The Way Things Always Work

by De Anna Brooks

My mother embodied principles of child rearing that would be thought of by normal people as excessively strict. I am normal, my mother is not, and we therefore could never agree on this point or any other. I fought through a difficult childhood, never understanding that agreement and diplomacy in no way play into the parental script. Of course this all changed when I could hang up my own phone without saying good-bye. Then, miraculously, understanding and agreement became my mother’s favorite words. She would still extol the same warnings, but would tack on, “It’s your life, dear,” at the end of each sermon, which I conveniently took as encouragement.

For a while I reveled in the victory of describing in lusty detail the floorboard of my car drowning in empty cigarette cartons. I knew this would bother her, my mother, who thought that seeing a cigarette would cause cells to grow at an uncontrollable rate, gaining mass and power in some kind of capitalistic haze until they had formed a clump the size of a small orange, which would be implanted in some sensitive part of my body and would spread and spread until I was reduced to using a bed pan with tubes jammed up every hole of my withering, decimated body, tubes which connected me to large, flat-gray machines with pulsating green lights that my mother would look at instead of me when she came to visit, and ask “How are you feeling today?” as if they were the ones that really knew. She, like any religious visionary, saw the most incredible and unavoidable consequences in almost any inanimate object. Even shaving my legs merited a morbid portent from my mother. The way she saw it, that thin layer of fuzz covering my skinny, bruised limbs acted as the only veil, however thin, protecting my gamine innocence from sure virgin vampiness.

“You are a girl, De Anna, and having smooth legs is a womanly thing. What are people supposed to think of a young girl with grown up legs? You are just opening yourself up to a lot of hurt, and my job, as your mother, and I’m the only one you got, is to protect you, and that is what I am going to do, and I don’t care what Andrea’s mom or Natasha’s mom lets them do. I am your mother, you are my daughter, and I will not have any razors in this bathroom!”

She then went on to describe a Kafkaesque nightmare where I would somehow, because of my shaved legs, attract the attention of child kidnappers at a carnival (which I suppose symbolized my youth and purity) who would nab me, throw me smooth legs and all into the back of some kind of van that only unlocks from the outside, and whisk me off to board a freight boat, where I would float amid my vomit and lack of change of clothes for months before reaching French Indochine, where I would lead a torturous life.

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of domestic service and razor burn. I pointed out the obvious flaws and holes in the story, such as the fact that French Indochine no longer existed, I hated carnivals, and that the hair on my legs would grow out during the boat ride, which would confuse and disenchant the kidnappers, who would no longer find me sexy or charming with scraggly leg hair flapping in the sea wind, and would release me, or simply throw me overboard. Mom stood her ground, and I abandoned trying to disassemble her weak arguments and finally won the battle by refusing to leave the house ever again in shorts, which I did for two torturous weeks of summer, until my anguished, streaked face got the best of her.

When it came to Mom and my development this is the way things always worked (which I later claimed was the reason I shoved an earring through my left nostril, and which my mother also cited as the primary reason for her near-nervous breakdown when I, as a teenager, not only shaved my legs, but my head as well). It wasn’t until I covered the floor with empty cigarette packs that Mom told me the real reasons behind all her scary stories. She never wanted me to smoke because lung cancer had already killed many family members, and leg shaving at eleven in a society whose rape law viewed women as either virgins or whores was never a good idea. I had to wait years for the real reasons, and spent a childhood thinking my mother hated me and had traded in all her capacity for rational thought for a baking powder dream of domesticity. Chances are I would not have listened if she had told me the real reasons, but Mom chose to protect me with hardly believable and melodramatic portents of evil and decadence. The same thing happened the first time I saw Rose.

Rose was the daughter of an elderly man named Colin, whose house my mother cleaned. Colin lived alone (his wife had died many years before) and occupied only four rooms of his house. I had an ominous respect for Colin’s house from the beginning, partly because it was the largest house I had ever been in, and because it stood alone on top of its own hill. I had already read a few books by that age, and I knew what a large house on its own hill meant. That was where everyone’s crazy, overweight aunt lived. The one that has never showed up at any of the reunions, but who somehow gets court custody of you after your parents die in a bizarre accident. The one that always waits a little too long to touch up her roots and drinks carbonated beverages all day from an obscenely large sipper cup. The one that would put you through hell and turn you into a very interesting person. I thought maybe just spending time there would make neat things happen to me. So I always looked forward to the days Mom cleaned Colin’s place.

