

*Jennie VerSteeg*

## Keeping Up In America

It was 1953 when Tanta Rose married Dom, sweetheart—and your mama was, what?—this is why God gave us fingers—twelve years old. My little sister! I was twenty-five then, and so was Tanta Rose, and Dom was only twenty.

Mostly I was there to sing—even though Ro was my best bosom friend (not really your aunt at all, any more than Dom is your uncle), I probably wouldn't have been there because it was her second marriage and she wanted it quiet and small—but she wanted me to sing “Oh, Promise Me.” So I did, exactly like I'd been told. But not at the wedding. It was after. No, your mama wasn't there dear—only twelve, what would Judy be doing there? I took better care of her than that! But you know Dom's sister at the Maid-Rite? She was there. We called her “Babe” then. Babe had asked me to “sing that one song, you know; you sang it for Judy and me last I was over to your place.”

And I say, “Come On-a My House?” That's no wedding song, Babe.” And then Rose says, “'Oh Promise Me,' okay? And I'll cry.”

And did later. Rose and I were weepers. We left a trail of tears like—like Hansel's breadcrumbs, you know? In high school. We could've bawled all night.

But she didn't right off. I stopped singing and this awful old apartment where we had the party afterwards, this damn *closet* we were in, just sort of ate it up. Ol' box of windows and splinters. Babe came with a jelly jar of gin, and Mike (you don't know him—he moved) and Johnny (you know Johnny—he's a Vinovich) sort of stood there, stared past me, nodding. “That was nice, Mag.” They just wanted to drink and dance. Men *wanted* to dance then.

But I couldn't dance.

You know now how they say that all of us have—urges?—say that we all feel like loving people of both sexes? I think I always felt a little of that for Rose. Oh, blushing? Not you, Miss Free Love. I don't mean I ever copped a feel. But the day she married Dom was one of the saddest days of my life. I wished all kinds of horrible things on him, to drop off bridges or to have his thing freeze up and Rose to divorce him. When you married back then it was like—you know—good-bye to all that. I could hardly move. I was so sad. I thought if I'd moved at all that everybody would know. Too far gone to hide.

But that Rose. She couldn't not dance. Pulled Dom's shirt “Dance honey,” she goes. “Da-a-a-ance.” Well he was already three sheets—that's “drunk” to you—and sat on the sectional next to that Mike's girlfriend Sandy. You really

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don't know her—she came in from the country when she was in the family way and went right back again when it was over. No, not the old country. The country country. Cows. She was staying in St. Monica's Home for Wayward Girls down by the KRNT Theatre and we always snuck her in after curfew. Okay, Sandy and Dom were on the sectional, Johnny and Babe on the Murphy bed. I was at the window. Always was the quiet one of the bunch. I told the morning-after stories. They all used to call me. "What happened last night?"

Know what? Sometimes? I made it all up.

Anyway, Rose and her stepbrother, Mike, who taught social dance at Arthur Murray, were jitterbugging out on the backdoor landing. They came twirling back in, bit by bit, and Mike tracked in thick black off his shoes. Rose wouldn't stop for love or money, though her pink chenille wedding dress (Chenille! Can you believe it?) was whipping 'round her bony knees. I was saying "Go Rose! Don't step on him, girl." She was always dancing like she had something to get rid of. She was such a scrapper. I always had this angel face here—yeah, this one right here. In high school, on Senior Ridiculous Day, she dressed me up like St. Ursula. Patron of girls.

Her Dom took all us girls on bed rides. Know what a Murphy bed is? He'd take it down out of the wall and position one or two of us upside down on the mattress. Dom's sister Babe—she was all of fourteen—too young, maybe, to drink, took her drink with her, trying not to spill or drop it. Dom yells "Here we go" and pushes the bed into the wall. Then, crash! Babe comes back out of the wall, giggling and holding this handful of broken glass.

Not bleeding.

I never married. It's like that thing I said. I wonder if—what is it? subconsciously?—I though I was saving myself for Rose. I'm not *asking* you. I'm *telling* you.

