with the two of them and their boyfriends. I was forty pounds overweight last summer and not in the mood for self-reflection.

I don't remember the occasion. Maybe just to meet my older sister's latest boyfriend. She'd had a few since her last divorce. Toads for the most part. I didn't, yet, know enough about this one to have passed final judgment.

We'd chosen the Tower Cafe, a Sacramento institution on the busy corner of Broadway and Land Park Boulevard, beside the still operating Tower Theatre, with its Art Deco rooftop spire, a familiar beacon visible from the elevated freeway. My husband, Bob, and I pushed through the front doors. The restaurant was packed, the babble of competing voices and the eclectic decor—a frenetic mash-up of ethnic, mystical and urban jungle—added to the sensory overload.

*“Hola, hermosa,”* my younger sister, Juliet, called out to me, waving both bare arms overhead. She and her boyfriend, Bill, were seated at a table for six, one with a bird's eye view of the massive dessert case, long as two coffins laid end to end. As we approached, Juliet stood, prancing with excitement. I squinted, checking out her outfit, tiny white shorts and an equally tiny

turquoise top – the perfect color against her unblemished, caramel complexion.

“I *know*,” she said, with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes, “Clinton Kelly says no shorts on women over 40, but I *love* my short-shorts.”

Juliet, four years younger than me, was on the cusp of 60, but I’m betting Clinton would have made an exception to the rule for her. On a good day, she can pass for 35. No lie.

“*Besos*,” she said, air kissing both my cheeks.

Speaking Spanish is a thing we do, a remnant of having lived in Mexico for a year when we were kids, and, like most Californians, we’d both taken years of Spanish in school. Her boyfriend Bill stood to hug me and shake my husband’s hand. Bob and I took the two chairs opposite them.

“It’s so good to see my beautiful twin,” Juliet said.

There is a strong likeness between us, or there used to be. In the past, we were often mistaken for one another. A total stranger would start talking to me in the grocery store or on the street, until I’d say, “You must think I’m Juliet.” That hasn’t happened in years.

“I wish,” I grumbled, giving her the stink eye.

“You make such great faces,” she said, laughing. “I love it. Reminds me of Dad.”

Even in the 100-plus degrees of a Sacramento summer, I wore a long-sleeve denim shirt to cover my jiggly upper arms and leggings under a long black jersey dress to keep my thighs from sticking together. I was a nun next to my near-naked sister.

I had no right to resent her – she eats like an anorexic bird and works out like an Olympian. Which made me feel guilty and mean-spirited. Which made me resent her even more. Which made me feel like crawling back into bed and calling it a day.

Sisters.

“I went to the best cardio class this morning,” Juliet said, her light eyes bright with enthusiasm.

I knew where this was going and narrowed my eyes, hoping she'd take the hint and drop it.

“I'm going again tomorrow. You should come.”

“So you can watch me have a heart attack?”

“Oh, don't be silly.” She flapped a dismissive hand.

Bill and Bob studied the menus.

Bill is a good guy, a retired fireman, solidly built and solidly handsome. He looks like he played football back in the day. He's also a political and social progressive. I didn't expect that. Which goes to show my biases about big guys who look like ex-footballers. He's been with my sister several years. They still hold hands under the table and make sappy eyes at one another. Good for them.

My husband, Bob, is tall and lean. Great legs. He makes up for the lack of hair on his head with body fuzz. The first time my mother met him, she plucked at the tufts sticking out from under his collar.

“Does that go all the way down?” she asked, classic Mom.

“Yep, and back up the other side,” he said.

That lifted Mom's eyebrows. My older sister, Roxanne, took to calling him “hirsute” after that. She's the family comedian.

It's probably a good thing Bob has lost most of the hair on his head, all but a Friar Tuck fringe. Otherwise, he'd be entirely too appealing, and I'd be forced to take better care of myself to ward off the competition. We've been married nineteen years, his second marriage, my third. We each brought two children to the party. Now we track our anniversaries by the age of our one child together, a surprise to us both on the cusp of 45. At the time of the Tower Cafe soiree, our daughter was spending a last summer at home, before leaving for college.

