

A Sweetheart At Thirty
THE STORY OF A WOMAN'S TRANSFORMATION
By Marion Rubincam

REALIZATION

Chapter 1

It was not until early spring that I began to realize what I was—or rather, what I had become. The transformation came later—quite a bit later—and was slow in coming. The realization was even slower, perhaps.

That was—well, let's see, three years or more ago. But the period actually covered by my transformation was not much more than two. And I am counting in that period every minute from the time I began to realize.

But before I begin, I want to say one thing, and I shall repeat it again and again as I go on with my story. And that is—

Any woman can be exactly what she wishes to be. Her fate lies in her own hands. Circumstances over which she has no control may help or hinder her; but in the end, what she is, depends on what she wishes to be. The power is in herself alone.

The period of realizing what was, then began very early in the Spring. This seemed appropriate—Spring is the time of rebirth. Nature renews its youth, why not I, a girl and woman? But, of course, I didn't think that or anything like that then.

Then, the coming of the Spring meant that we would let the coal fires go out, and that was less work for me, but also that we would plant the garden, and that meant more work for me. It meant that I would eventually put away my one black serge which had completed its second winter of wear, but also that I would bring out my black linen, which would begin its third summer of wear.

It meant—well, practical things, little, sordid, economical things, I meant nothing romantic in fact, would not even have guessed I was so near Spring, had not Violet come running in from school, swinging her hat, her hair flying loose, her hat in her hand.

"What a way for a girl your age to be carrying on! You're run all you're all out of breath!"

"Sure," Vi answered stantly. "I raced James back from school—beat him too!"

She turned from the table where she had dropped her belongings in a heap, and fairly danced to the open door. Still more dancing than walking, she went out to the porch and stood there taunting her brother, who was coming up more slowly. Her mother turned with some annoyance and shut the door.

"Well all catch out, dear!" she grumbled. "As for that child and her antics, she'll be in bed sick, such weather as this!"

Mrs. Haines returned to ironing. But I went to the window and looked out. Vi's voice came back to me.

"Beat you, beat you!" She was fairly singing her triumph. "You're a boy and I beat you!"

She repeated it over and over, it really sounded like a chant—that is, a joyous chant. Even in those days I noticed the rhythm in her words.

Beat you, beat you. You're a boy and I beat you. You can't notice the rhythm in the words? They sing themselves. I have noticed that—for my powers of noticing things have grown so much more acute lately. The Violet often talks rhythmically. Perhaps it is the natural poet that is in the child that expresses itself so.

James was coming up the path to the porch, carrying a load of school books under his arm. In spite of his sister's taunts he was looking quite peaceful.

"Not many boys would be a good natured if a girl beat them," I remarked to Esther.

"Not many boys would let their sisters beat them," she grumbled. The time came in again, James shutting the door which Violet had forgotten to close. A breath of fresh air blew in with them.

"Mother says you'll catch cold," I began. Esther was evidently in a bad humour and I wanted to smooth things down and keep the children quiet.

"Catch cold without a coat while I'm running?" Vi scoffed. "Why, it's Spring out. It's wonderful out. It's so warm and sunny

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and fresh and sweet. Why don't you two old stuffy creatures put on your young and come out and smell it?"

My little impudence was so quiet that not even her mother resented it. She looked through the window at the sunny yard where patches of brownish, dirty snow still lingered.

"Well, 'tis March," she agreed reluctantly—Esther hated to agree with anyone. I've sometimes thought, "Let's see, it's March 6th. My hand, it is getting along. Enid do you know you had a birthday last week?"

"No, I forgot," I answered and laughed.

"I should think you would be forgetting!" Esther said cattishly. "You've had so many of them now. You're 25, 24, 23, 22, 21, 20, 19, 18, 17, 16, 15, 14, 13, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. And an old maid!"

She went calmly back to her ironing.

CONFESSIONS
Chapter II

Esther, it seems to me now, as I look back over our life together, had a positively uncanny habit of saying the nastiest thing at the time when it would do her the most good.

She never meant it or for a moment she was ill at ease. In fact I've found out cynically that the world is full of people who do beautiful things and never mean anything but good. It was, as Jim used to say, "Esther's manner."

Now, to go back for a moment, you can have a picture of our family as it was on the day when my Great Awakening began—Esther was my sister-in-law, and my very best friend as well.

We had been brought up to gether—our families lived in adjoining places—and we had been inseparable. We had been almost like sisters; in fact, we got along rather better than sisters. So, when Esther married my only brother Jim I was delighted.

She was going to have her real relation, instead of a "play one." Esther was 18 when she married Jim, and Jim was 24. Our uncle died some time afterwards, and left him his farm, which was on the very edge of one of the "most villages in Connecticut," the little town of Haines Falls.