I had free reign of the living room, study, and kitchen, where I played quietly while my mother scraped and scrubbed and talked with Colin, who always wore the same brown, three-piece suit and preferred the hard chair of the kitchen table to the overstuffed antiques of the living room. I would slip in to watch him as he sat with one elbow resting on the Formica tabletop. The kitchen table stoically supported the largest collection of
brown bottles I had ever seen. Bottles of all different sizes choked the surface with their pills, ointments, and elixirs. I imagined my mother taking them all down, one by one, and cleaning the moist grime that had built up over the years as Colin added to his collection. I would often offer to help, hoping that she would allow me to clear the table and maybe even wash each individual bottle.

I was intrigued by the number of things wrong with Colin. I figured that each bottle coincided with an ailment, which meant that, judging from the number of bottles, Colin was very close to dying. I once asked my mother about this and whether it would be very long before he died.

“He's not sick, he just likes to be very healthy,” she would say in defense of his collection. I had other ideas. I doubted very much that Colin cared anything for his health. The only food he ever seemed to eat was pink ice cream with fluorescent nougats of maraschino cherry. He once gave me a bowl, which I found disgusting, but ate just to be polite. When I asked my mother why Colin liked something that tasted so gross, she said it was because he had lived through the Great Depression and those people just have different taste. I figured that was also the reason why he always wore brown and collected bottles to scare off death. I begin to have my doubts about the altruism of an old man who only ate ice cream, kept all the doors closed, and trusted his existence to something on his kitchen table.

Then Colin died one day, and his daughter Rose appeared in church the following Sunday as if taking his empty spot. I had never seen anyone like Rose. I didn’t need shaved legs to know that she was a slut. Her dyed red hair was the monolithic aftermath of a violent visit to the hairdresser, teased, stretched, and lacquered into stiff bubbles about to pop off her head. Her tailored pink skirt didn’t quite conceal the white lace-trimmed slip underneath, slithering out as she crossed and uncrossed her legs, which she did too often to convince anyone that the sermon was even remotely interesting to her. I watched attentively as her red polished hands reached into her purse and pulled out a stick of chewing gum, which she loudly unwrapped and popped into her small mouth. With envy I noted the complete insouciance with which she chewed her gum and gazed towards the pulpit with heavily made-up eyelids at half-mast. Rose chewed her gum in the front of her mouth, folding and flipping the rubbery ball with her front teeth. Occasionally she would let the gum dangle out of her mouth, her teeth holding onto a thin strip before sucking it back in. I watched as the gum dabbed her painted lips and returned to her mouth with loud streaks of bright coral lipstick and then re-emerged again, white. I thought her gum was just like the reason most people went to church. To enter scarlet and leave white and fluffy, like little white clouds high on Jesus.

After church my mother approached Rose, and the two began talking in very familiar, friendly terms. I wondered how my mother, a woman who didn’t believe in facial moisturizer, could know such an amazing testament to carnal knowledge. I was embar-
rassed for my mother in her dull brown skirt and oversized dress shirt, her hair pulled back in a tight I-don’t-have-orgasms bun. I watched as Rose dusted off some invisible eyelash from the bright pink patch of her cheekbone as she took in my mother’s shabby clothing and dry skin. I was frozen, horrified as my mother, the dumpy Mary Ann, talked to the glamorous Ginger, and I finally understood why the perky, gingham-clad Mary Ann never got the man and why that was important, even if he was a fiasco-prone, anemic idiot. I realized much to my horror that if my mother was shipwrecked on an island with Rose and an overgrown twelve-year-old, my mother would lose her chance to pass on her genes. Sure, Mom would be the one to provide all the comforts of a deserted island, like coconut radios and water purification systems made up of bamboo and palm leaves, but she would always be alone while Rose and the skinny man splashed each other with saltwater, daring one another to be the first to skinny dip that day. Finally my mother would find a way to rescue them from the island, which would seem a good idea at first, but which would turn into her greatest regret upon returning to the mainland, where the press would splash pictures on the front page of every magazine in the world, pictures of a grinning skinny man with his freshly pregnant Rose, while my mom would linger glum on the sidelines and would become the international symbol for the dumped one, the one left behind, the one that didn’t quite make the grade. My mother, the chick nobody wanted. Her name would become synonymous with ‘loser in the game of sexual desire.’ French people would refer to any drab, sexless girl as a fille de Melody. My mother’s name would enter the language. She would become her own word. But the worst kind. The kind you only said in pity or disgust. The shame would be too much to bear, and after a weak attempt at monopolizing on her misery with a book full of lewd references to sex on a small island with a redhead, my mother would slowly sink into her depression to such a point that when she finally killed herself People magazine would run a cover story describing her death as a “self-inflicted mercy killing” rather than a great loss. In an instinctual act of self-preservation, I rejected the sure fate of my mother and embraced with awe-struck admiration everything Rose seemed to stand for.

