

Rose

ANDREA MARION

In the bathroom stall, she sat on the seat, flapped her hands, rocked herself forward and back in terror. Fifteen-year-old Rose had just fled from the wings of the Seattle Moore Theater that was filled with an excited audience.

Her long black hair, streaked with purple, was pulled into a bun on her head. She wore a gold, sparkly unitard. Shimmering face paint in gold swirls covered her cheeks and forehead. Her Asian eyes, slightly askew with muscle imbalance, darted about. Despite years of physical therapy to keep her mouth closed, her mouth now popped wide with fright.

Rose forgot.

In this moment, she forgot that she had worked six months for this night, and that it had been more than a year since she began Circus Arts lessons. She forgot she was to perform backbends and flips on the Lyra, a four-foot diameter steel ring suspended from the stage ceiling. In her panic, she even forgot to put her fingers in her ears when the noise was too loud.

Ryann, Rose's multi-gendered coach, burst into the women's room like a thunderclap that Rose didn't hear, sealed as she was in her own world.

Ryann balanced as male and female; Rose teetered in and out of the neurological norm. Both were drawn to the fringe place of magic and flashing light that makes entertainment from deviation as well as beauty: the Circus.

"Rose," Ryann was stern, "you have 30 seconds to get on stage, *or we do this next year.*"

Everything in Rose's life up to that point had led to this juncture.

At nine months old, Rose had been malnourished, her muscles atrophied from spending 24 hours per day in her crib in Jiangxi Province, China. After months of preparation in the United States, Margaret and Larry, in their 40s, took her in their arms as their adopted child.

Freed from that crib, Rose wanted to constantly move. She wouldn't sleep for more than a few hours at a time.

Margaret would come in the front door at midnight with the stroller and ask Larry, "You take her for a drive. I've been around the neighborhood ten times."

Behind him in the car seat, Rose screamed as Larry pulled his truck out of the garage. The engine hummed. The truck rocked on the road turns. Rose quieted, dozed. Larry passed an all-night McDonald's, pulled into the drive-in order intercom, slowly braked the car. Rose, twitched awake, started to whimper. Larry rolled through.

"One coffee. I'll give you two bucks. I can't stop," Larry tried to explain in passing.

He pulled up to the pickup window. Miraculously, there was an arm attached to a hand that held a cup of coffee. Larry rolled the truck through, grabbed the coffee, stuffed the bills in the hand in continuous motion. Rose settled back into her car seat.

She wouldn't eat food unless it was smothered in applesauce because her throat muscles struggled with solids and different textures. One meal-time, a motorcycle roared by outside, and the noise scared Rose, seated in her booster seat; Larry, at the ready, played the Barney song on his guitar.

I love you. You love me. We're a happy family.

Rose calmed, took a spoonful of chicken and applesauce. Then she sang the Barney song for the next four hours straight.

To keep moving, Rose jumped and kicked her legs in the baby carrier. She bounced constantly in the jumper-roo, then graduated to a rocking horse. When Margaret brought Rose out on the sidewalk with a new tricycle, Rose sat on the seat, confused. She couldn't figure out how to peddle.

Margaret got on, made her big legs go around the tiny circles. A mom walked by, holding a screaming baby.

"No babies. No crying," yelled Rose. She ran toward the house.

"Honey, put your fingers in your ears," said Margaret, still seated on the trike.

When Rose was five, Margaret ordered a full-size trampoline from Walmart for their backyard. When it arrived, Larry and Margaret locked eyes, both thinking the same thing, "Put it up, quick!" Larry got out his tools; Margaret ripped open the boxes. Just as the last bolt was tight and Margaret secured the netting, Rose climbed on. She jumped and jumped for hours. Hours turned to days and weeks and quickly into years.

In the car, on the way to first grade, Rose memorized license plates on the passing cars and recited them: "D13-BRI. 147 YAK. BUGS – a word on this one, Mommy." She had pages of license numbers scribbled on papers at home.

The pediatrician had said, "She's so smart, she's so smart." But in school, Rose would oddly tap on her ears and hands, or rock back and forth. She couldn't learn to add numbers or read sentences.

Special education class was hard on Rose.

"Stay in your seat," called the exasperated teacher when Rose moved from desk to desk. Another girl screamed, jumped up and pulled Rose's long hair.

"Rose, stop," yelled the teacher.

"Why are you so mean to me?" Rose turned to the teacher and the other girl.

Each time Rose faced the injustice of her special needs, Margaret rose up like a mother lioness. Growing up, Margaret had seen her older brother go down a dark path with no help from parents or schools. As a teen, he had seen giant spiders on the wall. On winter nights, he watched through the lit window, afraid to come inside, as his family ate dinner. He was in and out of mental hospitals and spent some time homeless. Who decides why these, and so many others, suffer?

After Rose struggled through third grade, bypassed by overwhelmed teachers, Margaret and Larry sued the school district for funds to place her in a private academy. They won. With specialty instruction and environment, Rose learned to sit in a seat in a group, raise her hand, do multiplication, and read a story. With alternative health care, Rose learned to ride a bicycle. Over

the years, she learned how to do a somersault, a knee-drop and flip on the trampoline. It's hard to say who was happier: Rose in her bouncing joy or Margaret and Larry with the accomplishments in the face of the initial diagnosis and dire predictions by experts.

