

Celia's untreated mental illness wreaked havoc on her family. She got no help because mostly it was not recognized. Then the behavior was excused and tolerated. Because of this, she spiraled downward abusing family members in the process.

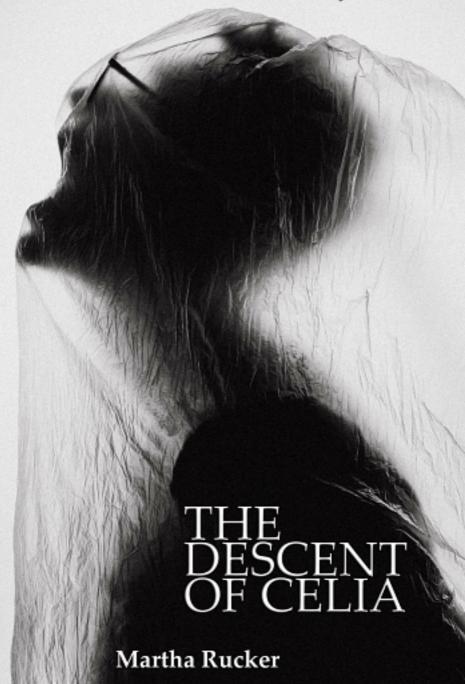
The Descent of Celia

By Martha Rucker

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One Woman's Untreated Mental Illness and the Havoc it Wreaked on Her Family



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Disclaimer

This book is a work of creative nonfiction. All of the events in this book are true to the best of the author's memory and research, although some situations, dialogue, and thoughts are speculative. Some names and identifying features are changed to protect the identity of certain parties. The views expressed in this book are solely those of the author. This book deals with mental illness, domestic violence, and the traumatic effects they have on people. While the author has taken great lengths to ensure the subject matter is dealt with compassionately and respectfully, it may be troubling for some readers.

Therefore, discretion is advised.

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1. Committed

Celia's daughter, Pat, had to have her mother committed because neither she nor anyone else could control her increasingly threatening and dangerous behavior. She signed the required paperwork.

The town sheriff aided in transporting Celia. Driven to the next town, the car from the hospital picked her up and continued to the State Mental Hospital, the final destination.

The sheriff had called Pat repeatedly to do something about her mother's behavior. Celia had taken to shooting at school buses filled with children because they wouldn't be quiet as they passed by her house. Pat had to come down from New Jersey when her mother had fallen on her front stoop. A neighbor called, and an ambulance came, and took Celia to the hospital. She'd had a minor stroke.

After a twelve-hour car ride, Pat followed her Aunt Leah in her car to the hospital. Pat and her brother T had lived with Aunt Leah for one year, when their mother had gone to New York City to work. Aunt Leah was bouncy with an infectious laugh, red hair, and freckles on her light-skinned face.

When they got to the hospital, Pat found that her mother had been so belligerent, combative, and uncontrollable that she had to be kept in restraints. The hospital staff couldn't handle her any other way. Before they entered the room, the team took the restraints off, and Celia was busy shoving the straitjacket into a bag, saying she would sue the hospital and the doctors. She looked at Pat and ordered her, "Tell them to release me!"

Having dealt with her mother's erratic behavior and rages for years, Pat had learned to under-react. Looking into her mother's face, twisted with anger, she calmly said, "I can't *tell* them when they should release you." Still enraged, Celia grabbed her daughter's blouse in the front, and forcefully pulled her face close to her own and said again with a snarl, "Do it!" Remaining calm, making no move, or raising her hands, Pat said, "I can't do that."

Aunt Leah had reluctantly slipped into the room. She was in the corner when this was happening. When Celia realized that Pat wasn't

going to do what she told her to, she pivoted, focusing her rage on her sister. Celia started toward her, saying even more angrily, "It's your fault!" Trapped in that corner with no way to get around her sister to get out of the room, Leah cowered in abject fear, with her hands held in front of her, backing away pleading, "Nooo! Nooo!" Pat had never in her life seen that kind of *raw fear* on anyone's face.

Celia had been so mad when she regained consciousness that she was raging, fighting, and cursing, and they had to restrain her. But neither the hospital, nor her doctor, would go on record as saying that something was wrong with her. That would have allowed her to be transported directly from the hospital to the state mental hospital. So, not having done what was needed, they could, without question, release Celia to Pat's care.

Pat drove back to her mother's house. It was a prefab ranch on a town road behind the elementary school where Pat had attended for one year in the seventh grade. Her brother T had bought this little house to move their mother from the Bronx back to South Carolina. Aunt Leah left the hospital and went back to her home.