Strange spring in '53. The trees blown all flat, doubled up like thumbs at the joint. Cold. Dom and Rose broke the news at Alma Cebuhar's St. Joseph's Day party. No darlin' you don't know her either. Wouldn't like her anyway. Well, there we were, all of us fallen Catholics, and Rose had never seen red beer before. She's walking around looking though her beer like some kind of telescope and Dom walks after her yelling "She landed me like a fish!" Holding her by the small hairs at her neck. Everybody yells for them to kiss, and I turn to Johnny and say "Let's go somewhere." He took me home after the streetcars stopped running, and the next day he called up and asked me what happened.

Do I need to tell you more, or do you understand?

Johnny had stood up with me at the j.p.'s house when Dom and Rose got

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married. He was stepping out with Babe, and his wife was from the old country. Clara. That was her name. She didn't know about Babe (or any of the other girls). In those days, these poor gals with these arranged marriages, well, you know, there was no comparison to an American girl. We used to think, so much for you. The name of the game is keeping up in America, and the married men just keep turning up like bad change. Fair game.

Clara pulled the weeds around her clothesline like she was proud to have to eat them.

And Johnny'd rented the walk-up over the hardware store "for entertaining" he says!

Rose was so thick sometimes. She stood up to her ankles in a big pile of leaves on the j. p.'s parking and said "We'll have the party there, then. For the wedding and for Halloween." She, Sandy and me took the truck and drove over only to find Dom's sister Babe (but he never called her that, he'd always called her his best girl, since she's been in diapers—fishy? What say?) sitting on this cheesy old orange throw rug, filing her nails, pretty as you please.

Well our hands were tied. On the one hand, Dom should've kicked Babe straight home, but on the other hand, Johnny was his friend, and for all we knew, maybe he and her loved each other... It was a hard one, and who were we, you know.

But Rose. Dance, dance, dance. Poor Sandy, all sweet and country and out to here, sat and tended the hi-fi, until Mike quit with a stitch in his side. Finally I danced with Rose, or tried to; she steered me past the heavy ashtray with a running Airedale curved up over it, past these two lamps coming out of china lady heads wearing real pearl earrings on fake china ears. You'd buy those now and think they were funny, wouldn't you?

That's when Dom and I went out to the kitchen together, for more drinks. Rose said something like "If he gives you any trouble out there, just holler." Okay," I say.

That very night Dom and Rose moved in with his parents and his sister Rafaella, who we called Babe, and Dom called his best girl, and their Grandpa Amadeo called "Little Stick"—only in Italian, into a little house by McHenry Park and the public high school practice field, just in back of the streetcar line. They lived there for two years, until Dom could swing his own place. I was living then in this cement block house way out in Valley Junction—that's West Des Moines to you—past the last paved road and city sewers. My neighbors were these sad old grandpa railroad pensioners and leftover miners with the black lung. They didn't know what to make of me and Judy. My mom—Grandma Jean—paid me fifteen dollars a month to keep Judy. She slept on my

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couch. Grandma Jean didn't have room for Judy after she found Fred McConkey sitting the cocktail lounge at Air Lanes. Never knew Fred either, honey—and you didn't know Bub or Frank neither. Grandma Jean has always attracted these old salesman types, and when she got 'em, boy, she'd do anything to keep 'em. Fred made her throw out all her pots and pans! He said they caused cancer!

In the kitchen, Dom was all teed off about Babe and Johnny. He kept opening the cupboards, one after the other, leaving them open, getting madder and madder. I wish you could've seen this place. Pretty gloomy place for some old married Serb to do his business with little girls. All these awful drawers and doors and cupboards painted like, a combination of shit and canned salmon. All completely empty. There was nothing. Not just no pots and pans. Not just no collanders and roasters or copper-bottom skillets. Just these dark caves, and there wasn't any light in there. There was one bulb for the whole place, and you'd carry it with you to the loo; Christ, what a mess.

Dom was saying something like "It doesn't take a fool to see what's going on here," and I was saying I was sorry.