Mom caught onto this, of course. Not with the use of her mystical, mind-reading skills that she would regularly exercise during my earring-through-cartilage-of-left-nostril years, but by applying the common sense she had amassed in raising me. Mom knew that if I expressed any interest, however small, in any object, idea or person, the interest would quickly devour my every waking moment and radically change my course of life until a new interest came along. She, no doubt, was reminded of the first time she let me in on one of America’s great annual pastimes – the dying of the Easter egg.

Besides Christmas, my family ignored most major holidays, leaving me with only a vague understanding of why, on some days, I was allowed to stay home from school. Gradually Mom unfurled the mysteries of celebration by introducing me to various rituals, one by
one, as she deemed me mature enough to handle such shocking myths as the cult of St. Nicholas or the ever-elusive tooth fairy. I reacted strongly to this new knowledge, perhaps because of this festival-deprivation mode of child rearing, and flung myself wholly into each new discovery. The age of nine marked some kind of maturation milestone in my mother's eyes, and I was let in on the secret of the dyed egg. Mom supplied me with empty sour-cream containers filled with water, different colored dyes, and six boiled eggs upon which to practice this new discovery. I found the process intriguing and delightful and soon finished my six-egg allotment and, dissatisfied, wanted more. With my life's savings, which amounted to a sock full of mostly nickels, which my grandfather gave me each time I scratched his back, I slipped out of the house and down the street to the corner grocer, where, in a consumer frenzy, I purchased four dozen eggs. I dyed them unboiled, since I had enough sense to know that there was no way I could boil 48 eggs on the stove without my mother noticing. I soon had my room full of primary colored eggs, without any kind of plan of how to store them. Upon discovering my collection my mother created a special menu for me that centered entirely on eggs, which I ate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the next five days. But the lesson was not learned, and later, after being told the meaning of Memorial Day, I ran off to the cemetery, returning with armloads of stolen flowers from the graves of loved-ones, and piled them onto the spot of land, marking the demise of my cherished kitten who had fallen out of my two-story bedroom window.

Mom most likely was reminding herself of my extremist nature while listening to my many questions about Rose as we drove home from church. She, no doubt, and with good reason, feared that I would soon be rummaging through her closet for her one pair of shoes with heels, pinning up my skirts to well above my knees, and using whatever makeup I could find to transform myself into a cheap trollop, traipsing through the house, my hips sloshing back and forth like water in a bucket. Mom couldn't have this, so sucking in a large gulp of air she prepared herself for yet another diatribe designed to protect from the evils of the world.

"De Anna. Now you listen to me and you listen good. Rose is a very unhappy and scarred individual. She has led a life that has caused her nothing but unhappiness and bladder infections." She stopped to look at me for emphasis on this last point, which, coincidentally, just happened to fall while we were stopped at a light, so she could shoot her undivided attention at me through her unlined eyes. I wanted to ask her if bladder infections were the reason that Dad left, but I kept quiet.

"Rose has made the mistake of thinking that bodies can substitute for weapons, and she has found out the hard way that nothing could be further from the truth. Who knows what will happen to you if you decide to follow in her misguided footsteps."

Then it came, the fantastic story designed to frighten and deter. Mom went on to describe a brilliantly insane connection between high heels and gum chewing in
church, coupled with an equally unbelievable outcome of my life. I would initially enjoy the attention I got from short skirts and pink cheekbones, but I would soon find myself middle aged with skin like taffy and a butt like a waterbed. I would have no friends, since they would all quit talking to me once I began to be noticeably in need of extensive plastic surgery, and I would divide my time between a greasy and dumpy postman (who would “visit” on days that he covered my route) and the many cats with limps and other physical deformities that I had adopted, to whom I would confess my desires and fears, as if they could not only comprehend English, but also understand why some fat old lady with underarms that flapped like filled douche bags bothered confiding in felines. I would slowly deteriorate, each day cooking more of what little hair I had left into yesterday’s leftovers, until one day someone, probably the decadent postman, found me face down in Sheba cat food on the kitchen floor, cold-dead of despair and desperation. I decided, judging from the vehemence with which Mom related this last premonition, that this wasn’t a fight worth fighting and directed my attention towards other potential obsessions.

