

# **Growing Up Rita**

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Below are two chapters from my novel for young readers, *Growing Up Rita*.

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These chapters are from a work of fiction.  
Any similarity between these characters and any  
of the places described is coincidental.

## Chapter 1

### The Present State of Things

Rita thought of the sun as her personal star. The others were hardly more than a twinkle they were so distant, but the sun was too close to look at directly. Only ninety-three million miles away. The flaming ball of mostly hydrogen that brought light and life to the world. Rita knew a lot about the sun. She knew about its winds and flares. She knew it took eight minutes for its energy to get here. She knew it was a medium sized star that was roughly halfway through its life. Four and a half billion years down, four and a half billion to go. Then it would become bigger and bigger, and hotter and hotter until it finally consumed her planet.

She sat with her back against a chimney. Laundry flapped on clotheslines that were strung helter-skelter around her. Misshapen television antennas stuck up at odd angles, looking like relics of some earlier civilization. School was over. She'd gotten A's. Nothing less than excellence was acceptable to her mother. Her mother was unrelenting on the subject. Rita thought her mother was a slave driver.

Now summer was here and she was free. For a few months at least. She had a reading list from school, but it was just three books, so she didn't consider it a big deal. She'd spend time at the community center pool. She'd try to find a way to make some money. Some sort of job. A few hours a week. She wanted to buy new shoes.

The roof was where she came to be alone. It was her thinking place, her wondering place, as had been the roofs of the other buildings where she and her mother had lived. She

could hear car horns and the shrieks of children at play coming from the streets below. Neighbors yelled to each other from open windows. She heard a police car howling. Sometimes at night the sounds were gunshots.

The half dozen pigeons that were lined up on the nearby wall took off all at once, as though they'd received a simultaneous message to depart. She wondered if she'd make any friends here. She didn't usually live in one place long enough to keep a friendship going. She wondered how long they'd stay. The rent was cheaper, but it still wasn't cheap. They took what could be had and paid what was demanded in return for no questions being asked. It was week to week. Miss with the rent, you were out on the street.

She wondered if her life would ever change. There seemed no way out of the one she had. It didn't matter that she could see the tall buildings of downtown from her roof. Or that sometimes she felt as though she could reach out and touch them. It didn't matter that the life she thought was possible there, was impossible this short distance away. Only a few miles separated the two places. It was the same city. But downtown was another country. She couldn't imagine how she'd ever get to be there. Her mother talked about college, about the life she'd have after she graduated, but the idea seemed as remote to Rita as becoming an astronaut and flying to Mars.

The girls she knew from school were already flirting with boys. They were getting ready to date. She didn't feel ready for that. But she did want a social life. And she wanted a boyfriend. Someday. She'd barely had a conversation with a boy. She wasn't at all used to their company. She wasn't at all sure how she was supposed to learn how to deal with such matters.

She heard her name being called. It was time to come down. Now. She wondered why her mother was so afraid. There were millions of illegal immigrants in the country. Why would anyone bother them? She looked past the clouds into the vastness of space. The big 'U' is what her science teacher called the universe. Mr. Harbinger said there might be billions of suns like ours in the Milky Way, and that each of them could potentially have a planet like Earth revolving around it. The thought captured her imagination. She wondered if right now, this very minute, there might be billions of Ritas sitting on billions of roofs, all of them pondering the same things.

She heard her name again. She stood and stretched. She looked out over the neighborhood and saw rooftops like hers. To the south was the forest of skyscrapers that made up the core of the city. She had only that short distance to travel. She collected the laundry and made her way downstairs, past the graffiti and loud music and sometimes louder voices. The fragrance of beans laced with cumin and oregano greeted her when she entered the apartment. She realized she was hungry.

"Smells good," she said. She spoke English with the accent of someone raised in the city.

"Rice and beans," her mother said. Alicia's English was spoken with the accent she'd brought with her through the tunnel.

"You didn't come when I called," Alicia said. She wasn't happy.

"I did," Rita said. She headed for the bedroom.

"I called twice," Alicia said.

"I heard once," Rita said.

"Listen better," Alicia said. She followed her daughter.

"You don't have to worry so much," Rita said.

"And why is that?" Alicia asked.

"Because you don't," Rita said.

