Chapter 17: The Song of Bernadette: A Sister Remembered

Our Mother had a deep devotion to St. Bernadette Soubirous, the visionary from Lourdes, France. Among the religious items in our Wheeling home, one stood out—a cherished statue of a grotto, depicting the "beautiful lady," the Blessed Mother, who appeared to humble Bernadette. It held a place of honor, symbolizing our Mother's faith and devotion. Though I don't know what became of that treasured statue, its meaning endured; fittingly, our mother named my little sister Bernadette.

This statue is similar to the one our Mother treasured. It shows the "beautiful lady" with Bernadette.

Sudden Loss: The Story of Our Bernadette

On April 24, 1969, just a few months after Tom and I welcomed our daughter Barbara into the world, the phone rang unexpectedly. My brother Ted was on the line. His voice was strained.

"Rose," he said. "You'd better sit down. I have bad news."

I held my breath. Then he spoke the unthinkable: our eleven-year-old sister Bernadette had been struck by a car and killed while crossing a busy road. She had been walking home from a nearby grocery store with a friend. A driver in one lane signaled for them to cross the highway. He was unaware that a car approached in the next lane. Bernadette was hit. She died instantly.

Stunned and hollow, I sat in silence. I could not process the sudden loss. Ted soon arrived at our home in Livonia, and together we went to our Mother's house in Taylor to be with her. Her grief was beyond words. This was the second child she had lost. Her heart seemed to fracture under the weight.

After spending time with Mom, Ted and I headed to Detroit, where our sister, Eleanor, was staying with her friend, Sally. As we waited in the living room, we tried to find the words to share the awful news. Eleanor's bright smile greeted us. "Oh, Ted and Rose, hi. What are you doing here?"

Tears welled in our eyes as we gently told her the truth. The pain on her face mirrored our own. We had a few details to offer, but what mattered was clear—our little sister, Bernadette, was gone. The weight of her absence pressed on all of us.

A Difficult Beginning

As we drove home from Eleanor's that evening in 1969, my thoughts drifted back more than a decade to December 30, 1957—a wintry day in Michigan, when Bernadette entered our lives. Back then, our unconventional household packed Mom's four children and Bernie's three into a two-bedroom, one-bath house in Detroit on John Kronk, across from a rumbling railroad

yard. Trains shook the place. A single oil space heater never quite warmed the drafty rooms. Icicles draped the roofline in the winter. It was cold, crowded, and loud.

And yet, into that chaotic world, Mom returned home one day from the hospital with a tiny bundle in her arms. She had not told us she was pregnant and, with her rather heavy physique, we had no idea. We were stunned—but delighted. The baby girl with soft pink skin, big brown eyes, and wisps of brunette hair was beautiful. In honor of the saint she revered, our Mother named her Bernadette Anne.

About fifteen months after Bernadette was born, in March 1959, our little sister Margaret Catherine arrived—a baby with Down syndrome who required much attention and care. Though our family had love to give, Bernadette often found herself without the attention and emotional support every young child needs, but we all did what we could to make her feel loved.

As a teenager, I tried to create small, special moments for Bernadette. Tom, my boyfriend at the time, and I sometimes took her along on our outings. One occasion stands out clearly in my memory. Mom and I pooled what little money we had, and I took Bernadette on a bus to the elegant J.L. Hudson Department Store in downtown Detroit for a haircut.

Multi-level J.L. Hudson Store on Woodward Avenue

Riding the brass-and-wood elevators, with operators calling out each department, felt like a dream. We arrived at the beautifully scented salon, where uniformed cosmetologists greeted us. We stood out among the stylish clients as we entered in our rather worn garments with no appointment. A kind stylist took us to his station.

He studied Bernadette's delicate features before giving her a modern bob with a shingled back and sideburns curled to her cheeks. The edgy style accentuated her big brown eyes. The caring cosmetologist made my little sister feel extra special. She beamed with pride. Afterward, we had a snack at the Woolworth's counter across the street. That day—full of elevators, new haircuts, and treats—became one of my special memories of Bernadette.

A Life Too Short

As Bernadette grew, our older sister, Mary, and her husband, Bill, became especially close to her. They often felt that our Mother didn't fully understand Bernadette's emotional needs. At one point, they even considered adopting her into their home, though I don't believe they ever voiced that hope aloud. Visits to Mary and Bill's cottage on Lake Erie became a beloved escape for Bernadette and our brother Jude—a time to laugh, swim, and just be kids.

As I reflect on her life, I am struck by how little time she was with us. Bernadette never got to attend high school. She never experienced college. She never started a family of her own. So much potential. So much love. Gone too soon. She had just begun to step into the fullness of her young life when tragedy took her away.

Bernadette is wearing a necklace
with an ivory rose I gave her.

Bernadette was in sixth grade at St. Alfred's School in Taylor when the auto accident took her from us. She was a sweet, sensitive soul. She left behind a space no one could fill. I miss her deeply and often wonder who she would have become. Her story, though short, is part of all of us. It is a significant part of our family's memory.

I will forever carry my sweet little Bernadette in my heart. Though your time with us was brief, your memory continues to guide, inspire, and remind us of the preciousness of love. Rest peacefully, dear sister. You are remembered, always.

Bernadette, Rose, Mary, Bill, Ken (Bill's Brother)