Rocky – Roxanne – and her current boyfriend arrived. Alan

was a bespectacled, aging hipster with skinny ankles. I have a thing about men with weak ankles, or maybe it's just men who have the nerve to be smaller than me. We all stood for another round of greetings. Roxanne hugged me too tight and for too long, tickling my ribs in the process. I pulled away and swatted her hands as if they were a swarm of pesky gnats.

"Aw, there's my prickly little sister. She just loves to be touched, doesn't she, Bob?" Rocky said, winking at him.

Bob wasn't so hesitant about hugging her back. He's an only child. My sisters are the closest thing he's got to siblings. Sometimes I wonder if he wouldn't prefer one of them to me. I would if I were a man.

Roxanne is shorter than Juliet and me. She wears her hair shorter too, a swingy bob that brushes her shoulders. The three of us are four years apart, a time span carefully planned by our mother based on the advice of child-rearing guru Dr. Benjamin Spock, who recommended four years as the ideal spread to discourage sibling rivalry. It didn't always work when we were kids, but it feels about right now. At 63, I'm in the middle.

Bob studied the menu. "Should we share something?" he asked.

The portions at the Tower are huge. But the suggestion felt personal. There was no way I could order my own entrée after that.

"We're splitting the Chinese Chicken Salad," Juliet said.

"Well then." I turned to Bob with a tight smile. "Why don't we do the same?"

"You sure? Will that be enough for you?"

"I'm not about to starve any time soon."

"That's not what I meant," he said, with that scrunched-up look he gets, as if his forehead were constipated with thought. His younger son, when he was a little boy, once ran a finger over the deep ridges and asked his father, "Does it hurt?" It looks like it might.

Our orders and two extra plates arrived. I dug into my salad. Juliet poked at her crispy noodles, pushing them into their own tidy little haystack and making another discreet pile of almond slivers, segregating the high calorie ingredients from the more benign veggies. Roxanne's technique was different. She disassembled her sandwich and squeezed piles of condiments on top of everything until her plate resembled a work of modern art more than anything recognizable as food. My sisters have mastered the art of pretend eating. It's not a skill I've ever been moved to perfect.

I eyed the dessert case and sighed, imagining that if I suggested we all split a few items, I'd be met with nervous glances and the unspoken subtext, "Aren't you trying to lose weight?"

"I like her hair color," Juliet said.

"Whose?" I asked.

"The girl behind the dessert case. I thought that's what you were looking at."

"Oh, right, cute."

"Gray hair on younger women is really a thing right now. Isn't Grace's like that now?" Roxanne asked.

Grace, my older daughter, 27 at the time, had recently gone from blond to gray.

"It's very *au courant*. Is that how you say that?" Roxanne said, mangling the French. Roxanne likes to try on new words, usually ones she's picked up reading and isn't sure of the pronunciation.

"I think Rocky should stop coloring her hair, go natural," Alan said. "I love gray hair on women." He had even less on his head than my husband.

"Like Meryl Streep or Helen Mirren," Roxanne chimed in. "Don't you think they're gorgeous?"

"You know I do, babe," Alan said. "It's just this youth-ob-

sessed culture that's brainwashed women into thinking they have to look like teenagers for the rest of their lives. Such a waste of time. And all those harsh chemicals are bad for your health."

Rocky leaned over the table and held out her hands, extending one to me, the other to Juliet.

"I think Alan's right," she said. "How about we all do it together."

"Go gray?" I asked, wondering if they'd cooked this up in advance. I squinted at Alan and got a smug, tight-lipped smile in response. I didn't take my sister's hand, though I did tap her fingertips.

