

Rose

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Brief bio: Karl is a neurohospitalist at VUH who started his Vanderbilt experience as a medical student, class of 1982. He was then resident, chief resident, and fellow here before becoming faculty. He has since had various jobs in neurology, informatics, business, and administration. He returned to Vanderbilt in 2018 to start the neurohospitalist program and is Professor of Clinical Neurology and Clinical Biomedical Informatics. Along the way he has published 20 medical texts, taught medicine around the world, and played keyboards in several rock bands. He is married to Christa Stoscheck and this year is their 40th anniversary; she is retired Medicine faculty.

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Rose awoke to the smell of pancakes. Mom was making the usual Saturday morning treat, blueberry pancakes with pure Vermont maple syrup. On special occasions, she would accompany the regular fare with patties of breakfast sausage, but she did not smell that sweet and spicy scent. No, just pancakes this morning.

Who would she play with today, Jenny? No Rose remembered that something had happened to Jenny. Something bad. Was she sick? Was she hurt? She could not, for the life of her, remember what happened. Okay then, she would play with the boys across the street, they were lunatics but fun. But then she remembered that the boys were away. Were they off at camp? Again, the details escaped her. Nevertheless, she would enjoy this summer morning.

Rose's eyes opened and she looked around the room. Panic briefly filled her. Where was she? But then she remembered, this was the guest bedroom at her daughter's house. That's right, she was visiting her daughter for a couple of weeks. She would not play with Jenny or the boys today, those were foggy memories from long ago. She was

visiting her daughter. What was her name? Violet. That's right. Or was it Lily? She had two daughters, and she wasn't sure whose house she was in.

Rose sat up in bed, swung her feet onto the floor, and prepared to start the day. Her bones creaked and groaned under protest, but followed her commands, as they had done for these eighty-some years. How many years was it? She had lost track.

"Good morning, Mom!" chimed a cheery voice which accompanied the opening of the bedroom door. "Happy Birthday, Mom!" A tall, thin woman with short red hair entered the room and strode to the bed. She bent down to embrace Rose, gave a kiss on the cheek, then stood upright, turning to adjust the vertical blinds. With a quick twist of her wrist, the direct rays of sunlight were out of Rose's eyes. "Is that better?"

"Yes, thanks," said Rose. Rose looked at the woman and was frightened that she forgot which of her daughters this was. She thought she would cover up her lack of memory by not saying her name. It would come to her eventually, like many other times when she would fight for a memory and it would finally come to her a few moments later.

The woman extended a hand with long slender fingers. Rose extended her own hand and they grasped. For a moment, Rose stared at the joined hands, one smooth and graceful and one wrinkled and gnarled. Had she not been on the opposite side of this exchange a number of years ago? She remembered how she had helped her mother in her long illness so many years ago and how frail she looked.

The young hand tightened its grip on hers and pulled. This was not social contact, this was help for her to rise from the low bed. Rose had been taller in her youth when her spine was straighter, but her legs were still long. She had liked being tall most of her life, but now getting in and out of low-slung cars and chairs and beds was a challenge.

As Rose stood, she noticed the name-tag on the woman's shirt. It said 'Lily' and below was 'Customer Service'. Ah! She was relieved, the guilt of not remembering could be left behind.

"Thank you Lily," Rose said.

Rose's memory was failing. The nice doctor told her she had Alzheimer's disease. At least he seemed nice. He was totally professional and polite. Rose remembered that, at least. She had been irritated that he had spoken more to her daughter than to her, but

then, she would not have remembered the details, anyway. She had also been irritated by all of the questions. She did not mind testing strength, reflexes, and coordination and listening to her heart. She had been an athlete in her younger years and she was proud of her body. No, the endless questions which formed the memory tests were particularly frustrating. Remembering three things then having to repeat them after a seeming eternity. No one would remember those. Who is the Vice President? Who cares? The Vice President is just a highly paid understudy, waiting for the President to not be President anymore.

The doctor had given her some pills to take. One little pill every morning. Rose did remember that the pill was to try to improve her memory. Had it worked? It did seem like she could remember a little better.

The two walked out of the bedroom and down a short hall, hand-in-hand. At the end of the hall was a family room complete with kitchen area, dinette, and comfortable seating area. On the perimeter of the room were a television and accompanying stand with accessories, desk with computer monitor, and another small incidental table filled with papers and envelopes. Lily led Rose to the kitchen and guided her to the dinette.

