

Paper Roses

By Louise Caiola

“Rumor grows as it goes.”

October 17, 2008: I’m the first to admit I have a major problem. My name is Petal Peterson and, no, *that* isn’t the problem, although I must say it has been an issue, especially when I was little and the other kids were called Melissa or Jennifer: cute, normal names like that. My initials didn’t help much either. At the age of ten or so, other kids enjoyed stringing them together, adding the word “head” and taunting me mercilessly. Anyhow, that’s all behind me now. I’ve had twenty-one years to adjust to my harmless affliction, 7,665 days to rise up, way up, and beyond the endearing curse bestowed on me by my parents, the Russian spies.

This is rumor # 1. It is laughable, mildly creative, and completely untrue. In reality they are Conway and Betsey Peterson, red-blooded and American true. My folks love the U.S.A. so much that they traipsed all over it, dragging me and my sister, and eventually, my little brother along for the ride.

“Roots are those things meant to keep trees from toppling over,” so says my father, the man Mom calls Connie.

To say we move around a lot is putting it mildly. I liked Chicago best but maybe that’s because I was born there. Anyway, nobody ever bothered to ask me. New Mexico

was too hot and it rained buckets in Seattle. Iowa is nothing but cornfield after cornfield and in Vermont the winter never ends. We've been in Northern California for four and a half years now, mostly due to Sparrow getting sick. Sparrow is my little sister, six years younger than me. When she was born, I thought my parents were giving me a tiny doll to play with. She was all mine right from the start.

Sparrow sauntered by me early this morning, not because she's ripe with fifteen-year-old attitude, but because she's got a kidney disease and it's changed so much about her so quickly. Even her walk is different.

"Feel like hitting the mall tonight?" I asked her.

"Not much." She folded her small body into the camel-backed kitchen chair.

Another big change. Sparrow was once a shopping freak. That was then.

"I'll fly AND buy," I suggested, trying to tempt her with the prospect of free stuff.

"No, thanks."

I took a second to survey her; still inexplicably gorgeous. She's the one with the package of good. Good hair. Good teeth. Good cheekbones. Good grades. Except for the kidney thing, which defies who Sparrow was supposed to be – the sister I should've spent my entire lifetime envying. Which brings me to rumor # 2: Sparrow is a by-product of genetic engineering at its finest. Nature could never be so gracious left to chance.

But it was, at first. But when she turned 11 all hell broke loose inside her where prying, gossiping eyes couldn't see.

"It's no fun to shop alone. We can get frozen yogurt after. Cherry vanilla." If I could just get her to do regular things, then everything might be the way it ought to be.

She tipped her head down; a blanket of soft, thick, wheat colored hair rushed over her shoulders. “I don’t like cherry vanilla anymore,” she said into the edge of the table.

She had become so different—Sparrow the imposter and it made me want to cry or go back to Chicago where every one of us was totally healthy and primarily happy.

I flipped her a smile even though she wasn’t paying attention. We all did that more and more; smiles for Sparrow for no apparent reason. We had recently become the Petersons, a pack of grinning fools. “Okay. Maybe tomorrow?”

“Maybe.”

I rubbed my palms over the sides of my cheeks. Never could rub the freckles off, even though I tried again and again, for years 13 through 18 when I gave up at last, dotted and defeated. It wasn’t the spots that bothered me, in and of themselves. There wasn’t an equal number of them. Left cheek, eight. Right, ten. So close and yet, so terribly far.

And *that* is my major problem. I have to match. One half of my body *must* coincide with the other. If it isn’t mirror image, something in my mind sends a message to something in my chest, which makes it hard to breathe. Fingernails can be torture enough to induce a full fledged panic attack. You can’t imagine how hard it is to get all ten to be the exact same length. Bracelets? A pair, always, of course – one on each wrist. I don’t wear earrings. Imagine if you will the audacity of anybody attempting to pierce two lobes in precisely the same place. Never happen.

Mom was rinsing a stalk of carrots under a spray of water in the sink. Betsey with the eyes of blue, chestnut brown bob, knobby knees, and feet like oars. I am most like her, right down to the toes, only she’s blissfully imperfect and me, I’m bliss-less.

“I have a parent teacher conference for Bond late this afternoon. Can you keep a watch on the stew, Petal? It’ll be in the crock.”

“Parent teacher conference for Bond? He’s six. What could there possibly be to conference about?” It was okay to collect all the loose pieces of my anger and frustration meant for diseases that attack the innocent and level it at the nearest adult.