Though somewhat hesitant, Pat made the mistake of stopping at the post office on the way home to get her mother's uncollected mail. She knew she couldn't leave her alone in the house to go back and get it. Pat got the mail as quickly as possible. When she came back out, Celia was standing outside of the car in her hospital gown, smoking a cigarette. Pat's anxiety rose even more. Her chances of controlling her were better in a restricted space. Now she was in the open. She could do anything. With her heart pounding, Pat thought to herself, *What am I going to do? How can I get her back into the car?* Forcing herself to stay calm, Pat asked, "Why did you get out of the car?" "I wanted a cigarette." Celia smoked two packs a day.

Pat said, "You didn't have to get out of the car to do that." Knowing that Celia didn't do what anyone asked her to do, Pat didn't know how she could coax her mother to get back in the car. "The sooner we get home, the sooner you can relax, and I'll fix you lunch. It can be whatever you like." Finally, Celia got back into the car, and Pat breathed a sigh of relief

It became clear to Pat over the next few days that she could not take care of a mentally ill woman all by herself. She could not control her mother for her well-being. She could not move from New Jersey to be at her beck and call as Celia wanted. Celia had always talked about how she had left teaching to take care of her mother, Martha. Pat could not do that. She knew, without a doubt, that if she did, either her mother would end up killing her in a rage or Pat would kill herself. So, that wasn't an option. Papers signed, arrangements in place, Pat waited for the day to arrive. She would fix her mother breakfast every morning of the week leading up to the commitment.

One morning, angry and aggressive, Celia lunged at Pat. She was dizzy when she got up and stumbled onto the floor. Pat spent almost an hour trying to lift this woman who weighed 180 pounds, nearly twice as much as she did. It was like lifting dead weight. Every time she put her arms underneath her mother's , Celia would scream, "You're hurting me! You're hurting me!"

Finally, unable to get her mother up, she went to a neighbor for help. The neighbor, a sturdy woman almost six feet tall, put her arms under Celia's and had her up off of the floor and onto the couch in one move. Celia started complaining to the neighbor that she was hungry and that Pat wouldn't feed her. The neighbor looked at the tray of food on the coffee table and said, "There's your food right there."

The day the sheriff was coming to pick up Celia, she stumbled into the living room and flopped her bulk down onto the couch. She was dizzy, her eyes glazed and unfocused. Her black hair was matted and uncombed. Her caramel-colored skin was shiny with sweat. With her possible minor stroke and diabetes, Pat knew Celia needed to eat. Pat prepared the insulin so Celia could give herself the shot before eating. "Why are you taking so long? I know you don't want to fix my food anyway," Celia growled. Pat made her mother some bacon, eggs and toast in the kitchen, and rushed as fast as she could while listening to her mother's loud, persistent complaints. Pat hurried into the living room with the tray of food and the insulin. She set it down on the coffee table and was stunned at what she saw.

Celia had stripped while Pat had been in the kitchen and thrown her clothes on the floor. She was sprawled back on the couch with one leg on the floor, completely naked. Pat attempted to remain calm. She quickly closed the front door, which opened directly to the front yard. The house was close to the road in the back of the school. Celia just said, "I was hot!" Celia's sister, Leah, lived only a few miles away but wouldn't come anywhere near to help because she was so terrified of Celia.

Pat tried to prick her mother's finger to get her blood sugar reading. Celia screamed and snatched her hand away, screaming, "Ouch!" Pat gave her mother the needle with the insulin, but Celia, pushing it away, growled, "You do it for me!" Pat had never given anyone a shot before, but decided she was going to try anyway. She knew her mother had to take the insulin before she ate, even though she hadn't gotten the blood sugar reading. Celia grabbed the needle with the insulin from Pat's hand and flung it across the room in a rage, screaming, "You're trying to hurt me on purpose!"

Pat was afraid the sheriff would come while her mother was still sprawled naked on the couch. She tried to get Celia to put a robe on. Her efforts were met with snarls and swipes at her daughter with her hands whenever Pat came near. If Celia could have gotten up, she would have tried to hurt her daughter. Pat's nerves were on edge, and she didn't know what to do. No one was there to help her. Her father had divorced Celia many years ago and now lived in Ohio. Her brother was in New York City and had emotionally disconnected from their mother. Her Aunt Leah was too terrified of her sister's rages to come anywhere near her. Pat was alone with someone she couldn't help or control. She felt a knot form in her stomach.

