

GARBAGE PICKER OF MEMORY:

LETTER FROM AUNT RITA

Meg Tuite

I, too, am a murderer. My daughter, Beth, was twenty. Yes, it was true that none of you saw me cry, not even at the funeral, but why would tears travel in public streams when what we see of the world's bodies of water are nothing more than flat blue blots on paper or shorelines that whisper a mere spittle spray of the vast rivers, lakes, oceans and seas? The doctors found malignant tumors under Beth's right arm, which they cut out and viciously attacked with radiation and chemotherapy over and over again. I knew those lumps would never disappear and would instead take up residence and destroy other parts of her body, because they were lumps in my throat that I'd swallowed my entire life, contracted from my mother, who'd carried

them like a totem pole in her spine until one day she'd sat down in a chair, never to rise again. One long continuous wailing NO that unleashed its deadly poison from out of us into the silent chambers of my daughter's blood.

You see, I have always been a coward. It is only at night in my bed, in my dreams, that I have fought and screamed, kicked and sworn, the dry-eyed arrested battles of the nocturnal, which served to raise me, like a tree, with the sun.

I married your uncle Sherman, blinded by a love that turned out to be a corrective astigmatism. We chose not to see each other clearly until after we'd crossed the threshold. He came to detest me as quickly as I did him. I sucked in his abuse and commandments and swallowed them along with my fear, my tongue and myself.

I'd hear over and over, "Why don't you get off your fat ass and do something, Rita?" when I hardly had an ass to speak of.

"Look at this pig sty! How can we possibly invite anyone into this house?" I would sing that song in my head to drown him out, "Hush little baby, don't you cry. Mama's going to buy you a piece of pie." I made up my own lyrics. I couldn't remember them, but one time when I got to the "Momma's going to buy you a mocking bird" part, this blue bird just appeared on the windowsill. Sherman didn't see it. He was too busy ranting.

“What the hell do you do all day? I work all day long... blah, blah, blah.”

There it was, blue as sky and magnificent. I swear it looked right inside me and I was transfixed. I thought for the first time that I could escape. Start a whole new life somewhere far away, where no one knew me. I'll never forget that bird. As soon as it flew off, I felt rage building up inside me and I stared at his globular, reddened face blathering on in front of me and almost spit in it. I hated Sherman, but I was afraid. He'd hit me a few times. My daughter, Beth, was the only thing that gushed out of me from this coupled inferno. She grew up watching and waiting for the volcano bubbling in my throat to erupt, but it never did.

Instead it ruptured out of Beth in short, fevered spurts of hatred toward me when her father was out. “All you do is pick up and cook for that asshole. You're nothing but his slave. He doesn't give a damn about you!” She feared her father's chronic manic episodes as much as I, knowing he could turn on her as quickly as he did on me. Sherman was a horror film. I'd come home and test the atmosphere in the room, searching for undertones of rage in his bone-chilling stare. His fabricated face, pliable in its chilling meteorological leaps and depths ravaged over his features like a typhoon blasting through a village built on sticks.

Sometimes the churning volcano threatened to swallow Beth up. When she was a teenager, she discovered it could be tempered and held beneath

the surface with liquor and pills, leaving her with a tongue as fat as a bible and eyes as vacant as glass. She slammed and locked her door every night, communicating what her thickened tongue did not, until the day she discovered those lumps of mine lodged under her arm in a tight little ghetto of clustered family heirlooms.

How was she murdered? Like memory. A car crash would have proved no more sudden than her prolonged illness, where the deathbed was just another vehicle that bore the domestic appearance of the everyday. I stationed myself by my daughter's bed, feeding her, changing her and cleaning up the scattered eruptions of fluids that drained from her body, while the deadly settlements of cancer spread themselves out for two long years inside her. Clocked revolutions of meals, bathing, dressing, laundry and medications must have been seen by the world as loving acts by a devoted mother, when in reality these were my weapons. Clean sheets were snapped down to cover her, tucked in with fingers raw with apology, sealing her in, tight as a drum in a family compression that her feet could never kick off. Pillows, pounded and puffed up, bore the bruises never raised from my sagging cheeks of repression. Milkshakes, whipped out of life's resignation, were my pride sucked by my daughter in lumps through a straw. The days moved on, taking her from me until one day I stood before a corpse in horror, while my hands, remaining unconvinced, groped their way

desperately around her sheets, creasing and tucking with an inconsolable hysteria of muteness.