“I think I'll sit at the bar, dear,” said Rose. They continued to low-backed bar chairs facing the kitchen area.

“What do you want to do today, Mom? This is your day!” Lily said.

Rose was puzzled, “I thought you have to go to work?”

Lily smiled, “I just got off work, I'm home for the day. I don't have to go in until tomorrow night.” Rose noticed Lily manipulate her pin, remove it, and deposit it on the counter.

Meanwhile, Rose picked up her handful of pills, dropped them into her mouth, and forced them down with a half-glass of water. She shuddered with the terrible taste. Why can't doctors come up with better flavor on those pills? Pills with an M&M candy coating? Now there's an idea.

Rose asked, “What do YOU want to do?”

Lily deflected the question, “This is your special day, you choose. Whatever you want...within reason.”

“So, I guess Alaska is out of the question,” she said with a smile.

Lily returned the smile but said nothing.

Rose asked, “Can Violet come over? Can we all have lunch together?”

Lily winced, “No, Mom. Violet can't come over today.”

Rose asked, “Maybe on the weekend? What day is today?”

“It's Saturday,” answered Lily. She bustled around the kitchen, preparing their usual fare, cereal, yogurt, coffee, and juice. Not hearty but healthy and satisfying. The pancakes she had smelled when she woke up had been a distant memory, part of one of her dreams. While Rose had always been a dreamer, her dreams had become particularly vivid this past few years. The nice doctor had said this was normal with Alzheimer's disease.

Lily continued, “Maybe you would like to go to the botanical garden?”

“Yes, that would be lovely,” said Rose. Why had she not thought of that herself? She loved the botanical garden, and so did her girls. Rose used to know all the names of the plants, and she would still remember many. Older memories were better preserved than newer ones.

Rose's heart skipped a beat. A memory. A thought. An emotion. She asked, “Why can't Violet come with us?” Lily did not answer. Rose asked again, “Please tell me. What happened?”

Lily looked down at her hands and stopped her bustling, “Mom, Violet passed away. She...” but Lily did not finish. She shook her head and turned away. Rose was sure Lily was crying now, and the emotion was contagious. She was sorry she asked. She now remembered what happened.

“Oh my God,” Rose started crying, “my Violet!”

Her beautiful sweet Violet, once full of life and laughter, withered away to a skeletal being, wracked by pain caused by ovarian cancer. This memory was horrible.

“Was it recent? I forgot when it happened,” Rose said, her tears now beginning to dry up.

“Yes Mom. Just a week ago. We buried her last Saturday.” Lily turned around, her normally bright cheeks flushed and her eyes red. Makeup had been streaked by her tears. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

Rose touched Lily's hand. “I'm sorry I keep forgetting. I made you sad again.”

Lily said, “I didn't want to bring it up on your birthday. I wanted this to be a happy day.”

Rose said, “It will be, dear.” Then she said. “I still remember how to be a mother. When you girls would get upset, I would change the subject or we would just leave the house. Let's go now. Skip breakfast and go to the garden.”

Lily nodded then gave a brave smile, “I think you're right. Let's go.”

Lily gathered warm clothes for Rose and soon the two were walking out the front door to the driveway. Lily helped Rose into the passenger's seat of the SUV, and soon they were on their way.

Rose always enjoyed riding in the car. This one was high enough for her to get into with little effort and high enough for her to see the sites. She recalled the Sunday afternoons when she and her husband Frank would just drive through the town, looking at the beautiful houses with their lawns and gardens.

Frank had taken an unusual interest in flowers, for a man of his generation. Perhaps spawned by marriage to a woman named for a beautiful flower, it was his idea to name their twin daughters after flowers. Rose had thought that just too cute to be appropriate, especially with a mother also named after a flower. But Frank had comically argued that the alternative was to name the girls after types of meat, just like he was. Rose had laughed when they had thought of the girls being named Bratwurst and Knockwurst.

Rose's Alzheimer's disease could not take that memory away. The drive home from the hospital was one of the happiest days of her life. After two miscarriages, she had finally carried identical twin girls to term. In the tradition of Rahab from the Bible, they had tied a piece of red yarn around an arm of the first child, Lily, until they could tell the two apart.