She called her aunt, telling her what was happening. Still too terrified to come, Aunt Leah said she would call the family minister. So, Pat waited for them to come, hoping they would get there before the sheriff. Stomach queasy and nerves on edge, she wanted to take some of her mother's sedatives, but was uncertain about doing that. Pat called the doctor who had prescribed them for Celia, and he said it would be okay. She downed a handful to help herself stay calm. It seemed like the sheriff was taking forever to get there. Barely controlling her nerves and her anxiety, with Celia still naked on the couch, Pat downed another

handful of the sedatives. She didn't know how her mother would behave when the sheriff came.

Finally, the minister and his wife arrived. Celia was still naked, and he stayed outside while his wife came inside and coaxed Celia into putting on a gown and robe. Pat, now barely able to breathe, sneaked into the kitchen and downed a third handful of the sedatives. With Celia dressed, the minister came into the house. The couple comforted Pat in a situation fraught with tension, walking a thin line between Celia's calm and possible rage. Pat slipped into the kitchen to get some more of the sedatives. She thought she was on the verge of completely losing it, not knowing how her mother would react. But she didn't have a chance to swallow that fourth handful of sedatives because, at that moment, the sheriff's car arrived.

Pat called her aunt, who drove over quickly while the minister and his wife guided Celia to the sheriff's car. Leah stayed in her car, slouched down, so Celia wouldn't see her, and waited for Pat to get in.

Celia was strangely calm and cooperative, and didn't fight it at all. Pat was too stressed to remember that people like her mother behaved nicely when 'outside' people were around. She and Aunt Leah followed the sheriff's car to the next town.

Celia remained calm. She didn't ask any questions about what was happening, why, or who was doing this to her. She did not react when transferred to the state hospital car. Her only concern was, "Where's my purse?" Pat gave her mother a change purse with a few coins, which seemed to satisfy her. Celia looked straight ahead as the car drove away.

Pat now felt dizzy and reacted in slow motion to what was happening. The sedatives were kicking in. She felt weak and dropped back onto the car seat, head nodding, her eyes fighting to stay open. She watched the hospital car drive away. She took a deep, exhausted breath, numbed by what she'd had to do.

IT was over. Aunt Leah took her home with her, not to her mother's. Pat didn't want to be alone in that house. Feeling weak, drained, and numb, Pat dropped onto a bed and fell into a deep, deep sleep. She slept almost twelve hours, far into the next day. Her Aunt Leah was concerned and finally woke her up. She didn't know Pat had taken so many sedatives, but she knew something was wrong and insisted that

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she get up and they go for a walk. Though still feeling listless, tired, and weak, Pat followed her aunt up the road in front of her house. Soon she realized that she had a throbbing headache, worse than any she'd ever had. When they got back to the house, she felt hungry, and Aunt Leah fixed her something to eat.

Still weak and listless, Pat dropped into a chair at the kitchen table. When Aunt Leah placed a plate in front of her, she ate slowly, slumped, head down. Lifting the fork to her mouth, it was as if her arm weighed a ton, and there was no strength to lift it. She could barely hold her head up or keep her eyes open.

After resting for a few days, she made the twelve-hour drive back to New Jersey.

PART ONE - Celia's Parents, Siblings & Early Years

2. Celia's Parents and Birth

Celia Liza Vance was born in 1910 in a little township called Princeton, South Carolina. Celia's parents, Martha Ann Mickens and Robert Vance, lived on about 70 acres surrounded by a barrier of trees separating them from their nearest neighbors, all of whom were White. They never said how they met.

Martha was a tall, gangly brown-skinned woman, almost six feet fall, with sparkling eyes and an easy smile. Robert, a little shorter, lived in the area and was a farm owner with fair sunburned skin and straight hair. Martha was also from a family who owned land. Blacks owning land at that time was unusual. When they got married in 1891, she was just eighteen years old. Martha received a land plot from her family, which she added to Robert's, and they started their life together

The extent of progress for Black independent farming doesn't admit easy generalizations between 1880 and 1920. Census data and other evidence are mixed. It reflected progress in land ownership for some but economic stagnation for most Black farmers. Increases in land ownership after 1900 were partly due to a significant rise in cotton prices that lasted until World War I in 1914. Blacks' growth in farmland acquisition during the late 19th and early 20th centuries demonstrates a period of economic mobility for 25 percent of farms. In the early 20th century, black farmers achieved landlord's status and some became philanthropic community leaders.