My mother angled her chin over her shoulder and lowered her voice. “There’s been a biting incident.”

Sparrow must have forgotten for a second that she was sick because she straightened her spine and lifted her head in attack mode, fully prepared to defend our brother, who will be a baby to us even when he’s a full grown man. “Someone bit Bond?”

“No,” Mom answered. “Bond was the perpetrator.”

“Oh.” And with that, Sparrow crumpled up again, unneeded and small.

Bond Peterson, in his tender years, was angry, too. Each one of us hated what was happening to Sparrow and none of us knew what to do about it.

Mom raised her brow. “Petal?”

“Watch the stew. Got it.”

I waited until Sparrow and I were alone again and then I tapped my fingers on the table until she looked at me. “What?”

“I’m just thinking about what they’ll say next, about Bond now that he’s taken to eating people.”

Couldn’t be more outrageous than rumor # 3. That’s the one about our brother, the boy we adopted without much drama from an orphanage in Korea. Only, the rumor goes

that we arranged for his kidnapping from a wealthy family of nobles who planned to raise him purely for stud purposes. Absurd, but that one Sparrow and I secretly started ourselves, for the sport of it.

And all at once one side of my sister's mouth curled at the corner. "Cannibal in training?"

"Undoubtedly," I said.

It felt nice in that skinny, infinitesimal moment in time to be light and carefree with her. It made me forget about how Sparrow was really the one with the major problem, which by comparison made my having-to-be-even thing downright silly.

"...And if we got sick at least we didn't die, so let us all be thankful."

November 12, 2008: I stared into the mirror, not in a vain wow-I'm-so-pretty way. I was taking stock with the calculator-thing in my brain that was always running. Sparrow sat behind me on the sofa with a blank gaze in the direction of the television set. She wasn't really watching. It was just her method of avoiding having to talk, not to answer any "how are you feeling" questions.

"Are my eyebrows the same?"

My sister is the only person who doesn't suck her teeth or sigh or cluck her tongue when I ask stuff like that. She looked at my reflection dutifully, as if it was just as important to her as it was to me.

"Turn," she said.

I swiveled my body to face her. Sparrow made her own assessment, taking her time to be correct. "They're the same."

“Thank you.” I smiled with temporary relief. The worrying would be along shortly. Not for me. For her. I can tell things aren’t getting any better for Sparrow by Mom’s hair. For years, my mother would grow it real long and sell it for people who needed extra – like in wigs. But it’s outlined in a silvery gray now, around her temples and jutting out here and there in wiry sprigs. “It won’t sell this way,” she told me just one week ago. I never thought it was true, that stress could cause that reaction. But with every week that passes, for every negative doctor’s report, my parents are showing signs of their age crashing down on their heads.

Bond sat on the carpet, his knees bent, and the bottom half of his legs tucked beneath him. He traced his hand over and over on an orange sheet of construction paper. “It’s gonna be a turkey,” he shouted into the air. “Mamma said I could glue feathers on it after it’s all colored in.”

“That’ll be awesome, Buddy,” I said. That’s what we call him, mostly because Dad started to one day and it sort of just stuck.

“See, Sparrow? See?” With a wave of his petite hand, Bond lifted the drawing off the coffee table.

My sister managed a densely filtered grin. “It’s my favorite turkey; the best one ever.”

Bond returned the favor. He’d recently lost his two front teeth which put a temporary halt to his biting fetish, leaving him with a mouth full of cherry red gums.

“Mamma said we all have to pick one thing to be thankful for.”

“It’s THANKful, Buddy,” I said with another parting gaze at my eyebrows.

“What are you thankful for, Petal?” he asked.

I took a second before I replied. “My sister and brother.”

“What about you, Sparrow?” He slid his feet out from under his behind. He wore two completely different socks. In my entire life that has never happened to me. I shudder to think.

“Orange paper turkeys,” Sparrow said smoothly. “And you, Buddy?”

Bond searched the ceiling for an answer, running his tongue over his lips. “I’m thankful that my teeth are gonna grow back real soon. Mamma said they’ll be even bigger and stronger than the ones that fell out.”

Sparrow and I passed a silent look between us. He was the thing that sealed the deal, finished the family. That’s why they named him Bond.

“Brothers, sisters, and orange paper turkeys,” Sparrow whispered.

“What’s in a name?”

December 20, 2008: My father ran a small printing press for a local paper in town. But if you had asked him what he did for a living or if you inquired how he defined himself, he would have told you that he builds airplanes. He built *one*, actually. And I’m pretty sure it couldn’t fly. It was only big enough for one person, looking more like a large bird suit. In fact, that’s what my father called it – “The Ole Bird” although its name is unofficial. Dad spent every free moment for weeks locked away in his workshop with that plane, like he was indulging a passionate love affair. Maybe, in a way, he was.

