

Becoming Rachel by Rachel Allen

7/29/2021 [6 Comments](#)

In middle school, when teachers called my name, giggles and laughter erupted. Shame crept through my body, flushed my face and burned my ears.

Someone, I don't remember who, eventually told me that there was a whorehouse in town named Rachel's. A gray house that sat on a steep hillside, halfway up a mountain road in coal and steel country with a single driveway that snuck behind the house, perhaps so cars could not be seen from the road.

Rachel's Whorehouse. My name, Rachel, linked to a brothel.

On the way to the scene of an emergency, my grandfather's sister, a nurse, my great aunt Rachel died in an ambulance accident.

My father tells me my grandfather grieved quietly, but deeply. And, I am told that when he heard that my parents had given me the name Rachel, that he wept.

My grandfather and his sister grew up in Oswego County in upstate New York in a farmhouse with 9 siblings. I'm not sure how my Aunt Rachel became a nurse, but I do know that my grandfather worked hard to put himself through school to become a teacher. It must have been even harder for my Aunt Rachel to go to nursing school.

Every day for as long as I can remember, I have looked at the picture of my namesake. Currently, on a radiator shelf right next to my bed, among other family photos, it sits. A black and white photo, with her curls peeking from under her nursing cap and her lips gently pursed in a comfortable non-smile.

Her eyes shine.

Rachel Dunn.

Her name. My name.

This name, in my growing years, carried two very different associations. The one in my family: beloved sister, aunt. Then, one in my community: a social outcast, someone who sold sex, the owner of a brothel.

Middle school humor is awkward, uncomfortable, crass and accompanied for me at the time, by the awareness that anyone's father, uncle, brother or grandfather could be frequenting *Rachel's, The Brothel*. Through the hallways of middle school, her name was whispered, and supposedly all the politicians, many of our male teachers and yes, even the police officers frequented the brothel.

Every time I raised my hand to answer a question.

Every time a teacher called me to answer a question.

Every time.

The classroom erupted in giggles and teasing.

Perhaps someone gave me a sympathetic glance, perhaps a teacher glared and tempered the response of my fellow students. If so, it went unnoticed by me.

If you can remember middle school, remember the hormonal confusion and rage. Now, add post manufacturing steel town at the end of the 1970's. Think of a pre music video, pre Internet, where fashion and culture have a very narrow expression, and there is nowhere to run. No escape to like-minded kids, just as isolated and forlorn as you. Maybe you might agree that shit like this can ruin your teenage-life, and for that time period it did mine.

Study hall in middle school ranked only a bit higher than gym class and the lunchroom which had their own unique opportunities for humiliation. Popular girls confidently exchanged notes while boys with long greasy bangs and smelly gym socks kicked the desks of the popular girls, snickering, perhaps thinking this would be appealing to these girls who matured early and seemingly effortlessly.

Here, no one studied or did work. Instead, they established their social hierarchy and position in school.

My name, associated in their minds with a brothel, put me squarely near the bottom of that hierarchy.

This particular day, perhaps the brothel was in the news the day before due to a bust, the calling of the roll in study hall and my name, Rachel Dunn provoked loud roars of laughter. Desks rattled and the laughter of the greasy banged boys roared into the study hall. The popular girls and everyone else averted their eyes, uncomfortable with my presence-- the one bearing this name, Rachel.

Numb and shame shrunk, I tried to render myself invisible. I hated myself for existing, and I hated everyone around me for laughing at my stupid name.

I dreaded school.

I tried a million excuses to get out of going and cried daily.

In my home where addiction and loud, frequent arguments occupied center stage, no one ever asked me why. I didn't want to go to school, and I didn't want to be home either.

I didn't want to exist in my own skin as Rachel. I didn't want to be someone associated with a brothel, and I didn't want to be someone whose stepfather commented about her body and whose roaming hands made me not want to exist in this life.. I wanted to find a way to live a life without so much pain.

I recall during this time, a friend told me how bad she felt for me--that my name was so shameful, and she doubted any boys would want to date me.

She, perhaps, also kindly omitted the other reasons, like my kitchen table haircuts and the hand-me-down clothes.

Inventing *Rae* as a person other than *Rachel* who identified so deeply with shame, was an act of survival.

Reflecting back on this invention, perhaps unknowingly, identifying as *Rae* meant practicing more discernment when picking clothes out of the large bags of hand-me-downs and choosing quality over quantity when it came to the very limited budget in our household for new clothes.

As *Rae*, I hung out with free range neighborhood kids with rebellious attitudes who sat on stoops and snuck cigarettes.

My identity as *Rae* vacillated between beer parties in the woods and playing trombone in marching band and getting good grades.

My identity as *Rae* studied social cues on fitting in and on posing as someone from a functional, loving family, and as someone who didn't spend sleepless nights listening to fighting or full on participating in the daily, constant rage of her home.

