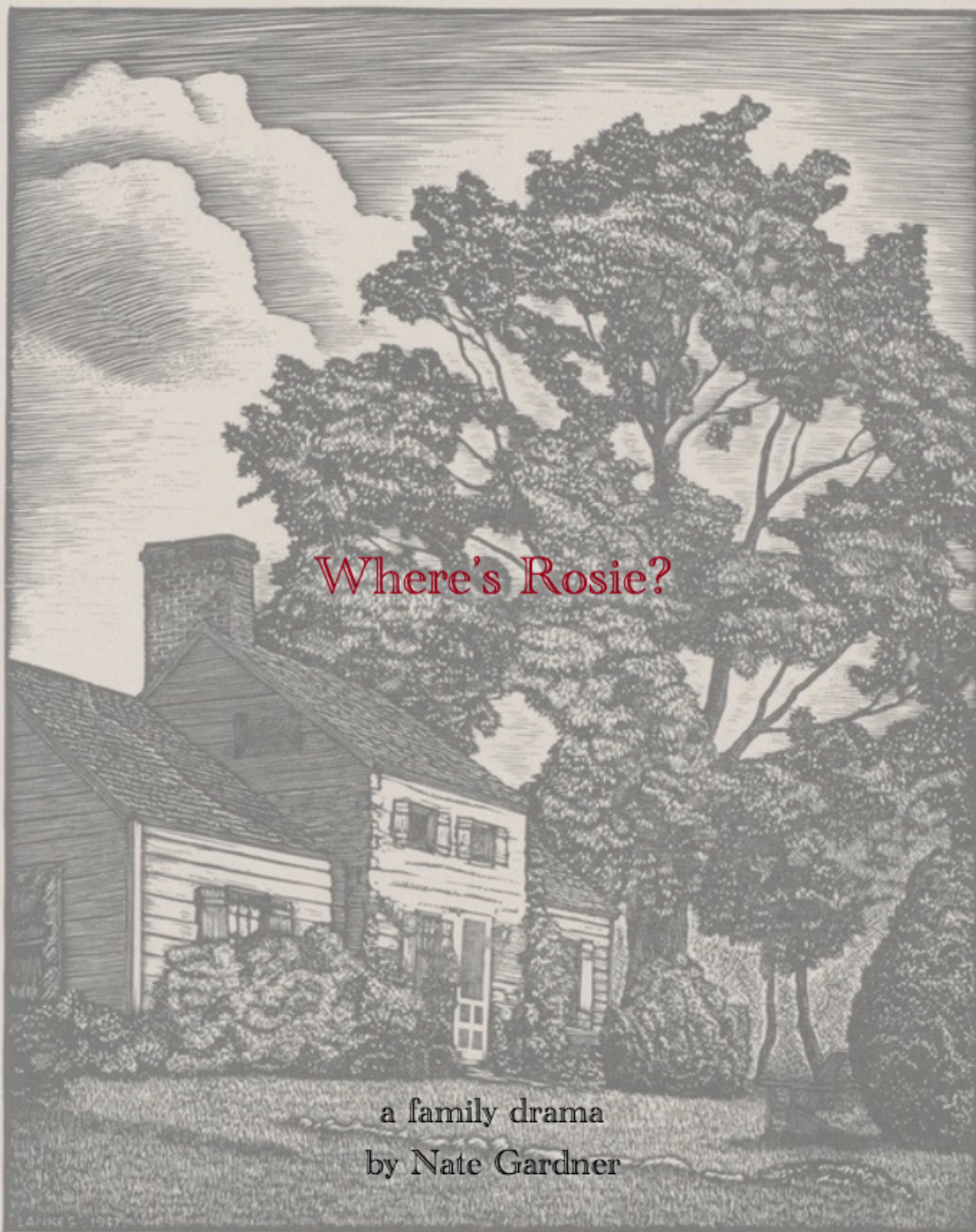




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W. Gardner

INT. CABIN LIVING ROOM

The great wooden dining table is set beautifully - rustic plate- and silverware for four. Embroidered napkins. A pitcher of ice water. Candles.

JESSICA, 48, tall and lean with a short cut and wearing a beige sweater and mom jeans, has brushed her hair, straightened out her sweater, removed her makeup. She's putting on her poise. But she's on alert, and there's something scary in her eyes.

MIKE, 45, same height as Jessica and losing his tennis figure, looks like he gave his hair a rinse and got sweaty all over again - just matted down in different directions. His quarter-zip hangs off him like a loose-knit runway item. He slouches in his chair next to Jessica, looks down.

