

2021 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Honorable Mention – Creative Non-Fiction Category

“One in a Million” by Jennifer Brunges

“People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”-Maya Angelo

It was a warm September day in 2017. The grill was sizzling and spitting with hot oil and flames were shooting high into the air. Ice water and salads were being passed around by the waiter. The aroma of the chicken and steak on the grill fills our nostrils. The whole restaurant is abuzz with noise and laughter from the other patrons. On our side of the grill is my husband Al, myself, and Rose. We brought Rose to Fuji Yama Hibachi for her birthday celebration. Rose looks adorable as always sitting in her wheelchair with her baby blue sweater, her white hair curled exactly right and her cute, crooked smile.

This was Al’s first-time meeting Rose after thirteen months of daily stories. I was so excited for this day. I was spoon feeding her rice from the ladle. Every time I gave her a bite, she smiled. My heart is so happy and bursting with joy. I am delighted that her daughter Sophie allowed me to be a part of this moment for her special birthday. As the chef on the hibachi prepared our meal, he lit the onion tower on fire. It was a red and orange fireball. Rose shrieked and clapped with delight. She smiles and holds my hand. Every now and then the hand squeeze gets a little tighter, and I just stared at her in amazement. The chef asked if anyone was celebrating anything special. That draws my attention back to the moment.

“Rose is celebrating her one 101 birthday,” I said.

“OH, what a special day!” the chef exclaimed.

The whole table sings “Happy Birthday.” She was beaming with delight, and I was so proud I held her hand so tightly, afraid that I would forget this moment and what she looked like. My mind drifted back to the past year.

~ ~ ~ ~

The year 2016 was extremely hard for me. I was a thirty-three-year-old stay at home mom of four young children. I had lost my identity and was depressed and working on finding myself. I had not worked outside of the house in seven years, and I was afraid to because of my conversion disorder. I had completed a few years of therapy, both occupational and psychological, and I was starting to grasp the idea of working outside the home. Conversion disorder is temporary paralysis of the limbs, face, or eyes. It is all due to stress and neurological issues and anxiety. There is no cure except for stress management and therapy. I also spent time regaining my walking and sight in 2012. I have not had a relapse since 2016. I felt like my disorder was giving me limitations and holding me back.

In the spring of 2016, I started working at a nursing home in Standale, MI. I really enjoyed the interactions with the residents. Just a simple smile or a hug from one of them, and I was so smitten. I met a particularly sweet resident named Rose. I really enjoyed my work there. It empowered me, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like myself again. About three months into my time there, Rose was moving out due to financial reasons, and I was upset. I thought I would never see her again.

Around the month of July, I decided to leave my job at that nursing home and find something closer to home. I applied at a homecare company, and I was given a patient assignment for Friday night respite care. The plan of care from my manager stated the patient was a 99-year-old lady that needed care when her guardians left the home.

That first Friday evening I put the address into my GPS and headed to the couple's house. As I pulled up, I noted a meticulously cut front lawn, a nice grey paint color and a magenta painted front door. I walked up and rang the doorbell, excited to see what was ahead of me for the evening. An older gentleman answered the door.

“Hi, my name is Tom,” he replied.

He had the warmest, most genuine smile. When I slipped off my shoes and stepped inside, I instantly felt a peace and warmth I cannot explain. Tom and Sophie were both dressed very hip and very trendy for their age. I also recall how tidy everything was and how everything was in its place.

“Let me introduce you to mother,” Sophie said.

I walked across the formal living room, through the kitchen, and took a step down into the living room. Imagine my shock when I saw Rose from the nursing home sitting on the teal couch.

“Rose! Oh, hello,” I gasped. I explained to the couple I knew her from my previous job and us being brought back together was a complete God thing. They hurried out the door to go play disc golf, and I sat there stunned at my situation.

Over the next few months, I became remarkably close to Tom, Rose, and Sophie. I noticed it was a three-person team effort to get Rose ready for the day and off to Sarah Care for daycare for the morning. I would arrive at 9:00 a.m. and bathe her, dress her, and blow dry her hair. Then, I would curl her hair while she ate breakfast. We read out of her *Jesus Calling* book and listened to WCSG on the radio. I had been away from the church for a few years, and it was refreshing to get back into prayer and worshipping again. Tom would pray every morning over breakfast and Sophie would make the most delicious scones or muffins. I would always decline them, but she would insist. I felt a part of a family, part of a greater force than I can explain. I was healing the more I spent time with these people. They felt like the family I longed to have, and I was finally starting to find my purpose.

