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BEER MONEY

Valerie Fioravanti

Rose Anna wiped her palms against her apron, and the red striped seersucker stayed bunched in her fists as she paced her kitchen. The hammering from the barges anchored off the river had given her a headache that pounded to the carpenters' rhythm. With the bicentennial this year, Macy's fireworks were supposed to be extra spectacular, and Rose Anna's rooftop, a half-block from the river, offered the best view in the city. The barges faced the rich folks in Manhattan, but they were anchored in Brooklyn, and stayed close enough during the display that ash fell around them, dusting the streets as far as Manhattan Avenue. There wasn't a family in the neighborhood that didn't deserve this yearly front-row seat. Rose Anna only prayed that when the fireworks came, they all had something left to celebrate.

She lapped around the living room, the only thing in motion against the dead summer heat. She switched the television on and then off again—she wouldn't get caught up in soap opera problems, not when she had so many of her own—then returned to the kitchen so she could check the sauce simmering on the stove. Behind the pot was the same faded, stained paper she'd been scrubbing for fifteen years and could never rub clean. If the rumors were true and the brewery shut down, she'd be scrubbing that same paper and the nicked, bleached-out floor until she was just as worn-through.

Rose Anna lifted the lid, and the trapped air rose soft and warm over her face. It was the gentlest touch of her day. That was the reason she always volunteered to make the sauce, giving her sisters some freedom from their stoves. She stirred, then checked the oven temperature. Her thermometer read 200°, 150° lower than its setting when summer already gave the oven a head start. She kicked the door closed, stirred her sauce once more before replacing the lid, and sat down to drink her cup of tea and smoke. She believed hot drinks and hot steam cooled

you down eventually.

She took a long first drag of her cigarette, and exhaled a few of her jangled nerves. She had a reputation for being demanding—and maybe she was, compared to the rest of her family—but she didn't want much. A house. Nothing fancy. Two or three bedrooms, with a little yard so she could plant a garden, grow her own vegetables and herbs. Maybe plant some pretty flowers in window boxes, rest a small table underneath a shady tree. But she'd trade that tree for appliances that worked the way they were supposed to, without coaxing or special tricks or rest breaks between use. Rose Anna was as old as her stove, and she didn't have the luxury of breaking down. Just thinking about it made her suck through her cigarette faster, when she wanted to savor it, make it last. She and her Vince had agreed only one carton each month, so they could try to make that down payment, even in hard times. They had a special home buyer's savings account down at the bank, and they tried to put away a little something with each paycheck. With the kids growing like magic beans and something always needing fixing or replacing, their balance hadn't come to much yet. The thought of what might be coming made her light another cigarette from the butt of the first.

She checked her sauce again, then went to check on her kids from the windows at the front of the apartment. She had six rooms and four windows, two each at the front and rear. Perpetual twilight, just dark enough to hide the chipped paint and cracked walls, tears in the furniture and tape on the floor. Vince had promised her a house, but the brewery was the last place to work along the docks. If it closed, she might die in this shithole. And be grateful for it. It was hard to imagine something worse, but their luck seemed to be shifting in that direction. Vince was a good husband, responsible and hard working, but he was a broad-shouldered longshoreman with a sixth-grade education. The whole city was running short on opportunities for that kind of man.

Her sister Donna was supposed to be minding the kids. She

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was clustered across the street with the other women, watching the brewery while the children played stickball between Webber's abandoned trucking garages. The brewery trucks were coming and going, and the kids were dodging them instead of breaking up the game.

Rose Anna banged on the window with her fist, but she was four floors up. The thought of a round-trip on the stairs in this heat made her want to lie down and nap, but her niece slipped on an oil slick right in front of an oncoming truck. Rose Anna's oldest, Vinny, pulled Lina away from the wheels. A dozen mothers had their heads turned in the opposite direction, worried about feeding kids that might be killed if she didn't get down there to hustle them off the street.

Rose Anna scattered the kids like chickens, clucking at them while she stomped through the street. They ran from her outstretched arms and reformed in clusters just beyond her reach. She called to her sister, but Donna was still gossiping with the other women.

Rose Anna muttered curses at them all, but she stopped when she saw the entrance to Schaeffer. There were men carting off kegs in their cars, in wheelbarrows, on go-carts, and little red wagons.