Martha's grandfather, Aaron Mickens, had been born a freeman in Virginia in 1804, but moved to South Carolina when he married. Martha's father, William, was born in 1845 and had three wives. His first wife, Amanda, also born in 1845, gave him four children: Newton (1866), Leona (1869), Henry (1872), and the youngest, Martha, who was born in 1873. Martha stayed in touch with her brother Henry, who married Susan (1899). He and Susan had five children: Aaron (1899), Mollie (1903), David (1905), Susie (1906) and Amanda (1908). Martha and Robert had ten children, including their ninth, who died as a toddler. Celia was their eighth child. Henry and Martha's children also stayed in touch. Martha and Robert planted cotton, raised all the vegetables they needed, had a mule for plowing, a cow for milk and

butter, and pigs and chickens for meat and eggs. Robert was a fair-skinned man with straight hair. His father was of unknown origin, and Robert never spoke of him. He knew who his mother was, but when asked about his father, he became stonily silent. He plowed the fields, took care of the livestock, and helped Martha till and gather the things from their gardens when he could. Martha, already a good cook, became better.

Within the first year, they welcomed their first-born son, William, called 'Son,' in 1892. A short two years later, they greeted Robert, and then Boaz, in 1896. Finally, in 1898, their first girl arrived. They called her Della. Robert affectionately called her 'daughter,' which was later shortened to 'Draught.' She had brown, velvety skin like Martha. Six years after that, in 1904, Luther was born, followed quickly by Booker in 1905. Elbert came in 1907. They started calling him Babe when he was a little boy. Celia, the eighth, was born in 1910, another girl was born in 1912 but died as a toddler. The last baby girl, Leah, came in 1916.

Martha was ready to give birth to her eighth baby in 1910. Since they lived in the country in the early 1900s, a midwife was with Martha when her time came. It was the same with all of her children, including this baby. Martha's friend Celia, a mid-wife, was visiting when the labor pains started. After seven other children, Martha knew what to expect, but something was different this time.

The younger children, Luther, Booker, and Elbert were sent to their Aunt Susie's house, who lived nearby. Susan, who they called Susie, was Martha's brother Henry's wife. Della stayed to help in any way she could. She was excited about the new baby. She was there when her brother Elbert was born. The older boys, William, Robert, and Boaz were helping their father in the fields. William was tall like his mother, with freckles like his father. Robert was brown-skinned, with twinkling eyes like Martha. Boaz, the shortest of the three, had his mother's velvety brown skin and his father's straight hair.

At that time, there was no such thing as going to a hospital or doctor, or taking a horse and buggy to get the doctor. It was all in the hands of a midwife, and whatever knowledge and experience she had learned over the years.

The midwife, in the 1900s, was not equipped to handle anything out of the ordinary. Martha was having problems with the birth of their eighth child. It was definitely out of the ordinary, and a little frightening. The labor was long and hard. When Robert and the older boys came back home, they stayed out of the room where Martha was giving birth with the midwife, Celia, in attendance. Della ran back and forth getting what was needed. Celia told Martha that the baby was coming out the wrong way. Instead of seeing the head, she saw the back end and a leg. She tried to reposition the baby as Martha screamed in agony. She kept trying. Finally, the baby came out, and a ripped and torn Martha was exhausted. It was a girl. Celia wiped the newborn off and wrapped her in a blanket. But, there still seemed to be a *strange film* over her face.

Celia handed the new baby to Della, who rocked her sister while Celia tended to Martha. Robert came in and held Martha's warm hand. He let out a long sigh as if he'd been holding his breath the whole time. Robert gazed at Martha's weak sweat-covered face for an anxious moment. Seeing that she seemed to be alright, he turned to look at his new baby girl and gently took her from Della's arms. Smiling, he saw that she looked a little like both of them. He handed the baby to Martha and cradled them both as Della stood close by, beaming. He asked, "What should we call her?"

Martha said, "I think Celia would be perfect, like the person who helped bring her into this world." Grinning, he said, "Then Celia it is." Then the boys came into the room, all with big smiles on their faces. They wanted to get a peek at the new baby. The younger boys met their new sister when they came home from Aunt Susie's house.

Another baby girl, their ninth child, followed in 1912. They named her Cornelia after another one of Martha's friends. Little Cornelia didn't reach her second birthday. Finally, the tenth baby, Leah, came in 1916. She was a spirited little red-head who looked like Robert. She was now the baby in the family.

Celia, now six-years-old, had been displaced for the second time, and was no longer the family's baby.

