

Excerpt from

*Rosa, Sola*

by

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Published by Arquilla Press

## Chapter 1: Owl Eyes

“Can I help, Mrs. Morelli?” Rosa asked as her best friend’s mother lifted baby Antonio from his crib. The baby kicked his chubby legs, beating the air with his bare feet. To Rosa’s surprise, he wore only a T-shirt and diaper. She thought babies had to be bundled up all the time, even in summer.

Mrs. Morelli answered, “You can give me a *pannolino*.” She nodded at the stack of white cloths on the dresser, then laid the baby on her bed.

Rosa handed a diaper to Mrs. Morelli, who smiled and said, “*Grazie*.”

“You’re welcome.” Rosa wanted to ask what else she could do, but a loud *clickety-clack* stopped her.

On the other side of the bed, AnnaMaria was shaking a lollipop-shaped toy over her brother’s head. Antonio turned toward the sound.

“AnnaMaria,” Mrs. Morelli said as she pulled off Antonio’s plastic pants, “you should be as helpful as your friend.”

“I help a lot, Mama.” AnnaMaria dropped the noisy rattle onto the bed. “But changing diapers is yucky.” She scrunched her nose and stepped back.

Rosa, however, drew closer. She watched, fascinated, while Mrs. Morelli undid Antonio’s diaper pins and hooked them onto her apron strap.

“Did you have a good nap, *bambino mio*?” Mrs. Morelli said to the baby. Antonio smiled as if he understood. Rosa smiled, too.

When Mrs. Morelli cleaned his bottom, though, the baby started crying. To distract him, AnnaMaria bent over and let her long brown hair dangle above his face. He stopped fussing and reached up.

“You can’t catch it, silly,” AnnaMaria said, turning her head from side to side. “I’m too fast for you.”

Rosa thought, *It isn’t fair*. AnnaMaria has a baby brother *and* two little sisters. Rosa didn’t have anyone.

Before pinning on the new diaper, Mrs. Morelli took Antonio’s tiny feet in one hand and rubbed baby powder over his bottom with the other. The powder’s fragrance chased away the last of the dirty diaper smell.

Finally, Mrs. Morelli pulled up Antonio’s plastic pants. “*Finito*.” She gave the baby’s bottom a pat, then turned to Rosa. “You want to hold him while I wash my hands?”

“Can I?” Even though she was nine years old, Rosa had never held a baby.

“Of course.” Mrs. Morelli pointed at a chair in the corner. “Sit down.”

Rosa’s heart pounded as she leaned forward in the chair.

Mrs. Morelli eased the baby into her arms, saying, “Just watch his head.”

Rosa cradled the baby’s bald head in her left elbow. He weighed more than she’d expected.

“AnnaMaria knows what to do if you need help,” Mrs. Morelli said as she walked away.

Rosa feared Antonio might cry again after his mother left, but he didn’t. Instead, he glanced around the room, his chocolate-colored eyes wide open. When he finally looked up at Rosa, she said, “Hello, Antonio.” He stared right at her.

The pounding of Rosa’s heart slowed as she stared back. Antonio’s dark eyes seemed too big for his round, bald head. Without looking up, Rosa said, “His eyes are huge.”

“Yeah. I call them owl eyes,” AnnaMaria said. “And watch this.” AnnaMaria touched a finger to Antonio’s palm. He immediately clenched his hand around it. She pulled away, but Antonio didn’t let go. “He’s really strong.”

Rosa heard footsteps coming down the hall, then Luisa burst into the room. Luisa was the youngest of the three Morelli girls, and a real chatterbox for a three-year-old. “I can’t find Dolly,” she cried. “You said I could play with her. I want to make her talk.”

“It’s okay, Luisa,” AnnaMaria said. “I’ll help you find Dolly.” AnnaMaria pried her finger from Antonio’s grip. “I’ll be right back, Rosa.”

Rosa looked down at Antonio. Why would Luisa want to play with a plastic doll when she had a real live baby brother? He was better than any doll, even one that said “Mama” when you pulled its string. Antonio needed someone to take care of him. A doll didn’t need anyone.

The baby blinked, fluttering his long, dark lashes. “Owl eyes,” Rosa said out loud. Yes, the name fit.

She bent over and inhaled his baby powder smell. Too bad her hair was tied back, not loose like AnnaMaria’s so that Antonio could play with it.

Rosa reached her right hand up from under the baby and touched her pinkie to his palm. He wrapped his hand around her finger, as he had done to AnnaMaria. A warm, tingly feeling spread through Rosa’s whole body.