When I knocked at the garage door early that afternoon I didn’t want to interrupt whatever it is one does when they entertain such a fixation.

“Enter,” he said.

“Mom sent me. She said you needed to talk.” I felt like a third wheel as my father ran his hand over one polished wing, caressing it gently.

He looked past me at first and then found my eyes. “The kidney’s got to go. We’ll all need to be tested.”

“Tested ...”

“She’s going to need a good one. Both of hers are failing, Petal. They want to see which of us, if any, is a potential match.”

“Sure, okay, fine. No problem. When?” I figured it would have to be soon. All my sister was doing was sleeping, and if she wasn’t doing that, she was crying from the headaches.

My father, Conway Peterson, the self-proclaimed pilot, informed me that we’d be going to the doctors by the end of the month. I put on my most valiant devil-may-care face. Give up a kidney? For my only sister? The calculator in my brain began to spin. What would the chances be that out of the three of us blood-related Petersons, I might be the winner?

And what would I be if inside of my body something that was supposed to be part of a set was suddenly standing alone, off balance, out of whack, and completely uneven?

Dad watched me as I lingered in the doorway, lost in thoughts of an obsession that was once the thing that troubled my parents most.

“I’m hoping it’s me, Petal. I know that’d be easier for all. If I can be the donor, if there’s a choice, it’ll be me.”

I nodded and turned to go, catching the last bits of him as he gave the Ole Bird a loving pat. That’s when I saw it there; a branding of sorts, just below the wing, in black

paint swirled in fancy cursive letters. My father's creation has been officially named "The Sparrow."

No choice could have been a more fitting or perfect match, I thought.

"Winning isn't everything..."

January 7, 2009: The house was filled with red and white poinsettia plants which should, by rights, be dead by now, evidence of my mother's flower fetish. The plants seemed to be beating the odds, which gave Mom a notion of immortality and a satisfied smile. Bond spent the morning at the kitchen table drawing pictures of Christmas trees, even though ours had been down for a week now.

"You're going to be an artist when you grow up," Mom told him just before she licked her palm and ran it over the top of his head, smoothing out a fresh layer of static hair.

"I'm making a book for Sparrow, so she'll get better again," he explained.

What a great idea. That's what I'd do. I'd make her something, like a handmade craft. Knit her a scarf or a string a beaded necklace. It ought to fix everything, right?

When the phone rang Bond made a mad dash. "Peterson house....yes, my mommy is right here. Hold, please."

My mother removed the silver clip earring from her ear and rested the handset on her shoulder. I heard her say, "Hello doctor," and then she did that thing where you slip off so that the conversation gets muffled and secretive, like she was 12 and talking to some cute boy from school.

I watched Bond study a silver crayon, and then take a royal blue, or was it cyan? Was it his destiny to wind up here with our family or had it been some random happenstance, the way a person picks one color over another without a lot of thought? And what did destiny have in store for me?

My mother returned to the room, her face suddenly an ashy gray, her hands fumbling with one side of her blouse that refused to lay straight.

“What did he say?” I asked.

She didn’t catch my eye. Instead she reached for a fresh bag of potting soil, up over the fridge in the pantry. “I think we ought to start a new indoor garden, maybe daisies. Daisies would be nice, right?”

“Daisies!” Bond shrieked.

“What did the doctor say?” I repeated.

Mom kept her packets of seeds clumped loosely together in a pink hair band, but always in alphabetical order. “Aster...carnation...daffodil...ahh – here we are – daisy.”

“It’s me, isn’t it?”

Bond leaped out of his chair. “I want to pour the dirt!” Three crayons rolled onto the floor.

My mother turned quickly, handed Bond the bag of soil and instructed him to be careful carting it to the table. She then stepped on the cyan which snapped in two beneath her heel. My brother didn’t seem to notice as Mom bent down to collect the crayons: two whole and unscathed, and one split in two. From there she looked up, her gaze meeting mine.

“Yes, Petal. It’s you.”

“One is the loneliest number...”

January 17, 2009: My father and I set off alone on a Saturday morning when the wind seemed angry or maybe frustrated; tossing and toppling innocent trash cans all around and biting at your ears and exposed flesh. The car heater was blowing, but only it spat out a warm breeze without much attitude.

I slipped my left boot on and off with my right foot. “Where are we going?”