3. Early Years

Celia was a plump, caramel-colored wiggly ball of arms and legs. Her brothers took their parent's word that it was a girl. She had no hair, tightly clenched fists, and when she opened her eyes, they could see that they were amber-colored. Those eyes stared intensely at them, as though sizing them up. As she got older, that intense stare would turn into a big gummy smile across her chubby face. The brothers all took turns holding, cooing to, and playing with the baby. Celia felt she was important to everyone around her. She felt loved. Della looked after her when Mama (that's what they called her) wasn't around. When Della had to help Mama in the garden or with the chickens, she kept a close eye on Celia to make sure she didn't put anything dangerous in her mouth.

When Celia could toddle around, she was either at Mama's skirt tail in the kitchen as she fixed breakfast or supper or crawling over her brothers when they played games in the evening. Whenever she hurt herself, she tottered over to Mama, who would stoop her tall frame down and wrap her arms around her baby. Mama's arms and kisses always made her feel better before she went back to playing.

She liked it when her brothers played with her. The older boys tickled and teased her, sometimes lifting and tossing her into the air. The younger ones played games with her, and she would run along after them if Della let her. She admired her sister, who was twelve years older. Her sister was treated differently as the first daughter. But she felt special and loved because she was the baby girl. When Celia wasn't coddled by her mother or bouncing on her daddy's knees, she was always with Della.

The boys played rough when they were outside, so Della didn't let her try to run after them. Instead, she made up little games that they could play to distract her. Celia loved patty cakes and, for some reason, wallowing around in wet mud. Of course, Mama wasn't too happy when Celia came inside covered from head to foot in mud, giggling and clapping her hands. Della had to clean her up before dinner.

Sometimes, Celia tried to help when Mama was picking vegetables from the garden for supper. Della loved to take her baby sister to pick wild blackberries so Mama could make a pie, one of those cobblers that the family loved. Celia would grab the sweet berries and usually ate more than she put in the basket. Della and her brothers were guilty of the same. But they made room after supper for the pie that Mama made.

After supper, Celia was usually curled up in her daddy's lap as Mama cleaned up the kitchen with Della's help. The boys were trying to sneak a last piece of pie before bed while Celia eventually dropped off to sleep. She liked daddy's lap almost as much as Mama's arms. She was her daddy's baby girl, and she felt his love. He didn't have to say anything, and he usually didn't.

Usually, Martha moved around quickly, in the house, going outside, in the garden, helping Robert and the three older boys in the fields if necessary. Della was looking after the younger boys and Celia in the house and around the yard. Then she started to slow down. When Celia was two years old, her Mama didn't always stoop down to hug her or pick her up anymore. She felt a little sad. When Celia would cling to Mama's legs or reach her arms up, Mama would sit in a chair and take her baby onto her lap. After being comforted, she'd squirm down to the floor and go back to playing.

Mama's stomach started to look like she was trying to hide a watermelon. Celia couldn't figure out why she would do that. She walked up to her Mama in the kitchen and reached up to lift the bottom of her shirt. There was no watermelon in there, just Mama's tummy! Seeing Celia's surprise, Martha sat down and took her onto her lap, and said, "You're going to have a new baby brother or sister." Celia looked at her Mama with concern in her wide amber eyes and asked in her best almost two-year-old voice, "I'm not going to be the baby anymore?" Mama hugged her and said, "You're always going to be my baby." The child wiggled down and looked back at her Mama with those amber eyes, a pout on her face. She wasn't sure about this new baby. One night, Celia knew that something was wrong because Mama was making moaning sounds and holding her back. Robert sent the older boys to get the doctor.

They now had a horse and buggy. The boys stopped by Celia, the midwife's, house, to tell her it was time. Celia got in her wagon and rode to the Vance farm. Robert stayed with Martha to comfort her as much

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as he could. Della took the younger boys and Celia over to their Aunt Susie's and then returned home to help her father while waiting for the doctor to come. The midwife got there first. The doctor followed the three older boys back to the Vance farm in his wagon. After a few hours, Martha gave birth to another girl. She didn't have as hard a time as she did when she gave birth to baby Celia. The baby girl was round and plump and cried from the minute she came out. They decided to call her Cornelia, after Robert's mother. Della went to get the three younger boys, Luther, Booker, Babe, and baby Celia. They all came home from Aunt Susie's.

They all crowded into the room to meet the new baby. Mama looked tired but happy. They were excited and craning their necks to get a look at the baby's chubby cheeks as Mama had her cradled in a blanket. Holding her big sister Della's hand, Celia hung back a little bit. They all coaxed her to move in closer, and Della picked her up so she could get a better look. Celia looked down at this new creature. She didn't want to sit on the bed with Mama or touch *it*. She finally wiggled down and sat cross-legged on the floor playing with her shoestrings.