"Rheingold dumped the extra beer in the river when they shut down. At least Schaeffer's giving it away," Donna said.

"Lord help us, they're the last. Least they can do is get them all drunk and stupid on the leftovers," said Margie, the widow who lived in 33.

That didn't sound right to Rose Anna, but she didn't want to speak out against the group. At least not without a reason. Her niece, the only one from her husband's side, rode past on her bike and stopped by her cousin Tessa, Rose Anna's youngest. Tessa and Franca called Lina over, but she waved and kept playing stickball with the boys. Lina and Franca were best friends, as their mothers had been as children. Her nieces proved it was still good to live here, close to both families, in a neighborhood with second-generation friendships.

Franca's bike stayed glued to her hip while she talked. Rose Anna never saw her without it, and the purple paint, streamers, and pretty white basket with matching purple flowers had given both Tessa and Lina terrible bicycle envy. Not that Tessa had ever asked for a bicycle. Rose Anna wondered how many cigarettes it would take to buy something that fine, to see her own child's face riding by looking so red-cheeked and happy. Sometimes Rose Anna wanted better for her children so bad she wished she'd never had them.

Her apron was balled in her fists again. She sighed, shook out her fingers, and walked over to the girls. Tessa greeted her with, "We're not doing nothing, Ma."

"How's Nana doing, Franca? I haven't seen her on the stoop in a few days."

"Her gout's bad again, so she can't make it down the stairs."

"Tell her I'll get up to visit just as soon as I can. Could you ask your father to have a look at my stove when he gets a chance? The temperature's off."

"Yes, *zia*," Franca said.

Rose Anna patted her niece on the cheek and turned away. "Tessa, if you're not doing nothing, feel free to run upstairs and clean your room," she called out behind her.

She walked back to the women, who hadn't stirred. She watched the alley with them for a few minutes. A few men trickled out without any beer. Rose Anna tried to understand why some men carted off a dozen kegs and some men none. Seniority? Old Bill Hawkins was walking out empty-handed, and he'd worked at the brewery so long he said he hated the sight and smell of beer. That didn't sit right with any severance she could think of. If he didn't want to drink it, he could sell it later, right?

"They're not giving it away for free." Rose Anna kicked the curb, the nearest target. "They're letting 'em buy it for cheap with their salaries."

Donna, who knew when to ignore her sister, had also learned to trust her over the years. Rose Anna was harder to please than

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the rest of them, and she was always the most right about things going wrong. "Did you pay the rent yet?"

Rose Anna said, "Come on, I need to think." Donna followed her across the street and sat down beside her on the stoop.

"You don't think they'd spend it all, do you?" Donna asked. Rose Anna's legs were shaking, making her hair bounce and shimmer in the light. "I mean, not their last, they wouldn't . . ."

"Yeah, like they've never drank it all away before," Rose Anna said, in that voice that made her sisters feel stupid in a way even their husbands couldn't manage.

Rose Anna grabbed Donna by the shoulders. "We need to get in there and get the money away from Fat Louie before their shifts end."

"He won't give us the money," Donna said. She tried to use the stupid voice, but it didn't work right.

"Not us." Rose Anna bit roughly at her thumb nail. "Vinny, Lina, get over here now." She pointed at Lina, the youngest child in the family. "Her."

Donna said, "But, she's a *beast*."

"She's got something. It'll work on Fat Louie."

"What, Ma?" Vinny kept Lina slightly behind him, shielding her. Rose Anna was proud that her boy was prepared to take the brunt of whatever he thought was coming. He was a good boy, and she thought he'd do right when he was grown.

"You know what Fat Louie looks like?"

"Yeah."

"I want you to go in and ask for your father's and your uncles' last pay. Tell him I sent you, and if he doesn't give it to you, I'll remember. Show respect, but tell Fat Louie I'll remember till I'm dancing on his grave."

"Ma . . ." Vinny stuffed his hands in his jeans and rocked on his heels, afraid she'd dance on his grave, too, if he disrespected her.

"You're taking Lina with you. She's your secret weapon. You tell him what I said, and you leave the rest to her."