"More and more people are asked for identification," Alicia said. "More are being deported. You see it in the newspaper every day."

"Nobody is going to bother us," Rita said.

"Good," Alicia said. "I'm relieved."

Rita could tell by her mother's tone that it was time to end this discussion. "I'll listen better," she said.

"Thank you," Alicia said.

Rita spread the laundry on her mother's bed and began folding it on hers. The beds were four feet apart. The room was ten feet long. There was a single closet. The window looked out onto a window in the next building. It was covered with a broken venetian blind that couldn't be opened. Alicia began helping her. At a glance they might have been taken for sisters. Rita was a slightly lighter hue of cinnamon. She had short black hair and dark, intense eyes. Her mother's hair was longer. They were nearly the same size. The lines around Alicia's eyes were what gave her age away. They revealed the toll life had taken. She'd be thirty-two soon. Rita was twelve.

"I want to make some money this summer," Rita said.

"Doing what?" Alicia asked.

"I could run errands," Rita said. "I could wash dishes. I could make deliveries. I could watch somebody's children."

"When you're sixteen," Alicia said.

"Just a few hours a week," Rita said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you have schoolwork to do this summer. And

I want us to spend time together. You'll have a job soon enough."

Rita made a face. "I've decided to make a lot of money when I grow up," she said.

"I'm looking forward to it," Alicia said. She smiled. "Meanwhile we're going downtown tomorrow. I've made a list of hotels. I have a good feeling I'll find something."

"Maybe I'll find something too," Rita said.

"You're stubborn like your grandmother," Alicia said.

"Like you too," Rita said.

Her mother gave her a look. The conversation turned to what they'd wear tomorrow. Alicia had a dress for church and special occasions. Rita had a skirt and blouse that served the same purpose. Otherwise it was variations of shirts and pants.

"If I can find a job we'll be able to stay here for a while," Alicia said. "Not that I wouldn't rather move." The entire apartment consisted of the bedroom, kitchen and bathroom.

"When I'm rich we'll live wherever we like," Rita said.

"It's good to know I'll be looked after in my old age," Alicia said.

"You'll never be old," Rita said.

After dinner Alicia got out the cards and they played gin rummy. They played quickly, and with great passion. Cards were slammed on the table and victory, when it came, was loudly proclaimed. When one of them took too long to discard, the other started razzing. They complained about each other's bad playing. They laughed a lot.

In their beds, with the lights out, they talked. They often did.

"What do you dream about?" Rita asked.

"Sometimes about when I was a little girl," Alicia said.

"Sometimes about my parents."

"Are they good dreams?"

"Most of the time. Sometimes I dream about coming here. Sometimes about the tunnel."

"Did you always want to come?"

"Since I was your age," Alicia said. "I've told you a thousand times."

They were quiet for a while. Rita thought about her mother's courage. She couldn't imagine being that brave.

"Are you ever sorry you came?" she asked.

"Never," Alicia said.

"How could it be worse than here?" Rita asked.

"The difference is hope," Alicia said. "Besides, if I hadn't come, there's be no you."

"You would have had other children," Rita said.

"But not you," Alicia said.

"Do you ever have nightmares?" Rita asked.

"Of course," Alicia said. "Everybody does. Are you having bad dreams?"

"I try not to remember them," Rita said.

"Remember the good ones," Alicia said.

"I had a dream that I was flying and I couldn't come down," Rita said. "I liked being in the air, but I was scared. I didn't know where I was. I didn't recognize anyone."

"It means you'll get your wings soon," Alicia said.

"What wings?" Rita asked.

"Your grownup wings," Alicia said. "It's not that long before you're a woman."

"How long?" Rita asked.

"Go to sleep," her mother said.

## Chapter 4

### Here Today, Gone Today

"Have you considered the possibility," Edmund said as he entered the break room carrying two bananas, "that we could get hit by a giant asteroid. Whammo! End of story." He held out a banana.

Rita thanked him. She closed her book, peeled back the top of the banana, took a small bite and waited for him to continue.

"There's one coming extremely close in a few years and we are in no way prepared to deflect it," he said, sitting in the same chair as last time. "We know how. A little nudge from the back, a little magnetic attraction, either way, but we're not ready."

"An asteroid is what wiped out the dinosaurs," she said. "If one was big enough it could destroy everything."

