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## Mama, Ruby and Me

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*Amy Fleury*

## Mama, Ruby and Me

Anybody could see that it would come to no good end. But Mama said what would unravel between Ruby and Gus was to be left in the hands of God, and it wasn't our place to be butting in. Courting between old folks like that is tricky business, especially when it involves the likes of my aunt, Ruby, who has lived in this house for seventy-three years, and for every breath of that time has remained untethered to any man other than her dear, sweet daddy (God bless his soul) and the likes of Gus Rosenbaum, that nasty pipe-smoking German, who is a drunken peddler of lies and poison to women, namely those four, Ida, Anna, Corrinne, and Bliss, who took him for a husband and found him to be their death.

Death comes upon us all, it is true, but it seems to come lickety split for any wife of Gus Rosenbaum. Every woman with any sense knows to stay clear of that old coot. Far be it from me though to tell Ruby that her senses have left her.

Gus came around one afternoon while we three were podding peas. He loped up to the porch with his trousers sagging on his old man body and his pipe fixed between his teeth. I have never seen him without his pipe, so it seems to be a part of his face, like a moustache or a scar or some such other thing that might be found on a face. Just sitting there we were, spilling peas from between our thumbs, and never again were our lives to be the same.

"Kind ladies," he said while clenching the pipe that sent sweet tobacco messages up to heaven, up to his dear wives, Ida, Anna, Corrinne and Bliss, "is there anything I can fetch for you from town?"

"Lord yes," said Ruby in the first moment of her madness, "we are needing some pickling lime and a spool of red thread."

Maybe it is a spell that Gus puts on them, or more likely a curse, but whatever it is, it is as strong and sweet as the whiskey on his breath. None of us, Mama, Ruby or me, had ever put up with the notion of romance. Only Mama had been married, which is how she got me, but her husband, my daddy, had wandered off somewhere when I was just a pip. Perhaps it was me, and not Mama, who drove him away with my tight-fisted hollering and carrying on all day. Quite a bundle of thunder, me. Ruby has been with us always, and never have I known it another way. She has sat beside me these fifty-five years at our kitchen table, on the porch and in the parlor, and never

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have I seen her act so foolish as to fall full belly-buster in love with Gus Rosenbaum.

That day he brought us back our thread and lime and a bag of peppermint candies, and from then on he began to work his slow, smoky magic on poor Ruby. Unsuspecting as she was, my aunt was coaxed into performing the ridiculous, doting tasks of those in love—embroidering silly handkerchiefs, baking elaborate pies, and all the while humming or warbling some ninny song. Very much like Ida, Anna, Corrinne and Bliss.

When Gus came to call the day before last, the two of them sat on the porch swing, cuddling and cooing like a couple of kids, and he gave her a letter he'd composed about Ruby being his sun and his moon. *X's and O's*, *Gus*, he'd signed it. Yesterday Ruby came to me and Mama and said that she was leaving us to marry Gus, that she wanted to be at his side, to darn his socks, to hoe his garden, to put up his beans, to sleep in his bed and to hold his hand for the rest of her days. Zeal can kill you, I say.