

Painting Amy's Nails  
By Peggy Rambach

It had been a long time since Peggy Rambach had visited her disabled sister, who was put into care at birth. Now, as her sister lay dying, Peggy decided there was one last thing she could do for her ...

Four days before she died, I painted my sister's nails. I would have to remove the last of the old chipped pink, cut them, file them, and apply two coats of new polish. And I would have to request and wait for someone to find all the supplies. It was going to take time, which was something we certainly had.

But there was my mother to consider.

"Fifteen minutes," she had told the driver. It had already taken us five to find the place, the last door we knocked on, in a row of four identical houses that had been built recently on the grounds of the much older, red-brick institution. Then I went to the bathroom, and then I saw Amy.

I could say I hadn't seen her for 10 years, but that would only be out of convenience, the number chosen, regardless of its accuracy, to imply a significant passage of time, one in which I had not remarried, had taught for a living, written a novel, and raised my two daughters into their 20s. Truth was, I didn't know how many years it had been, it had been that many. And yet, I did not have to anticipate her resentment for my having failed for so long to see her. Now I was 48 years old, and she nearly 50, and dying, we had been told, of Hepatitis C - the reason for our visit.

What I worried about most, on the 30-minute drive from Manhattan, was how she might look. As it turned out, I did not even have to worry about that. Same straight, dark red hair, cut short now, and without a trace of grey. Same smile, but no teeth. She lay raised in a hospital bed that filled the small room, a tray table in front of her with one black and one purple marker, and a colouring book on it, open to a picture of a snowman.

I leaned over to kiss her, and sat down by her bedside. But this did not induce my mother to do the same. She had, most likely, already greeted Amy with a kiss. She always did, but now had chosen to remain in the

doorway, as if to make it perfectly clear that though we had just arrived, it was already time to go.

Then I saw Amy's nails, which introduced the matter of a manicure, sure to put a kink in my mother's timing. That was, if I were to do it well. After all, Amy would not care, would not even know, because Amy had Down's syndrome and had never for all her life been anything but affable, cheerful, accepting, sweet. Even now, jaundiced, and drawn, her stomach distended, her hands shaky, she had gamely picked up a dried marker to scribble along with my black, some purple into the snowman's scarf.

Amy's incapacity to judge was something my family had always counted on. She would never suspect that the birthday gifts my mother sent her along with cards she signed from us all - nightgowns, watches, bathrobes, jewellery - were cheaper than anything my mother would ever have bought for her three other daughters. And we always knew, just as I had known on this day, that Amy would never resent us for our infrequent visits, diminishing from once a season, throughout her childhood, to next to none.

So of course I could easily get away with giving Amy any kind of manicure I wanted, or no manicure at all, and would not even need to apologise for it - and so save myself from having to apologise to my mother.

Because, for me, to give Amy what she deserved, would be, to my mother, an affront, just as it had been when as a teenager I began to buy my own presents for Amy, send her cards and call on her on her birthday. I had decided, once I left home for a New England boarding school, then university, to stop depending on my mother, and acknowledge Amy's special occasions, the same way I did my other two sisters', the ones with whom I'd grown up. And each time, I reported back to my mother, hoping always, I suppose, for her blessing, and consistently receiving, in the tightness of her voice, a rebuff. Because, by trying to be Amy's sister, I had exposed how much my mother wanted not to be Amy's mother, when Amy's mother was something she could never not be.

This was why she was standing in the doorway, why she couldn't wait to leave, why, over the years, as Amy lost her teeth, had problems with her eyes, deteriorated, as my mother said, she had visited her less and less. And it was why she had been so offended, when on one long-ago visit, Amy called her "doll", an endearment she had obviously learned from the people

who cared for her. It was a word that Amy surely would never have used had she been raised like the rest of my mother's daughters, on Manhattan's upper east side, given the same quality of medical care, clothes from Bloomingdale's, trips to Europe, ski houses in Vermont, summer houses in the Hamptons, and a private school education; given the same life of privilege me and my two older sisters would have been denied, my parents thought, if they had ever brought Amy home. Or more accurately, denied my two older sisters, because, having only wanted three children, if they had brought Amy home, I would not have been at all.

I knew, really, that my mother's sometimes shocking indifference to Amy's existence was not because she did not care about it, but because she could not bear how much she did.

And this was why, now, she could not help but urge me to cut and repair Amy's nails. Despite her protest earlier, I had gone ahead and stripped them of the old polish, which had more fully revealed their deplorable condition. Yellowed, grown far past her fingertips, and jagged, a subtle sign of institutional life. Then, just as quickly, my mother insisted that it would be impossible, that no one would be able to find a clipper in the place.

But her slip had emboldened me enough to ask for one anyway, and wait there for as long as it might take someone to find it; a clipper but no file. And while Amy watched, her face bent intently to my task, I held each of her small, square, fingers in mine, and told myself to clip slowly and carefully, and ignore my mother's rising anxiety from where she still stood, behind me, at the door. Nails cut, I began the first coat of purple, Amy's choice over a mild and uninteresting pink, and now moved on to the second.

After all, it was the least I could do - the very least I could do - given how long it had been since I had seen her. And I had pretty much given up buying and sending her my own presents, had continually broken my vow to write her a monthly card, and finally - the worst offence - I had never even thought to defy my parents by insisting on finding out how Amy contracted the disease that would kill her, having always been vaguely aware, but never facing the fact that it was due to neglect. Because, had I done so, I would have had to face my own.

I could say I had no choice, that Amy was a decision my parents made before I was born. What responsibility was she of mine? And I suppose that

is what I did say, yet always with the belief that I still had the chance to redeem myself - by driving the five hours south to see her more often, by sending those cards, by finally, at least in some small way, becoming part of her life, or allowing her to become part of mine. That was until four days after our visit - more than a year ago now - when my mother called to tell me she had died. Then I knew, of course, that I could never fulfil my responsibility to Amy, nor ever convince myself that it wasn't mine.

The very fact that I was born was, after all, what gave me the responsibility, because being born made me Amy's sister. But it also made me my mother's daughter. So, as Amy's sister and my mother's daughter, I had a choice: I could be a bad daughter to be a good sister, or a bad sister to be a good daughter. And the choice I made was clear.

And yet, as I leaned over to apply the last coat to Amy's left hand, I felt her gently pat my shoulder with her right hand, like she had when, on those occasional days out as children, we stood beside each other to throw stones in a lake, peeled and ate hard-boiled eggs on a picnic blanket, and rode in the back seat of a car; just as she always had, during those early visits, when she and I had played like sisters because that is what we were; and were now, too, one sister doing the other's nails, in what I knew would be my last memory of Amy.

Then, she lay back and yawned; and I sealed the polish, while my mother finally entered the room to give her a clumsy kiss. Then I kissed her too, and put on my coat, and joined my mother at the door.

And just like she always had, over all the years we had left her, and left her, and left her - Amy smiled, and simply waved goodbye.

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Do you have a story about your life to tell? Peggy Rambach will help us to explore this idea.