My identity as *Rae* separated me from *Rachel* who had not only the shameful moniker associated with the brothel, *Rachel*, but who also had sacred boundaries violated by her stepfather. He would whisper about my body, rub my legs in the car, and masturbate in front of me.

Rachel, who could barely stand to exist in her own skin, decided to live as someone else.

In Johnstown, we were struggling to recover from our third flood in less than a century, the closing of the steel mills, and the disintegration of the Steelworkers Union that advocated for decent, living wages.

Only aware of my own identity struggle, I never considered that even the popular girls and the boys with greasy bangs might be suffering in other ways. I only knew their taunts and indifference, not if they might also go home to addiction, violence, and abuse.

My own circumstances led me to believe that if I could only change some basic things, like my shameful name, and please God, my unruly curly hair, and other outward trappings, that I could make my life better.

In some capacity, I did.

Rae had decidedly more confidence than *Rachel*, and somehow she maneuvered my family into the purchase of contact lenses after years of bottle cap glasses that left indentations on my nose and the tops of my ears. I fought with and tamed my hair that curled in all the wrong places, using so much AquaNet that lighting matches for those forbidden cigarettes was a definite hazard.

Without knowing it, I had achieved, through no small amount of effort and a great deal of eye shadow, a small measure of attractiveness as *Rae*.

I entered high school as her and landed a boyfriend. This new version of me was a mixture of scandal from the beer parties in the woods and intellectual curiosity and success in school. This recently developed complexity bridged the serious solitary awkwardness of *Rachel*, who didn't have many friends to invite to birthday parties or to the lunch table, to *Rae*, who didn't necessarily excel socially but at the very least, wasn't openly mocked and had a bit of confidence in high school cafeteria lunch table seating arrangements.

Transitioning from *Rachel* to *Rae* was bumpy, yet in this emerging space, I found creative and interesting friends who actually seemed to like me. In this group, there was a Rae Ann. To further solidify my identification as *Rae*, we together became, "The Raes."

After high school, I remained *Rae* for a time. After all, I was still in my hometown attending college 12 miles from *Rachel's Brothel*. I recall hearing the occasional mention of the brothel, but as *Rae*, it was not as jarring. But slowly, I began to reclaim my name.

Moving on with life and after moving to Pittsburgh, without conscious thought, I began referring to myself as *Rachel*. I don't know that I have ever unpacked this until I started writing about my name. Until the words unfolded, I hadn't recognized that I remade myself into another persona.

In this unfolding, I hold my younger self in so much tenderness. I marvel at her ingenuity in inventing what she needed. When she was not given acceptance, predictability, safety, worthiness of love and care, I did what I needed to do to make it through the day.

Isn't this what we call survival?

We create what we need to make it through the excruciating moments, days and years of trials and traumas. We draw from God knows where, resiliency—that ability to shape meaning and grow even through obstacles and challenges.

Now, I live back in Johnstown and have for 30 years as *Rachel*. This woman, who still continually arrives into an emerging awareness of what it means to embody her authentic self, the self that doesn't require validation from popular girls and boys with greasy bangs.

Here, in my hometown that is still figuring out how to be in the 21st century without its steel mills and industry, I arrive, curious, without judgment, wondering about the woman who made her living running a brothel and what she did to survive. I arrive here grateful, also, to have a namesake, whose story largely remains a mystery to me and in whose image I see my own eyes and features. This image of my Aunt Rachel, drives my desire to embody myself, my name, my history, my DNA—shame-free and living life as Rachel.

Rachel Allen is an emerging writer from Johnstown, Pa who also plays the Celtic Harp for hospice patients and teaches Trauma Informed Yoga on Zoom and in urban green spaces. Rachel has work published by Hags on Fire, Christians Practicing Yoga and has been a guest blogger for Yoga Service Council.

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6 Comments

Alexis Zinovenko

8/3/2021 08:28:01 am

OK-I loved everything about this. I can identify with your struggle as they're my own but in a far different way! I was Alexis in a county that had no Alexis's. I was half Russian, half German at a time (1962) when Germans and Russians were not thought well of in this nation., The red scare was barely over and WW2 was still a memory to many a child's father. I was hated for being me. For something I could not control,

I admire the woman you have become and we are proof that what does not destroys us makes us stronger.

Rachel

8/10/2021 09:09:51 am

Thank you so much for reading it and your comments mean a lot to me.

REPLY

Jackie

8/3/2021 07:25:25 pm

What a beautiful picture painted with your words. You are multi-talenrd. I so enjoy your work.

REPLY

Rachel

8/10/2021 09:11:02 am

I so appreciate your support! It means so much to me!

REPLY

Tracy Tredennick

8/4/2021 04:39:47 pm

I was immediately became enveloped in the story and wanted to read till the end. Gently raw and well written. Kudos!

REPLY

Rachel

8/10/2021 09:11:36 am

Thank you for reading and for your kind words!

REPLY

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