"Not cockroaches," he said. "Nothing gets rid of them."

"You have cockroaches?" Rita was surprised. Somehow she thought they only kept company with the poor.

"They're everywhere," he said. "They were here before the dinosaurs. There are five different species. The largest is six inches long and has a wing span of a foot. You wouldn't want one of those under your sink. They can hold their breath for forty minutes. They can live for a week without their heads."

Rita looked at him for a very long moment. She was still trying to figure out why he'd returned to talk to her, and why he'd brought her a whole banana. "You know a lot about cockroaches," she said finally.

"I wrote a paper for school," he said. "Extra credit. I like bugs. I like animals. I'm interested in lots of things. I think I might be a biologist. Or maybe an entomologist. What are you interested in?"

"The sun," she said. "We revolve around it, and it revolves around the galaxy, and the galaxy revolves around the universe, and the universe revolves around something. At least that's what I think it does. That's what I'm interested in. Everything out there."

"Then you'll be a star gazer," he said.

She shrugged her shoulders. It's exactly what she'd thought about. It seemed to her a dream too large.

"You'll be somebody who looks into the future," he said.

"It's the past," she said. "The farther out you go, the older it gets."

He considered this for a moment. "Do you think we've ever been visited by beings from outer space?" he asked.

She gave him another long look. "You mean aliens in space ships?"

"It's possible," he said.

"I think the universe is filled with life," she said, "but I don't think any of it's been here yet."

"If they were smart enough to get here," he said, "they'd be smart enough to be here without us knowing it."

"I could be from outer space," she said.

"So could I," he said.

He leaned back and took a large bite of his banana.

She wondered why he was so easy to talk to. Maybe he'd come back because he was bored and had nothing better to do.

"Where do you live?" he asked.

"Way uptown," she said. "Do you know Monty across

the street?"

"Everybody knows Monty," Edmund said. "He shines shoes."

"He's going to show me how to shine mine," she said. She lifted a leg to show him her shoe.

Edmund studied it. "Monty is an institution," he said.

Rita put her foot down.

"He's old," Edmund said. "Almost everybody around here is. I don't know how some of the bellmen can lift a suitcase."

"Have you always lived here?" she asked.

"When I was three my parents got divorced," he said. "My mother moved to London and we moved into the Mandrake. Is your family together?"

"It's me and my mother."

"What happened to your father? If you don't mind me asking."

"He left before I was born. My mother doesn't talk about him much except to say if not for him, no me."

Edmund peeled back more of his banana. Rita took another small bite of hers.

"Do you always carry bananas around?" she asked.

"Bananas, apples, pears, whatever I can get from the kitchen," he said. "The cooks are usually quite generous. I eat a lot of my meals there when my father is busy. Sometimes I eat in our apartment. Sometimes at Buster's Bistro. I have an account there."

"You go by yourself?"

"By myself. With my father when he's free. Occasionally I go with Florence."

"Who's Florence?"

"Somebody I know," he said.

"You can eat whatever you like and just sign for it?" she asked.

"If it's not too expensive," he said.

The idea of a menu for every meal, of being able to choose whatever she wanted and simply sign her name to pay for it was nearly beyond her comprehension. She caught sight of her mother in the doorway and jumped to her feet.

Edmund was right behind her.

Rita introduced them.

"It's a great pleasure to meet the mother of my new friend," Edmund said. He turned to Rita. "Perhaps I'll see you tomorrow."

"Perhaps you will," she said, realizing how much she hoped for exactly that.

He bowed slightly and disappeared into the corridor.

Alicia sat and accepted the rest of Rita's banana.

"He just came in to talk," Rita said. "He goes wherever he likes in the hotel." She related what she'd learned of his circumstances.

"You don't know this boy," Alicia said. "He could be trouble."

Rita thought it highly unlikely, but decided not to say so. Instead, she nodded.

Alicia nibbled at the banana and talked about the women in the laundry. She was sure that several were like herself, without green cards, but it wasn't something they talked about. They all worked hard. She was convinced that Tessa would make her permanent at the end of the week.

"What did Tessa say about Monty?" Rita asked.

"She said he was all right."

"I won't go anywhere else."

"You'd better not. And be careful."

"I will," Rita said. As soon as her mother returned to work, she made her way to the shoeshine stand.