Lily and Violet had been the closest of friends throughout childhood, even sharing rooms until they left for college. Although they had endured their share of arguments, in the end, they shared more than DNA, and were closer than two earthly people could normally expect to be. Completing each other's sentences, they were cute to their friends and family and annoying to others.

Lily was the quiet and intense one. She had finished college then worked in a series of industry service jobs, working her way to middle management until the birth of her own child.

Rose thought, "What was his name?" Rose began to get angry at herself for not remembering her own grandson's name. She did remember that he was in college somewhere. Lily had been so sad when he had left her with an empty nest. It did not help that shortly after her grandson left for college Lily's husband also left.

Lily's husband left because he had found a younger, prettier love interest. Lily never saw it coming. All those business trips had not been business at all. Rose had suspected something but had said nothing to her daughter. Her memory was already somewhat faulty and she was hesitant to voice her opinion about things. It would not have mattered anyway.

So Lily returned to work. But because she was out of the workforce for so many years, she had to take an entry level position. Night shift at the Hilton. Not a bad job, but not what Rose had wanted for her child at this stage of life.

Violet was more wild and poorly focused, though no less bright than her twin. Violet had spent much more time in college than she intended, changing majors twice. Eventually, armed with a degree in nursing, she became an oncology nurse, administering chemotherapy to children and adults at the university hospital.

This had made the diagnosis of incurable cancer particularly painful. Ovarian cancer. Hard to detect and even harder to treat. By the time the cancer had been found, metastases had become widespread. She knew that she would be in for a rough ride.

Conventional treatment was followed by experimental treatment, then more experimental treatment. Eventually, Violet's tired body and mind could endure no more, and the experimentation stopped. Violet's passionate and exuberant spirit had

left this earth and now there was a void in Rose's life. Rose fought to keep the tears from beginning to flow again. She had to be strong for Lily.

Rose had barely replayed the history in her mind when they arrived at the botanical garden. Lily parked in a handicapped spot, though Rose had often objected. 'The walk will do me good.' she would protest. But her knees were not up to a long walk through both the parking lot and garden, so she would accept the perk.

The flowers were as beautiful as ever. Despite the unseasonably cool morning, the flowers raised their faces to the rising sun. Artistic arrangements of color and greenery painted a magnificent abstract painting from a distance. Yet the delicate and intricate beauty of each flower allowed one to appreciate the garden from any distance. After surveying the gardens from the walkway near the visitor's center, Lily and Rose strode the paths between the beds, stopping periodically to examine some special flower. Lily and Rose would each occasionally pinch off a wilting flower and drop it on the ground.

"These are so beautiful," said Lily, approaching a bed of plants with bright orange flowers and rounded leaves.

Rose said, "Nasturtium." She saw the surprise on Lily's face. Rose smiled, "I haven't lost all of my memory!"

"Of course," answered Lily. She squeezed her mother's hand a little harder.

"You know, the flowers are edible," said Rose.

Lily laughed, but said nothing.

"No really, they are, along with a lot of other flowers," said Rose. "Why did you laugh?"

"My mother with Alzheimer's teaches me something I did not know," said Lily.

"Well, at least you believe me," said Rose.

"She should," said a booming masculine voice which startled the two ladies. They turned their heads to see a squat little old man a whole head shorter than the ladies. He sported a yellow jacket which identified him as one of the caretakers of the garden.

"I'm so sorry I startled you, ladies."

Lily extended her free hand to shake his, "Hi Paul, you startled me."

“Nice to see you again, Miss Lily.” and I assume this is your Mum?” He turned to greet Rose.

Lily gave the introduction, “Paul, this is my mother, Rose. She is visiting from West Virginia . And Mom, Paul is one of the horticulturalists here. He is from Scotland .”

“Nice to meet you, Miss Rose.” He gave a short nod of the head to the elderly woman towering above him. “Lilly comes here quite a lot...as did Violet.” He sighed. “I'm so sorry for your loss. She was a wonderful person.”

Lily answered in a hurry, “Yes, thanks...”

“I'm sorry I couldn't come to the funeral, I had a medical situation in my own family.”

Rose asked, “Oh I'm sorry, anything serious?” she looked concerned.

Paul waved his hand, “No, nothing like that, I am a grandfather, again. He gave a weak smile.

Rose said, “Congratulations, Paul. Perhaps you might name the child Violet?”