She wasn't the baby anymore. She didn't like how they were all fussing over the new baby, and she was a little mad at Mama. Celia didn't know what that funny feeling was in her stomach that felt like worms as she looked up at everyone crowding around this new baby.

4. Not "The Baby" Anymore

Celia was no longer the baby in the family. Things just weren't the same anymore, although Papa still worked the farm every day, and the three older boys, William, Robert, and Boaz, always helped him. They were gone most of the day, only coming in for lunch. Mama was cooking when she wasn't outside in her garden or the chicken yard collecting eggs. When the younger boys, Luther, Book, and Babe, weren't running around and playing, they helped Mama.

Della was usually inside or on the porch watching baby Cornelia and making sure toddler Celia didn't get into too much trouble. Sometimes, Celia would cross her arms, tuck her head, and stare at Della with those amber-colored eyes when she seemed to be paying too much attention to that baby. Mama and Della weren't giving all of their attention to Celia anymore. When Cornelia wasn't sleeping, she was crying. Whenever the baby cried, Della would run to see what was wrong and try to rock and cradle her when Mama wasn't around. Sometimes when Della was helping Mama in the kitchen, she would tell Celia to watch baby Cornelia. Celia liked her better when she was quiet.

Mama was in and out of the house, in the chicken coop, and in the kitchen fixing lunch, and then supper. When Papa and the older boys came to the house for lunch, they all sat to eat together. They were all silent, eating Mama's delicious food, until baby Cornelia started crying. Then they all started trying to see what was wrong, Papa lifting her and rocking her, the boys took turns cooing and playing with her, with Della running around helping Mama get ready to feed her. Celia couldn't understand why the baby didn't eat the same thing as the rest of them. Why did she have to suck on Mama's chest? Well, at least that shut her up.

Papa went back out to work, and William, Robert, and Boaz went with him. Mama sent a quart mason jar of water for each of them for when they got thirsty. That would last until they came back to the house for supper. Luther, Book, and Babe, not yet old enough to help their father in the fields, helped Mama clean the chicken coop and played in the barnyard. Della helped Mama in the house, watching the baby and Celia, and only called Mama when Cornelia was crying and hungry.

It was like this every day except Sunday. On Sunday, the boys, Della, toddler Celia, and baby Cornelia, dressed in the clothes that Mama and Aunt Susie had made for them, would all pile into the back of the wagon. Papa, with Mama holding baby Cornelia, was sitting up front as they drove the horse and buggy to the country church about a mile away from their farm. Usually, Cornelia would start fussing and crying, and Mama would have to feed her. It was bad enough to see Mama taking care of Cornelia at home, with her sucking on Mama's chest. Seeing her do it at church made Celia wish she could sit somewhere else. Sometimes, she managed to go over and sit near Aunt Susie. All the time, everyone seemed to be cooing over Cornelia, even at church. Sometimes, they would still play with her, but only after playing with Cornelia.

One Sunday after church, Papa drove the wagon real fast going back home, whipping the horse so it would run more quickly. All the kids were bouncing around in the back, holding on as tightly as they could. Papa seemed to be mad about something but was silent. Mama held on tight to the wagon seat with one hand, holding baby Cornelia in her other arm. She was quiet, too, as she occasionally glanced at Papa. When they got home, Papa went straight to the barn to put the horse and buggy away. He finally came into the house, and Mama set the food out that she had cooked the day before, and everybody sat and ate together.

The meal was noisy, but Papa was still silent. He said nothing to the younger boys, who were roughhousing after super. They didn't know what had made him so mad. *Did someone at church say something that upset him?* After a while, Mama told them to go outside. Before they went out, they played a little with Celia, which made her feel special again. Then they turned to play with baby Cornelia, making Celia feel left out.

Everybody always did that, she thought. Celia crawled to a corner and played with a rag doll Mama had made for her a long time ago when she was a baby. She sat there staring at her younger brothers Luther, Book, and Babe, big sister Della, and that baby. Her amber eyes flicked from person to person. Papa was still in a foul mood, and when she tried to crawl onto his lap, he just said, "Not now, baby." Mama was always busy in the kitchen. She felt like nobody cared about her.

She went outside and walked toward the chicken coop. The older boys weren't paying any attention to her, and Della was still in the house with Mama and baby Cornelia. There were some baby chicks inside the chicken yard. Celia reached her tiny arm through the chicken wire and tried to grab one of them. They hurried away as everybody else did.