But Rose took up the fight for me. She had apparently picked up on the deep admiration emanating from my pubescent frame that day after church, and, because that was probably the only time anyone besides randy men had admired her for anything, she clung fiercely to the possibility of becoming someone’s mentor. She began asking my mother if I could sit with her during the service, and my mom, recognizing the demand to espouse ideals of brotherly love within those sacred walls, acquiesced, allowing me to sit with the painted lady outside of her range of control. Rose and I would sit with crossed legs and chewing gum, me trying hard to imitate the subtle disdain on her face as we watched our overweight pastor deliver yet another sermon glorifying charity and patriarchy. After the sermon, Rose and I would go to the ladies room to “freshen up” for mingling in the foyer. She would dab my chapped lips with orange lipstick and pinch my cheeks for color. Sometimes she would spot the back of my ears with perfume that smelled of roses and toilet bowl cleaner. With my coral lips and distinctive stench, I would roam through the church crowd feeling strangely confident, until my mother got me alone long enough to wipe my lips clean and scold me for ignoring her warnings. I would defend myself saying that I just wished to extend love and acceptance to Rose, citing such scripture as “When in Rome act as the Romans” as evidence that wearing “1-"’" at eleven followed verbatim the advice of the Holy Book. Suddenly, Sunday was transformed from an effective form of torture to the highlight of my week. And then it all got better.

Rose began phoning, asking my mother if I could come over to help her with some unnecessary chore like door knob polishing or cupboard arranging. My mother complied, probably believing that my unadulterated innocence would have a positive effect on Rose and maybe bring some real meaning into her existence. Rose called more and more
frequently, and soon I was making the journey to her deceased father's house each Saturday morning without her having to call beforehand.

We would usually make milkshakes in the blender with chocolate ice cream. It was a relief to know that Rose did not share the same taste as her dead father in frozen dairy products. Sitting at the kitchen table, we would sip our milkshakes while Rose told me stories of life outside the city. Sometimes she would start crying while relating one of her memoirs. They all started out looking so good, but Rose always managed to lose somehow in the end. There was the one about how Rose had wanted to be a nurse, but had married two years into the program. Her husband, the second by this time, had demanded she drop out, and she did, only to commit herself for five years to her husband's career until he left her for the piano player at a local church. Her third husband had been even worse. He didn't even bother leaving her when he cheated, just carried on like all the women were just another Sunday paper. When the memories became too much, Rose would walk over to the sink, her back to me, gazing out the window at the street as she spluttered and fought to control her emotional outbursts became more and more frequent, and I slowly realized that they always happened on the days when Rose smelled strong of something resembling rotting coconut. One day, after using the toilet in her bathroom, I opened the cupboard under the sink and found a bottle of brown liquid. It smelled like Rose did on the days she cried and looked out the window. It smelled like my Dad had on the days he yelled and threatened to leave and never come back. Before the day he really meant it.

One Saturday Rose couldn't mask it anymore. She stumbled through the making of the milkshakes with such lack of grace that I worried that she would somehow blender off her hand. We finished our treats hurriedly, since there was something she wanted to show me. After emptying our glasses, Rose attempted to place them into the sink, where one of the glasses busted up into hundreds of little weapons after slipping from her hand. She didn't seem to notice the flashing broken glass mixing with the milky ooze, covering the chrome of the sink like a cloud, and gestured for me to follow her into her father's room. The room smelled strong of neglect, and Rose explained that she had not done anything to clean it since her father's death.

"I hardly ever even come in here," she said, rubbing her lips together and pushing the orange outside of the lines. "It gives me the creeps and why shouldn't it." She said, gesturing towards the paper bags full of clothes lining the walls of the room.

"Those are my father's clothes," she said, pointing. "He didn't change a thing after mama died. Left her clothes in the closet and put his in bags on the floor 'cause there wasn't enough room. Dad hated to change things. Nothing. Not a goddamned thing. My whole life."

I wondered what she was referring to and walked over to one of the bags and cautiously looked inside, as if something like a mouse or a secret would jump out and startle
me. A pink oval-shaped wastebasket sat next to the bag. Inside was a yellowed maxi-pad half unfurled. I realized this was most certainly Eric’s dead wife’s maxi-pad. Eighteen years spent sleeping next to a crunchy maxi-pad.

“Yep, you’ve got to be either real lazy or just plain ol’ disturbin’ to do that,” said Rose, following my eyes to the wastebasket and reading my mind. “Dad was a mixture of both, but this is what I want to show ya.”