But I really wasn't, you know? I mean, sure, Johnny was married, and Babe was just a girl, but—well, a girl needs a teacher, yes? And there's nothing like an older man, he goes slower, I guess, and with Johnny, he was such a shit, always yelling and taking charge. It was thrilling. Don't you think.

Dom and I started arguing. Oh, Baby! Uncle Dom and I could never agree on anything—even in goddamn grammar school, pardon my French, the three of us fought. Rose and Dom and me, every day at recess, all recess long. Rose was on him like paste on paper, and I followed them around, kicking up the asphalt. "Dommie!" I yelled "Stop hurting Rose!" "I'm fine, I'm fine" Rose yells, "Just kick him!" Even then he was sweet on Rose; he paid about as much attention to me as a sweat bee at a spigot.

That night, Dom grabbed me and damn near broke my arm, skidded me back up against the icebox.

"Leave go," I'm whispering, with all of the others out in the other room.

And, I'm looking at the little bones in his neck, and his Adam's apple. Thinking about Babe and Rose and what time of the month it is. Whether he could make love to me.

Don't be surprised Rosemary. The fifties weren't so boring. I was twenty-five years old, a good looking woman. He was a damn dreamboat. And maybe I thought, making love with Dom would be like—hurting Tanta Rose. Or even making love to her.

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But that's when it started.

Dom slung me over his shoulder like a sack, and started twirling me around and around, and I couldn't breathe we were going so fast. This smell came up—like sweat and cigarettes and gin—all that gin! It smelled like peat. I kept calling him a flathead wop. “Put me down!”

And he finally put me down. We stood there laughing at each other, 'cause we were both staggering like bums and had forgotten what we'd been arguing about. “I forget we're not slugging out in the cinders anymore,” he says.

Wham! There was this thud from the living room, and Rose yells “Cut her off,” and Babe saying “I'm all right, I'm all right, I'm all...” The music stopped and Dom comes to me and kisses me, pushing me back against the icebox.

You girls don't have to worry about having babies anymore, do you? It's a wonderful thing, this Pill, no matter what the Church says. But it's changed sex for the worse, too. There was always this—I don't know, a feeling like you were just tossing *everything* to the wind, this risk was like someone else standing outside it all, watching you. You were giving more then.

“I need a drink.” I pulled away and knocked down this shot, just like Tanta Rose'd taught me (She drank like a sailor, Rosemary.), wrist and neck stiff, only your throat moves, like a heart beating.

“You need a man,” Dom says, and opens his arms to me.

It started out sweet, doll, it was easy. Staring out through my hair, holding onto his neck. There was a vein in his head that was—ticking—like a clock. I remember thinking I could make love with Dom and Rose and Johnny, hell, with Mike and Sandy, Babe and Judy...that I was so drunk and it was so dark and I was sad, but happy, too—like making love to the world.

Then Dom couldn't. We tried everything we knew, but poor Uncle Dom stayed just plain limp.

I thought about Rosie.

Nothing.

I could see her nappy hair and her damn spaniel eyes.

More nothing.

Dom says, “I love Rose.”

I said I did too. We stared at each other.

He leaps up “What do we do? What do we do?” He's pulling his pants up and I'm skating around the floor looking for my panties, and he's knocking his head against his hands and saying we should come clean to Rose. I say “What we need to do is to *love* Rose.” You know? She needed both of us.

So I stood up and said “Come on. Mind yourself.”

We went out to see Rose.

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Do you see? You got to love your friends and love your family and you got to find a man to love—or a woman; who am I to say? You gotta do all these things, Rosemary. Your mom would say the same thing.

And life goes on, you know. We had a Halloween party the very next week. Rose dolled me up like St. Ursula again. And now Tanta Rose is still going strong and Dom is keeping up. Little Judy grew up—where does the time go?—and here you are, the picture of her.

No, Johnny and Babe never got together. But where was the guarantee? They were happy for awhile. And isn't that enough, dear heart?

Is there really all that much to keeping up in America?