"Yeah, why not?" she said, "I want to do it, but I could really use some moral support from my sisters, my best friends in the whole world." Roxanne batted her lashes, laying it on thick. "We can find out what makeup and colors go best with gray hair. It'll be fun, another adventure." She beamed encouragement.

Alan's hooded gaze flicked round the table. Bob chewed with concentration. Juliet smiled her polite, let's-change-the-subject, smile.

"You dye your hair, honey?" Bill asked, studying Juliet's cascade of dark chocolate curls.

"She is nearly 60," I said.

"Thanks for the reminder," Juliet said.

"Awkward," Roxanne said, making a show of coughing into her napkin.

"My younger sister is gray. I think it makes her look old," Bill said, matter-of-fact. His own hair is a snowy white. "For what it's worth, I love your hair the way it is, dear. You look fantastic." He and Juliet kissed.

I smeared butter on a roll and tore off a big bite, angry on behalf of Bill's sister. Why is it that men become more distinguished with age, while for a woman, going gray isn't a natural

consequence, but rather a political statement, or an admission that they've given up on their appearance?

"What do you think, Bob?" Roxanne asked, raising an inquisitive brow at my husband.

He peered right, left, then right again, as if checking for the nearest exit. "Don't pull me into this," he said.

"Wise man," Bill said.

"But seriously," I said. "Would you care if I went gray again?"

"It's your hair." Bob paused for a moment, chewing with studied determination. "I do like it long. But I can see how you must get tired of dealing with it."

"So, if I kept the length, you wouldn't mind?"

"Like I said, it's your hair."

I knew he'd prefer I keep coloring it. I also knew he'd never tell me what he really thought, about this or anything else.

"I'm in," I said, eyes on Bob's face. He remained expressionless as he sipped his iced tea.

"I'm so excited." Roxanne grabbed hold of my hand. "You?"

"Super excited," I said, deadpan.

Rocky turned her high beams on Juliet.

"Yeah, no, count me out." Our younger sister shook her head. Her long, dark hair swished.

I pictured Juliet at ninety, still rocking the hula girl hair, with a body to match. I envied her that likelihood. Yet in my future fantasy scenario, a thick gray braid trails over one shoulder. It tickles the keyboard as I tinker with my latest murder mystery, a series of cozies featuring a modern-day Miss Marple and her guinea pig sidekick. Since girlhood I'd dreamed of being a prolific author. Given my age, a dozen cozies now seemed more doable than, say, your *War and Peace* type of book.

The waitress brought our check and a to-go box for Juliet's uneaten salad.

"Lunch for tomorrow," Juliet said.

“Did you get enough?” my husband asked, eyeing my spit-cleaned plate.

My cheeks burned. It was only a measly half a salad.

I hadn’t forgotten that dessert case. It would have been nice to take a little something home to savor in front of the tv. But I wouldn’t give my sisters, or Bob, the satisfaction.

As we wound our way through the tables towards the door, Rocky hooked her arm through mine.

“I already talked to my hairdresser about putting in highlights and lowlights for starters.”

I was all for that. The last time I went gray, I’d gone cold turkey. The first year was rough, and just when it was nicely grown out, I gave up and went running back to the salon. Why did I do that? Oh, that’s right, it was after another demoralizing sister get-together.

“Earth to Bozo,” Roxanne said, breaking into my sour reverie.

She raised her hand for a high five. I smacked her palm, determined to show Bill, my husband, my bony-ass little sister, even the hipster chick behind the counter, that I would rock the hell out of gray hair. I’d look just like one of those “mature” fashion models in the Chico’s catalogs, just like that, only of a certain age *and* plus-sized. I’d be spotted on the street and offered a modeling contract. Just picturing the possibilities was as satisfying as the slice of turtle pie I’d had my eye on.

Almost.



On the drive home from the restaurant, I was lost to daydreams, picturing myself a year or two down the road, gray again, naturally. My hair would look amazing. If gray could be hip on hipsters, why not seniors? In my mental movie, I was fit