The first thing Monty demonstrated was how to clean her shoes in preparation for the polish. Then he showed her how to apply polish, and how to sharpen the edges of the soles, and how to reach the tongue behind the laces, and how to buff, and finally how to snap.

"Get yourself up there," he said, indicating that she should sit in the large brown naugahyde chair that was fastened to a platform that was set on wheels which were presently locked. The naugahyde had been patched so many times it was half tape. A faded red umbrella was attached to the chair, providing customers with shade.

Rita had to sit at the chair's edge for her feet to reach the rests.

Monty began snapping a rag across the tops of her toes. "The snapping is mostly for dramatic purposes," he said. "It's the show. I give my customers what they pay for, plus a performance. That's why I'm still in business after fifty years. I'm the fastest snapper in town."

As she watched the sharp, crisp snaps of the rag fly across her shoes, it occurred to her that this might be the way to make some money. It didn't require anyone to hire her. Age wasn't a factor. All she needed was the skill and a little equipment.

"There you go," Monty said. He stepped back and bowed slightly in a practiced move. The result of his effort was a shine Rita's shoes had never seen before.

"I said I wasn't going to shine 'em," he said, "but I can't help myself. On the house."

"They're magnificent," Rita said.

"Of course they are," he said.

"Will you teach me how?" She climbed down from the chair.

"I just did," he said.

"I mean so I can do it for money," she said.

He gave her a long look. "You serious?"

"I have to buy new shoes," she said, "and I can't get a job. Maybe I can do this."

"How old are you?"

"How old were you when you started?"

"Eleven."

"I'm twelve."

"What would your mother have to say?"

"I haven't asked her yet."

"You do that first," Monty said, "then I might be disposed to teaching you. You'd have to watch me for a while. It's not just the shining you have to get right, its customer relations. You have to be good with people. It's inventory. It's being dependable. You have to know how to run a business."

"I can learn all that," she said.

"I can't pay you," he said, "but I can help you get set up when you're ready."

She thanked him twice and said she'd be back in the morning, then ran across the street and down the alley. She decided to wait to ask her mother about Monty until dinner tonight. The afternoon dragged on. Edmund didn't return. She did a sheet of math problems and two science assignments. She kept looking at her watch, trying to make the second hand move faster through force of thought. Then she ordered herself to stop looking, but she did anyway. When her mother appeared she jumped to her feet, ready to go.

"I have to work late," Alicia said. "We all do."

Rita sank back into her chair.

Alicia handed her some money. "You can go home and get things ready for dinner. Make something interesting. Tessa said we'll be done no later than eight."

Rita was happy to escape the small room. She kissed her mother, then watched her return to the laundry, then headed for the subway station. The ride uptown was unremarkable. The car was full. She'd been taking the train alone since she was ten. The city was filled with kids who traveled back and forth to school, and generally got around on their own. She thought about Monty and the prospect of making some money. She wondered how long it would take until she had enough to buy new shoes. She looked down at the ones she was wearing and wondered what kind she wanted.

While she was at the market shopping, she tried to imagine what it would be like to live at the Mandrake. The idea fascinated her. It seemed the ultimate in sophistication. As she made her way up seven flights of stairs to the apartment, she thought the summer might not be so bad after all. Even with the school work she had to do.

"Rita." Mrs. Valenzuela was waving a newspaper from the doorway to her apartment. "For your mother. I finished with it early." Mrs. Valenzuela was their first friend in the building. She lived at the end of the hall. She asked how Alicia was doing.

Rita told her about the new job and thanked her for the paper, then started dinner. She seasoned the quarter pound of ground pork, added bread crumbs and an egg, then mixed them together. She shaped the pork into balls and fried them in oil, turning them so they browned all over. She sauteed some chopped onion and garlic, then added oregano, then

stirred in a can of crushed tomatoes, then added the meatballs, stirred again, turned the heat to low and put the cover on the pot.

At nearly that precise moment, Monty was wheeling his chair toward its nightly resting place, a nearby storage bin. He stopped at the corner to wait for the light. A white van whipped onto the street, followed by another, then a third. They pulled up in front of the Mandrake. He watched as men and women wearing blue jackets with the initials ICE on the back, left the vans and headed into the hotel.