ELIZA, 18, looks like she lost her first boxing match - her left eye is almost completely swollen shut. She's wearing a billowy, flower-dusted blouse and her own pair of too-large mom jeans. Seated next to Jessica, she could hardly be her child. Across from Mike, it makes sense.

The fourth seat is empty.

They can hear Linda moving around upstairs. Forth and back. Back and forth.

Eliza tries to make eye contact with her parents, begging them with her eyes eye to say something.

Jessica steals quick glances at Eliza, but she can't actually look at her daughter. She's never been great at it, looking with anything but some kind of judgement, but now not-looking is self-preservation.

Mike just navel-gazes. Or tries to stay awake?

ELIZA

Mom.

Jessica's eyes dart to Eliza and she purses her lips, a sharp "shut up" glare.

ELIZA (CONT'D)

Dad.

Mike's eyes rise to his daughter, but his head remains hung. He gives it a small shake "no", lets his eyes fall.

ELIZA (CONT'D)

Guys.

Jessica and Mike finally lock on Eliza. They shake their heads "no" in unison. Mike lowers his head, and Jessica looks up at the latest noise from above, then goes back to scanning the cabin.

ELIZA (CONT'D)
(hissing)
What the fuck is going on?

JESSICA
Shh!
(isn't it obvious?)

Concern is really starting to show, even through Eliza's swollen redness.

MIKE
(whispering)
Can you hear her?

Mike points up.

MIKE (CONT'D)
She can hear us.

Jessica glares at both of them. Eliza is incredulous.

ELIZA
Then why don't we just leave?

JESSICA KICKS ELIZA under the table.

Eliza bites her lip to keep from yelping.

Mike looks at his wife like he doesn't even know her.

LINDA, 42, tall and broad-shouldered woman with a great mane of tumbling red hair swings around the table in a billowing floral dress and passes right into the kitchen, talking over her shoulder while throwing her apron back on.

LINDA
So quiet down here, y'all don't
have anything to talk about? I hope
you weren't just whispering about
me!

Linda opens the oven, its light glowing on the sweet potatoes in their dish and on her beaming face.

Linda brings the sweet potatoes to the table, her hands protected by Little Shop of Horrors oven mitts, and sets them as the centerpiece of the spread.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Oh this is just darling, thank you
both!

Linda returns to the oven, extricating a Jenga arrangement of
casserole dishes.

MIKE
C-can I give you a hand?

Linda returns with two more dishes - several ears of corn on
the cob and spinach casserole.

LINDA
That is so sweet of you Mike. But
you did your job, you can relax
while I take care of mine. Besides,
it gives me a chance to show off,
you know!

Linda reaches into the oven's maw again.

Jessica looks at her husband like she doesn't even know him.

A great platter of oven-broiled ribs.

Rolls. Gravy.

And Mac n Cheese. Of course.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Now, would you mind doing the
honors?

Linda holds a bottle of red wine and an opener out for Mike.
He looks genuinely grateful.

MIKE
I'd be honored.

Linda sits at the open seat while Mike hastily uncorks the
wine. He pours for everyone - but Linda holds up her hand
when he gets to Eliza.

Mike is ready to apologize to Linda, and Jessica is holding
her breath.

ELIZA
If there was any day to break the
rules-

LINDA
Did you take any of the Advil?

ELIZA

Three. That's half the maximum dose
for my weight. And my liver's a
self-repairing machine.

LINDA

Guess I'm not the only nurse here.
Dad- it's your call.

Jessica's eyes dart viciously between Linda and Mike. Eliza
clocks it - she knows her mother. Did anyone else?

MIKE

Can't deny that logic. And I
wouldn't be much of a father if I
was the one drinking, sans head
injury.

Mike pours a half glass for Eliza. After all that?

MIKE (CONT'D)

See if you like it.

ELIZA

You guys share wine with me.

MIKE

And do you like it?

Eliza glowers. Mike can't keep down a smile.

Jessica glowers. Linda's eyes shimmer. Eliza doesn't clock
it.

But Jessica does.

Mike raises his glass.

Linda holds her hands out to Eliza and Mike. Smiles at
Jessica.

Mike lowers his glass. Looks at Linda's hand.

Eliza looks at her dad - the mess of reactions he's trying to
hide. It makes her hair stand up.

Jessica stares Linda down.

Holds out her hands.

Shocking Mike and Eliza out of their shared anxiety.

