

# My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother

## By: Patricia Polacco

My brother and our mother and I all lived with my grandparents on their farm in Union City, Michigan. Now my babushka, my grandmother, knew lots of things. She knew just how to tell a good story. She knew how to make the best chocolate cake in Michigan. After she told my brother and me a grand tale from her homeland, we'd always ask,

"Bubbe, is that true?"

She'd answer, "Of course is true, but it may not have happened!"

Then she'd laugh.

Now, I knew that she loved me all right, but I couldn't quite understand how she could even like my older brother, Richard. He had orange hair that was like wire; he was covered in freckles and looked like a weasel with glasses.

The one thing that my Bubbe didn't seem to know was how perfectly awful my brother really was! Mind you, he was always nice whenever she was around us; but as soon as she'd leave, he would do something terrible to me and laugh.

There were so many things that I couldn't stand about him. The worst was that he was always telling me he could do just about everything better than I.

"Bet I can pick more blackberries than you can," he jeered at me one day.

"No you can't."

"Can so."

"Cannot!"

"Can," he whispered.

"Not," I said louder.

"Can!" he whispered so low that I could hardly hear him.

"Not!" I screamed back.

We both picked berries for most of the afternoon.

Well, he upped and did it! He not only picked more berries than I, he set a record that wasn't even challenged for the next ten years.

"You make me sick, Richard Barber!" I yelled at him.

Then he smiled that smile that only a rotten redheaded older brother could smile. I guess I would have to face it. He could run fastest, climb the highest, throw the farthest, sit the longest, get the dirtiest, burp the loudest, and spit the farthest. He had no equal, certainly not me!

"And I'm four years older than you...Always have been and always will be," he sneered.

There had to be something - SOMETHING - I could do that he couldn't! Then inspired thought comforted me like a fresh breeze on a hot summer day.

"Oh, Richie, " I cooed as I stood next to rhubarb bushes.

"Do you like rhubarb?"

"No!" he said. "It's the sourest stuff on this planet!"

Now I knew, at long last that I had him.

"Bet I can eat more of this raw rhubarb than you can without getting the puckers!" I challenged.

"I don't think so!"

"I do!" I insisted.

"Don't," he hissed, looking smug.

"Do," I said furiously as I grabbed the first stalk and started chewing it almost down to the leaf.

When I couldn't get one more sour bite into my mouth, he was still eating with relish.

"I thought you said you don't like rhubarb," I said through pursed lips.

"I don't like it...I LOVE IT!" he announced as he popped the last stalk into his mouth.

I was so mad, I couldn't even feel how my belly was starting to ache.

"I can't stand you, Richard Barber...I double dog can't stand you!" I screamed as I went into the house to be consoled by my grandmother.

"Yeah, and I'm four years older than you, too, you little twerp...Always have been and always will be!" he called after me. Then he laughed that rotten redheaded older brother laugh.

That night at dinner I could hardly eat.

"Have you been eating angry apples again, child?" Bubbie asked as she sliced me a huge wedge of rhubarb pie.

"I baked your favorite!"

Richard gave me one of his extra-rotten, weasel-eyed, greenytoothed grins.

At bedtime my bubbie came and sat on the edge o my bed like she did every night.

"Look, a falling star," she said.

We watched it streak across the sky. Then she spit twice between her fingers and gave her chest a loud slap.

"Why did you do that, Bubbie?" I asked.

"I was making a wish...Didn't you know that wishes on falling stars come true?"

At last I knew how I was going to get back at my brother. For the longest time I watched the dark sky until I saw a star shoot across the night. Then I spit between my two fingers and slapped my chest. It was done. My wish was to do something – anything – better than my brother. I'd show him!

The next morning all I could think about was my wish. I was thinking about it so hard I almost didn't notice the wagons and trucks pulling into the field down the road near Four Corners.

"A traveling carnival," my brother shouted as he ran toward me. "They're setting up right here in our field! Bet I can eat more hot dogs than you can," he teased.

He was already starting it, but this time I was going to do something so incredible that even he would have to sit up and take notice. I had a star wish...I'd show my rotten redheaded older brother all right!

That night I ran straight for the merry-go-round. We must have taken fifty turns on that carousel. But then my brother got off! I stayed on. I went around and around and around.

"I knew I could do this longer than you," I shouted to my brother, feeling proud but just a bit dizzy.

"Tr...ee...sh...a," I heard my Bubbie call out. "Get off that thing...it's time to go home!"

The last thing I remembered was stepping off from the platform. Next thing I knew I woke up with Bubbie sitting on the edge of my bed.

Mom and Grandpa were there, too.

"You gave us a fright!" Momma said. "How do you feel?"

"What happened?" I asked.

"You fell!" my rotten redheaded older brother announced with the biggest grin on his face.

"I don't know what we would have done," my bubbie said softly. "Your brother carried you all the way home, and then he had to run to get Dr. Lee."

"You had to have stitches...I watched it all!" he said excitedly.

"You fell off the merry - go - round right into some pop bottles," my gramps added.

"You even passed out!" my brother chirped. "Looks like you finally did something special!"

It was from that exact moment that our relationship changed somehow.

"Thanks, Richie," I said to him.

"What's a big brother for anyway," he said, blushing.

That night we were all out in the yard. On hot Michigan nights it was my family's custom to sleep outside, where it was cool.

"Look at those stars," Bubbie said quietly.

"Wishes are funny, aren't they," I said. "Sometimes they come true differently than you think they will."

"That's why you have to be very careful what you wish for...It just may come true!" Bubbie said. Then she squeezed both of our hands. "Hang onto the grass," she whispered.

"Why, Bub?" my brother asked.

"Because if we don't, we might float up to the stars." Then she leaned over and kissed us both three times. "I kiss your eyes, and I hold both of your hearts in my good keeping...And this night I thank God that I walk this earth with both of you...Ah-meen!"

Then we all just lay on our blankets in the gentle summer night.

"I'll always be four years older than you, though," my brother whispered softly. Then he smiled. All of us held one another's hands, and then we all drifted off to sleep.