Edmund was in the lobby. The screech of tires brought him to his feet. He saw the vans outside, then their occupants as some headed for the alley and the rest charged straight toward him. One went to the front desk. Others entered elevators. Some headed for the stairs. One was left by the revolving door.

"Everybody stay where they are," the man in the blue jacket at the front desk ordered. "Nobody leave the lobby."

Alicia heard shouts coming from the corridor. Then the laundry was filled with confusion and blue jackets. The women were lined up. They were asked for identification. Alicia said she didn't have any. Her heart was beating so fast she thought it would burst. One of the women was crying. Alicia saw the plastic straps, then felt them on her wrists as they were tightened. All she could think about was Rita.

Rita was feeling the nudge of anxiety. It was well past eight o'clock. If her mother was still at work she would have called Mrs. Valenzuela to pass on the message. It was possible that the subway had broken down. That wasn't uncommon. She stirred the sauce for something to do, then went to ask Mrs. Valenzuela if she could use the phone. She called the laundry room. There was no answer. She called the front

desk.

"The laundry room is closed," the clerk who answered informed her.

"How long ago?" Rita asked.

"I can't say more than that," the clerk said.

"More than what?" Rita asked.

"I can't say," the clerk said.

"I'm looking for my mother," Rita said.

"What's her name?" the clerk asked.

Rita started to answer, then hung up. Something didn't sound right. She returned to the apartment, turned off the stove, left a note in case her mother came back while she was gone, then left.

Edmund waited outside the hotel. He was certain Rita would come. How else could she find out why her mother hadn't come home? He still couldn't believe what he'd seen. He'd maneuvered his way slowly across the lobby to the entrance, then slipped past the momentarily distracted ICE agent to the sidewalk. He'd seen Tessa, then Alicia, then two more women from the laundry, their hands secured behind their backs. Just before she disappeared into one of the vans, Alicia had seen Edmund. They'd made eye contact. The image was burned deeply into his brain. He would never forget the depth of sadness in her face.

Since watching the vans drive off, he'd been thinking about what help Rita might need. It had crossed his mind that she might not have anybody. The idea of being alone in the world was almost too much for him to bear. Then he saw her. She saw him. He waved her into the alley. She crossed the street and moved to the employee entrance. The door was locked. A few moments later it opened from the inside.

"Quick," Edmund said. He pulled her in and closed the

door.

"I'm looking for my mother," she said.

"I know," he said. He led her to the break room.

"What's going on," she asked. "Did something happen?"

"There was a raid," he said. He turned on the light. "It was the immigration department."

Rita didn't need to be told more. She knew. Her body found a chair and she fell backwards into it. She heard pounding in her head. She felt like she'd been kicked in the chest.

"They took your mother and Tessa and two others," he said.

"Took them where?" she heard herself ask.

"I don't know," he said.

Her mother was gone. How could that be? They'd discussed the possibility many times. Always before a new job. But Rita had never believed it would happen. Why would she? It had never happened to anyone she knew. She'd always thought her mother was being silly for worrying so much. She saw Edmund talking on a cell phone. Then he was talking to her. She finally brought him into focus.

"If you have no place to go," she heard him say, "Florence will put you up for the night."

It occurred to her that she should have stayed when her mother had to work late. She felt guilty about being happy to leave. If she'd been here she could have told the immigration people that she needed her mother, that they couldn't have her. How was she going to find her? How was she going to get her back? She headed for the laundry room, as though drawn by some unseen force. She retrieved her mother's purse from beneath the pile of rags behind the staining table.

She headed for the stairs.

"Do you have someplace?" Edmund asked. He hadn't let her out of his sight.

"I have to go home," she said.

"You can stay here if there's nowhere else," he said.

She gave him a long, searching look. What was he talking about? Why would he make such an offer?

"I'm serious," he said. "You shouldn't be on your own.

"I have to find my mother," she said.

"I can help," he said. "Two of us trying has to be better than one."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because two can get more done," he said.

"Why do you want to help me?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said, not quite sure himself. He just knew he did. That he had to. "I want to, that's all. What difference does it make? Take my phone number. Call me if you need anything." He caught up with her.

"Take it," he said. "Please."

Rita took the piece of paper, put it in her mother's purse and disappeared into the alley.