“Rita, I’m your sister. Talk to me. Please.”

“I’ve got all these people over, Lucy. I’ve got to feed them. I’ve always hated those parties when there’s never enough food to go around, haven’t you? Would make us look cheap, and I won’t have it.” I picked up a tray of meatballs and started to make my way out of the kitchen, past Lucy, with that empty stare I now owned.

“Rita, I’m dying along with you, here! I loved Beth like she was my one of my daughters. You’ve held up the front long enough.” Lucy grabbed me by the shoulders. “Forget the goddamn food and the guests. This is your daughter’s goddamn funeral!” Lucy dropped her arms and started to cry. “You did everything for that girl. Always so strong, Rita. She was lucky to have you for a mother.” Lucy put her arms out to hug me, but I pushed past her with the tray in my hand. “It’s okay, Lucy. I’ll be right back.” I patted Lucy on the head like I was petting a dog. “Food’s getting cold.” And I slipped out of the kitchen with Lucy staring at the door, tears sliding down her face without a sound.

It was said that my silence became impossible to talk over. It carried the wailing hands and tearing hair of a multitude locked up inside it. They called it shock, and then it was depression—this grief where words have always

been stones, and the body, a traitor—and so voltage with its immediate answer to dark rooms was the only prescription to tear up these crypts. A shock for a shock, though none of the doctors, nurses, my husband or sister knew that while they electrocuted my brain, attacking and destroying synapses, assuring each other that these convulsions were necessary to implode all disruptive memory into irretrievable waters, this vision of Beth's murder was doubled up in ten shrieking digits, five on either side of me, crouching inside my two bloodless fists.

And the other murderer? It was my sister Lucy, mother to all you heathens. You never got to know what a genius she was. That was the crime. She taught herself to read and devoured every book she could get her hands on.

“What you reading now, Lucy?” I asked, tapping my foot on the stack of books leaning against the couch she was stretched out on.

“*Gone with the Wind*,” said Lucy, without looking up.

“But that's a movie, stupid. We already saw it,” I said, wanting Lucy to play hopscotch with me outside.

Lucy put her massive book down and rolled her eyes at me. “It was a book long before it became a movie, stupid.” She picked up the book. “And by the way, it's by a woman author, and that's what I'm going to be someday.”

I was jealous that Lucy had something I didn't have. Ambition. I never thought of what I'd be. I just wanted to get outside and play.

The sick part was that Lucy never found a place to feed that knowledge. It was the fifties and everyone was getting married. Your mom dropped out of school and married Peter with his platinum teeth and reliable job. None of us knew what kind of idiot we got married to until after we tied that deadbolt of a knot. Your father, Peter, was just like the rest of them, riding your mother like a racehorse each night until she was rotting in a suburb with four screaming babies.

Evil clutters through the species and no one with an eye toward humanity could keep from tripping over it for long. Humans will destroy each other under the guise of lust, religion, nation, possessions or boredom, when it really goes no further than the length of an arm or the downward slope of the spine. I watched a man cross a street and viciously beat another guy with a lead pipe, with nothing more than a few grimaces and some staggered posturing exchanged. Not a word passed between them. If you forget for a minute that you're a mammal, then you had better watch your back.

I wish I'd taken a stick to Sherman. Hell, even Peter, your father. But no, that would have been the sane thing to do. Lucy and I slaughtered ourselves instead with the slow, agonizing paper cuts of day-to-day existence. Lucy wanted to be a writer, but there she was for four damn years, swollen up like

the world's pride. She could have been great. She put pen to page for a few years in college and then gave up on both when she got married. All four of you kids blame Peter for Lucy's depression, but your mother didn't fight for her life. Neither did I.

One day, when you were a pack of toddlers crying for something, Lucy just started screaming along with you.

"Rita?"

"Peter, are you okay?"

"It's Lucy. She's lost it! I mean really gone. She's howling like a raving maniac and I can't get her to stop. Can you get over here, please! I need your help! She's gone and I can't get her back! Help me, Rita, I can't do this."

