

The Ones We Name

- 2006: The cycle nearly repeated, but I had much more to learn.

I first saw her in math class. Some low-level bullshit I was half-asleep for, the kind of class they stick you in when no one thinks you're going anywhere. She walked in like the new girl always does, eyes scanning, hands fidgeting, shoulders pulled tight like a suitcase with broken wheels. I didn't say a word. Just stared like a fucking idiot. She was beautiful in a way I couldn't name back then—soft amber skin, dark hair, eyes that had seen shit no one asked about.

I was frozen. Until lunch. She came through the cafeteria doors looking for somewhere to sit, clutching a tray like it was a goddamn life raft. She was dazed. Alone. And I said it—without even thinking:

“Come sit with me and the cool kids.”

Cocky little shit I was back then, pretending I wasn't nervous. She smiled and sat down. Just like that, Rita became real.

She lived in Savona, about thirty minutes out. Her family moved a lot. I didn't ask why. I figured if she wanted to talk about it, she would. We started hanging out. Talking more. And when I stayed with her for those couple weeks after a fight with BJ, it felt like something sacred. Dirt bikes. Late-night movies. Falling asleep in the middle of the day, her head on my chest like the world finally gave me a moment to breathe.

I remember pretending to sleep when her mom came to the door. I had my arms wrapped around Rita like she was the last good thing on earth. Her mom stared for a second and then whispered to her husband:

“You never hold me like that anymore.”

It wasn't about sex. It was about safety. We were just kids—but we knew what it meant to hold on tight. Around the time prom came she was showing. I didn't fully understand at the time—just a tightness in her dress, a way her arms started covering her stomach more than her heart. And then she was gone to some nowhere town in Virginia.

She moved within a month of the abortion.

She told me about it later. She said it was twins. One was aborted and the other miscarried. I never got the whole truth. I stopped asking eventually. Because the pain was already real. I didn't need receipts.

I sold my '73 Honda CB350 to buy a bus ticket. That machine was almost mint. A damn beauty. But she was worth more than the bike. She was still worth more than most of the people I've met since.

Virginia was quiet. We rode dirt bikes with her brothers. Laughed like we hadn't buried something. While I was visiting her we went to Short Pump Mall. Together we walked into Build-A-Bear like two kids who hadn't just lost a family no one even knew existed. We named them Desmond and Anntonette. We dressed them and kissed their hearts. Pretending they were just toys.

But they weren't. They were ours. The only pieces of them that we were allowed to keep. I fought for those bears like they were blood. Because to me—they were.

We tried the long-distance thing. We were horny teenagers with big grief and no tools. The relationship didn't last. By the time school started again, we were done. Just over with no bang. No closure to be had. Just the slow fade of someone you still love walking backwards into the fog.

I've had other women since. Some tried to heal me. Some tried to own me. Some just wanted the story I tell in the bedroom. None of them were Rita. She hurt me worse than any of them. But she's the only one I still believe could've been safe—if we'd met in a better world. Even now I would probably still run to if the door was ever opened again. They say you never forget your first love. Sometimes though, even first loves hurt to hang on to.

And maybe that's just an excuse. Maybe I'm still that 16-year-old boy staring across the lunchroom saying "come sit with me" and hoping she'll still choose me. But if love ever had a pure form in my life, it was Rita. Not because it was the best or the deepest, but because this was unadulterated. There were no scars from past failed relationships. There were no old wounds that echoed into our relationship.

We survived. It cost us parts of each other, but we survived.

In some twisted, sacred way,
I hope she never reads this.
Because if she does, she'll know—
I never stopped holding her like that.

The bears didn't stay with me. Not at first. When my time in Virginia concluded We drove to the bus terminal in Richmond and said our farewells. We hugged in that obnoxiously long way. Somehow it was like we knew that was the last time.

She mailed them to me weeks later—a big box, too big for what it carried. Like she couldn't stand to see them anymore, or maybe she knew I needed the weight.

Desmond and Anntonette.
Neatly packed. Still dressed.
Still pretending to be alive.

I kept them for months.

When the storm inside that fucking house got too loud—BJ drunk, Verm indifferent, Nick screaming or silent—I had two places I would go:

- Beneath my stereo.
- Or into the busted old shed.

That stereo corner? That was my bunker.
I'd put on the headphones, crank *Sanitarium* or *One* by Metallica until the world bled away.
I'd clutch those bears like they were made of bone instead of stuffing. Sometimes I'd stare out the window, forehead pressed to glass, just begging my Grandma Mary to show me I wasn't alone.

She never really answered. But I kept asking.

Other times I'd hit the shed—beer hidden with the bike. Whiskey and weapons buried behind wood and denial. Sixteen going on self-destruct. And no matter where I went, those fucking bears came with me. Not physically. But they haunted everything. They didn't make me feel better. They made me feel profoundly alone.

They weren't comforting. They were evidence. Evidence of love lost. Of what we built and buried. Of what I held and couldn't keep. They were paper sails, torn by hurricane winds. Proof that my love didn't float. It drowned.

And me?

I was going nowhere. I don't know where they are now. They're probably gone. Buried in some landfill like the rest of the broken promises and bloody wishes that won't come true. Threadbare ghosts no longer even resembling the children they once symbolized.

But I still see them. I still feel the weight of Desmond and Anntonette when I close my eyes and hear rain on glass. I don't hold stuffed animals anymore. I hold daughters. I hold back rage. I hold the line. Some nights, when it's quiet and the ache comes crawling in, I wonder if they'd forgive me. Not for losing them. But for surviving without them.

That box was the first coffin I ever grieved. Not a burial of bodies. But of a belief—that love alone could be enough. Maybe that's why I still write. Because someone must remember. Someone must carry the names. Even if no one ever hears them again but me.

Rita's stepdad was on a KX250. He rode with the calm of a man who'd done this a thousand times. I followed him through back trails like I was chasing my own fucking ghost. A little older. A little stronger. Just far enough ahead that I could never quite catch up.

We spent the day doing landscaping work. It was shitty labor but decent money. I don't remember why I did it—maybe Rita was at school. Maybe I just needed something to fill the hours. But I remember the weight of it. The sweat. The ache in my back. The silence I was too young to name as grief.

We rode together after the work was finished. I have no idea where I was, but the whole state knew where we were with the way we rode. Later that night, after beer and weed blurred the edges, I fell apart.

I was ugly crying in the bathtub. You know the uncontrollable release of emotional overpressure. The tears that hurt and give you a headache from fighting so hard to lock it up and failing. My clothes were still on. I got puke on my chest. Tears mixed with water that couldn't rinse away what I'd lost. I don't remember what I said—just the shape of it, shouted into tile and steam:

“Give me my fucking children.”

I didn't want to be a father. I was terrified I'd ruin them. But I knew one thing: I wasn't going to abandon them.

I never held them. And I'll never let them go.

There's this photo Carl took of me riding the RM250 back home—rear tire spraying dirt mid-turn, roasting the earth behind me like I was born to run from something. Virginia didn't look like that. I wasn't on the RM. I wasn't even on a proper bike. Just some little thing. It was Bigger than the Purple Rocket I grew up with, but smaller than anything a grown man should be riding. I was chasing my future that day. It had more power than I did and more distance than I could make up.

Now, when I look at that photo of me roasting that turn, I wonder if that kid knew he'd already lost something he would never stop loving.