Margaret had left her job of serving as a cog in the wheel of retail management when they brought Rose home. By the time she was fifty, Margaret had a master's degree of knowledge about brain development. Her cadre of mothers of autistic kids supported each other and compared notes. Margaret researched expensive alternative treatments, from cranial sacral care to special music and vibrational treatments for nervous system development. Margaret had run the gamut from coddling and protecting her daughter to stepping back, insisting Rose find her way.

As a pre-teen struggling with social skills, Rose once said to Erica, one of her first new friends, "Your bangs are crooked, funny looking." Rose laughed and laughed.

"You can't be mean to others," Margaret coached the first time it happened. For the next visit, Erica had a pimple. Rose made fun of her. "That's being mean. No iPod for three days."

"MOM!" Rose cried out.

When Margaret had filled out the adoption forms, she came to the question: "What are your parenting values?" Love baseball, eat ice cream, she thought. She had changed.

At her first summer camp, Rose looked at the 40-foot rope to the gym ceiling.

"That rope is high up. Other kids climb that rope. How can they climb that rope?" Rose asked a hundred times at home, throughout the weeks of the camp.

In the last week, Margaret said, "This is the day. You've talked about it all summer. Now, go!" Rose made it half-way up. "Only a little higher," Margaret lied. Rose inched up, then froze in place.

"Mom," she yelled.

"Keep going," Margaret yelled back as she bit her nails. Hand over hand, Rose inched up. Her thighs gripped the rope. Her feet slipped, peddled frantically in the air, then gripped again. Rose pulled upward. In the next ring, Margaret saw a young performer swiftly glide up piked at the hips, using only her hands and arms. "Clamp and stand, big pulls," yelled the camp counselor. Hands gripped tight, Rose pulled her knees to her chest, gripped the rope

with her feet, and stood up to reach the ceiling with one hand like she was touching heaven.

Rose was a bundle of energy, muscle, and determination. Born in the Chinese Year of the Monkey, she had her own brilliance and perseverance intermingled with impetuous, obsessive, unexpected behavior. She'd run up to women in the mall to touch their nail polish, fascinated with the color. On neighborhood walks, she would twist free from Margaret's hand, run to the flower bed and start picking up the pansies.

"Those are not your pansies. You can't touch them," explained Margaret. They turned a corner. Rose dashed for more pansies. Margaret grabbed the back of her shirt. Rose screamed. A lady poked her head between the nearby house window curtains in disapproval. Margaret let go. Rose grabbed a fistful of pansies from a planter. Margaret, defeated, turned her head as if she hadn't seen.

In the supermarket, a woman came down the aisle toward Margaret's cart.

"Mom, the lady is fat," observed Rose. The lady came closer.

"You can't say things like that," said Margaret as she desperately turned her cart in the other direction with one hand, pulling Rose alongside.

"But she's so fat. Why is she so fat?" insisted Rose. Margaret's shopping cart was bent and wouldn't turn. The lady came closer.

"You're fat!" Rose said right to her face.

"What a nasty child," the woman snorted.

Margaret abandoned her full cart, grabbed Rose's hand, and made for the exit door.

When Rose was fourteen, an out-of-the box pediatrician suggested the "Everybody Circus," a program for special needs kids. On the first day, Rose and Margaret saw a parent carry his son with cerebral palsy to the Everybody Circus ring. A child with Tourette syndrome blurted loudly. A few Down's syndrome kids stared placidly into space. "Mom, I don't like this. This is special needs."

"Just try it," Margaret insisted. Rose looked around. In other rings, girls with matching sequined leotards did handstands, cartwheels, and climbed on the trapeze.

"I want to do that," Rose pointed to the neurotypical groups, "I want to wear sparkles."

“Work your way up,” Margaret suggested, though she wasn’t sure herself if that was possible. She nudged Rose toward the Everybody Circus ring. After a few weeks, Circus was Rose’s piece of heaven. She excelled.

Within months, Ryann, the Circus Arts coach, noticed Rose’s aptitude. When they suggested Rose could perform in the annual Circus Arts Gala, Margaret initially hesitated. No special needs kid had ever participated in the Gala.

“Mommy, I want to do it,” declared Rose.

“Are we setting her up for an autism dog-and-pony show?” Margaret asked Larry.

“Up to you, honey,” Larry always stepped aside in decisions like this.

Larry worked from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. in his home office, racking up industrial equipment sales to earn the money required to pay for Rose’s school and healthcare. At the computer, head down like a bison in a blizzard, he took on the financial burden of private circus arts lessons.

When Larry was twelve, his family moved away from his boyhood buddies in Texas to what for him was the foreign land of New Jersey. Soon after, his father died of cancer. Larry was old enough to understand his father had been the ground of love and patience. And he was young enough to achingly miss that footing. He would give Rose what he had lost.

