Rossalia and Her Daughter Rose

Gina Withnell*
ROSSALIA AND HER DAUGHTER ROSE

Rossalia had a very dumb daughter. Her daughter, Rose, sat in the corners of their tiny apartment picking the dirt from underneath her toenails and eating what she found. She often stumbled and fell or accidently cut or scraped herself. Instead of crying as most children would, Rose would stop whatever it was she had been doing, land with a loud plopping sound on her large buttocks, and inspect with glee her cuts and wounds, picking off the scabs and eating the scab and whatever else was in the wound. She did not suck her thumb—she sucked the index finger and her third finger. Her two-pronged suckle served two purposes: first, it kept her groping fingers and mouth occupied; second, the index finger told her what to think about in the odd minutes of the day and the middle finger told her what to think about during the even ones. Even with a two finger guide—the quality of Rose’s thoughts was quite poor revolving chiefly around acting out nursery rhymes and old family legends, studying old photographs, and eating as much bread she could hold without splitting.

In spite of all this, Rossalia loved her daughter, even though she could not be sure who the father was. And even though Rose would never fit in well anywhere, Rossalia bit her lip, drawing blood and determined to work as hard for this unwanted daughter as her own mother had worked for Rossalia in her youth.
And so at the New Moon festival, Rossalia started paying on her unwritten contract she had made for Rose. When she was thirteen, doctors discovered that she could never bear a child. She sought other doctors, mystics, herbalists, and finally, in desperation, consulted a medium. She had scoured every quarter of the sagging city before finding a witch who would help. The witch burned the mark of three trees in Rossalia’s arm, branding Rossalia as property of the devil never to be redeemed in payment of services rendered.

The next morning, Rossalia woke to find a small salt and sandstone figurine of a dirty child. Rossalia poured water on the statue and watched as it slowly came to life, writhing and struggling off the stone and salt into a large muddy pool. The child blinked through sandy grey eyes and tried to speak, but the sounds stopped short in her throat, as if even her throat were full of sand. The stone child was enormously handsome and well made from perfectly carved ears to a smooth sanded cheek. However, as the minutes progressed, it became quite clear to Rossalia that there was something very wrong with her new child: she was deaf and one of her eyes was slow. The cause of the defect was this: just as loansharks and pawnbrokers undercut the value of a genuine article in return for a defected one, so it is when one deals with the Devil. The Devil cannot by himself create without defects—namely, the element of humanity that divinity cannot abide yet the
Devil cannot escape because he himself is no longer divine. Thus, everything created by the Devil is a cheap replica that structurally has some fault, regardless of the cosmetics of the creation. So while thumbprints mark each individual as separate and unique, immortals created by Lucifer are marked by their unique flaws. Some creatures, like the centaur, have incurable halitosis, some ingrown digits, others a perpetual runny nose or eye, and with Rose, muteness.

Thus, Rose remained as mute as the stone from which she came.

During the short years she lived with her mother, Rose showed unusual strength and intelligence. However, Rose’s energy seemed to her mother a bit misdirected, if not perverse. On Friday evenings, when the Jews began preparations for the Sabbath, and the faithful fasted from fish and scaled creatures, Rose would creep toward the water’s edge of the river and catch grasshoppers and frogs. Once she had collected a whole skirt full of frogs and insects, she would sit on their back stoop. She had filed her fingernails all to razor sharp points, and pinned the grasshoppers onto corkboard with her nails. For hours, she watched them writhe and squirm, tearing their own legs off and then dying as they baked under the sun, unable to move.

But with the frogs it was different.

Rose would hold the frogs in her lap, stroking their
skin. Then starting from the base of their head and working backward, she skinned them with her nails, flaying them wide open. She always left a bit of skin around the frog’s feet so that the whole of its skin was still attached and lying in a puddle like shadow. Then, she’d clap her hands and stomp her feet to watch the frog jump around with the skin shadow trailing, or if she pinned the skin down, to watch it jump out from its own skin.

Perhaps even more unusual was the fact that animals—whether butterflies, birds, or frogs—so readily followed Rose around. And each one of them provided for her some new perverse pleasure: the legs of the daddy long legs adorned her braided hair with butterfly wings, and once as a joke, she wore a thrush she had just killed around her neck.

Her mother would watch in horror from behind the screen door, but said nothing. Yet when Rose had turned 10 and was well past the age of accountability, Rossalia sent her strange, inscrutable daughter to the sisters for monastic training.

