

Margherita Lotti Mancini *Saint Rita of Cascia*

Stories about women whose dreams somehow get lost aren't anything new. Sometimes it's because a woman gets caught in a cultural or emotional vortex. At other times, dueling desires or biological clocks compete for attention. And, every so often, a woman just takes a wrong turn in life, ends up on a wrong path and, for a while, gets stuck. However, Margherita Lotti shows us how, with victory, it is possible for our dreams to be merely deferred, but not necessarily denied.

Born in the fourteenth century, Margherita faced many of the same issues that continue to challenge women today: societal restraints, domestic abuse, oppressive cultural customs, etc. In her day, however, a woman had no rights, less value than farm animals, and was duty-bound to be obedient to her parents and later to her husband. Consequently, any young woman with desires or dreams of her own had little chance of seeing them fulfilled.

Margherita Lotti lived in a village just outside of Cascia, a town about one hundred miles northeast of Rome, Italy. Born around 1380, she was the only child of older parents. Rita grew up to be a smart, beautiful and spiritual young woman. Her passion was serving God. She wanted to devote her life to religious service and decided to become a nun.

Unfortunately, her parents had other plans. They wanted her to get married, have children and live a normal, stable life. They arranged a marriage for her to Paolo Mancini, a well-heeled government worker. Rita protested. Her parents insisted. Rita obeyed.

The stories of Rita's marriage vary but the facts all seem to agree that, for eighteen years, Rita stayed married to Paolo and had two sons. Some accounts describe Paolo as an arrogant and abusive man who beat Rita and whose sons modeled their father's angry behavior. They say that Rita lived in daily terror. Other accounts say that, though Rita's husband was no saint, he was "a good man of strong and impetuous nature" whose behavior was typical for the culture of his day. Decide for yourself what those descriptions mean in real life terms.

At any rate, during a time of political and social upheaval, Paolo was violently killed by an assassin. Rita's sons sought revenge through the blood-vengeance called a vendetta. Fearing that her sons would murder their father's enemy and be eternally damned, Rita prayed for God's grace to keep her sons from committing the sinful act. Before then year ended, and before anyone was killed, both of her sons died. Rita considered their deaths an answer to her prayers.

Through her grief, Rita sought peace and forgave Paolo's killers. Then, having fulfilled her obligation as a spouse and mother, Rita turned back to her dream of serving God through convent life. She tried several times to enter the Augustinian order, but the nuns refused her, fearing the convent would be targeted by Paolo's enemies.

For a while, it seemed as though Rita's dream was again being denied. She prayed about what to do and asked for answers.

Finally, in an act of great courage, Rita went to Paolo's enemies. She also approached the family of her in-laws. She convinced both families to take a blood oath agreeing, in writing, that they would not retaliate against the convent for accepting Rita. It was a great victory for Rita. She immediately took the peace document to the nuns and, finally, they accepted the determined woman into the convent. Sister Rita lived with them for forty years.

Shortly before her death, the bedridden Sister Rita had a visitor from her hometown. Even though it was January, Sister Rita's only request of her visitor was for a rose from her family's estate. The visitor left her bedside with little hope of finding one in the dead of winter, but did as asked...and, amazingly, *found a single rose blossom*.

Nearly five hundred years later, on May 24, 1900, Rita was canonized by the Catholic Church. Sainted during one of the major waves of European immigration into the United States, St. Rita quickly became the patron saint of Italian immigrants. In 1907, a church was built in her honor in South Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

St. Rita of Cascia still enjoys a huge following...and even garners a little bit of modern day publicity. Most recently she surfaced in the 2002 movie *The Rookie*, starring Dennis Quaid. In the first scenes of this charming baseball movie, two nuns are walking in the desolate prairie, seeking help from St. Rita, the "patron saint of impossible dreams." A hundred years later, the land becomes the baseball field of the rookie's success.

The majestic South Philadelphia church, now the designated American National Shrine to St. Rita, is celebrating its centennial year. It still holds an annual celebration on St. Rita's feast day, May 22. It serves thousands of devoted followers who come from all over to attend the feast of Saint Rita, share the miracles they have been granted through prayer to St. Rita...*and get their own rose*, the symbol of the saint's dying miracle.

On a personal note: Saint Rita has always been a part of my life. My parents, first generation Americans, grew up in the South Philadelphia parish of St. Rita. Throughout his life, my father had great devotion to Saint Rita. He was baptized at the church, was an altar boy while attending the parish parochial school, and later served as an usher. That's where my mother first saw my father and finagled an introduction to him, right in front of the church. They married there on May 24. Even after my parents moved away, for many years my father returned each May for the special nine-day novena and, on the last day, he would get the St. Rita rose. He died on her feast day, May 22. Today, my mother still attends the annual commemorative. While there, she returns to exact spot where she first talked to my father. She sits right next to the aisle where she walked as a bride so many years ago. She also gets two St. Rita roses. She keeps one for herself and takes the other to my father's grave so he has "his own St. Rita rose" for the year.

***If you are a woman who desires her own victory, but
you've taken a wrong turn or two,
or you feel stuck and believe your dreams are dead,
consider how Victorious Woman Rita never lost site of what she wanted.
Her life demonstrates the power of faithful focus and
though her dream was deferred, it wasn't denied.***

***St. Rita of Cascia is well-known as a patron saint for
seemingly lost, forgotten or impossible causes and situations
as well as for mothers, marriage problems and domestic abuse.***

Thank you, St. Rita!