She gestured to the still unmade bed, upon which was a pile of clothes and a few plastic bags. These were Rose’s clothes. Clothes she used to wear when she still told stories and laughed instead of cried. Clothes she wore when she didn’t have a bottle of brown stuff under her bathroom sink. I realized how similar to her father she was. They both used bottles to avoid things. The difference lay in what was in them.

Rose sent me home that day, my arms loaded up with bags of dresses, suits and shoes from the fifties. I rushed home exuberant and fearful that my mother would try to take away my gifts. She didn’t. Mom thought that anything modern promoted death and decay while everything of previous generations espoused truth and goodness.

The next day Rose didn’t show up at church. When Saturday came I made my usual journey to her house. I pounded on every door and window I could reach. But she did not answer. I went home disappointed. I feared that maybe Rose had tired of our friendship and had given me the clothes as a way to get rid of me without feeling guilty about it. I had grown fond of Rose and our shared Saturdays and went silently mad with grief at the possibility that she didn’t share this sentiment.

Rose failed to show up for church again, and I spent my second service in a row with my hands stiffly folded in my lap, which was the only way to avoid a snarling look from my mother. My mouth felt rubbery and sticky, and I longed for a stick of Rose’s white gum. I wore a dusty pink, two-piece, tailored suit with black rope sewed onto the collar in loops and swirls, and wondered how Rose had looked in it when she was young and wore make-up to make herself look older instead of wearing it to hide her age. I realized how much better church was sitting square and cocky next to a disdainful hooker. I tried to imagine my mother’s cracked hands and chipped fingernails dabbing some stinking eau de toilette behind my ears. She could never wear perfume like Rose. It would just seem silly. Then I realized Mom had her own perfume. A mixture of Comet and baked bread, but Mom had to work and toil for her scent and she always had something to show for it, a clean toilet, fresh bread to melt butter on. Rose just dumped her perfume from some bottle slowly working her way towards empty. That was the difference between them. Mom filled things and Rose emptied them. I knew which one was easier. I knew why Mom chose the hard one.

After the service the fat pastor pulled Mom aside and spoke to her in low tones. I could tell he was upset about something because he pushed gusts of air out with each word as if he had just finished running. His chest heaved while his hands rose and fell.
Mom said nothing, and, with a grave nodding of her head, left his side.

During the drive home she remained quiet and noticeably agitated about something. When I asked her what was bothering her, she looked at me, and I saw that pity had turned the whites of her eyes yellow. I could see in her eyes that she did not want to tell me, but that she had to. She turned away, closed her eyes, exhaled, and began.

"De Anna, I am going to tell you something because I think you are old enough to understand it and to learn from it." My heart fell. I knew that Mom thought only bad things carried lessons with them. If this had a lesson and an age limit, it had to be very bad.

"Rose Matson died last week. They found her Monday morning. They think she did it sometime Saturday night."

"Did what?" I asked, but I knew. I knew what "it" was. I had always known.

"Apparently Rose wanted to die and swallowed about forty sleeping pills and a bottle of booze to make sure it happened." She was sad and annoyed at this fact surrounding Rose's death. She stopped at a light and turned to look at me. I felt my lips go white. White because Rose was no longer there to paint them for me.

"I'm sorry. Death doesn't make any sense when you're so young. I know this must all be very confusing for you."

I wondered at what age Mom would let me in on the secret of when death makes sense. I tried to imagine how Rose's death could make sense. I tried to imagine the way I would think when I wore makeup and shaved my legs, and how I would rationalize Rose washing down forty pills with Jack Daniels. I thought of Rose telling herself that it made sense as she popped and swallowed pill after pill until all her bottles were empty. I saw her taking the last gulp of brown and sinking slowly down into her empty bottles. The bottles that finally killed her because Rose did not know how to fill them. She only knew how to empty things. I did not understand it, but it was not confusing. I could tell that Mom wanted me to say something so that she could understand it. So that she could understand it too. Apparently neither of us were old enough for this. I wondered how to tell her about the bottles, the way Rose cried and went to the window to forget bad memories. I wondered how to tell her about the bags in Eric's room and the dusty maxi-pad and the bottle under the bathroom sink. I wondered how to tell her that life for Rose was just a bottle with a leak in it. It just ran out and there was nothing left to do. Rose had emptied and there was nothing she could do to stop it. She didn't know how. She just felt a little lighter every day. With nothing to show for it.

I tried to tell Mom all of this so I said, "It was in the bathroom, wasn't it?"