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Ramona's Song

What made me decide to go on my first visit to the nursing home? Looking back, I question whether I went there out of service to the elderly or whether I went to satisfy my own need. Did I go to be a companion to those seeking the presence of others or to be in the presence of the sweet-faced, caring elderly who recount stories from days past? I believe it was a little bit of both. A give and take of needs existed between us.

Visits to the nursing home are part of my weekly schedule which cause me to feel both routinely excited and apprehensive. I never know what will be waiting for me when I open the doors to the healthcare center. I always expect to be greeted by the smell of antiseptic and aging bodies. I always expect to feel the heat of the eighty-five-degree climate-controlled environment. I always expect to find birds chirping away in their cage and to see a widescreen television playing a show which no one bothers to watch. I always expect to see nurses in their brightly colored scrubs dispensing medicine. However, I never know which residents will be sitting in the lobby or who I will get to interact with during my visits. I often hope to see my two favorite ladies, Virginia and Eloise. Virginia is a mere whiff of air with a fragile voice but has a strong and sharp mind. Eloise is Virginia's companion with a smile as sweet as sugar.

On this particular day, neither of them sat in the lobby amidst the floral couches, aged library books, audience-less television, and caged birds. Instead, I was in the presence of less familiar faces. I found myself talking to a woman with a laughter-filled voice and listening to a

gentleman play a plethora of harmonica tunes when I noticed an elderly lady sitting in a wheelchair across the room. She was turning the pages of a magazine. Although the expanse of the room separated us, I was struck by how vividly I could see her. She looked content but also extremely alone. When the woman with the voice of laughter decided to move to a new location, I ventured across the room and sat down on a floral couch next to her. In her wheelchair, she looked delicate but not frail. She sat primly in her pale blue sweatshirt with a matching turtleneck and had straight off-white hair parted down the middle which fell to her shoulders.

Within minutes of first hearing her sweet soft voice with a faint Minnesotan accent, we bonded over our love of cooking. We spoke of her love to collect recipes, my adventures with cooking classes, and looked through Martha Stewart's magazine, *Living*. Our talk of cooking led her to point out her inability to cook anymore.

She pointed to her left leg and said, "I fell and hurt my foot. And do you know what they did? Surgery up this whole leg. I'm staying here until it gets better, but I just want to go home."

I expressed my sympathies at her pain and felt the first stab of joint sorrow. Next, she directed my attention to a page in the magazine with Martha Stewart's chow chow admiring hydrangeas, a peculiar yet endearing sight. The adorable picture led her to share the story of her cat, Pumpkin. The cat still lived at her house and received care from her niece. However, she worried about him because he hid from her niece whenever she visited.

In a wistful voice she said, "I just want to go home and have him sit right here on my lap. I would just pet him. He's a little lap heater."

Again, my heart cracked with her pain. I tried to distract her with a story about my own loveable furry friend who lived with my family, but family turned out to be the hardest topic to discuss of them all. Her sister actually lived in the same building. They lived in such a close

proximity yet were often unable to see each other because of her sister's deteriorating mental state. For this woman who lived next door to her sister her whole life, several hallways of separation seemed endless.

This time she barely whispered, "I just want to take her home and take care of her, but I know I can't. It's hard."

After she shared her story, her eyes shone, and her hands shook. Her face was red, and her lips quivered. As I put my hand into hers, we became more than acquaintances.

The thought to exchange names did not occur to us until after she shared parts of her which gave her far greater identity than a name ever could. I learned this honest woman's name was Ramona, and Ramona's stories moved me. I felt the desire to see Ramona's sister, move them back into her house, and snuggle with Pumpkin just as much as she did. At first, I couldn't tell why. I wondered if it was Ramona's ability to share such deeply beautiful and sad feeling with me so shortly after meeting me. I wondered if my own eyes swelled with tears when Ramona spoke because I heard her simple requests that were impossible to grant at the moment. I felt frustration at the injustice of seeing Ramona lose the ability to enjoy the small satisfactions of life which cooking, petting animals, and seeing one's kin bring.

I thought about what I could do for Ramona. I had no solutions. I did not possess the power to bring her home, reunite her with her sister, or care for her cat. I also did not want to try to assuage her pain with empty statements. All I could do that day was to hold out my hand and open my ears as she spoke.

Long after I walked out the doors of the nursing home and left behind floral couches, aged books, a woman with a voice of laughter, and a man who spoke best with his harmonica, my strongest memory remained the image of a woman in a pale blue sweatshirt. I could still hear

the desperately hopeful voice of Ramona singing out to me like a caged bird. She chirped softly and said, "I just want to go home."