

Lullaby

By E. B. Sullivan

Having washed the grime from her once feminine hands, Rita Moro glanced at her wrinkled brow in the bathroom mirror. With great apprehension, she wondered how she could face the daughter she had foolishly given away fifty-two years ago.

Gardening usually calmed her, but this particular morning, it raised her anxiety. Perhaps her nervousness had more to do with her anticipated mingling with people than her recent interactions with plants.

After five long decades, she planned to have contact with her daughter. At six o'clock that evening, they would meet for a second time.

Preparing for the important visit, Rita removed her clothing, ripped off the morphine patch, and stepped into the shower. As the water sprayed her sickly frame, she felt trapped in an abyss of memories.

Though she often wanted to locate her little girl, until recently, she decided against it by telling herself she didn't want to disrupt her daughter's life. In truth, Rita felt ashamed of her dreadful deed and knew she deserved severe chastising for having abandoned her infant.

Seven months earlier, when diagnosed with cancer, Rita began the search for her daughter. She intended to use the information to establish a trust fund for her only heir.

As a well-respected author, Rita focused on creating fanciful books for young boys

and girls. While her products, including full-length motion pictures, delighted children and brought fame and riches they failed to alleviate her daily guilt. At no time did Rita believe material things could compensate for all she had previously failed to provide. She wasn't seeking approval or forgiveness. Thus, Rita decided to give her child the substantial inheritance anonymously.

To her surprise, she quickly located her daughter. Two brief meetings with a private investigator produced a detailed report including names and locations.

Much of the data Rita received astounded her, especially the fact that others called her little girl Zoe. Of course, the child needed a real name, but for over half a century, Rita referred to the person she helped bring into this world simply as *Baby*.

At today's rendezvous, Rita would not share the details of her compounded mistakes. Nor did she intend to make excuses for her previous actions. No words could explain her selfish behavior. As an insensitive teen, she thought only of her future and opportunities. It would do no good to describe the confusion she felt as a seventeen-year-old ostracized by her family and condemned by their moral convictions.

She saw no point in telling Zoe anything about her natural father. At the time of conception, he was only a boy. Not ready for parenthood, he joined the Marines and allowed Rita to make the final decision regarding the fate of their child. It certainly didn't seem essential to impose even a hint of sadness upon Zoe by informing her of his tragic death. With courage, he served this country. Twenty-six days after the adoption of their baby he died in a skirmish not even considered a war.

It made no difference what Rita and the unborn child went through together: a

pronounced and prolonged period of morning sickness, hypertension, edema, and complications leading to a cesarean section. One fact remained pertinent. Since Zoe's miraculous delivery, mother and daughter lived separate lives as strangers.

In the hazy months following the blessed birth, Rita recalled sorting through the debris of her devastating choice. She concluded with great sorrow that, somewhere in the rumble, she'd lost the valid reason for her existence.

Books became her sole diversion. In this solitary world of reading, drawing, and writing, Rita attempted to escape into the world of make-believe. Alas, even in this imagined universe, she couldn't avoid the pangs of never-ending heartache.

Rita stepped out of the shower. Without the morphine patch, indescribable physical distress consumed much of her energy. Still rather than having the luxury of medication, Rita chose coherency and alertness for her appointment with Zoe.

Unaccustomed to such a keen state of awareness, her horrific appearance startled her. Sunken eyes and protruding bones resembled a corpse. She combed the sparse strands of her stringy gray hair with incredible difficulty. As hard as she tried, no makeup could freshen her pallid flesh.

Once dressed, she gazed in the full-length mirror and cringed at how her shoulders pathetically drooped under the classic design of her expensive new suit.

One final detail remained. Rita's gnarled fingers fumbled until she fastened the clasp of an old chain. She wore this piece of jewelry every day because it allowed a simple locket to swing over her heart.