She pressed her face against his. His cheek felt softer than the angora scarf Ma had knitted her for Christmas. “Oh, Antonio,” Rosa whispered. “I wish you were *my* brother.”

Mrs. Morelli returned before AnnaMaria did. “I’m sorry, Rosa.” She took the baby from Rosa. “AnnaMaria should not have left you *sola*.”

“But I wasn’t alone.” Rosa smiled up at Mrs. Morelli. “Antonio was with me.”

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Rosa didn’t feel alone until she had to walk home by herself. *Sola*. Just thinking the word made her lonely. With Papa at work, Ma would be the only one home. And she’d be busy sewing for her customers.

Rosa reached into her pocket for the baseball Uncle Sal had caught at Wrigley Field the day before. Every June, her great-uncle took her to a Cubs game to celebrate the start of summer, but this was the first time he’d caught a foul ball there. A real major league baseball. The ball’s stitching felt bumpy under Rosa’s fingers.

Showing the ball to AnnaMaria had been Rosa’s excuse to visit her friend. Ever since Antonio had been born, Ma had kept Rosa from going to the Morellis’—she didn’t want Rosa to be a bother. Now Rosa couldn’t wait to tell Ma how she hadn’t been a bother, but a help, and how Mrs. Morelli had let her hold the baby.

As Rosa skipped home she tossed the ball into the air. It came down faster than she expected and landed with a thump alongside the Kowalskis’ back fence. The ball just missed a pair of girl’s red and white polka-dotted shorts hanging at the end of the crowded clothesline. Rosa recognized the shorts. They belonged to Debbie, the next to youngest of the six Kowalski kids. Debbie had been in Rosa’s third grade class.

Most of the kids at Our Lady of Mercy School came from big families like the Kowalskis'. Debbie often teased Rosa about being the only one in their class without a brother or sister. Rosa didn't know which she hated more—being lonely or being different.

One thing she did know—she wanted a baby brother.

She picked up the baseball and tucked it into her pocket.

When Rosa reached home, her Sunday dress was the only thing on the backyard clothesline. As she watched the pink flowered dress fluttering all alone in the wind, the idea came to her. At Mass next Sunday, she would say an extra-special prayer. She would ask God to send her a baby brother. One just like Antonio.

## Chapter 2: Heartfelt Prayers

Three weeks later, Papa drove Ma and Rosa to Fullerton Avenue Beach to celebrate the Fourth of July. As they crept along in the holiday traffic, Rosa shifted from side to side to keep her legs from sticking to the vinyl seat. She could hardly wait to get to the beach. Swimming with Papa was a special treat. During the busy summer construction season, Papa's bricklaying job left little time for fun.

Papa parked the car and they found a spot on the crowded beach. "*Andiamo*, Rosa," he said as soon as they were settled. "Let's see how the water is." Rosa left Ma sitting on their blanket and followed him.

When Rosa stepped into Lake Michigan, her skin broke out in goose bumps. "It's freezing!"

"Here, I'll help you get used to it," Papa said. He bent down and splashed her with both hands.

Rosa shrieked, then splashed him back.

Papa laughed. “Catch me if you can!” He dove into the water.

Rosa plunged in after him.

They had their own special rules for water tag: Papa never went in the really deep water. He always swam slow enough for Rosa to catch him. And when Papa was “it,” he counted to ten before chasing Rosa.

Despite the cold water, Rosa soon caught up to Papa. “Gotcha,” she said, tagging his leg. But as she started to swim away, someone called, “Look out!”

A black Frisbee came flying right at Rosa. Before she could react, Papa lunged forward and blocked it from hitting her in the face.

He snatched the Frisbee, then turned to yell at the boy who had hollered the warning. “What’s the matter with you!” Papa stood up, stretching to his full height. He was only five foot ten, but his thick muscles made him seem taller. As he scowled at the boy, Papa’s heavy eyebrows joined to form one dark hairy line across his forehead. Rosa shivered. That look meant trouble.

Papa shook the Frisbee at the boy. “You trying to kill somebody?”

“I’m really sorry, Mister,” the boy said. “I was throwing to *him*.” He motioned toward another boy standing about six feet to Rosa’s right. The other boy waved, then swam for shore.

Papa clutched the Frisbee, still scowling. Rosa reached up and squeezed his outstretched arm. “It was an accident, Papa.”

Papa lowered his arm. He put his free hand on Rosa’s shoulder. “You okay, Rosalina?”

Rosa nodded. “The Frisbee didn’t even touch me.”



