

## Summer 1989: Rosemary's thirty-fifth birthday.

The last night before they left was Rosemary Gruber's thirty-fifth birthday.

It had, of course, been her birthday since the morning, and the girls had duly remembered to call out "Happy birthday, mommy!" when they came out of the bedroom. Meredith did the bulk of the remembering, and had written it on her chart by the door, but after they were finished the chart came down and was thrown away, and Rosemary dug her nails gently at the bits of Scotch tape stuck to the hollow door's wooden veneer, because they did not want to lose their security deposit. Jack had assumed they would lose it, with the three girls, but Rosemary knew better. Teach a child that food is only served at the table, and they'll never try to eat it over the carpet. It hadn't been like that in her house when she was a child, but she had made this home with her own words and will. (And now she was unmaking it and stacking it in boxes, and that chart was finally coming down.)

"Were you born on a Friday?" Meredith asked, as Rosemary brushed her hair.

"No," Rosemary said. "I was born on a Saturday." She was pretty sure of this. It sounded like it could be true. She was thinking about everything that still had to be finished before they left, and only partially thinking about Meredith's hair, and it was a good thing the mirror had been packed away or her daughter would have noticed.

"Saturday's child works hard for a living," Meredith recited. *That's true enough*, Rosemary thought, with the part of her mind that wasn't worrying about packing and cleaning and whether it was worth it to bathe all three girls one more time before they left. "What day was I born on?" her daughter continued.

"Tuesday," Rosemary said, and this she *did* remember, because she had been watching *Laverne and Shirley* in the hospital while she waited for her contractions to continue.

"Tuesday's child is full of grace," Meredith said, and smiled at herself, and at the idea of being graceful. It was a real smile, because Meredith was happy, not one of the posed ones she put on for pictures. Rosemary's oldest daughter was not yet eight years old and she would tilt her head and widen her eyes whenever anyone pulled out a camera, imitating the child models she saw in Rosemary's issues of *Ladies' Home Journal*. Rosemary had thought about tossing the magazines out before Meredith could get to them, but her weirdo kid read everything that came into the house, often before Rosemary herself could read it. She'd be making dinner and the kids would have PBS on and Meredith wouldn't be watching; she'd be squatting on the carpet in front of the sofa with one knee tucked under her chin, studying "Can This Marriage be Saved?"

"What day was Natalie born on?" Meredith asked, and Rosemary said "Sunday," because she remembered that day too—and then she suddenly remembered she was wrong about Meredith, that she had gone into the hospital on Tuesday but Meredith had been born at night, when it was Wednesday.

"Nat, hair," Meredith called out, and Rosemary's second daughter took her place in front of what would have been the mirror but was now just a blank wall, with a mom and her little girl cross-legged on the carpet and facing the empty space. Rosemary did not need to look in the mirror on her thirty-fifth birthday; she had not showered that day and probably wouldn't until the

evening, and she had stopped wearing makeup years ago, but she was still thin, and Jack smiled when he looked at her, and nobody else really looked at her besides her daughters.

“Sunday’s child—no, wait, the child that’s born on the Sabbath Day is blithe and bonny and good and gay,” Meredith sang, and Natalie echoed “blithe and bonny” the way she always imitated her sister, and Rosemary looked at her happy baby, the one who came home from preschool with stories about new friends and games, and thought again: *true enough*. Her middle daughter had Rosemary’s own golden-brown wavy hair, though the girls only knew that from photos because Rosemary had cut it all short right before Meredith was born. All three of her children had been born with hair that clustered in tiny dark sweatlocks, but Natalie’s hair was the only one to thicken and curl.

“Blithe and bonny,” Natalie continued to sing, turning the words into nonsense, and Rosemary could see Meredith stiffen slightly with frustration. The two of them were close, but Meredith very much wanted to be her own person. The nursery rhyme was something *she* had memorized.

“When was Jackie born?” Meredith asked, over Natalie’s song.

“I don’t remember,” Rosemary said, even though it would have been easy enough to count backwards; Jackie had just turned three a few weeks ago. On a Tuesday.

“We don’t know who you are yet,” Meredith said to Jackie, and Rosemary thought this was also true; she was pretty sure she knew who her two older daughters were, but Jackie was still toddling between babyhood and personality. Watching the two girls who had already gone ahead of her and figuring out how she was going to be similar to—and different from—them.

Her mother called in the afternoon, while Rosemary was sitting on the carpet playing Lotto with Jackie and Nat, and Jack was using Meredith’s help to hold boxes together as he taped them shut. Rosemary stretched the phone cord out and called to the girls, and they took turns standing by the phone to say hello to Grandma.

“Well, I’ll be looking forward to seeing you all in the new house,” her mother said, when it was Rosemary’s turn again. “You still haven’t seen it yet?”

