

LORI D'ANGELO

Mary Rice

Like all guidance counselors' offices in the public school system, Mr. Woods' is small. But he tries to make it seem new-agey and welcoming by having a framed impressionist painting in the background, a Monet print, I think, and a small fountain on his desk where water brushes smooth, polished stones, so we, his victims, can hear the sound of running water while he tries to find out stuff on our inner psyches. Then he can write a book someday and get a better job, maybe. I also think he might actually like it if one of us went all Columbine on the school so that he could do the talk show circuit and get paid speaking fees for going around the country and talking about how to help a community in crisis or some such psychobabble nonsense. I get it though, his language, even though I don't buy most of it. He's trying to understand our souls but you can't do that. At least not with science. With art, maybe.

Still, Mr. Woods can be useful. Since he thinks I'm troubled because both of my parents are dead and I get detentions every week even though my brother, Jerry, is a model student, a math genius, one of Northmont High's finest. He tells me I can come and talk to him any time. I think there's something slightly Freudian going on. He thinks that he's a father figure for me, and oh yeah, did I mention, the one thing I know for sure about my mother, from pictures, is that I am like her in at least one way? I am well endowed.

I am wearing a low cut shirt, black nail polish and cling-to-my-ass jeans. I walk into the communal area of the guidance office. I tell the secretary, "I am here to see Mr. Woods."

"Do you have an appointment?" she asks.

"No," I say, "but tell him Mary Rice is here."

He'll see me. He always sees me. Even if he should be doing something else like contacting the parents of other students with low grades. "Wait one minute," says the secretary, Mrs. Adams, a wide woman with freckly white skin and short, badly cut hair. She wears blue eye shadow and pink lipstick.

And one minute later, Mr. Woods, a balding man who favors button down shirts, pullover sweaters and dress pants that seem just a little to the right of ragged, comes out.

"Ah, Mary," he says in a friendly but clinical manner. I stare at his bitten-down nails. "What can I do for you?"

"I want to talk to you about my mother," I say.

His face brightens. "Come right in."

Talking about crap like this is my way to miss class and have it be excused.

He shuts the door and offers me a hard chair. "So what has brought about this sudden breakthrough?" he asks me through rectangular glasses and blue, sympathetic eyes. He looks like a bureaucrat or a math teacher. On the wall, he has more soft paintings. I think "The Scream" would be more appropriate for this place.

Instead of answering, I ask, "Do you like filling out all that paperwork there?" I point to a large stack. Mr. Woods is one of those extremely organized people with a day planner and in and out stacks. He's one of those who quotes inspirational sayings to himself and reads books like *The Seven Habits*

of Highly Successful People. And he finishes work each day exactly on time and goes home to his wife.

His wife is one of those ridiculously conventional women who always wears makeup even if she's only going to the Supercenter at 5 a.m. to pick up two items. I know. I've seen her there smelling of expensive perfume and salon shampoo. He can't admit it, but I think he would have been better off with someone wilder.

Ahem. Mr. Woods is clearing his throat. I make him nervous. Despite his academic interest in the field of psychology, he's not all that good with people. Most of the other people at the school seem to think that we're lucky to have a man of his caliber. But I think he's an overgrown misfit like my brother or my Aunt Judy, who I live with now that my parents are dead. He is interesting in all the ways that the boring life he tries to live doesn't fit. I lean forward slightly so he can see my breasts. But I act like it is unintentional. Like I am waiting for an answer.

"Um, well, I don't mind. But we're not here to talk about me," Mr. Woods says as he twirls a pencil nervously in his right hand. He likes to say 'we' when he means 'I.'

"Yes, right," I say, leaning forward further still. Mr. Woods' interest is split between what I'm saying and what I'm doing. He stops twirling the pencil, adjusts his glasses, writes in a yellow legal pad each time I come to visit him. Sometimes I'm tempted to ask how large my file is. But I have a feeling that a question like that might land me back in Vice Principal McCaffrey's office. Mr. McCaffrey likes to speak to me about how disappointed my mother would be with my behavior. And the thing is Mr. McCaffrey is better at playing me than anyone. I do feel guilty each time I go there. Maybe my mother, who died in a car accident when I was five, really would be disappointed in me. Maybe I don't care. But I do. Of course I do. What girl doesn't want her mother's approval regardless of what she says? Even if she's dead. In Mr. Woods' office, though, I know that I am in control. Mr. Woods seems slightly afraid of me or is it something else?