"We should ask Grace about this," Donna said. Rose Anna growled at her. Her sister never knew humans could make that sound. But then, Rose Anna wasn't acting very human right now. Her own boy looked terrified, although little Lina, who Grace sometimes called Rose Anna Junior, seemed incapable of expressing fear. Even so, Donna tried again. "Rose Anna—"

"*Basta.*" Rose Anna said, dismissing her elder sister. She reached out for Lina and pulled her closer. "Listen, honey, I need you to stare, the way you do sometimes when we yell at you. I don't want you to say anything with that smart mouth you've got. You can't do that, *carina*, promise me, right? Just stare and don't blink like you do at Fat Louie and don't stop, even if your daddy or Uncle Vince or Uncle Hugo or Uncle Pete see you and try to make you go home."

Rose Anna pulled out Lina's barrettes and smoothed out her hair. She tucked her shirt in her shorts, and wiped the smudges from Lina's face with her apron. "Your dad or your uncles they might yell at you, but you just have to get stubborn like you do and keep staring. Nobody likes it when you stare that way. When you see Fat Louie—Vinny's going to point him out if you don't know him—you don't worry 'bout no one but him. You just stare, and if you do that, you'll start to make up for all the trouble you cause. You understand me?"

Lina nodded, too dazed by all the words her aunt threw at her to speak or blink. But she was doing exactly what Rose Anna wanted.

Rose Anna turned on Vinny, cleaning him up roughly with some spit and her apron. "You stay clear of your father and your uncles, and if you can't and you see them, you tell them I'll lock 'em all out if they cross me. Every last one of them." She slapped her fists on her thighs for emphasis. "You understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Go!" Rose Anna commanded.

Lina thought all her problems stemmed from not being born a boy. She spent a lot of time thinking about why she was always in trouble. She didn't think she was bad; she just wasn't very

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good at girl stuff. She got angry fast, she talked back sometimes, and she had real problems staying clean. She thought the last part made them maddest of all, but it was the hardest one to change. Dirt was everywhere, waiting. She tried real hard not to talk back sometimes, concentrated on it until her head hurt, but they didn't like that either. They said she was staring, but she was just thinking hard, trying not to talk back. She wasn't looking at them at all. It was like she was all inside her head making sure she didn't say nothing but "Yes, ma'am" and "No, ma'am." When she was in trouble that was all they ever wanted to hear.

She followed Vinny across the street and onto the docks, past the boarded-up envelope factory and in through the side entrance of Schaeffer's loading zone. Vinny made Lina duck behind some crates, wood that smelled like the blind alley where the bad men slept in cardboard at night. She wanted to leave, run away from the smell that made her want to be sick, but she stuck with Vinny like she was told. Aunt Rose Anna stayed mad the longest, and she always let Mama know just how angry she was. Mama didn't like that much. Nobody liked it when Aunt Rose Anna was mad. Besides, if she got sick in front of Vinny, he'd tell all the other cousins that she was still a baby.

Lina watched Uncle Pete pass by on a little truck with long metal hands. Vinny pulled her along the row of crates until they turned the corner and snuck up behind Fat Louie, who wasn't fat, but tall. His wallet was fat, because he was *The Bookie*. Lina didn't know what that meant yet, but she would. She had to be real careful who she asked or else she'd be called a baby. Then she'd get mad and just end up in trouble again.

Lina *hated* being the youngest.

Vinny said, "That's Fat Louie. He gives out quarters sometimes."

Lina nodded, impressed with this information. She was always the last to know something.

"What do you want, kid?"

"My Ma sent me. She wants you to give me all the paychecks for the family." Vinny wouldn't look up at Fat Louie. Lina knew

that was a mistake. You weren't supposed to look afraid with grownups. Being in trouble all the time taught her that much.

"Why didn't she come herself?" he asked.

"I don't know. She's cooking or something."

"Get outta here, before your dad comes and knocks you on your ass."

"She'll be real mad. . . ."

"Dames are always mad about something, kid." Fat Louie patted Vinny on the rear. "Time you learned that."

Vinny stepped back as Lina stepped forward. She looked at Fat Louie, then looked inside her head even though she wasn't mad at anybody.

"Who are you?" Fat Louie asked.