JESSICA

We don't really do grace. But I'd love to hear yours.

LINDA

Oh, well, it's no big thing, a toast will do-

JESSICA

I think it's a nice idea. I'd like to hear your grace. I think we all would.

Eliza doesn't want to look away from Mike. Mike doesn't want to look away from Eliza. But he gives an apologetic nod and smile, and reaches for Linda's and Jessica's hands - like they're vipers ready to strike.

Eliza follows her father's lead, watching his hands.

Linda smiles big enough to warm a concert hall.

LINDA

Well I am just so glad to get all of us together like this. I know the circumstances aren't ideal - believe me, this isn't exactly how I imagined this dinner - busted forehead and burnt Mac n cheese and all - it's only a little burned, I promise - but, but what matters is that we're here. Together. One big family. Finally, for the first time! Oh, I've been dreaming - but not the last time, I can promise you, we'll make a real tradition of it! A yearly celebration - my Umpah, he cared so much about tradition, birthdays especially were so important. And my daddy hated it, said it never mattered, it was just another day. And my Umpah would get the whole family together, even after we moved to Virginia he'd organize a road trip and turn Momma's property into a damn circus, all for a man who'd rather be at work on his birthday. One year he even disappeared-

Eliza can't take it anymore - she gives Linda's hand a squeeze.

Linda breaks from her reverie and glances at Eliza. She gives Linda a curt smile.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Well, like I was saying, I just am
so happy to have y'all here. To
celebrate Eliza, and this first get-
together. Now let's eat!

Linda gives Eliza and Mike's hands a forceful squeeze and lets them go.

Eliza goes right for a pair of rolls.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Oh, Mike...

Mike looks at Linda like a child caught bedwetting. Linda looks down at her hand, covered in a glistening sheen.

Jessica makes a show of wiping her hand on her napkin. Her look across the table at Linda says "welcome to the club."

Mike sinks into his chair, eyes down.

Eliza does the same across from him.

LINDA (CONT'D)
Go on load up your plate, then
let's have that toast you were
going to give.

Hands take turns reaching for the middle of the table, grabbing food and ladles and tongs. Plates fill.

Mike raises his wine glass.

Jessica makes eye contact with Eliza. Pointed eye contact.

She looks at Eliza's plate. Then the sweet potatoes. Then Eliza's plate again - no potatoes.

MIKE
I'll keep this quick-

ELIZA
I'm not eating that.

JESSICA
Eliza.

ELIZA
I'm not.

Jessica starts to blink more as she argues with Eliza. Oddly. It only agitates Eliza more.

JESSICA

We are not doing this right now.

ELIZA

You're right. We're not.

MIKE

I just-

JESSICA

You are not a child anymore, and this woman worked very hard to cook for you-

LINDA

This woman?

ELIZA

You know I hate sweet potatoes! I have always hated sweet potatoes!

JESSICA

No you have not! You eat them every year at Thanksgiving!

ELIZA

Yeah, the one comically tiny sweet potato Uncle Jimmy makes for me once a year that I gag down to humor him, because it's Uncle Jimmy! Who is *where*, by the way?

JESSICA

Believe me, if I knew where James was-

Jessica rounds on Linda. Stops the blinking.

LINDA

You really don't like sweet potatoes?

Linda is speaking to Eliza, but stays looking at Jessica.

ELIZA

I am not a picky eater. But if that was the one thing on the menu in a prison camp, I'd starve. Well, I'd escape before starving, but you get the idea.

Mike downs his glass of wine. He holds up the bottle to see if anyone else needs a top-up - no one has drunk any yet, or pays him any attention. He fills his glass.

LINDA

Huh. You know, I thought it was your favorite.

ELIZA

Not the first thing you've gotten wrong.

LINDA

Well, I got this information from a very reliable source. Or at least, a source I would expect to be reliable.

ELIZA

Uncle Jimmy? He'd get a laugh out of that.

LINDA

Well, how are the ribs?

ELIZA

Actually pretty good. Might just be that I haven't eaten in two days, but they're really tender.

JESSICA

Two days?? Eliza-

ELIZA

Eating now, aren't I? And I didn't eat *nothing*, I had granola bars. Not the longest I've gone without a meal...

Linda hasn't broken eye contact with Jessica.

LINDA

And the gravy?

Eliza just nods her satisfaction.

LINDA

How about the Mac n Cheese?

ELIZA

Are you just watching me eat?

MIKE

I think the Mac n Cheese is great.

