

# Marianne Leone

## TRANSFIGURATION

Rita and Christina had lunch at the place that served the ninety-nine cent clam dinners across from Filene's Basement. Mother and daughter sat facing each other like strangers forced to share a booth during the lunchtime rush and, like strangers, said little besides pass the salt, or hand me a napkin. It was the first time they had ever eaten in a restaurant alone together. They were calmed by the bustle of the lunchtime crowd, the clink of china, the indifferent voices of secretaries and shoppers that swaddled them. Rita had come on the subway, all the way into town, to see Christina's apartment for herself, and to gauge how much her changeling daughter had changed in the month since she had packed her bags and left Derby Street and the home where she was born. She had dressed carefully for the trip into the city in a tailored grey suit and frilly white blouse, presenting her best self to the world, something her daughter didn't understand, the need for a *bella figura* to protect one from scorn. Her daughter invited scorn with her rags and her feathers, like a village *pazza*.

Still, Rita hoped that this new, wet-winged version of her daughter would be at last one she could comprehend. She thought often of the fortune-telling card with the blonde *finocchio* walking off the cliff, *lo scemo*, the Fool, the time she found her daughter with Tarot cards, like a strega making spells. At night, she dreamed of Christina falling and woke with a start. Joe acted mad with her and turned his back across the widening gulf of their double bed. He blamed Rita for letting Christina move out because she was the girl and the girl belonged to the mother, just like Vinny was his. But he was wrong about that and had spurned the child that was his, like a spiteful king in a story for children. He didn't know he had done this. He didn't know his daughter grieved this betrayal of her self and he didn't see the way she wanted him to look at her. And now she was gone and Joe was like a child who sulks because he flies in a dream and then wakes up and can no longer fly. Rita knew the way her daughter wanted to be seen by her: as opposite in every way. As different as sun from moon, night from day, dark from light, *principessa* from *contadina*, daughter from mother. Beh.

So if that was the price she had to pay to see this opera, Rita would pay. She could play *lo scemo* and walk off the cliff like the *finocchio* in the picture on the magic card. Christina wanted her mother to treat her like a member of the *nobili*, like someone who thinks she can choose her life for herself, who doesn't have to worry about fate. Joe's sister Connie was wrong, too, with her sly words over coffee to make her think that Christina was a bad girl. Connie was jealous because she chose badly and was married to a *stupidone*, and Christina was free. Free. A pride rose in her when she thought of her daughter having the courage to be free. But in the end she would open her legs for some man, and Rita prayed he would be as good a man as Joe. And she would open her legs again to push out a child. And when her daughter did that, she would see that she and Rita were the same, exactly the

same. But now Christina wanted Rita to play this part, and this she could do. If Christina wanted to be dark, she would be light. Rita would laugh and be light and reassure Christina that she had nothing to fear from her: they were not the same, not now. She ordered a whiskey sour, and prepared to laugh, for Christina's sake.

Rita lagged behind Christina on the stairs to her fourth-floor apartment, giggling and repeating "I'm drunk" louder and louder with every flight and calling for Christina to 'elp. Christina found her mother's drunk routine fake and not funny in the least though her mother kept acting like she should think it was a riot. Her mother had had one drink as far as Christina could recall and was now jeopardizing Christina's relationship with everyone else in the building on Anderson Street, a tenement on the wrong side of Beacon Hill. Christina was skittish about how her mother, whose tastes ran to the baroque, would react to her bare-bones apartment. Her room-mate Penny, who worked at the Bread and Bowler, had brought home some random pottery and candlesticks for the living room (where she also slept) but Christina's room was no-frills: a mattress on the floor covered by a yellow Indian print bedspread, a candle beside the mattress and two grimy uncurtained windows that looked out onto the backs of other tenements. Rita ran to the bathroom and was even now, Christina guessed, staring in queasy wonder at the eye collage Penny and Christina had slapped on the walls after smoking a joint and collapsing in hysterics at their own cleverness in creating a bathroom that was a many-eyed Argus.

