

Secrets

by Megan Williams

Une femme se remémore une partie troublante de son enfance—comment elle est devenue «soeur de sang» avec une copine, comment ensemble elles ont exploré le mystère des tampons hygiéniques—tout en revivant le traumatisme relié à la tentative de suicide de sa mère.

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The first time I meet Rose-Marie I am spellbound. She draws me in like smoke through a cigarette and swirls me inside her. At least that's how it feels when she cups her hands around my ear and whispers, "Come over to my house after lunch. I've got a secret to show you."

I am eight, lonely, and a sucker for secrets. Rose-Marie is nine and the closest thing to a princess I have encountered. She shines and sparkles and emits an endless flow of magical promise. I want to be with her, I want to share her possibilities.

Rose-Marie's mother has brought her over. She is sitting in the living room with Aunt Pat drinking coffee and eating the chocolate covered biscuits that are just for adults. They leave us in the kitchen with grape koolaid and digestive cookies.

I am new here, at my aunt's. A tight eddy of anxiety has churned in my stomach since I arrived. Her house is dark and worn and cloaked in the stark smell of mothballs. She seems too old to be my mother and besides there's no man. I wonder what I will tell the others when I start the new school. Maybe they won't ask. I wonder what my aunt has told Rose-Marie's mother. I wonder what Rose-Marie knows.

A halo of golden hair wafts above Rose-Marie's head and frothy lace cascades to her knees. Two little smudges of purple koolaid mark the corners of her mouth. I ask her if she was at a birthday party and she looks at me funny and says, "No." I have never seen a girl wear a dress like that before except at a birthday party.

When Rose-Marie and her mother go to leave, Rose-Marie pauses at the door and looks at me up and down as if she's not quite sure she should have asked me to come over. I pull my t-shirt down over my cut-off shorts that suddenly seem tough and shoddy.

"Do you have a bathing suit?" she asks. I tell her I do and she says, "Wear it over because we have a pool." A pool!

For lunch there is a baloney sandwich with mustard and sliced cucumbers that my aunt made early this morning and covered with wax paper in the fridge. I gobble it down as fast as I can and

go change into my Speedo. I say good-bye to my aunt on the couch watching General Hospital and knitting me a red cardigan for the fall. I hop the fence to Rose-Marie's. The suspense is unbearable.

Rose-Marie is waiting for me crouched against a tool shed at the far end of her back yard. She's changed out of the party dress. She now wears a pastel green and yellow two-piece bathing suit that looks like a grandmother knit. She reminds me of the glossy china toad that sits in the front garden of the house across the street.

"Aren't you itchy in a knitted bathing suit?" I ask as I kneel down beside her.

"It's not knitted. It's *crocheted*. That's a French word, for your information," she retorts.

She tilts forward on her knees so our noses almost touch and whispers excitedly, "Are you ready to see the *thing*?"

"Yes! Let me see it!" I whisper back, not moving.

Her face has spread out across my vision forming a blur of white so doughy I am tempted to stick my finger in her cheek to see how far it will sink. A sea of blue shimmers where her eyes are, the two black dots of her pupils keeping feverishly afloat. Tight, delicate lips—a scarlet so bright they startle me—are wriggling in speech.

"You can't tell anyone, not even your aunt because if you do we'll get in *big* trouble," she is saying.

I fall back on my bum and the world spins into place. No, I won't tell my aunt, I promise. I won't tell anyone.

Rose-Marie squints nervously in the direction of the back porch. Her mother is hanging laundry on the other side of the pool. Every few seconds she jerks her chin up to look in our direction. She is suspicious, although I am not sure of whom. When she goes inside, the anxiety in Rose-Marie face melts, and she motions for me to follow her. With the lumbering grace of a raccoon she squeezes between the back of the tool shed and the prickly bushes that line the yard, her green and yellow behind bobbing out of sight. "Come on!" she hisses.

Careful not to catch my Speedo on the bushes, I press close to the shed and crawl after her. There's a cave-like hollow in the bushes where Rose-Marie rolls over onto her bottom and sits cross-legged. She carefully picks the dirt off one knee then the other. I place myself in front of her and copy the procedure.

"Close your eyes," she commands.

I obey, partially. Through my lashes I see her arm reach under the shed and grope for something. Her fist retrieves a pink glossy tube that looks like a giant lipstick container.

"You can look now," she says.

As I open my eyes I do my best to appear surprised at the thing she clasps.

"What is it?" I exclaim.

"It's a harpoon," she answers. Her eyes gleam triumphantly.