“All right then.” Papa turned to the boy. “Next time, you be more careful.” Papa tossed the Frisbee back. As he watched the boy swim away, Papa’s eyebrows returned to normal.

Relieved, Rosa scooped a handful of water and splashed him. “You’re it, remember?”

“Oh, I forgot.” He ruffled her hair, then began counting, “*Uno, due, tre ...*”

Rosa swam off, happy to return to their game. They played water tag till her arms and legs ached. Then Rosa headed toward the beach while Papa went for a swim in the deep water.

Half-way back to shore, she stopped to scan the beach for Ma. A little boy wearing a white sailor hat caught Rosa’s attention. He stood at the edge of the water, clutching the handle of a green bucket. He looked afraid to step into the lake. Then a girl about Rosa’s age came up alongside him. She took the boy’s free hand and led him into the water. She stomped her foot, splashing the boy’s legs. The boy laughed and stomped his foot too, splashing himself as much as his sister. Rosa smiled. But she couldn’t help wondering, When would *she* have a little brother to play with?

Rosa finally spotted Ma in her yellow sundress—Ma couldn’t swim, so she didn’t even own a swimsuit. Rosa waved, and Ma waved back. The day before had been the third Sunday Rosa had prayed for a baby brother at Mass, but she still didn’t see any change in Ma. Why was God taking so long to answer her prayers?

Suddenly, Rosa felt two strong hands gripping her waist. She turned just as Papa lifted her out of the water. “Hey,” she cried, pounding his wet shoulders. “Put me down, you big sea monster.”

“If you say so,” he said, tossing her into the lake.

She jumped up and ran for shore with Papa only steps behind.

When she reached their blanket, Ma handed her a towel. “How’s the water?”

Rosa shivered and wrapped the towel around herself. “Cold!”

“Here, Frannie, feel for yourself.” Papa bent over and shook his head toward Ma.

Water sprayed everywhere.

Ma raised her arms. “*Basta*, Joe!” she said, laughing. “Enough!”

Papa kissed Ma’s cheek, dripping water onto the shoulder of her sundress. He dabbed the wet spot with his towel. “There, all better.”

Ma laughed again. Rosa smiled. Her mother’s laughter always reminded her of a bird chirping.

“Off with you,” Ma said, pushing Papa away. “Before you soak the blanket.”

Papa spread his towel on the closest patch of bare sand and lay down on his back. The beads of water clinging to the hair on his chest glistened in the sun. Rosa wished they could have more days like this. But Papa worked six days a week, from early in the morning till almost dark. Except for holidays, Sunday was Papa’s only day off—his day to catch up on sleep and chores. He didn’t even go to Mass with Rosa and Ma unless it was a special occasion.

Ma had just finished combing the tangles from Rosa’s wet hair when a high-pitched cry filled the air. Rosa turned to see a little girl rubbing her eyes, her face partially hidden by her long blond hair.

“Mommy,” the girl cried between sobs. “I want Mommy.”

Several people gathered around her on the ledge that separated the beach from the park. A tall woman wearing horn-rimmed glasses stared down at the girl and said, “Are you lost, dear?”

“What’s your name?” asked an old man with a cigar.

A teenager in a tie-dyed shirt held out a bag of potato chips. “You hungry, kid?”

The girl cried even louder, “Mommy!”

Rosa felt sorry for the little girl. How would she ever find her mother in such a crowd?

Before Rosa could say anything, Ma got up. Rosa followed.

Ma sat down on the ledge next to the girl so they were eye to eye. “What a pretty bathing suit,” Ma said. “Are those fishies?”

The girl sniffled, then nodded.

“So many bright colors. Do you know what color this is?”

The girl looked down at the fish Ma pointed at. “Orange.”

“That’s right. And this one?”

“Green,” the girl answered.

“Yes. Now, tell me, can you remember what color bathing suit your mama is wearing today?”

The girl nodded. “Blue and white.” She wiped the tears from her cheeks.

“Very good.” Ma pointed at herself. “My name is Francesca. And this is my daughter, Rosa.” Ma touched Rosa’s arm, her hand warm against Rosa’s skin. “We want to help you find your mama. If I pick you up, you will see better. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Your hair is so beautiful,” Ma said as she lifted the girl. “Is your mama’s the same color?”

The girl nodded.

Ma soon had her talking in sentences. The girl told Ma her name was Patty, she was three years old, and she had a dog named Buster. When her daddy went to buy some hot dogs, Buster ran off after a squirrel. Patty tried to catch him and got lost.

Poor little Patty. Ma would never have let Rosa wander off like that.