“Oh Mom...” interrupted Lily.

Paul quickly answered, “That might be an idea, but it was a baby boy. Might give the lad a complex, you know.”

The three smiled, then Paul picked one of the wilting flowers, then dropped it at the base of the bush. He fingered another flower beginning to wilt, but let it stay on the bush.

Lily nodded. The three walked a little further, approaching the next bed, this one with very low velvety leaves punctuated by purple flowers.

“You know, Violets are also edible,” said Paul. Then he flushed, aware of his faux pas.

Rose spoke quickly to break the awkward moment, “That's right, in fact they were used as herbs, sometimes dried.”

The two seniors looked at Lily. She looked tense. Tears again appeared in her eyes.

“I'm sorry,” said Paul. “I shouldn't...”

“That's alright,” said Rose. “This is a happy day. This is my birthday!”

Paul brightened and said, "Congratulations, Miss Rose. And how old are you now?"

Rose smiled, "I'm...How old am I?" she asked Lily.

"Eighty-five," answered Lily.

Paul said, "Well, you don't look it."

"Thanks for the lie." Rose smirked. "I hope I remember you, Paul."

Paul said, "I am sure I will remember you, Miss Rose."

Rose said, "I wish I could be as confident. I have Alzheimer's, so the doctor says."

Paul's face fell, "Oh, I am sorry."

Rose smiled a genuine smile, "That's okay. I can still enjoy this wonderful day, this wonderful garden, my wonderful daughter, and my wonderful new friend."

Paul blushed, "Thank you, Miss Rose." He then turned to Lily who had as brave a smile as she could muster. "Miss Lily, I have something I'd like to say to you."

Lily nodded, and answered shortly, "Of course, Paul."

Paul continued, "Just an observation, and I'm not telling you anything your mother does not know, since she is my elder... by three years. You have had more than your share of tragedy lately. You have a difficult time freeing your mind from thoughts of suffering and loss. Divorce from your husband, departure of your son to college, death of Violet, and the infirmities of your mother, Miss Rose..."

Lily started to speak, "Surely not..." but a squeeze from Rose's hand cut her off.

Paul continued, "You came here to enjoy earth's beauty. The beauty of these flowers, which I so diligently attend. When we look at a flower, we rejoice in its beauty and purpose. We know its transience, but we don't think too long about it. That's part of being a flower, don't you see? My joy has been the visits of you, your sister, and now your mother, three lovely flowers. But like all flowers, we are here for a time, then our time is gone." He hesitated, eyes moving between Rose's face and Lily's. "I see before me three flowers. One in the prime of form and beauty. One a bit wilted around the edges but still magnificent. One in my mind's eye who I recall to be a particularly exceptional. My memory of Violet is a good one. Try to remember the beauty. Okay?"

Lily nodded but her eyes teared up. She looked at Rose who was busily dabbing her eyes with a tissue. “Thank you Paul,” Lily said.

Paul turned to a stand of rose bushes behind the violets. He fingered a beautiful rose, wilted yet still with a sparkle of life and beauty. He did not pick it, but let it go to be enjoyed for another day. “Aren't these lovely flowers?”

Rose answered, “Not more lovely than their caretaker.”

Paul looked up at Rose and smiled. The trio walked the paths of the garden, silence broken only by rustling of the wind in the trees and chirps of the occasional bird. Lily stopped and held out her arms, halting her companions.

“Look!” whispered Lily.

Immediately in front of them, a hummingbird hovered near an orchid, its long bill deep within the delicate flower. The wings were a blur of motion and created the softest flutter, barely audible with the ambient noise. The three watched for a moment while the hummingbird made the rounds of the local flowers, eventually descending to an urn full of lilies and bordered by variegated violets and wisteria spilling over the edge. The hummingbird moved from flower to flower, then moved on to a lily in the middle of the bed.

When the show was over, Rose turned to look at Lily. “Look, the hummingbird was dining on your flower.”

Lily smiled. “Speaking of dining, I’m hungry. We missed breakfast, let’s get something to eat.”

Closing salutations were made then the ladies walked toward the front entrance while Paul returned to his duties. Rose sat on a bench at the entrance while Lily fetched the car. The SUV pulled up to the curb and Lily exited the vehicle to help Rose into the passenger seat. When both were buckled in, they drove to the house.