Haines Falls was the place known as Haines Falls, and my very best friend moved away, especially as I had few other friends to console myself with.

It did not like many of the people around me, and I suspect they did not like me. They thought I was " queer."

But Haines Falls was not far away from our old home and I often drove over to see Esther and Jim. Indeed I knew as many people in that place as in the place where my own parents lived.

Then, when my mother and father died, Jim closed up the old home, and I very naturally went to live with him and Esther.

Esther had three children. Enid was the first, she came not quite a year after they were married, and she was one of the chubby babies I ever saw. She was the prettiest too. She took all the beautiful baby prizes at the fairs and once was given a medal of some sort by a magazine. It offered prizes for pictures of the best looking baby in the state.

Three years Jim two years later, and then came a little more than a year after that, Jim, or James, as we called him—for his dad always came running when Esther was calling the baby—was not a pretty baby, though he did have lovely eyes. And Violet was not thought pretty at all. But I said to think—and I know now—that the little homely children Violet was bound to be the best looking of them in the end. Esther didn't think so when she was a baby, but I did; and for that reason, they always called Vi my child.

Now—that is, at the time of my Great Awakening—Esther was about 40, the most tragic age for a woman. She had been married 22 years. Laura was 21, James was 19 and a nice quiet lad, and Violet was not yet 18. And I, as Esther reminded me so cruelly that afternoon, I was 25—and an old maid.

The remembered birthday seemed to make Esther reminiscent. "You was only 13 when I was married," she said, her mind on the subject of ages. "Lord, we used to play together almost as though we was one age. You seemed nearly as old as me." That too was a cut, but I did not think of it at the time.

"I always was mature, I agreed. "I remember you didn't do up your hair until you were 17. I had mine up when you were married—mother let me do it first for the wedding."

growing responsibilities and had little time for such games either. So many of the old days, "Lord, I hadn't so much fun then. But I never was a slim one!"

She glanced down at herself rather complacently. I thought, "many stout women do. Esther was fat—but of course, that idea didn't occur to me then."

"Laura takes after me," she said speaking of the older girl, who was out that afternoon. "James I don't know who he takes after. He's all for dreaming and sitting around doing nothing at all. There's not much in Jim's as I can see. Vi Now she has more sense than James, and she's quick as can be, but she doesn't stick at anything. Just hops around like a bird on a tree. I think she's more Haines than Laura, or James."

She went back to her ironing, and I gathered up the curtains I had been mending and carried them to the bedroom, up stairs. On the way I stopped in the room—and stood before my mirror.

Self-revelation begins with a looking glass.

THE HAINES FAMILY
Chapter 3

Self-revelation begins with a looking glass!

Most women spend a lot of time before a glass—a statement that will please most cynical minded men. Few of us spend enough time—rather, spend the time before the glass to the best advantage. No man will agree with me in that, I know, but nevertheless it is true.

As is usual with most fairly busy women, I looked in the glass about twice a day—once in the morning when I combed my hair, and pinned on the collar of my house-dress; once at night when I took out the hairpins before going to bed. But I never saw myself in the mirror while performing these mechanical motions—

Not until the day when all this great change began to take place. That day, carrying the mended curtains over my arm, I stopped off in my own room, and deliberately walked over to the mirror. I looked—actually looked—long and critically and impersonally at myself. This is what I saw:

A spare woman, with some what best shoulders, straight hair, not curled, and so without life or lustre that it might be gray or muddy brown—it had no real color. Fine lines ran over the forehead, and around the eyes. The nose, I saw, and there were coarse deep lines were grown around the mouth; the lips were colorless and drooped at the corners with a suggestion of eternal disappointment. There were lines on the neck too, especially where the tight collars I always wore on my black serge, pressed against the skin.

Whatever figure I might possess, was so lost under the stiff, cheap house-dress, that no definite lines were visible. Altogether, the woman who presented herself to me in the glass might have been forty—might have been 55. She was so colorless that not even her age was definite.

As I turned around, I made came into the glass. Violet entered the room saw me and laughed. Then slipping up behind me she put her chin on my shoulder and looked in the glass with me. Her youth and vitality only made me seem older.

"You're nice eyes aunt Enid," she said. "They look so young!" I had not noticed my eyes in my scrutiny. I looked again—yes, my eyes were young. They were the only remnant of my youth left—eyes of golden brown, but whatever pleasure I felt at discovering my one good point was lost in dejection over the bad ones. Violet, guessing this, laid down her books and helped me with the curtains.

"It's nice to be young, Vi," I said to her. She paused in her work—she was standing on a chair slipping these fresh curtains over their brass rods.

"It's not nice to be too young," she said.

"Why? It's a fault soon enough overcome," and I sighed as I said it.

"Well it would be nice to be a year or so older," Violet urged.

"Mother says I'm too young to go out alone with Bud, and that she doesn't want me to get any notions in my head about him, or any one else."