"I had this memory of her," I tell him, "in a dream." He looks excited. I wonder if he's smart enough to figure out that I make up half the stuff I tell him. Well, yeah, he's smart enough but also desperate. Maybe one of us really will provide him with a case study that will make him famous. I don't know what the rules are and if he would be breaking them by writing about us. But I'm sure he'd find a way to get around them or persuade our parents and guardians to sign a waiver for the good of the intellectual community or some b.s. like that. "She was 23 then, and I was maybe a year old or so and she was breast feeding me. I don't know how I remember this," I continue leaning forward so he can see my breasts the whole entire time.

He's looking and trying not to look. His face is turning red. I am pleased but keep my face neutral, as if absorbed in my memory. He glances down at his notepad and when he looks up he pretends like he's not seeing. "But I remember that they were warm, and I liked the feeling and when I was there up against her sucking on them, I felt safe. Like the world couldn't harm me."

"Um hmm," he says, trying to sound detached. He grips the pencil hard. Because of the strange things I'm interested in, some of the girls at school think I'm a lesbian, and I let them think it. I wonder what Mr. Woods thinks. But I know better than to ask. Just to pretend that this is an innocent memory.

"And there's another memory too. I was a little older and we were riding together in a car. And my mother put out her hand because we came to a sudden stop. I had my seat belt on but she held out her hand just to be sure, just to be safe. She worried about me always. Me before herself." This second memory is true. The trick about lying is that you need to include enough of the truth to make it sound plausible.

Mr. Woods scribbles furiously in his notebook while I finish talking, and I can tell that he is debating what to ask me about, the real memory or the fake one. I can tell that he's wondering what would be appropriate and what would cross the line. Can he ask me about my mother's breasts while staring so plainly at my own and trying to convince himself that I won't notice?

"Hmm," he says, trying to play it safe, "and what do you think these things mean?"

He's got ink on his hands and on his sweater.

"Well, you know," I say, leaning farther forward so that my hands are resting on his desk and my breasts are practically in his face. He tries so hard to control what he's feeling. I wonder if he admits that he's attracted to me. "When my mother died, it was like I was ripped from the womb again," I say, wondering if this is too much. Even for me.

"The womb is a place of safety and the world is a place of cruelty and rejection. Mary," he asks, "do you feel rejected?"

"Um," I say, "doesn't everybody feel that way, in high school. I mean at least a little?"

"I suppose," he says, "but do you sometimes feel that it is hard for you in particular?"

"Yes," I say, and I realize that we've reached one of those rare places in a conversation where I am actually being honest. I've cut out all the bullshit. Even if it's only for a minute, which for me is likely all there can be, still it's significant that I've said something true. I am communicating for once. I know that this rarely happens between two people. "It is sometimes hard for me in particular."

He looks at me. Not at my breasts, but at me: my face, my eyes and he sees me. And I feel bad about what I've been doing, the ways I've been manipulating him, because, in spite of his failed ambitions and his silly pretensions, beneath all that, he actually is a good man. Maybe my father was like that. I look at him and think that his eyes seem calm or calming and his hands, long and thin, seem strong and comforting. I wonder what it would be like to be patted on the head or the shoulder by them. I wish that I could tell him about the ink on his hands, that I could take his hand in mine and—

"I don't think about my father much," I admit.

"Oh no?" he asks.

"No," I say. I barely remember my father at all. He bought me ice cream once and took me to the movies and I sat on his lap once and he held me. He died along with my mother in that accident.

This would be the time for him to psychoanalyze me, to probe deeper and, like my brother does in his obscure research, take copious notes.

But he doesn't. Instead, he says, with more emotion in his voice than I am used to hearing, "Mary, if you can just make it through the next few years, things will get better for you. They really will."

I look at him again, notice the gray in his hair interwoven with the black, in the places where he still has hair, how he's tried to hide the bald spots, notice the wrinkles around his eyes. Notice the scar on his left cheek, wonder what it's from. I want to put my hand there, feel his skin. He seems different somehow even though he is still the same pathetic man whose life's ambitions have been thwarted and who clamors for regard in such a way as to make him seem pitiable, and I am still a high school student in his office who has come here to secretly mock him. But for a minute I don't want to.

"You know maybe one of us, one of our stories will provide you with the material for that book you're wanting to write and you can, you know, get out of here, sometime."

He stops writing, looks up at me with surprise. And I wonder if I have said too much, if I have been too honest.

"Do you want to stay here and talk more about your dreams?" he asks, and there is something hard in his voice, something that frightens me and I wonder if he's guessed the truth, "or do you want to return to, what is it that you have this period, trigonometry, in which you received a D last semester

because, according to your teacher, although you never did any of the homework, you got Bs and As on every single test?"