Then Celia remembered how Mama would throw something into the yard, and they would come running. She grabbed a handful of grass and threw it inside the fence. Some of the chicks came running toward her. Through the chicken wire, she swiped her tiny hand again until she was successful in grabbing one of the baby chicks. She pulled it back through the fence, cupping it in both hands. She watched the wiggly ball of yellow fur struggle at first, then calm down. It was looking around, all the time making a funny "peep, peep, peep," sound. Celia wondered if she was crying, calling for her Mama.

Celia closed her hands, completely covering the chick, and felt it struggling again. She opened her hands just enough for the baby chick to stick its head through her thumbs and forefingers. She didn't want it to get away, so she held it tighter and tighter. The baby chick kept peeping and wiggling. Celia just wanted it to be quiet. She squeezed and squeezed until the peeping stopped. It's fuzzy yellow head fell to the side against her fingers, its mouth open. Her younger brothers ran over and asked her, "What are you doing?" She looked up, still holding the chick's limp body.

Looking wide-eyed at her brothers then back down at the chick, she said, "It wouldn't be quiet."

They took the chick and put it somewhere they didn't think the dogs could get at it. They knew that if the dogs got a taste of chicken, they would have trouble keeping them out of the chicken yard after that. If the dogs got at all of the newly hatched baby chicks, they wouldn't grow into roosters or hens. That meant no more eggs, no more chicken for supper, especially on Sunday, and Mama's fried chicken was mouthwatering. Mama dearly loved her chickens, their eggs, and all the new baby chicks that hatched each year. If they didn't have chicks every year, the chicken yard would soon be empty.

They took Celia's hand and led her back into the house. She looked around in the direction of the chicken yard and remembered how it felt to squeeze that chick until it went limp and stopped that peeping noise.

Cornelia's constant crying and whining just made Celia mad. The only time she was quiet was when she was asleep. When she was awake and crying, somebody always came to see what was wrong. Celia felt like nobody paid any attention to her when that baby was crying. When Celia was hurt, they would check to see if she was okay, then they'd go back to the baby. Celia started to feel disconnected, not a part of the family.

When Celia was about three years old, and Cornelia was eighteen months, they thought she was old enough to watch the baby as she slept. Della was busy helping Mama in the kitchen or outside in the garden, helping her gather some vegetables for dinner. If the baby started to cry, she was supposed to come and get them. The older boys, as always, were helping Papa in the fields. When they got tired of playing inside, the younger boys would go outside and make up games or help Mama and Della in the garden.

One day, baby Cornelia woke up with only Celia there. She started crying. Celia looked up quickly from playing with her rag doll. She thought, *Oh no, she's crying!* She ran to the window to see where Mama and Della were. She couldn't see the garden from the window, so she went to the back door. Celia called out for Mama but didn't see anybody coming. She went back to the room where Cornelia was still crying. She had rolled off of the bed and was tottering toward the kitchen, still screaming. They would be mad at her if baby Cornelia got into the kitchen or out the door. She pulled the screaming child back to the bed and struggled to get her back up onto it. Celia thought that if she gave the baby her rag doll, she would stop crying.

Cornelia just screamed louder. Celia pushed the ragdoll onto her face, but the baby twisted her head from side to side, her arms and legs flailing. Celia got up on the bed and pressed the doll close to her face.

She wrapped her arms around Cornelia and pressed her closer. It was like putting her hands around the baby chick and squeezing until it stopped moving and got limp and quiet.

Cornelia finally stopped moving and was quiet. She lay still on the bed, on her back with her head turned to the side. Celia stared at her for a long time, thinking, *At least she's quiet now*. She put a light blanket over the baby, took her ragdoll, sat back down on the floor, and continued to play.

Celia looked up from adjusting her doll's dress when she heard voices. It was Mama and Della coming back into the house. They looked into the room and saw that Celia was playing with her doll, and Cornelia was still asleep.

Mama asked, "Is the baby alright?" "Yes, Mama," Celia said. "She moved around a little bit, but then she went back to sleep. She's quiet now."

Mama and Della went back to the kitchen to start supper. A little while later, Papa and the older boys, and then the younger boys, who had been outside playing, came into the house when supper was ready. Della, with Celia's help, set the table.

Mama went to see why the baby was still sleeping despite all the commotion that was going on. Something wasn't right. Mama walked over to the bed and picked up the baby's limp body. She was not waking up. Mama shook her a little bit. Martha laid her child back down on the bed, still attempting to wake her. Then she noticed that Cornelia's lips were blue. She let out a blood-curdling scream. Robert and the other children ran into the room. They were all excited and talking because the baby wouldn't wake up. They shook the bed, touched her face, called her name, nothing. Mama started rocking and moaning, moaning and crying, looking at her baby's lifeless body lying on the bed.

