

Jars of Dreams

by Ana Sun

The first time Rita invited me over after school, I noticed a huge glass jar dominating her bedside table. Inside were small scraps of paper, a tiny stuffed rabbit, and a few foreign-looking coins.

“It’s my jar of dreams,” Rita giggled. She opened it, and there was a faint aroma of gingerbread. “Still smells a bit like Grandma’s cookies no matter how much I washed it.”

Before I’d even asked, she took out a scrap and showed me. It was torn out of a lined notebook. In her schoolgirl scrawl, she’d written across the lines with sparkling purple ink: *Move to New York.*

“Why New York?”

She shrugged and replaced the scrap into the jar.

“Dunno? I’d like to get out of here one day, I guess. Be someone interesting.” She giggled more. “Be all the things my mom wouldn’t want me to be.”

I was intrigued. “What do you do when they come true?”

“I yeet ’em.” She pointed to the trash can in the far corner of the room. “Anyway, you heard what Jimbo did yesterday?”

And so we brooded about our boring suburban lives, gossiped about a boy, talked about another girl she liked. New York was a distant dream.

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The moment I got home, I picked out a jam jar from the recycling bin. A hot soapy wash and a careful towel-dry later, it was ready. I would begin my own jar of dreams, even if it was one-tenth of the size of Rita’s. Dreams had to start somewhere.



I ripped a page out of a notebook, folded it into sixteen squares and used a ruler to tear along the creases. But when I tried to write, no words came. My heart felt heavy in the pit of my stomach. Was I not capable of dreaming?

Eventually, I scribbled *Move somewhere else* onto a fragment, folded it twice and dropped it into the jar. A lone fantasy in a vitreous vessel. Should I have been more specific? I didn't know.

Dreaming took practice, perhaps.

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Rita and I got into the habit of reading each other's new dreams every year, on one chosen day between Christmas and New Year's Day. She had a system. She would use paper of a different color for each year, so she could see at a glance whether there were more leftover dreams from one year to another. So smart.

The contents of my jar were always modest, my dreams small and uninspired. *Get into the marching band. Become the editor of the student magazine.*

Rita dreamed big. Hers said *Travel the world, or Start a permaculture farm in Portugal.* One year, she had written: *Climb the peak of Mount Everest.*

"Really?" I was incredulous. "You don't even like P.E.!"

"That's why it's a dream," she grinned.

Some years later, I finally upgraded to a quart-sized Mason jar. I was so pleased. Rita would be amused. We had planned to do our annual ritual in the summer before we both moved away for college. But the next day the phone rang. It was Rita, sobbing down the line so hard I could barely make her words out.

"Slow down," I said, trying to keep us both steady. "What happened?"



Her dad's car wasn't there when her mom got home. The handgun was missing from the bedroom. They found his body by the river where he loved to go fishing. Single bullet through the head.

Things got complicated; they had a lot to do. When I finally visited two weeks later, Rita's mom had started to pack up their home.

It hit me then; reality slamming so hard it rattled my bones. They couldn't keep the house, there wasn't money. Rita wouldn't be going to college now.

She wept into my shoulder, her tumble of black curls uncombed. Suddenly she pulled back and shoved something towards me.

"Take this away." It was a command, but her voice was soft with all life leached from it.

Her jar of dreams felt heavier than I'd remembered.

"What do you want me to—"

"Just take it away from me." She told me to go, promising to call when they got to her grandparents'.

We embraced but didn't say goodbye.

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When I moved to Boston to study journalism a month later, I took both jars with me. It was hard to fathom that the contents of her jar would remain unchanged, so I stopped adding dreams to mine. Let both be frozen in time.

Rita never called. Eventually, I figured she wouldn't mind if I'd peeked into her jar. *Walk the pilgrimage in Shikoku. See an arctic fox in the Westfjords. Witness a sunrise at Uluru.*

I had since internalized mine. My dreams lived in a metaphorical jar tucked at the back of my mind, biding their time. But still, wherever I moved, I'd place our jars in a designated place. They always looked comical. My tiny vessel next to her giant canister. My lack of ambition alongside her



lofty dreams. In my cozy Brooklyn apartment, I kept them at the bottom of the wardrobe, burying our forgotten dreams under the seams of long skirts and hems of dresses. If Rita couldn't make it to New York, at least I'd brought her dreams here.

One day, as I was about to head to work, my phone pinged. It was from a number I didn't recognise.

Ana? This still u?

The area code was 718—Queens? Brooklyn?

Yes. Who r u?

The phone in my hand rang and I nearly dropped it.

“Ana?” said a long-lost voice.

“Rita—”

Half crying, half laughing, we made plans to meet. The moment she hung up, I ran into the bedroom and rummaged for my glass jar. Unscrewing the top took a bit of effort, my palms were sweaty. I removed a distinct folded scrap of paper. *Give Rita her dreams back.* Euphoric, I hurled it into the trash can.