Lily pulled some vegetable soup out of the refrigerator and heated it up in the microwave. She would serve birthday cake after their soup.

“What lovely soup,” Rose said, as she ate hungrily.

Lily brought out the birthday cake and lighted the single candle, “Happy Birthday, Mom!”

“What a surprise!” Rose said, “It’s my birthday?”

“Yes,” Lily replied. “You’re 85 today.

“My goodness,” answered Rose, “That’s very old, isn’t it?”

Lily cut a slice of cake for each of them.

“You were so sweet to have baked me a cake,” Rose said.

Lily had bought the cake from the supermarket but she knew better than to correct her mother on this inconsequential issue. Lily replied, “You’re welcome.”

After lunch Lily turned the TV to the Cooking Channel. Rose loved to watch food preparation almost as much as she enjoyed food consumption. She had once been a good cook herself, but after burning several dishes, Lily thought it was best Rose helped only with the clean-up.

Lily, meanwhile, chipped away at the household chores, then cooked dinner. Spaghetti. A favorite of Lily’s from childhood, spaghetti was the first meal Rose had taught her to prepare. That was when Lily was half her present height, and needed a box to stand on.

After dinner, Rose said, “Let me help with the dishes.” She started to rise, but when half-vertical fell back into the chair. Lily sprang to her aid, helping her up.

“Mom, why don't you lie down. I can tell you’re tired.”

Rose stood for a moment, then nodded. “Okay. But please save some work for me to do. I don't want you taking care of me.”

Lily said, “That's what family is for. You look after me and I look after you.”

“Lily, you are such a lovely girl.” She then corrected herself, “Such a lovely woman.”

The two walked hand to arm down the hall. When Rose was washed and in her nightgown, the two shuffled to the bedroom. Rose slid off her slippers and climbed into bed. Lily tucked Rose in, gently folding the sheet below Rose's chin, much as Rose had done for the twins so many years ago.

Lily sat on the side of the bed, leaned forward and kissed Rose's cheek. "Goodnight Mom. Sleep well."

Rose smiled and held Lily's hand. "Goodnight Lily." They held hands for a moment. "We had a nice day, didn't we."

Lily returned the smile, "We had a great day. Happy birthday, Mom."

"That's right," said Rose with renewed sparkle. "Today is my birthday. How old..."

"Eighty-five, Mom." Lily responded once again.

Rose squeezed Lily's hand before releasing it. "I love you so much."

"Love you too."

Lily stood, adjusted the blinds so that the morning sun would not wake her early again, clicked off the light, and closed the door behind her.

Rose was so tired. Her stamina was not what it once was. Nowadays, she had a hard time even watching TV without dozing off. It seemed a paradox, then, that sleep would come with difficulty at night. But this night, she was so tired, exhausted from the effort and emotion of the day.

Rose stared around the room, now indistinct due to the low light level and cataracts. The room was silent yet seemed alive, walls moving and morphing, dissolving into another place.

A light shone in the center of her vision, blinding white at first, then softening into a flurry of colors. Wherever she looked, the light followed, obscuring her view of the bedroom. When the colors had totally enveloped her visual space, she looked at a different room with clearer eyes. It was familiar yet she could not place it. Why was she cursed with this struggling memory? Then it cleared. This was another place, or a dream of one. Lace curtains hung from the windows, morning sunlight broken through the threads.

Rose sat up, swinging her feet off the side of the bed. She reached for her cane, but apparently she had misplaced it. She reached with her hand, and saw someone else's hand, not the gnarled arthritic limb to which she had become accustomed, but one of

someone considerably more youthful. She turned it and it responded to every command. Rose wondered how long this dream would last.

She heard the door open and turned to see a tall, thin figure with high cheek-bones and angular features. This time the recognition was instant. Violet. But not the Violet she had said goodbye to. Not the bald skin and bones which had given her a final embrace. This was a vibrant, athletic Violet. A Violet of yesteryear.

Violet smiled, "Good morning, Mom."

Tears slipped down Rose's cheek. "Violet, is that you?"

"Of course, Mom." she said. "You didn't think I would forget your birthday, did you?"

Violet strode to the bed and Rose stood, looking Violet in the eye, rising to every inch of their six feet in height. Rose embraced Violet and stroked her short brown hair. One last embrace. That would be enough of a reward for the short remainder of her life, even if in a dream.