The nuns of the order of Cluny received Rose with misgivings because she was so beautiful and yet, God had clearly stopped her tongue for some divine reason. However, Rose, as silent and odd as she had become, was quite useful in the kitchen skinning and slicing the fowl or fish with her nails so deftly they could hang the skins completely intact from the hanging pot rack. After a time, she
earned quite a reputation among the lesser nuns with her uncanny culinary abilities, and began by virtue of her talents, to earn not a small amount of respect.

Rose stayed on with the Cluniacs, studying their scriptures, which seemed, at times, incomprehensible to her, and at other times, completely ridiculous. By the time she was thirteen, Rose had been entrusted with a special stylus with which she could write the sacred scripts in mercury. The nuns trusted her because she could not possibly tell the others what she was doing or divulge of the secrets the words afforded her.

However, what the nuns didn’t know was that Rose had a photographic memory. Rose studied the Latin texts as she translated, all the while filing them away into the dark corners of her mind, waiting for a great storm to scare them up again.

Rose grew in beauty, piety and grace, and to the amazement of the Cluniacs, seemed to relish the pains the discalced incur, growing unnaturally mindful of the blisters and scabs on her feet. She continued on this way for several years until one day, on her twentieth birthday, a great wind arose. The wind was so powerful, the pots gathering rain water on the cornices fell into the courtyard with a terrible clattering and the pigeons and doves in the eaves and pipes flapped frantically against the wind. Several were kept at a dead standstill, straining against the blast. A furious clanging could be heard in the portico under the bell tower, a
racket whose fury reminded the nuns of the day on which St. Thomas’s bell tolled, a day when ghosts were said to walk.

A fire broke out in the kitchen threatening to take the refectory as well. The nuns scattered to pump water and in the midst of chaos, a man appeared at the gate and let himself in. He walked with calm, surveying the scene, and went directly to the kitchen where Rossalia stood, mutely watching the others and the fire. He seemed to possess, within his black cape, the halcyon calm of someone who knows a great secret, the future perhaps, but wouldn’t dream of revealing it.

Rose instantly recognized the man.

Rose felt an odd stirring in her throat. She felt like she had swallowed feathers and dust and she thought she might cough. Then a cold warmth generating from her voicebox spread up her throat, and her tongue, which had lay still as a sloth within her mouth suddenly twitched. Rose the Mute opened her mouth in her familiar fashion and for the first time in all her life of stone and salt, Rose spoke.

“If you’re here for the texts, follow me,” she said.

And so he did. Up the winding stone staircases and long dark corridors they climbed until they reached Rose’s solitary cell with the air pregnant with the smell of mercury.

Rose opened the only fragment of the texts she still
had in the room and read its contents to the man. Then, she
retold the accounts stored in her picture memory of every
word and event described by words she had translated or
recopied. She felt her tongue making sounds it had never
known and once, she felt the burdening of Eve, of knowing
the knowledge that will exact one’s immortality, and she
stopped speaking. The man waited for a moment and
spitting in his hand, spread the spittle on his finger, and
without a word, touched her lips. And as if her tongue had
a tongue of its own, it began to move restlessly over her
palate and up against her teeth, articulating whole books in
a single breath. As she spoke in the forbidden language,
language that only lost angels know, the stranger recopied
the text. His fingers passed over the mercury, burning the
letters as he went, searing them forever into oblivion. His
fingers wrote so fast, the pages glowed under his fingertips
which looked as though they were actually setting the
words on fire with a strange blue-white cloud.

At last, they finished. All the work Rose had done
in the seven years the Cluniacs received her had been
consumed by a stranger in mere minutes. In the place of
the texts and Rose’s memory of the words was the image of
crumbled parchment. The pieces containing the words of
Christ resembled broken bits of stone. Rose closed her
eyes and imagined herself eating the stone and found that it
tasted like manna. It was not the eucharist of fire, or grace.
It was for Rose, rather, a taste of thorns, thistle soup,
something like sadness. She opened her eyes to ask the
man the meaning of sadness, something she had not known.
But the man was gone, and her tongue which had moved so
easily before, was shut to the bottom of her mouth. Rose
could not even contort her tongue or mouth enough to make
the sounds of a woman crying. Even so, she tried. The
sounds escaping her throat were barely human.

When the fire had consumed everything within the
confines of the convent, Rose put on all her clothes under
her habit, plucked the thorns from a rose bush and pushing
a thorn into the tips of each of her fingers, one for each year
at the convent, she traveled two days east and one day
north.

_Gina Withnell_