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**Rea On Top** (7 mins)

I still smile every time I recall following Rea Rossi into that horse-barn.

It's 1951 and for this boy, there's nothing sweet about sixteen. I'm changing schools more often than my socks.

I'm failing every subject at school because I can't seem to pay attention. My folks are shipping me off to a new private day school that Dad says is "progressive." The way he says the word "progressive," it sounds like code for "looney bin."

This fall morning is the first day of school and I'm riding next to the driver in the front seat of a small, wood-sided bus. This will be my daily ride to the Scarborough School, fourteen miles away, where I'll be joining the ninth grade. Frank, the driver, tells me we'll be making four additional stops.

Every student who gets on the bus is a girl.

I'm glad I'm sitting way up in the single front passenger seat because, even though I'm sixteen, I'm a little uncomfortable around girls. When a girl is pretty, I suffer an instant crush, which makes me want her attention. Then when I get it, I don't know what to say. I want to hide.

At the last pickup the mailbox says A. Rossi, MD, and the girl who boards breezes up the step and tosses me a smile. I turn to watch as she plops down in a seat in the back. I learn her name is Rea and she's in the tenth grade, which means she's too old for me. The driver grinds the bus into gear, announcing that the next stop is the school.

This place is very different from the other schools I've attended. We can smoke anywhere we want, wear sneakers and blue jeans and eat lunch in the woods. In my new homeroom I discover that I'm the only boy in my class. Being with so many girls gives me a little stage fright combined with a hint of glee. I am shocked when I'm elected class president. Apparently gender counts, because all I have to offer is being taller and having shorter hair and a deeper voice than everybody else.

One of my favorite spots in the school is the art classroom, which sits in the basement with a view of a garage-like building with three stable doors. It is in art class that I receive my very first compliment from a teacher when Mr. Beckerman, a short, soft-spoken man, stops to look at one of my paintings. "That's very good, Gary. You have a real talent." I'm speechless and thrilled. I'm proud from being validated by Mr. Beckerman. I feel I am floating above the battlefield debris of my years in school. I breathe in the smell of the oil paints and wet modeling clay around me. I finish my assigned drawing well before the end of the period and step outside to have a cigarette, to celebrate my compliment and kill time before the next class.

Rea Rossi appears from around the building; she's also an escapee from her class. Since she usually sits behind me during our daily bus rides, I have never noticed what she looks like until now. She's pretty with bobbed black hair and delicate pale skin framing dark eyes. She's wearing a white tight-fitting blouse and a green plaid pleated skirt. She leans back against the stable wall next to me. I try to not stare at her.

"I wonder what's behind these old doors" I ask. Rea turns and presses the flat latch. Pulling the heavy door slightly ajar, she smiles, then tugs at my shirtsleeve and jerks a little for me to follow. When we squeeze together through the doorway, I feel the warmth of her body. She smiles again, and I'm not sure why. Later in life, I will discover the joys of being the recipient of advances, but for now, I'm confused.

Inside, we stand in dim light and see 40 mattresses along the walls, stacked in piles six feet high. "Those must be for the summer boarding kids," Rea says. "What a great place for a hangout. Let's jump up on the stack." She steps on a low pile of three box springs and hauls herself up six mattresses high, where she pats the bedding next to her and says, "Come on, sit up here." As I climb up, musty air escapes from the compressed mattresses and mixes with a faint soap fragrance from Rea.

We're both sitting on top kicking our heels into the edges of the mattresses below. Our heads are only inches from the ceiling. Rea says, "You have a nice smile."

She leans against my arm and whispers, "Do you think we're being bad?" Before I can answer, she pushes my shoulder and I fall back onto the mattress. Rea flops next to me and flings the back of her arm across my chest in a deliciously carefree gesture. My heart beats a rapid flutter.

I like the feeling of her arm resting on me but, in an instant, I know that I'm in over my head, that I've just moved from adventure into something a little dangerous and scary. This is not a reasoned thought but a screaming instinct. I sit up and jump off the mattresses to the floor. "Gotta go now," I say with forced cheerfulness and charge out the door. Rea and I return to being bus-mates.

Six years later I will open a copy of TIME Magazine and see an article irresistibly headlined "Unreasonable Parents." The article describes the reaction of a father in Westchester who was unhappy with his 18-year-old daughter's plans to marry.

4 Furious with Roman Catholic authorities who refused to block the ceremony, Dr. Anthony B. Rossi filled his medical bag with rocks and went to St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. There, from the sidewalk, he heaved the rocks breaking stained glass windows then pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct."

I realize that this is Rea's father, who was **so** angry at her sister's unsanctioned wedding that he went vengefully berserk.

Whenever I recall Rea's tantalizing advances, I think that even though I missed a great opportunity, at least I didn't get stoned.

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