VISITATION

I was thirteen, going on fourteen years old that June in 1965. We lived on Chicago’s South Side. My mother had a best friend named Rita. They had been best friends since their school days, before each had gotten married in their early 20’s. They were both lively, fun, and sociable ladies then. They enjoyed dancing Downtown and drinking cocktails and smoking cigarettes with their new husbands on “double dates” in the brief days before the men went off to fight in World War II in 1943.

My mom regularly asked me to visit Rita and deliver small gifts or home-baked goods or Avon cosmetic products. Rita lived about seven city blocks from our house, just past St. Mary Magdelene’s Church on Manistee Ave. Although they regularly talked on the phone, I could never figure out why my mom didn’t just walk over to visit Rita in person and deliver the items herself. But I did as I was asked, and usually rode my bicycle over to Rita’s house because it took less time.

Rita was always happy to see me, and she was glad for the company. Her husband had recently died from lung cancer, and they had one child – a son named Ricky – who enlisted in the Marines and was sent to Vietnam. He was nineteen. I would drop off my delivery, and Rita would give me something to drink and eat in her kitchen and we would chat for about a half-hour. It was always somewhat awkward, though, because we had little in common, given our age difference. Another thing I always noticed was that she kept the inside of her house rather dark, with the blinds and drapes drawn. As I got up to leave -- each and every time -- she gave me a hug and a Welch’s Cocoanut candy bar as I left.

This routine went on, with perhaps one or two visits a month. My mom always wanted a report on how Rita was doing. Sometimes Rita gave me an item to take back to my mom.

One visit, however, was most unusual. Rita let me in her back porch door as usual, but I noticed that she had been crying, her eyes reddened. She asked me to sit down at the kitchen table, then she brought me a cold bottle of Pepsi and a bologna sandwich which was already made and had been stored in her refrigerator. Then she got a gold-framed 8 X 10 picture of her son from the living room. Ricky looked handsome and proud, smiling in his crisp new Marine uniform.

“He’s dead. He was killed over there,” Rita moaned. “It’s just not right. He was our only child. First, my husband dies, and now my son. How can this be happening? Why did this happen to me?” Rita started shaking and sobbing. “Jackie, you remind me of him when he was young.” She grabbed my hand and looked pleadingly into my eyes, for what I knew not. I was startled and very uncomfortable. What should I do? What should I say? I was silent, then got up abruptly to leave. Rita rushed to hug me, hard. I yearned to flee, to return to the world of sunlight and life, to run from the shadow of death. As I left, Rita thrust the familiar cocoanut candy bar into my hand and for the first time kissed me.

Bicycling home fast, I threw the candy bar away in some bushes. I am ashamed to admit today that I never went back to visit Rita after I told my mom what had happened. But my mom already knew that Ricky had been killed. That’s why she kept sending me over to visit Rita on “errands.”

Ricky was just one of 1,928 American men who died in Vietnam that particular year.

And Rita never recovered from her loss…

THE END

By Jack Karolewski

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