Rosa followed Ma and Patty across the blanket-covered beach. The hot sand scorched the bottom of Rosa's feet, and before long her head ached from searching the crowd. She didn't see any blond woman in a blue and white swimsuit. Maybe Patty was wrong. After all, she was only three.

As they trudged on, the Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice" blared from someone's transistor radio. Patty leaned her head against Ma's, her hair bright yellow next to Ma's dark curls. Rosa wondered what it would be like to brush that long blond hair. Maybe if they didn't find her mother, Patty could move in with Rosa's family. Rosa really wanted a baby brother like Antonio, but a little sister would be fun, too. Rosa began singing in her mind, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a brother and a sister—"

"Where's Mommy?" Patty asked Ma. Her voice sounded so sad, Rosa felt sorry for what she'd been thinking.

"Don't worry," Ma said. "We will find her."

They had almost reached the bathhouse when Rosa spotted a blond woman talking to a policeman. The woman was wearing a white beach cover-up over a navy blue swimsuit. She stood with her back to them, waving frantically toward the park.

Rosa pointed. "Over there, Patty. Is that your mother?"

"Mommy!" Ma set Patty down and she ran toward the woman.

The woman turned around. “Patty!” She scooped up Patty, hugging her tight. “Where did you go? I was so worried.”

“I got lost, Mommy. They helped me find you.” Patty pointed at Rosa and Ma.

“Thank you so much!” Patty’s mother pressed her daughter’s cheek against her own tear-streaked face. Their matching yellow hair looked like a halo holding their heads together. “How can I ever repay you?”

“No need,” Ma said. She put her arm around Rosa. “I know what it is to have a daughter.”

The words made Rosa’s heart swell. She leaned her head on Ma’s shoulder. Ma tilted her own head against Rosa’s and gave her a sideways hug. Rosa wondered if they had a halo, too.

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Back on the blanket, Rosa said, “You were so good with Patty, Ma. How did you do that?”

Ma shrugged. “I like children, that’s all.”

“Then why didn’t you have more after me?”

“I wanted to, Rosa.” Ma put her hand on Rosa’s. “But they never came.”

“Why not?”

Ma hesitated, then said quietly, “I guess you are old enough to know now. Something happened to me when you were born. I am a small woman and you were a big baby.” Ma touched her belly with her free hand. “The doctor said it would be hard for me to ever carry a baby inside again.”

A queasy feeling crept into Rosa's stomach. She pulled her hand from Ma's. "Then it's *my* fault?"

"No, no, *cara*." Ma brushed a curl from Rosa's forehead. "Do not blame yourself. It is no one's fault. In the Old Country we call it *Il Destino*. Destiny. It was not meant to be."

"Then I've been praying for something impossible?"

"You have been praying I should have a baby?"

Rosa nodded. "A baby boy, just like AnnaMaria's brother." After what Ma had just said, though, it sounded pretty foolish.

"The doctor never said it is *impossibile*, Rosa. Only that there is not much chance." Ma put her finger under Rosa's chin and lifted her face. "Nothing is *impossibile* for God."

"Really?" Rosa felt hopeful again. "So it's okay to keep praying?"

"Of course it's okay." Ma hugged Rosa. Then she pointed at Papa, asleep on his towel. "You better wake your papa, now, before the sun turns him into a lobster."

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On the way home in the car, Rosa thought of what Ma had said about destiny. But Ma's words hadn't calmed the queasiness in Rosa's stomach. *She* was the reason Ma hadn't had more kids.

Rosa closed her eyes. Maybe if she prayed for forgiveness, God would make everything all right. She reached for the gold cross she always wore around her neck. Holding the cross, she prayed in her mind. "Dear God, I'm really sorry I hurt Ma when I was born. Please forgive me, and fix it so she can have a baby again." Then Rosa recited the Act of Contrition.

She let go of the cross and opened her eyes. What should she do for her penance? The hardest penance Monsignor Kelly had ever given her was to pray a decade of the rosary. Ten Hail Marys, just for talking back to Ma. Rosa decided to give herself the toughest penance she could think of—a whole rosary.

The car stopped at a red light. Through the open window, Rosa saw a woman pushing a blue baby buggy. She wondered if the baby inside was a boy, like Antonio.

Rosa got another idea. Instead of praying for a baby brother once a week at Mass, she would say a rosary every day. And she wouldn't stop till Ma was pregnant. Then God would *have* to answer her prayers. "God always answers heartfelt prayers," Sister Mary Giles had told Rosa's third grade class, "as long as they're for something that will bring you good." Rosa couldn't imagine how Ma having a baby could bring anything but good.