I look down. "I'd like to stay here," I say, "if I can."

"You can't keep doing this, Mary. There's no future in it." I wonder what he means by this. Skipping class. Getting bad grades because I don't try. Manipulating everyone I know. Any or all of the above.

"I know, but I'm not ready quite yet to give it up. Did you," I venture, "know my mother, or were you at Ohio State then working on your PhD?"

He looks at me again with interest and something else. "Mary, this is," but he stops. I wonder what he's thinking that he can't say. "I want you to do better. I know you can do better. You have a lot of potential."

I look down at my half-empty notebook. "Like you did?" I ask. And I know the question is inappropriate. That he could haul me down to Mr. McCaffrey's office and tell me that I'm never allowed to come talk to him ever again.

"No, maybe more," he says. Out of my file, he holds up some drawings I made for art class. They are both drawings I did based on a photo I saw of my family when my parents were still alive. My mother is young and thin and happy. My father has his arm around her. At her side is a little boy, a toddler, my brother, and in her arms is me, a little baby girl.

"What else is in there, my fingerprints?"

"There's real emotion in this picture, Mary," he says as he puts it back down. "If you bring your grades up, maybe you could go to art school. I don't know if it's too late for you to win a scholarship. Ms. Schindler, your art teacher, says she's talked to you about that. And you tell her you're interested, but then you just keep doing the same stupid things over and over again. Why?"

"I don't know," I admit. "I want to be better, but sometimes I don't know if I want it enough."

He doesn't answer. But he looks at me in such a way that tells me that he does.

"Do you think you'll ever write about me?"

"Do you think that it would be appropriate . . . for me to write about a student?"

Any student, I wonder, or me in particular. I don't ask but instead say, "Maybe it depends on what you're writing." I look at the way he's staring at the pictures I've drawn. He seems to actually be admiring them.

"Or who I'm writing about?" he ventures. And I wonder if he likes these meetings as much as I like these meetings.

"If I get my shit together – sorry, excuse my language, write me up if you have to – but I'm just wondering, if I, you know, repent, reform, all that crap, can I still come see you?" I hope I don't look or sound too eager.

He isn't writing anymore, I realize, and I wonder at what point he's stopped.

"Do you think," he asks slowly, "that that would be appropriate?"

"I don't really like that word, you know," I say and realize that at some point that I've stopped leaning so far down on his desk.

"I know," he says.

"I didn't ask if it would be appropriate. I asked . . . is it okay with you? Maybe after I graduate, sometime I could . . . visit?"

He doesn't say anything, and I realize that, though I can't say how or when, the boundaries of what old fashioned people used to call propriety have broken down. We haven't done anything wrong exactly, nothing that you could ever accuse either of us of, but something's changed between us.

"Maybe for now though, I should stop coming because I won't need to anymore."

"You're right, Mary. I think you should go to class instead." I wonder though if he knows what I mean, if he feels what I feel.

"Can you write me a note so that I can be excused from trigonometry one last time?" I wonder if there are any cameras in the schools. There probably are. So I don't do anything else even though I want to reach out and touch him so bad. He gets up and walks me to the door and he is staring at me in a way that scares me. My face reddens and I start breathing faster. I think we're out of camera range if we just step to the right.

"Could I give you a hug?" I venture. I don't wait for him to reply. Instead, I grip him hard and he seems surprised. I breathe in the smell of him and think— it's some cheap drugstore cologne that he buys in spite of the fact that his wife must think it tacky. I savor the smell. I don't want to let him go.

"Mary," he says, but he too seems reluctant.

"Can we count to five?" I ask.

"Mary," he says again and gently disengages me but he doesn't seem to be in any hurry, and, before we move apart, he touches my cheek with his ink-stained hand. I want to grab it and hold it but know that I can't.

"I want to kiss you," I blurt out. He doesn't respond. I feel like I'm burning inside. I walk out of his office with a note in my hand and return to my class.

Later, I write him a thank you note. And I put it in his faculty mailbox. I slip it in the next day before all the other teachers come. We're not allowed in there, but whatever. It's not like I ever let rules stop me before. I won't repeat what it says, but when he sees me later he asks so quietly that it's almost a whisper, "You'll remember, won't you?"

"Yes, I'll remember," I say, and outside, I'm still the same. Still the same girl with the low-cut shirts and black eyeliner and bad-ass attitude. But inside, I'm not.

The next time on grade day, when Mr. Woods sees me in the hallway, he smiles. And for years, not until after my graduation and his divorce, we do not talk again.