And so, I came over, of course, and took care of you kids. Your mother had lost it. Lucy carried on for seven days and seven nights, rising and falling within a deranged river of grief no matter what Peter or I said.

This abominable overkill of hers could have raised her to star billing had she been placed in my house. I didn't scream, nor beat Sherman, nor throw dishes when my daughter died, though for this there would have been no penalty. Lucy, Peter, you kids watched instead while I did nothing. I found no respite from the piteous, elongated faces with their eyebrows up, waiting for what? What had been a whole life of one thing suddenly became another. Lucy said I was in shock for three months, and then it was

depression, and what was different? The house was vacuumed and meals were made. I ran errands and bought groceries. There wasn't a light bulb burned out in the house. Sherman continued to work. He may have wailed in public, I don't know, but no one followed him around. He was under no suspicion. This non-performance of mine proved as lethal as your mom's over-performance, and yet there were no dramatic battles here and no one dragged me off the stage. Lucy and Sherman had said, "Look, maybe..." and then I found myself sitting three times a week with a psychiatrist who smiled and called shock therapy a "clearing out." I smiled back, like an imbecile, and said, "Nobody would mind if they opened the drapes a little wider and lightened up the room." Lucy held my hand while Sherman signed papers. My brain was electrocuted for three weeks/two-a-day sessions and I was bathed and fed.

I know you're all wondering how Lucy and I sold each other out. It was easy. We had died long before the shock therapy annihilated us. Your mom never told you this one, but I'm going to. It explains a lot. Lucy was nine years old and I was seven when it really started.

"Little chicklins, come out here and meet your new uncle Alexander. He's just married your aunt Theresa. Alexander this here's Lucy, and the littler one is Rita. Go on girls, give him a peck on the cheek," our mother said. Uncle Alex leaned down and we girls complied.

“Well, you’re just as cute as buttons, aren’t you?” Uncle Alex looked up at our mom. “I’m hoping Theresa and I can make some of our own real soon, ma’am.”

Aunt Theresa and Uncle Alex moved into the house with our family. That was the time of the Depression, Uncle Alex was unemployed and became our babysitter because he just loved children and said he’d rather stay home with us and let the adults go off to run their errands and work.

“Lucy, come on in here,” Uncle Alex yelled out at us while we were playing outside. “Rita, you stay outside. I’ll send Lucy back out directly,” he’d say. There was no playing with Uncle Alex. He was an evil man when the adults were gone. He made us promise never to tell or he’d do worse to us than he was already doing. I knew what he did to me in the kitchen pantry, and figured he was doing the same to Lucy, but the two of us never talked about it with each other.

“Now Rita, you know what ole uncle Alex wants, so let’s just get on with this.” Uncle Alex would have his pants at his ankles. I want you to hold on to it and stroke it real nice, honey, like one of your dolls.” I had been yanked around by him once when I didn’t do what he said, so I always listened now and tried to get it over with as quickly as possible.

Our mother found him with me after at least a year of this going on. I was clutching the shelves of the cupboard with Uncle Alex thrusting in me

from behind when the door opened and I remember this brilliant light illuminating the rows of canned beans, tomatoes, sauces and jams that surrounded me. Mother started screaming and beating on Uncle Alex while my dad grabbed the shovel and knocked him right over the head. Mother cried all the time after that and would call us in and hug us tight for hours sometimes. She barely left us alone. That was the end of that chapter, but it changed Lucy and me forever. We learned to comply and accept anything that came our way.

I have to say I got some pleasure in Lucy screaming on and on for a whole week. Your father, Peter, asked me to stay with you kids and he dragged Lucy into the psychiatric ward of a hospital near your home. One swift injection of a tranquilizer by an able nurse and the perverse cradle of a straitjacket delivered, within moments, an abrupt salvation of silence and the return of the woman whom Peter had married, but not before he'd signed some papers as well. He drove back home an exhausted, saddled man. Lucy drowned into a flightless slumber that night. I remember. I left Peter with all of you and drove to the hospital, slept in the bed next to Lucy that night.