Celia walked over to her Mama and tried to comfort her, saying, "Don't cry, Mama, you have me. I'm still your baby."

The next few days were a flurry of activity. Uncle Henry, Aunt Susie, and their five kids: Aaron, Mollie, David, young Susie, and Amanda, came often. The eight Vance kids and the five Mickens's kids played in the yard, running around and having fun, and the younger ones always included Celia in their games.

During that time, a man in a funny-looking black suit came with a box and then took the box away with him when he left. The adults were inside and spoke in hushed tones with sad faces. Martha acted like something had ripped her heart out. Sometimes, Celia would walk up to her Mama when she was sitting in a chair, put both hands on her cheeks, and try to make her face not look sad. Cornelia had disappeared. Celia thought, *that's okay, I'm the baby again.'*

One day, not too long after that flurry of activity, Mama and Papa made all the kids dress in their Sunday-best. They put on their Sunday clothes also. Celia was a little confused because she knew it wasn't Sunday. Papa said they were going to the church. All of the kids except Celia sat in the back of the wagon. She sat on the wagon seat between her Mama and Papa. Mama put her arm around her, and she felt special again. She looked up and saw that both Papa and Mama had that sad look on their faces.

When they got to the church, the kids piled out of the back of the wagon. Instead of roughhousing and playing before going inside, they quietly followed Mama and Papa, who were looking straight ahead. Mama was holding Celia's hand.

Inside, Celia saw that the church was full of people she didn't know. She did see Uncle Henry, Aunt Susie, and her cousins. She smiled and waved at them. Everyone sat down after Mama, Papa, and the kids sat down. Seated in the front row between her parents, Celia noticed a little box at the front. It was like the one that the strange man in black had taken away with him after Mama had screamed and cried when Cornelia wouldn't wake up. There were bunches of flowers around it.

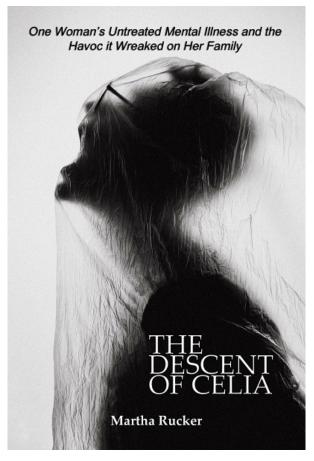
A man she knew was the preacher got up and started to speak. He asked Mama, Papa, and anyone else who wanted to, to come up and look inside the little box. Celia's Papa picked her up and walked toward the box, surrounded by flowers. She looked down and saw Cornelia inside. The toddler thought, *She looks like she's sleeping, and she's still quiet*. She looked at her Papa, and he looked stone-faced. Celia turned to look at her Mama next to them and could see that she was shaking. When she saw Cornelia, she started moaning and crying like when she couldn't get Cornelia to wake up. Papa helped her as they went back to their seats, then the boys and Della went up. They were all crying as they came back to sit down. Some of the other people got up to look at Cornelia in the box, including Uncle Henry, Aunt Susie, and her cousins. Finally, they were all back in their seats.

The Descent of Celia

The preacher started talking again. Martha took Celia into her lap and wrapped her arms around her baby, still crying softly. Papa sat stone-faced. Celia looked around over her mother's shoulder and was surprised to see that other people besides her Mama, brothers and sister were crying. Were they all sad to see Cornelia sleeping and quiet?

Mama's arms around her felt nice, and she went to sleep while the preacher was still talking. She woke up in Papa's arms. Everyone was walking out into the trees at the side of the church. Sometimes, she, her brothers and Della, and their cousins would play at the edge of the trees before going back home from church on Sunday. Now they walked further into the trees until they came to a hole in the ground. Then some men, including Uncle Henry, lowered the box into the hole with some rope. People were crying even louder now, and Mama was screaming louder than anyone else. She sounded like their dogs when they were howling at night. Celia wanted to laugh but put her hand over her mouth to stop her giggle from coming out. Robert was still stone-faced as he held Celia in one arm with the other around Martha as she continued to shake and cry.

Finally, the rest of the children followed them back to the wagon, and they all rode home in silence.



Celia's untreated mental illness wreaked havoc on her family. She got no help because mostly it was not recognized. Then the behavior was excused and tolerated. Because of this, she spiraled downward abusing family members in the process.

The Descent of Celia

By Martha Rucker

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