“Just the photos,” Rosemary said. Sometimes she wondered if her mother even understood how the world worked, anymore. Of course she couldn’t fly out to Missouri with Jack just to see a house. He had brought back a roll of film, and she had come out of the grocery store a week later with the image of a front porch, where a swing could go.

“What if you don’t like it?” Rosemary’s mother’s voice had started to pick up that quaver that old women had. It made Rosemary a little uncomfortable to think about it, so she focused her irritation on the question.

“I’m going to like it,” she said, because she had already decided she was going to like it. If it hadn’t been long distance, and her family hadn’t been within earshot, and her mother had been a different person, Rosemary might have explained about the porch swing, and the picture her mind put over the photograph that Jack had taken. A future that already felt like a memory. Her girls, on that swing, in matching dresses.

There were presents after dinner, small because they were moving, and small *because they were moving*. Jack cut open an avocado, squeezed it into a china soup bowl that had been part of

Rosemary's wedding set, and added the last scrapes of the mayonnaise jar, so it would serve five. He offered it to Rosemary first, and Meredith and Natalie watched her with hungry eyes but were quiet, because it was her birthday. Because having a birthday was kind of like being a guest, and Rosemary had taught them how to behave when they had guests.

But at this party Rosemary was both a guest and a host and a mother, and so she took a small portion for herself and gave the rest to her girls.

"Guacamole is my favorite food," Meredith said.

"Salsa is my favorite food," Natalie said. "And guacamole."

Jackie said "Salsa!" and laughed, and that seemed to settle it.

Later Rosemary would wash the china bowl and the plates and the forks from this last dinner in their Portland apartment—because paper plates, even for the last day, cost money—and later she would put the girls to bed in sleeping bags on the floor, and later she would do one more load of laundry and make sure all the suitcases were ready for the morning.

But first her daughters had a surprise for her, and she already knew what it was.

Meredith hauled the cassette player out of the bedroom, one of the few toys that hadn't been packed away because they were going to need it on the long car drive from Oregon to Missouri. Their Volvo's tape deck had died two months ago, with Natalie's cassette of *The Muppets Take Manhattan* still inside. The girls talked about that cassette sometimes as if it were a lost historical artifact, and argued over who remembered the correct words to the songs.

There was a bit of whispering over where to stand, and then the three Gruber children decided to form a line in the doorway. Meredith ran to the cassette player, pressed Play, and hurried back into place.

The three girls sang "So Long, Farewell" from *The Sound of Music*, accompanied by the soundtrack that Meredith and Natalie had created by holding the cassette recorder up to the television while the movie was playing. Meredith and Natalie acted out most of the parts—and Rosemary knew that Meredith had negotiated the choice role of Liesl by allowing Natalie to play "all the other girls"—and at the end the two girls scooted out of the way to let Jackie take center stage and sing Gretl's final verse. Natalie sang along from the side, since Jackie was a little unclear on the words (this had also been part of Meredith's negotiation), and Meredith furiously pantomimed putting her head on her hands until Jackie finally picked up that she was supposed to pretend to be falling asleep. Then Meredith, still playing Liesl, paraded in to carry her offstage.

It was a birthday gift and it was a goodbye to their apartment and their old life. The next day they would get into the car and drive, for five days straight, to Kirkland, Missouri. A town that Rosemary had never seen; that none of them had seen except for Jack, when he went down to Kirkland College for his final job interview.

She knew whatever was coming had to be better than what they had now, in this tiny apartment where she didn't even like to have the girls outside, because of the neighbors and the voices calling out and the people who gathered in the parking lot, just to stand there. So far she had made a quiet and structured world for them indoors, with PBS and *The Sound of Music* and Meredith's to-do list on the wall—although that had been Meredith's idea, and honestly Rosemary

thought that Meredith could do a little without whatever it was that prompted her to make lists, but it was much easier to say “in this house, we eat food at the table” than it was to say “in this house, seven-year-olds don’t read Mommy’s magazines or tape handwritten charts to the door.” She could have canceled the subscription, though, or taken down the charts when they were sleeping. It was part of her job, making the right kind of world for her family. It was exhausting. (She would shower the next morning, before they packed everything away. She would put the earrings Jack bought her in her purse, by the door.)

Now they were going to make a different world for themselves, Rosemary and Jack and the three little girls in their sleeping bags with the nightlight plugged into the wall, the one thing Rosemary would forget to pack when they left the next morning. Her girls would discuss it like a lost treasure, this piece of plastic shaped like a castle that they no longer owned. It would be a reminder that there once was another bedroom and another city, and that even if they spent the rest of their lives together in this small Missouri town, they would always have come from somewhere else.