"And you shouldn't," I always tried to back up Esther's words. "I don't care about the others, only about Bud. Violet having carefully arranged the clean curtains, jumped lightly from the chair. "I'll never like anyone but

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Bud. You may smile if you want and say I'm too young to know what I'm not. Besides," illogically, "I'm not young—I'm nearly 18, and I'm to graduate this June. This suggested another subject at once. Violet hopped from topic to topic, like a conversational bird.

"I want you to do lots and lots of drawn work on my dress," she said eagerly. "You will, won't you? That's a dress of the best, aunt!" her quick moving little hands were tucking in stray locks of hair as she coaxed me. "Mother will let me have the white voile she bought last year and never made up and a lovely white ribbon sash. And you're to do drawwork on it, in squares. I'll show you how I want it."

We gathered up the curtains and went on with our work while she discussed her dress and her young Bud Pearsoll alternately, in no time at all Esther's voice came up to us.

"Supper's ready."

So we went down together, to the table set at one side of the big farmhouse kitchen. Jim was waiting for us. Esther was discharging her duties as the oldest girl, was not home. As we sat down, I began to observe my family—having begun to observe myself.

We all looked as though we had let go of life, we older ones and we had.

For life had once held out its hands to us, it had once been typical. We gasped, we quarrelled, or we ate in sullen silence, or else we told each other about the worries of the past day and speculated about the worries of tomorrow.

The table is the last place in the world to bring quarrels or worries. Many a marriage has been wrecked because the wife complained of the husband growing old over the dinner table. It was natural enough in our case. We never met as a family except at meals, and there our various differences rubbed against each other, and we irritated each other.

Tonight after James had fled from the table, and after Jim, first to finish had gotten up and stalked off without a word, Esther gathered up the dishes and began to help her.

"Go on in and do your lessons," I told Vi. "I'll wipe and put the things away."

"The milk cans have to be scoured yet," Esther fretted. "And I think I'd better take those small rag rugs from the bedrooms and put them to soak. To-morrow I'll wash them. Vi can go get them."

"I'll do it, let her study," I protested.

"Well, Esther conceded. "We got to house-clean pretty soon, it is going to be Spring. So much cold this year I can't believe it."

She put the last dish on the table, where I picked it up to wipe, hot and dripping from the tin water. Then she attacked a pile of pans, two frying pans of heavy iron, coated now with dark cold grease, and any number of sauce pans.

We were not a large family, but somehow we managed to use up an immense amount of dishes and utensils at a meal. Esther poured more hot water into her dish pan, and soaped her rag from a bar of homemade washing soap. I noticed her hands as she lifted them from the strong hot suds. They were red and puffy looking—in the old days she had cunning, chubby little hands with short blunt fingers I used to admire them then and the pink nails at the end if them. Nowadays Esther's nails broke from her work, and were kept short that way, and the skin around them was broken and thick and stained indelibly from work.

"Jim says he's got a man to come this Spring for the sowing," she said. "I hope he stays through the summer. Jim says they're asking awful wages now. Well, I'll clean the attic room for him."

Our last hired man had left us on the Fall and gone to the city to work in the factories. We had been trying to get a new one for weeks.

"Jim really needs two men on this big place," I suggested. For the Haines farm was really fairly sized to be run efficiently there should have been many helpers. "Jim always tried to do the work of three," I went on.

"Think of the money it costs to hire work—and they loaf when you're not looking," Esther answered, taking the true "back country" view, and the way to economy is to spend less, rather than to make more.

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had allowed me to name her and I chose Violet because of her deep blue almost purple-blue eyes.

Violet grew up as slender and graceful as a reed. Her hair kept the gold of sunlight, her eyes stayed always that lovely, deep, deep blue. Her skin was a quiet white and her cheeks almost a too bright a pink. Her face was long and slender too with a high forehead and a thin and somewhat irregular nose and a pointed chin indeed her face might have been thought thin, except for the fact that her cheeks were full toward the eyes so that when she smiled, the line of the cheek on a three quarter face view, curving a marvellously graceful curve.

I wondered where, from these two families, she had inherited the many wonderful qualities she possessed. She was like a bright bird staying restlessly among us. Jim spoke suddenly breaking the silence that fell upon us when he had scolded James.

"Dwyer's Laura?" Esther answered. "Mrs. Dwyer is showing her some fancy embroidery stitches."

"One sensible girl, anyway," Jim approved, a deep glow in his voice. "She wants to learn something. You look at James and his heads in a book—not that he wants to learn anything, just wants to doze work that's all."

"That's a bit laid by of course she went on, lifting the last pan from the water and wiping it with her wrung-out cloth, then setting on the back of the stove to dry. "But there's so much to spend it on. And the work. Then Vi graduates in June, and there's her dress to make, and another for class day. That'll mean white shoes too."