“To the park.”

“Dad, it’s a little cold for the park today. What gives?”

He wore a plaid pea cap and a beige windbreaker, which I didn’t recall seeing before. Around his eyes were three tiny creases, which I hadn’t noticed before either. “I want to show you something, Petal.”

“Okay, fine. But, Dad, just so you know, the whole kidney thing—it’s undoable. I mean, I love Sparrow. I really do. And I want to help her. If there’s any other way...”

My father just drove in silence, not seeming to be mad or disappointed or much of anything. We arrived at the park where an anemic gathering of lost souls had collected in some unnamed faith to try to become found. I followed him, a step or two behind as he led me off to a remote corner where an assortment of bushes and trees stood in a half-moon design. I’d never been this far into this park before. It was practically like a sanctuary or something equally reverent and quiet. His stride took us in closer to the center of the semi-circle, and then over to a small garden cordoned off with twisted rope and black wrought iron steaks. Inside the garden were those types of plants that survive

any climatic woes with green petals of victory raised up toward the sky. They gently hugged a small round plaque that simply read, “For Blossom.”

“What is this?” I asked, staring down without a blink.

“Wherever we move to your mom makes one of these. The original’s back in Chicago. You know how fanatical she is about flowers. Obviously that’s where you got your name.”

“Who is Blossom?”

“She was your twin.”

“My twin?” I felt my knees do that thing where they shiver of their own accord.

My father shifted his eyes to me at last. “We figured that’s why you’ve always needed to have things be even. We assumed it was because on some deep level you craved the twin sister you lost before you were born.”

There was no bench to relieve my legs, no bright swatch of light for me to see clearly. I was blurry, confused, and all at once dehydrated. I curled at the waist and let my knees burrow into the grass. My father knelt beside me.

“I had a twin sister? Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“When she passed away in your mother’s womb, she had to let her go—mentally, emotionally, every which way. It was too painful for her to deal with. Then afterwards we were afraid that if you knew, you might think her passing had something to do with you.”

“Did it?”

“No, Petal, not at all. It was just what fate had in store. That’s why we called her Blossom. So she’d be forever in bloom. And you, a petal, forever a part of her.”

Five very long minutes went by before either of us spoke. In that time I managed to finally make sense of things I never quite understood in twenty-one years. I knew it was up to me not to allow another sister of mine to die.

Dad spoke first. “I know it’s important that you have two of whatever it is you’re supposed to have, but please consider this. You have only one heart.”

Two small minutes passed before I replied, “I’ll do it.”

“Are my eyebrows the same?”

February 14, 2009: The first thing I asked my sister after we both emerged from our surgical haze was my famous line, although I meant it as a joke. She stifled a chuckle. The week before Dad’s paper ran a story about Sparrow and me, about how I donated a kidney to save her life. People seemed to think it was pretty big news, and at least the rumors about us getting cosmetic alterations have been put to rest.

Sharing a hospital room allowed the family to visit us both at once. Mom spent all day with us when she wasn’t busy with our brother. Last week Bond sprouted the jagged edge of a front tooth – just the beginning of one, which he kept rubbing with the tip of his tongue like it was covered in chocolate. He knew another would be along soon, but it did not seem to matter to him either way. He lived in a numberless world, where all things aren’t equal and that’s absolutely fine.

This morning it was as if he swallowed an entire cup of pure cane sugar. Mom had to tell him over and over, “Buddy, don’t bounce on the beds.”

Bond danced back and forth from Sparrow’s to mine, lighting up her eyes with each rotation.

“Did you forget you have a present for your sisters?”

My mother reached into her purse (more like an undersized suitcase) until Bond caught her wrist and dunked his fist inside the bag.

“This one’s for you, Sparrow.” He charged at her, presenting a pale pink page cut into curves and soft round edges. “It’s a paper rose. It will last forever.”

A smile stretched over her lips. “It’s awesome, Buddy.”

In a flash he was at my side, a crumpled sheet of bright red construction paper dangling from his fingers. It looked like a large bean.

“This ones for you, Petal. It’s a kidney. It’s so you’ll have two again.”

It’s a funny thing. With just one word, one deed, one little boy, one family, and two hands you can find your balance. Just like that.

“I love it, Buddy.”

Dad slipped up beside me, watching Sparrow as he whispered, “You gave her wings. Now she can fly.”

One day, I assume, we’ll all set off again, to Wisconsin, Florida, or maybe even Hawaii. We’ll build new gardens wherever we go as we traipse together, growing in uneven, healthy, and ever-loving spurts.

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