Mike forks a big bite of Mac n Cheese past his lips, the bottom a flat black pane of charred cheese. It makes an audible crunch when he bites.

He slurps half his wine glass to get it down.

LINDA

Thanks Mike. And no, I just wanted to see how I did. If you don't like sweet potatoes, what is your favorite food?

ELIZA

Can I just eat, please? Head hurts.

LINDA

Of course! But I will get back to you on that. Mike, I was wondering, how did you and Jessica meet?

MIKE

Oh, Jessica's much better at telling the story.

JESSICA

She asked you, Mike.

MIKE

Well, let's see.. I think this was back when I was still teaching, out in Goochland, and I got stuck with contacting someone from Habitat so we could build some kinda repartee between them and the shop class. Why it wasn't the shop teacher I'll never know - but! Who do I get saddled with to hash out the details? James Little, my old partner in crime from our Teach for America days.

Eliza notices that Mike is rambling more than usual. She looks to her mom - and Jessica is **blinking oddly** at her again.

MIKE (CONT'D)

Should've known that'd be the beginning of the end. Well, he invites me to a party, and I see this radiant young thing with hair down to her waist and a joint 'tween her fingers, like she's on a mission to bring back the 60s all by herself.

ELIZA

And you didn't have the guts to talk to her, so you asked the girl next to you, who happened to be mom.

Mike clutches his heart.

MIKE

Didn't have the guts! My own daughter! Of course you're right - except, she gets up and walks over to me, and starts talking to the guy next to me, your Uncle Jimmy. Her brother.

Eliza's eyes balloon. Jessica's sharpen. Linda's scan her guests.

ELIZA

You told me that Uncle Jimmy set you two up on a movie date- to see Catch Me If You Can.

MIKE

Actually it was The Ring. We did see Catch Me If You Can, because you just went to the movies back then, but I thought The Ring was gonna be some wedding rom-com.

JESSICA

That's a great movie.

MIKE (CONT'D)

God that movie was awful.

LINDA

You know, the one I really liked was Signs.

ELIZA

But what about that girl, with the hair and the joint- mom, what happened??

JESSICA

Your father is really exercising his poetic license to impress our- uh, Linda- but no, there is no fair-haired woodland sprite in either of our pasts, unless your father is confabulating at the moment.

Mike leans toward Eliza, conspiratorial.

MIKE

Your uncle introduced her as
"Jessie Jane."

ELIZA

Mom!

JESSICA

Mike! Our daughter is 18, about to graduate, with piss-poor grades, slacker friends, and no plans to move out before starting community college in the fall. Is now really the time to make up stories about free-spirited weed smokin' mom? Enough with the wine! And what are you smirking at??

Eliza looks at her mom - fierce, and frayed at the edges.

At her dad - setting his glass down, mouth slack, teeth pink.

At Linda.

LINDA

I just think it's interesting. You don't seem to know what your daughter likes to eat. And she doesn't know how you met. Does she really know you?

JESSICA

That- that is a gross overstatement, a complete misrepresentation of everything I've said-

ELIZA

You know it's serious when the lawyer-talk starts coming out.

JESSICA

Michael! Please!

Jessica smacks the table and raises her voice, to distract from KICKING ELIZA UNDER THE TABLE AGAIN - her bad leg.

But no one's distracted.

Eliza winces at the kick and looks at her mom in shock- Mike picks up the ball too late- Linda takes it all in, angry and vindicated.

MIKE

Your mom's absolutely right, I was just enjoying a little embellishment-

LINDA

Did you just kick her? Your daughter?

JESSICA

What are you talking about?

MIKE

It- it was just a classic dinner and a movie-

LINDA

You just kicked your daughter. In her injured leg.

Linda is holding something, under the table. No one can see it, but Jessica and Mike both stiffen.

Jessica starts blinking rapidly at Eliza, no longer trying at all to hide it.

MIKE

Hey, no, I'm sure that's not what happened, at home, we- it's just like a game-

LINDA

Mike, shut up!

Mike literally BOUNCES in his chair, the word "game" bouncing around in his mouth. His body slackens. His hair is much sweatier.

MIKE

...of footsie...

Eliza's lips quiver, looking at her dad.

JESSICA

In front of her? In front of her??

ELIZA

Mom, what's going on? What are you talking about?

LINDA

Yeah, "mom", what is going on?

JESSICA
I'll tell you what's going on, that
woman-!

Jessica's whole body tenses and shudders, her teeth CHATTER.

ELIZA
Mom!!