"I'll buy her white silk stockings as my present," I suggested. Vi had never had a pair of silk stockings—none of us had, as far as that goes—and it was the girl's great ambition. I had a little money—I did not know how much—but all I used it for was to spend on my family.

"You'll put notions in her head," Esther answered. Silk stockings I was married with cotton ones—but girls these days have ideas different from them. Vi's got enough notions as it is.

"But one pair of silk stockings won't hurt," I protested.

"I'll have to have a new dress for the commencement, too, and you'll see Esther grumbled. "That'll mean taking off a couple of days and going over to Hartford shopping. We can stay with the Tucker's. And cleaning to do—and Jim must get a new suit; his best one is too small by now. She fretted along, her hands in the dishpan full of soapy water. Esther could always think of work for months ahead, and mention every last duty to be done.

"But thank goodness, it'll be over then she ended up. "Laura will probably be getting married soon, but Vi will be home to help. Then Vi came into the room her cheeks pinker than ever, her eyes very bright. I knew she had nerve herself for some unusual effort.

"I won't be home to help," she announced, trying to make her voice calm. "I'm going—that is I want to go—to college."

Esther turned to her, her jaw lax so her mouth was slightly open. Vi looked back at her with all the determination of youth in her face.

THE FAMILY ARGUMENT
Chapter 6

To most families, the announcement that the daughter wants to go to college is only a casual, or an expected statement, but to ours, it was a bombshell.

We were not a backwoods family. The "old Haines place" as they called our house, stood on the edge of a straggling little village called Haines Falls. There were perhaps a hundred families in the village itself, and a hundred more who lived in sight of it—that is, in sight if one stood on the top of the big hill behind our house. To the left of us stood our nearest neighbors, to the right, the fields that made up our farm. Behind, was the big new barn, one of the finest in the county.

I threw a shawl around my shoulders after we were through the dishes and stepped out on the back porch for a breath of air. It was a clear night, with a bright moon, and I could see quite a long distance. Violet joined me and slid her arm around my waist. The fences, or walls, of fields, stone, piled together without comment, that distinguished New England farm land, could be made out easily. They ran in lovely, waving lines over the hill, and marked off the pastures and the ploughed fields.

"I've started something," Violet told me softly. "Mother is in there talking it over with father, and I guess they won't let me go. You might have thought I'd thrown a brick the way they act. They must have known all along that I wanted to go to college."

We stood together a little longer, then Violet asked, "You'll stick with me, won't you aunt Enid? You understand things so much better than they do—isn't it funny? Mothers ought to understand—but sometimes aunts are much more sympathetic."

I promised I'd help all I could and we went in together.

"I s'pose you two have been putting your heads together out there," Esther spoke up suspiciously, as she saw us enter. "End of course, thinks Vi ought to go—she'd let her do anything she wanted to."

"Of course I think so," I answered. "The more educated she is, the more useful she'll be."

"Not doing canning and summing or cleaning," Esther remarked acidly.

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"Why has Charlie spoken—" Jim began, but Esther interrupted.

"Not yet, but he will. I know, and there's too much work here in this big house for me, even with Enid helping—with all the gardening and outside work and chores to be done."

James came in and stood looking on from the doorway. No one paid any attention to him—poor James, little attention was ever paid him.

"I'd have to hire help, or else you would have to get another man, so I wouldn't have milking and garden work," Esther said. "There would be that expense, besides the expense of the college course, and her board in town. And I won't let her go alone, that's final."

I spoke up suddenly. "I'll go with her then."

Here was the turning point—this sudden remark of mine—but I did not know then what a momentous thing it was. Great crisis often pass unnoticed.

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and all the work to be done!" "I'll do double work," offered James suddenly. "I won't be in school next winter, so you can give me all the outside work, and you needn't get another hired man. Besides, I'll do heavy cleaning for evenings when the farm work's over."

"James graduates in June too," Vi put in, hoping this reminder would help her gain her point. But its results were unexpected. Jim had not yet got over his sapper time anger. He swung around on James.

"Oh he does, does he," he growled. "It starts ploughing the North field Monday, and after that I've enough to keep him busy!"

"But father, I graduate then!" James burst out. "It's only three months, and I'll help all I can after school hours and study evenings."

"I can use your time from nine to three," Jim said. "That's when you'd be in school, and most likely reading instead of studying and—way," he added unreasonably.

"But father!" James face had gone white again, and Violet's eyes were overflowing with sympathy. "I don't see as three months study will make much difference one way or the other," Jim said. "You've had all the lessons practically up to the end of the high school work."

"But I want to graduate—" "That'll be all!" Jim roared, and the very volume of his tone stopped argument, James disappeared again.

It was no time to start arguing, Violet's plea. She too, left the room, softly picking up her books as she