Taking slow deliberate steps, she made her way outside. Her heels clicked on the stone

path. When she stopped moving her entire mind, body, and spirit attended to this day filled with life. In the distance a dog barked, a plane flew overhead, and a multicolored butterfly fluttered before her eyes. Under a sky of crystal clarity, she composed herself as she focused on her sacred mission.

After arriving a few minutes early, the cab fell behind schedule as it slowly inched through the hectic downtown traffic. The driver talked incessantly about nothing in particular. Her ears perked up when Rita heard him say, “Bad day to be going to the Hilton, Lady. That’s where the inaugural shin-dig’s going on.”

“Yes. I know,” Rita said. Her heart swelled with pride only a parent could feel.

Rita felt thankful to the outgoing Governor. In appreciation for Rita’s considerable campaign contributions to the candidate of his choice, he invited Rita to this gala ceremony.

Exhausted and frustrated by the prolonged journey, Rita drifted off in thought. Her daydreams overflowed with the joys of motherhood. For a few moments, she existed back in time. She marveled at the tiny, innocent beauty wrapped in a pale pink receiving blanket. Her lips brushed the soft skin. She inhaled the delicate scent. Her eyes recorded the perfection of each feature. She heard her miracle emit a tender cry.

Rita began to hum a sweet lullaby. With each note, her heartbeats reinforced a single truth. She knew there would be no greater love than mother and babe.

All too soon, the dream turned into an ugly nightmare. A nurse snatched the baby from Rita’s arms. The room darkened.

“Give her back,” Rita screamed. “I can’t live without her.”

“What you’d say?” The cabby’s brusque voice roused her.

“Have we arrived?”

“Yeah, we’re here, ma’am, at the Hilton.”

Thousands of people came to honor the newly elected dignitary, her Baby. Taking in the aura of excitement Rita felt vindicated for having stayed out of Zoe’s life. It seemed impossible to believe a mortal such as Rita gave birth to a genuine angel. However, whoever raised her child accepted and committed to the daunting task. For the remarkable job these true parents performed, Rita said a silent prayer of indebtedness.

Despite her overwhelming discomfort, Rita managed to find her seat at one of the circular tables. She took a few deep breaths and waited.

Thunderous applause welcomed their new governor, her daughter Zoe Anderson.

Rising to her feet, Rita clapped and cheered. The rest of the audience joined in a congratulatory welcome, but she beamed with maternal love alone.

Victorious enthusiasm summed up the governor’s tone. Rita felt Zoe spoke to her personally when she said, “It’s wonderful to see you this evening.” Rita wanted to believe Zoe talked to her alone when she added, “With genuine gratitude, I want to thank you for the part you played in my life.”

A combination of joy and agony caused Rita’s heart to pound frighteningly. Unnoticed in the distracted crowd, she slipped out of the double doors of the reception area. All the while, her palm clutched the tarnished pendant dangling around her neck. Among the crowd gathered in the hall, Rita made her way to an alcove where she slithered down to the floor, gasping for air.

A secret service agent who observed Rita ran to offer assistance. On his knees, he

asked, “Can I help you, ma’am?”

Collecting the last reserve of her strength, she tried to speak in a clear voice, “Tell the governor I’m sorry.”

“Sure, ma’am,” he said respectfully. “I’m certain she’ll understand.”

Rita struggled to lift her head as her eyes met his, “Are you sure?”

“Yes, ma’am, I am.”

Her spine gracefully reclined. For a time she rested. With both hands, she clutched her locket. Her fingers opened it and rubbed the pictures encased in glass. She began to hum the sweet lullaby from her dream. A sublime expression spread across her face.

Rita felt strong arms lifting her body onto a stretcher.

A soft touch rejuvenated her. Her eyelids fluttered. She released the locket and reached towards her Baby, Zoe. Rita watched her smiling daughter peer at the open locket. One side revealed a faded photograph of a newborn infant; on the other, a glossy picture of Governor Zoe Anderson shone in the light.