~ ~ ~ ~

Al tapped me on the shoulder and drew my attention back to the room. The dinner was winding down and I wheeled Rose's wheelchair to the door so we could get her into the Tahoe. I was thinking about how Rose had just received that wheelchair that morning because the hospice nurse explained she was declining in health rapidly. I refused to believe it. I still saw the Rose I know walking with her walker and enjoying life. Al and I boosted Rose into the Tahoe because she was quite heavy. She was not a frail 101-year-old lady. She still had a lot of spunk and life in her. We headed on our way back to Tom and Sophie's house beaming with delight.

When we arrived back at the house, Al helped me get Rose inside. We pushed and fenagled our way inside. Rose was not able to get up the landing stairs like usual. We wheeled her inside to the dining room table, and there was a pile of gifts awaiting her. I was in the

bathroom, and I could hear Rose say through the wall, “Are you the hired help?” to Al. I laughed to myself. Rose opened each gift slowly and meticulously I had spent the morning picking them out for her. She opened a square shaped one. Inside was a photo collage of our thirteen months together, photos of her outdoors with flowers, photos making cookies, photos of us doing our Friday night puzzles. I was so thrilled by the whole evening. “Thanks a million kid,” Rose said. *She always calls me a kid*, I thought to myself. As Rose was getting into bed, she kissed me on the cheek and said, “I love you.” I replied, “I love you more.” I had no idea how important this last dinner would be and how it would play a pivotal role in my life.

The next morning my cell phone rang. It was Sophie calling, and she stated that Rose was feeling ill. Over the night, she had developed a cough and Sophie would be calling the hospice nurse for advice. I rushed over to their house and sat with Rose and Sophie on the couch. The hospice case manager had just stopped over and did not seem concerned. She had seen a lot of these cases throughout the years, and this was the usual scenario for her. With this being my first hospice patient, I was naive to the situation. I had never had to say goodbye to a patient before. I was ignorant about the process of dying. I did not think Rose would live forever; I just never had thought about it at all. I chatted with Sophie for a few minutes, and then headed home. On Monday morning when I arrived for my shift, Sophie stated Rose had become unresponsive and was entering into the end-of-life stages.

I ran straight into Rose’s room where she was laying in her bed. She had her pink stuffed rabbit I had given her on Easter under her arm, and she looked like she was sleeping. I tried to speak to her but there was no response. All I could do was bravely hold her hand. Her skin was

hot, and her cheeks were flushed. I sat there for a half hour before her daughter and sons arrived from out of town. I was just talking to God and praying that this was not happening. I felt like my entire world was collapsing and I did not know what to do. Those next three days of hospice care, I had to help place a catheter, brush her teeth, sponge bathe her lifeless body, dress her, and roll her to prevent pressure sores. I put her small hearing aids into her ears in hopes that she could still hear me. I cared for her like she was still alive, but she could no longer respond or communicate. I did not sleep at all those nights; I was caught between an odd feeling of life and death all mixed in one. I was about to experience a profound loss that would leave my life forever changed.

~ ~ ~ ~

A month later, the organ was playing “Amazing Grace,” and everyone was dressed in black. I scanned the room for a familiar face in the crowd. Beautiful roses of yellow and pink, and white lilies sprinkled the podium. I saw a small silver heart shaped urn. Rose’s stuffed pink rabbit I gave her last Easter sat by her family photo display. I sat by Al as Rose’s family talked about her life and her memories. It was in my moment of grief I decided right then I wanted to work in a hospice. I realized that just one person out of the millions out there changed me. She gave this shy, anxiety ridden mom a new chance at life. She showed me that I do not have to be defined by my disorder and that I am a person worthy of love and giving love. My new purpose in life is to give back to others the way Rose gave back to me. She changed my life with her words and her compassion, and I will forever be grateful. Those thirteen months will always be

in my heart and one day I hope I can be the Rose in someone's life. I am blessed and lucky to have had Rose in my life.