

The Fourteenth of September

Excerpt

Rita Dragonette

They had decided they would all watch the lottery drawing at David's dorm, since that's where most of them lived. However, after his outburst about women, Vida suggested the girls stay together, and they all agreed, except Marsha. Howie wanted her to be with him. So Judy, Vida, RoMo, Sheila, and a few other women took places early, along the wall in the back of the north TV room. Judy watched David and the others take over the front row as the rest of the ecumenical crowd gathered, letterman jackets and army-surplus fatigues. Greeks and freaks together, everyone in jeans. Denim and the war, she thought, the great levelers. As the room began to fill, the guys practically walked over the women, pressing them toward the last-row seats, then taking over the standing room.

"What about space in the back?" an irritated voice called out.

"That's girls," someone said.

Judy felt a wave of shame and grabbed Vida, pulling her by the sleeve.

A blonde she didn't even know looked up as they left. Judy jerked her head, motioning her to follow as a look of recognition and guilt came over her.

"I didn't think," the blonde said, once they were out of the TV room.

"It's all right," Judy said, "me neither."

"Wait up," Marsha called. "I told Howie I couldn't take up a seat. He's sitting with David. I think he'll be fine."

They joined a crowd of women in exile in the adjacent student lounge. They waited.

"Ron's been a mess," one girl said, furiously twisting her ring. "He looks at me, and it's like he wants me to say something, but I don't know what."

“Al, too,” another said. “And no matter what I say, it’s not what he wants to hear. He can get real mad.” She bowed her head. “It scares me.”

“I’m going to leave,” Marsha said. “I can’t take this.”

“Stay,” Judy said, holding her by the arm. Marsha sat down as Judy continued in a whisper, “Later won’t be any better.”

“What if—” Marsha began.

“No, don’t,” Judy said, “not yet.”

They waited in silence, prayer, and concentration. Hair was twisted, lips bitten; fingernails wouldn’t make it through the night. They smoked, even if they didn’t. They played with their pieces of paper that had birth dates of brothers and cousins and boyfriends at other schools. Even RoMo knew that Wizard’s birthday was January 30.

“I want to scream,” Marsha said, grabbing her hair with her hands and holding her head between her knees. The smell of fear, something like sulfur, thickened the air.

Sounds filtered through from the TV room like little pockets of pressure, exploding as they called each number. Sometimes hoots of relief. Sometimes the hiss of a loud, disbelieving expulsion of air. Snap, crackle, pop, dud, silence. They couldn’t figure the code for the noises. No one came out.

At one point, Judy could no longer sit still. She went to stand just outside the TV room. The guys had turned off the lights, and she could see the strobe effect over them as the images changed on the television screen. A flicker, and she saw baby faces so tender she wanted to fold them in her arms and take them home to be safe. Another flicker, and she saw hollow eyes prematurely aged with fear. She shrunk down, lost her balance, and backed off.

Suddenly, Fish was running to her. He picked her up and spun her around, as if it were VE Day on the Champs-Élysées, then planted big kisses, wet as hell, all over her face. “I’m 327!” He fell to his knees with a beatific look on his face and a huge smile. “I love you! You know how much I love you?” He stretched his long arms wide. “I love you this much.”

Judy laughed nervously as he turned to RoMo and called out, stretching his arms even wider.

“I love you this much,” he repeated, “on the map!”

She was confused. If Fish was 327, they must be almost done. Could it mean that everyone she knew had a high number? Could they possibly be that lucky?

Achilles walked out somberly, and she held her breath.

“Ninety-six,” he said.

“That’s almost a hundred, Achilles. You’ll be safe.”

“Yeah, great.” He walked past her toward the elevators. “I’d rather it was just nine. At least I’d know. Now I’m in no-man’s-land.” He stepped into the elevator, and she heard his voice die as the doors closed. “Fucking no-man’s-land.”

She heard Marsha shriek and turned to watch Howie come out, skinny and smiling.

“Take me to McDonald’s,” he said, then engulfed her in a bear hug. “Three forty-three,” he yelled with a clenched fist in the air and his old guitar-playing grin on his face.

David walked out slowly but deliberately, his gaze fixed at a spot on the floor, about three feet ahead of him. Judy could feel her fear rising, her heartbeat so intense it seemed to be coming out of the top of her head. She wasn’t breathing. She would not cry. She could not cry. She touched his arm and he stopped his march.

“Two thirty.”

She burst into tears and moved to hug him, but he pulled back.

“But David, that’s nearly halfway. You’ll be safe.”

“Yeah, lucky me,” he said and headed to the elevator.

“Don’t follow me,” he called back at her.

“But . . .”

“Don’t.”

Judy turned in circles as others walked out of the room, not sure what had just happened with David. She strained her neck looking for Wil, Wizard, Meldrich.

“We have a Number One!” she heard someone say, followed by a chorus of disembodied voices.

“Number One. September fourteenth.”

Judy sat down in the middle of the floor, jelly legs giving up. “My birthday, too,” she said out loud to people who weren’t listening.

The post-lottery pandemonium went on above and around her. Someone just walked over my grave, she thought, and then had the sensation of dropping, like a heavy stone, accelerating. She tried to steady herself with her hands on the floor. In my family I was supposed to be a boy, she thought. It was to be a boy first and only then a girl.

“September fourteenth is my birthday, too,” she said out loud again to stop her fall.

Judy felt she should find the Number One and tell him that were it not for a flip of the chromosome coin—one extra more or less—she would be in his place, random, just like the lottery. She really could understand.

She tried to picture herself in a uniform, a helmet, but the closest she could get was to see her little brother, the same hair, blue eyes, and freckles. She tried to envision him older, so she

would know what a male version of herself would look like. She couldn't make it work. All she could conjure up was the image of a small man in fatigues with the familiar face of a seven-year-old. This face and figure froze in her mind as she felt the digit 1 burning into her forehead like a private scarlet letter. This had to mean something.

She wandered outside. It was December. The cold hurt. She took her hands out of her pockets and forced them down at her sides as the icy air coated them, penetrating in daggers of pain to the bone. It was the least she could do.