Lucy was put out to pasture for a month of electroconvulsive therapy, (as they called it at that time) two times a day and puddled meals. She used to talk in those days. She told me about Peter's mistress. She overheard him

lusting on the phone one night with a younger woman. It was some girl he'd met somewhere or another. It didn't matter. Their marriage had long been over but, amazingly, Lucy hadn't seen it coming. She was deeply depressed and accepted the prototype of what a marriage was supposed to be, even though Peter confessed to me one day that they hadn't had sex in years. I wasn't surprised. I hadn't had sex with Sherman since the early years. I can't speak for your mom, but it was no day in the park to have Sherman huffing and grunting on top of me.

I came to visit Lucy when she first got home from the hospital. She sat on the lawn chair out on your front porch while you kids were at school and stared at the same trees, pedestrians, and passing cars. Her face was bland. The sound of footsteps frightened her. She never looked toward them. Her features froze and her head trembled until they passed. I bit my nails. I know I didn't come to visit much, but our love for each other was intact because we had survived something as horrible as a war.

At that time we were two middle-aged women sitting up on a porch. In summer you would not be able to pass more than a few streets without spotting a pair of us. Little did we shift our direction as we would the world of words. Lucy used to love to talk. Now she barely spoke.

And then came the divorce that Peter was blamed for. He had money and he used it. He got an excellent lawyer. Lucy was broke. A friend of the

family felt sorry for her and represented her in court. Your father excelled in the courtroom, pontificating with the language of an insider repeating the words “nevertheless,” “above all,” and “furthermore,” while his lawyer handed over the hospital documents to the judge. Peter easily won all the money, but left the house to Lucy. At least none of you were left out on the street. He had to give you that, the bastard.

In life there is never one set version of history, just as there are multitudes of roads that lead to the same destination. Lucy screamed and I did not, and yet we ended up in the same place: the psych ward getting nuked with electric shock.

So, now I live alone. I’m an old lady and Sherman is dead. You know that. What you probably don’t know is that I spend most of my time riding buses these days. I have traveled the city from line to line with a transfer and followed the threads of history as they are picked up at one corner and dropped off at another. Some of the blindest old women have knitted the rattiest snarls of yarn into masterful canvases of scarves and sweaters, so why shouldn’t I be capable of bleeding together a few fragmented stories out of the downpour of discarded babble that never ceases. With my monthly bus pass I follow an endless trail of saliva from stranger’s mouths—set my bucket under it, so to speak, and guess what I find? Murderers in every one of them.

I call myself the garbage picker of memory. It situates me with the species. History is a web of stories that have been locked up in textbooks and museums, lined up single file by chronology. Civilization, colonization, war, famine, and all those kingdoms march before us, yet we need only put our ear up close to any of those textbooks to hear the silent screams of millions buried alive by that print. They reach out from those iron bars of words, pounding in futile agitation from the buried cells of the past, and yet look at these ridiculous beasts parading their costumes and stuffed with their facts that call themselves history when they are no more representative of the truth than the sacred beasts we line up on our own private mantels in the guise of memory. Are we not all trash collectors of the past? Time and memory can only be murdered by fear. We destroyed our younger selves, but to hell with those old photographs. We have all found a way to create our own beginnings and endings to make up for a life the world never gave us. Just get on the next bus and listen. My daughter, Beth, is dead, but she comes alive every time I speak or write. Now, I open up my damn mouth and say whatever the hell I feel.

So, how do I end this? With Lucy and I, of course. She has cancer. She's not long for this world. We all know that, but your mother and I have come to an understanding. She lets me write the stories she never did. I sit next to

her and read them when I visit. She listens and laughs. That is enough for both of us.

Two old women sitting up on a porch. In summer you won't pass more than a few streets without spotting a pair of us. We are as dismissed and as old as the trees, but we still hold an ocean of history inside us.

The last story I read to your mom began with, "I, too, am a murderer." Damn, did she get a kick out of that one! The story she'd been waiting to write forever. When I got to the part about Uncle Alex, she clutched my hand and tears welled up in her eyes. But when I got to the part about her losing it, screeching and roaring like an orangutan, Lucy let out a howl and started beating her chest. This tiny little blue bird in her robe and nightgown was roaring so loud and slapping her thighs she almost fell out of her chair.

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