Christina's mother emerged unsteadily from the bathroom and took her first look around.

"Nice," she pronounced insincerely. "You get the light." This was a blatant falsehood, since the apartment was at the back of the building and it was often hard to tell day from night, or a grey day from one bright with sun. Rita smiled and gestured toward the tiny room beside the "living room" which held Christina's bed.

"You sleep-a 'ere?" she asked. Christina opened the door. Rita's smile wavered and she began to blink rapidly once she took in the mattress on the floor and the dungeon-like essence of the room, amplified by Christina's mad-looking slogans scrawled on the wall, quotes from Rimbaud writ large in black magic marker.

"Yeah, but I'm never here. I'm always at school," Christina said. "Or at work."

Christina had two jobs, the cool one at the coffeehouse on Charles Street and the prosaic one at the Mug n' Muffin, also on Charles Street. Christina felt the need to babble, to forestall the tears threatening to spill from her mother's tormented-saint eyes. She asked about Vinny, Nonno, her father, Rose. Rita shrugged, unable to speak.

"Want a cup of tea?" she asked. Rita nodded.

Christina disappeared into the tiny kitchenette to boil water. Rita sat at the rickety table, trying and failing to compose herself.

Christina returned with a thick blue mug and placed it before Rita. She placed one for herself on the other side of the table.

"It's herbal," she informed her mother. "Chamomile."

Rita grasped the bobbing life raft of a familiar word in this unfamiliar place.

"*Camomilla!*" she said, with pleasure. "My nonna used to give me!"

"Oh, yeah?" Christina said. "You never told me about her. Maybe that's someone in the family I'm like. You're always saying I'm not from this family."

Rita took a fortifying sip of her tea. She looked up and smiled.

"You better make sure you not like her," she said.

"Why?"

"Because," Rita said, beginning to giggle, "She was *pazza*."

Rita laughed, this time for real. Christina laughed, too, relief making her laughter giddy and high-pitched.

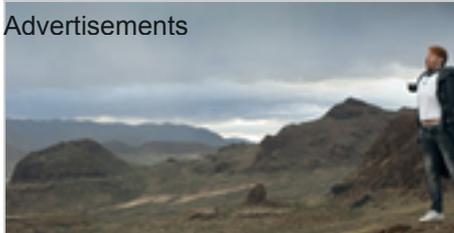
"What was her name?" Christina managed to gasp.

"I forget," her mother said. "Nonna." This made them laugh harder. They gave themselves over to their laughter and it echoed and rose higher and higher, bouncing off the bare apartment walls. When at last it ebbed, Rita got ready to go, blotting her lips with a tissue fished from her giant purse, primping her hair. Christina understood then that when she next returned home for Sunday dinner, nothing would be the same. And that made her both happy, and a little afraid.

**Marianne Leone** is the author of *JESSE, A MOTHER'S STORY* (Simon & Schuster). Her essays have appeared in the Boston Globe, Coastal Living, Post Road, Bark Magazine and elsewhere. She played Joanne Moltisanti (Christopher's mother) on the Sopranos for three seasons. She is married to actor Chris Cooper. Marianne is a first generation Italian American and her latest memoir *MA SPEAKS UP* (Beacon Press) is about her immigrant mother, who came to the U.S. to escape fascism and an arranged marriage.

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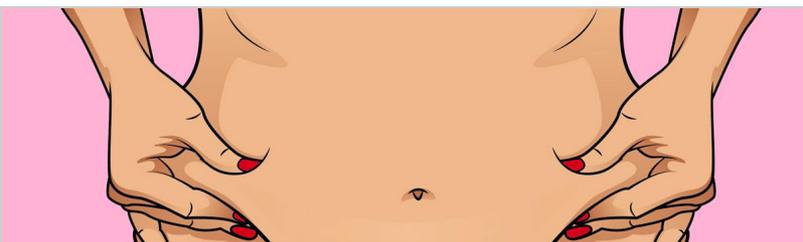
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