"A harpoon?" I repeat. Genuine curiosity grows at the thought of hidden weapons. I picture an adventure unfolding, like those in After School Specials.

Rose-Marie grasps the tube at each end like a Christmas cracker and yanks. Out flies a paper stick that resembles a very large cigarette. Only it's not a cigarette, it's a tampon. I know it's a tampon because I've seen them under the bathroom sink in the farm house. When mom dressed the white string would dangle between her legs like the loose end of a parcel. It was for her period, she'd told me, for when she bled.

I don't want to see it all again, but it closes in around me, the dark stain spreading across her sheets, drawing its colour from her wrists. *Mom, you're bleeding! You're bleeding! Should I get some tampons ?!* But I can't find them. So I run across the field and they call for help and under a sky of pulsating red she is driven from me forever.

"See?" Rose-Marie pushes the white stick in front of my face.

"But that's not a harpoon," I begin slowly, giving away nothing. "It's a tampon. It's for when..."

"Harpoon's the secret word, stupid. The *code* word," she says sticking a finger over my mouth to quiet me.

She is going to demonstrate its use. With some difficulty, she wriggles her bathing suit bottoms past her bum and slides them down over her feet. She pulls her feet up to her crotch and her knees flop open like a frog, exposing the pale folds of her vagina. I watch in silence as she carefully peels the wrapping off the tampon.

"It goes in your dink hole," she giggles, poking her vagina with the tampon. Her legs squeeze together and the tampon disappears into the flesh of her thighs. She flops them open again and the tampon drops to the ground.

"Try and stick it in your hole," she urges, picking it up and prodding me with it.

I try to imagine how such a big thing could fit inside me. I'm not even sure I have a hole and I don't want to make that discovery with Rose-Marie watching.

Rose-Marie's mother suddenly calls from the house. I am saved.

"Girls... where are you?"

Wide-eye panic overtakes Rose-Marie's grin. In a whirlwind of motion she stuffs the tampon and case back under the shed, pulls on her bottoms and races back around the shed. I follow close behind.

"Here we are mom! Just playing hide and seek," she chirps in a sugar sweet voice.

Her mother stands with her hands on her hips, squinting into the sun at us. "I've warned you, Rose-Marie. You'll be very sorry if I find out you've left the backyard again. I won't stand for anymore of your nonsense," she says before stepping back inside. I wonder what nonsense she's referring to and am about to ask

when I notice a streak of crimson stretching down Rose-Marie's arm.

"Rose-Marie!" I gasp. "Your arm!"

"Oooh," she pants, still out of breath from the high paced crawling. She looks at her arm dazedly. "I'm bleeding."

"Should I get your mom?" I ask, rising to my feet.

"No, no! Sit down!" she says, pulling me to my knees. "She'll just yell at me some more. She blames everything on me."

Rose-Marie fingers the blood on her arm, frowning. Then a slow smile spreads across her face and she looks up at me.

"I know," she says. "We can be blood sisters!"

"Blood sisters?"

"Yeah! We put our cuts together and our blood gets mixed up and then we become we sisters!"

"But I don't have a cut..."

"Well, we'll make one! Or you can use the scab on your knee. We can make that bleed," she says pointing to the purple week-old crust crowning my knee.

"OK," I say hesitantly.

Her eyes twinkle in a way that makes me feel uneasy.

"But first you have to tell me a secret. I showed you my secret. Now it's your turn,

"But I don't have any," I lie.

"Yes you do.... What about your parents? Tell me and then we can be blood sisters. You want to be my sister don't you?"

"What do you want to know?" The knot in my stomach furls into a tight fist.

"Didn't they get divorced?"

"Yeah."

"And what about your mother?"

"What about her?"

"Isn't she sick?"

"No."

"I overheard my mom say she was sick. What's wrong with her? I promise I won't tell."

"I don't know. She just got sick."

"Isn't she sick in the head?"

"No."

"We can't be *real* blood sisters unless you tell me the truth. Tell me the truth....Is your mom sick in the head?"

I sit in shaky silence, feeling my baloney sandwich push up towards my throat. I want to escape, to go back to the farm before everything went wrong, to hide deep in its woods. But I need Rose-Marie as my friend more than anything now.

"Yes," I finally breath, "But don't tell anyone, please..."

"It'll be just our secret. And now we can be sisters forever."

Rose-Marie beams maternally as she tugs my leg across her lap. Taking my knee in her hand she tenderly peels off the scab, blowing gently on the oozing blood before squeezing her fleshy arm against my knee.

"Ouch," I whimper, though the pain is not in my knee.

"Hush, hush," she croons. "Everything's fine. We're sisters now."

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