2023 Ben Strauss Youth Program

Middle School

Teen Essay Contest

Honorable Mention

Elizabeth Fluck

The Hero on the Third Floor

This is her story told by herself. Forgive her; first person is too painful. Third-person allows for memories to be felt from a distance. It is the better ones that surface.

She lies there, and no one is around. The annoying IV pole starts beeping obnoxiously. It is like a baby; it either has air in its tubes or it needs to be changed. She would know, babies are always crying and fussing. It’s gassy with little air bubbles in the line. She opens the latch to access the tube. She flicks the plastic in the same way the nurses have done countless times. The bubbles rise, she closes the latch, and it stops crying. She roles over, alone in her hospital bed, and faces a real baby. Someone else’s child…also alone. If only there were someone her age to play with. Someone well enough. If only she were strong enough to run, laugh, and cause chaos like she used to. That’s when she decided that she needed a hero, so that’s what she became.

Pushing her IV pole with her port side arm, she walked down the third floor, away from room number three. As she walked, she peeked ever so slightly into the other rooms to see who would come to play. A few kids did, mostly younger and some in wheelchairs. It was like watching a zombie apocalypse. Everyone dragged their feet and poles to the games and “fun.” Once inside, the kids pepped up when they saw glue, buckets, and slime activator. They miraculously ran to get the color and glitter of their choice. But she stayed in the back, letting kids go in front of her. Normally she would have green slime, but that day was different, it was an ice-cold blue, her favorite. The children contently made their slimes. The newbies added everything in at one time, whereas the pros added little by little, until they got perfect texture. No one was talking, so she initiated the conversation, and soon they shared glitter paint and other ingredients. She made friends with everyone: the little kids, the kids too sick to use both hands, the kids with massive scars on their bald heads, and the kids from other countries that didn’t speak English. She became the older sister to all of them, for a short time. Soon the nurses took the kids back to their rooms. Eventually a nurse came for her. At least she got to play instead of being confined to her room.

Months later she and her mother sat on the “bridge,” the glass enclosed hallway that overlooked the ER. She and her mother ate muddy scrambled eggs and bitter orange juice. A boy and his mother arrived on the bridge and sat on the other side. He was new. He still had his hair. After a few quick glances, she put down her Styrofoam plate and sat in the seat close to them. She crossed her hands in her lap and finally she spoke only one word, “Hi.” After a pause he answered a meek, “Hi” back. Soon they figured out each other’s names and after some persuading, they had all the paper and markers they needed to make paper airplanes. They started with a game, who could throw it the highest without it going over the glass into the ER waiting room. Soon so many planes were flying over, the security guards were picking them up left and right. Then the target was their heads! To avoid serious trouble, they wrote quotes on the wings. The boy wrote, “Happiness can be found in the darkest of places if one remembers to turn on the lights.” She wrote, “You have been assigned this mountain to show others it can be moved.” Then there was smiling and laughing in a most depressing place. The boy won -20 points.

All in all, she set out to be her own hero, yet for three years, she positively affected the lives of others. Most are now thriving and were too young to remember the horrors they endured. Others…well she’s afraid their stories may have ended. She clings to the good memories, like when a little girl’s mother came up to her with tears in her eyes and gave her a warm embrace. She told her that her daughter had the strength to stand up, because she wanted to be like her friend, the big girl in room three, the hero on the third floor.