Unlike Mike, Jessica doesn't slump, and just starts blinking
at Eliza again.

ELIZA
What, what the hell, are you okay??
Are you having a stroke?

LINDA
It's a good act, but if you think
I'm taking you to the hospital-

MIKE
(standing)
If you caused my wife to have a
stroke- FUUUUUCK!!

Mike convulses again, hitting the table and collapsing back
into his chair.

JESSICA
Oh my god, I'm not having a stroke!
It's Morse code! Morse code! Don't
you remember? From your fucking spy
phase??

ELIZA
(close to tears)
Morse code??

JESSICA
It was everywhere, there were more
dashes and dots on your homework
than homework! You kept sending
messages to that- that friend of
yours and every night I had to tell
you to cut it out because the damn
beeping was driving me up the
goddamn wall!

ELIZA
I never learned Morse Code! I- I
just thought it was cool!

JESSICA

AHH! Why don't you just tell her?
Huh? Tell her why we're here, the
crazy shit you cooked up!

Linda stands, pointing at Jessica with a small black plastic
object - a REMOTE - in her hand.

Both Jessica and Mike flinch.

LINDA

I told you about calling me crazy!
This- this is crazy! The position
you've put me in, all these years,
is crazy! And now- God! It wasn't
supposed to be like this! You- you
made it like this! What's crazy is
you! You don't even know your
daughter! What she likes, to eat,
to do, what she does with her time,
who her friends are- and she
doesn't know you! Because it's a
lie! You're a lie! You're liars!

JESSICA

She thinks she's your mother!

LINDA

I *am* your mother!!

Eliza's like a rabbit, caught between two wolves.

LINDA

That picture on the fridge? That
beautiful little baby girl? That's
you! That's my Rosie!

JESSICA

Eliza!

LINDA

And they took her from me! When you
were just a tiny little thing, I
couldn't- I couldn't protect you, I
couldn't save you, and I'm sorry,
I'm so so sorry, and I know I don't
deserve to ever be forgiven, but
I'm here now, your real mom's
finally here-

JESSICA

For fuck's sake, Mike!

Mike has been inching for his wine glass, and finally got a hold of it.

He gives Jessica a pained, dirty look, then THROWS THE GLASS AT LINDA'S FACE.

Linda blocks her face, wine splashes all over her as the glass flies clear over her head, and MIKE LUNGES TOWARD HER-

Linda smashes the black remote in her hand, now covered in wine.

Mike goes stiff as a board, then hits the floor. And thrashes.

	ELIZA	JESSICA
Dad!		Mike!

Mike is convulsing on the floor, his eyes darting between Eliza, Jessica, and Linda, pink spit spilling from his quivering lips.

Linda frantically smashes the buttons on the remote.

At one point Jessica stands straight up with an involuntary yelp.

Linda yanks the batteries out of the remote.

Mike still flops like a fish.

Eliza rushes to her dad, but Linda beats her to him, on hands and knees. Eliza stands over Linda.

Jessica just stands at her seat. She can't go to her husband.

Eliza spots an ANTLER-HANDLE KNIFE on the table - just as Linda snatches it.

Jessica's hands fly to her mouth.

ELIZA
What are you doing??

Linda pushes up Mike's pant leg to reveal a SHOCK COLLAR AROUND HIS ANKLE - glued in place.

Linda jams the knife into the collar and twists, popping a plastic panel off of it. She wedges the batteries out.

Mike's thrashing slows. He still pulses with cramps, his nerves and muscles taut and remembering the jolts of electricity.

He curls around the table leg.

LINDA

You get it now? You get it now,
don't you? I- I really didn't want
it to go this way, but what did I
honestly expect. I've been fighting
for you for eighteen years. I'm
prepared to fight a little more.

Eliza slides to the floor, looking at her dad.

Jessica collapses into her chair.

Linda takes a napkin from the table and wipes Mike's mouth.

Mike can't look at his daughter.

LINDA (CONT'D)

Now, I want to do a family photo.

JESSICA

What??

LINDA

It's still light out, and while
I've got you all up here, I'd like
to get a photo. I brought Eliza's
cap and gown. It's a really big
step in anyone's life, and it's the
first one I've gotten to be around
for since, you know, the first one.
We'll clean Mike up, and then we'll
take it out on the cabin steps. And
one with the sunflowers.

Linda stands. She has her confident face back on.

LINDA (CONT'D)

Well, what'll it be, Jessie Jane?
You gonna help hubby out, or would
you prefer I do it?