Lina stared, mouth shut like she was told. As Fat Louie moved, Lina moved along with him, three steps to his one.

"She's my cousin," Vinny said.

"The whole freakin' neighborhood's your cousin. Whose girl is she?"

"She's my Aunt Grace and my Uncle Burt's kid. She's only seven."

"What's she doing?"

"I don't know, my Ma told her to stare at you."

"What for?" Fat Louie stepped back but Lina inched forward. He was taller than anyone in her family, and he didn't lean down to make it easier. "Is she doing that freaky evil eye shit?"

"If you give me them, I'll stop saying what my aunt told me to," Lina said. She liked the idea of being an evil eye girl.

"My Ma told her not to say anything," Vinny said.

"She told me to say it on the inside so you wouldn't find out."

Fat Louie tried to hide his body behind a too-small crate. "Your mother's a fucked-up bitch, sending a kid around to jinx me like this."

"She told me it would be doubly bad if you cursed." Fat Louie tripped on a box edge. Lina enjoyed making up lies to tell him. This was like ghost stories under the covers till you were too

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scared to sleep in your own bed.

"You wait here," he said to Vinny. "You keep the little *strega* with you."

Fat Louie came back and tossed some envelopes at them. Vinny stuck them all deep into the front pocket of his shorts. He took her hand and walked with his other tightly clenched around the money.

Lina wrenched her hand free and skipped ahead of him down West Street. He might have the money now, but she knew that she got it from Fat Louie when Vinny, an older *boy*, was ready to give up and go home for a quarter. She sang, "I did it," over and over to the rhythm of her skipping until she saw Aunt Donna and Aunt Rose Anna circling each other, pacing the length of the stoop, their hands all wild and crazy like when Uncle Matt got sick and went away. She thought *I did it* one last time. The pleasure she felt drained from her, because something important was happening and they sent her. They didn't go themselves. They sent *her*.

Vinny caught up and then passed her, handing the checks over to his mother. She tucked them all inside her housedress. Vinny said, "You told her not to say anything and she told Fat Louie she was giving him the evil eye."

Aunt Donna laughed. Aunt Rose Anna said, "Brilliant," and showered her with kisses. Aunt Rose Anna's cheeks were wet and sweaty.

Aunt Rose Anna never cried. She was the mean aunt, the one who was never afraid. What was so scary about a tall man who got frightened by a little girl? What would have happened to her if Fat Louie wasn't afraid of her being an evil eye girl? Did they send her *because* she was so much trouble? She wished she could ask Vinny or even Tessa, but they wouldn't tell her. They liked it too much when she didn't know stuff.

"This goes a long way with me, *carina*, a very long way," Aunt Rose Anna said, before putting Lina down and wiping both their cheeks with her apron.

Lina wanted to know why Aunt Rose Anna was happy and

crying, why this once she wasn't in trouble, and if Fat Louie being *The Bookie* had something to do with punishing bad little girls.

"The kids aren't going to feed themselves," Aunt Donna said. She pinched Lina's cheek before she went inside.

Rose Anna stood, tugging at Lina's sleeve. "Coming?"

Lina shrugged her off. She didn't like how she felt, how things were so mixed up inside. It was a new kind of dirty.

Rose Anna sat down again. It was getting dark, and the brewery's strobe lights rumbled on. "When I was your age, every building along the docks had lights like those. Watching them light up was like having our own sunrise at sunset."

"I want to see that." Lina looked expectantly down the street, as if their combined will could make it happen.

"I wish you could." Rose Anna watched her niece's mood change, how she brightened at the prospect of a new experience. She would try to yell at Lina less, and she would get Grace to stop telling her she was "Too smart for her own good" all the time. There was no such thing, and it was time they all learned that.

Rose Anna's headache returned, although the hammering had stopped for the night. Lina stared at the docks. "You'll get to see the fireworks in a few days." Rose Anna brushed the hair from Lina's eyes, which was always tangled, despite Grace's constant effort. "You like watching them, right?"

Lina sprang off the stoop, startling Rose Anna with such quick motion. "Teacher taught us a song for the bicentennial. Want to hear?"

Rose Anna swallowed a sigh, and reflexively felt for the checks tucked inside her bra. "Sure, *carina*, sing me your song."