After dinner and bath time every night, the six-foot six Larry could be found in a rocker at Rose’s bedside. A mountain presence, he listened to her seemingly endless questions. “Why did that kid ride on the back of a motorcycle? That was noisy. Why do factories make smoke? Why does Mom always take away the iPod when I’m in trouble? Mom needs to choose a variety of consequences.” Her questions and answers eventually would die out, and he’d get up, go to bed. Then every morning, he’d warm her breakfast sausage; no more applesauce. She’d developed throat muscle strength and texture tolerance.

Larry had built the family a mountain cabin near Mt. Rainier. Margaret held the sheet rock while Larry taped. Rose sat at the table with her iPod, looked up ninety five members for her imaginary rock band on YouTube and narrated that list fifty times to her working parents. On weekends, Larry cut wood for the woodstove. The fire warmed Rose when she came in from cross country skiing or hiking. “Pop, I can snow plough,” she said in triumph one day, after weeks of practice to stay in the tracks and coordinate a stop.

Months into the circus sessions, Rose's arms rippled, and her upper body slimmed into a tight waist above strong thighs and calves. She learned how to better tolerate other kids working next to her, and deal with the surrounding sound and light fluctuation. Ryann was patient with her quirks, but they were also stern.

Rose swung on the Lyra, the four-foot hoop that hung from the ceiling.

"Time to spin and split, Rose," Ryann instructed.

Rose hung from her knees, upside down.

"Do you want a time out, finish early today?"

"No, I want to learn."

"Then listen. Focus," Ryann said.

Rose climbed to the top of the Lyra to practice her split. She reached her right leg in one direction, her left leg slipped off the Lyra and she fell, catching herself on the bottom of the hoop. Margaret ran to the car, phoned Larry in fright, crying out, "What if she fails and is heartbroken?"

Larry listened. "Maybe so." He didn't know what else to say.

For the dress rehearsal, Rose was excited. The light show flashed around her; she kept her mind on her routine. The sound system echoed through the nearly empty theater. She moved on the Lyra in rhythm. The night of the big show, Ryann brought Rose from the Green Room and into the wings to wait for her turn on stage.

Rose's excitement turned to panic when she heard a loud, flamboyant Master of Ceremonies joke with the audience as two girls finished a trapeze routine. His microphoned voice filled the theater. He was heavily covered in stage make-up and wore half a moon across one side of his face.

"Love that trapeze pair," he boomed. "The clown will meet them off stage. What a nice jester!"

The audience roared.

Rose backed away from the noise. "No, no, no," her thoughts raced as she felt the booming voice push against her. She ran down the hall, into the women's room, and locked herself in the stall.

In their seats in the audience, Margaret, Larry, and their friends had no idea what was happening, but Margaret was worried.

"She could melt down," she whispered to Larry.

"Maybe not," Larry whispered back.

"She had a hard time with the sippy cup, couldn't ride a bike. Now, she's up there."

"Wait and see."

In the stall, Rose rocked, flapped, hummed, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. "Oh no, no, no NO noise," said Rose as her anxiety heightened.

But somewhere, somehow, Ryann's words penetrated her awareness. "*...Or we do this next year?*"

Rose jerked to attention. She became still.

Rose recalled.

She recalled she wanted to join a Circus Arts group of girls in order to belong despite her differences. She recalled the treatments and training to help her focus. She recalled how good it felt to accomplish her goals.

"I'm gonna do this," she thought, even as fear and adrenaline electrified her body. She pulled the stall lock open, pushed past Ryann, and ran down the hall. Ryann dashed to catch up to her. She bolted into the wings and rushed like a storm onto stage while the trapeze duo was taking a bow, front and center.

"My friend just got a steady job..." roared the MC. He saw Rose. "Oh...uh, he's a tightrope walker." The audience tittered, confused, then went silent.

"What's going on?" hissed Margaret to Larry when she saw her daughter on stage at the wrong time.

In a heartbeat, Ryann ran out and pulled Rose back to the wings. The trapeze pair exited, not having seen Rose behind them.

"Here is Rose Sparkles," the Master of Ceremonies boomed, covering for Rose's premature entrance. "She started with the Everybody Circus." The audience let out a loud *awwwh*, as most of them knew about the special needs program. The MC continued, "With a lot of her own hard work and the love, encouragement, and teaching from her parents and coaches, Rose found her happy place in Circus Arts. She is here to perform for you tonight!"

Ryann nudged her onto the stage. Rose, open-mouthed, looked out at the audience. With exaggerated movements, Margaret opened her mouth wide before sealing her lips down over her teeth. On stage, as if on cue, Rose closed her mouth.

"She remembered," breathed Margaret.

Lyrics from her performance music began, floating over the audience:

"Three little birds sat on my window

And they told me I don't need to worry

Summer came like cinnamon, so sweet

Little girls, double-dutch on the concrete."

Rose took a few steps toward the Lyra, then a few more, then skipped to the hoop and pulled herself up. She was wearing her socks.

Margaret said, "Oh no. She forgot to take off the socks!"

Rose wrapped one hand and one leg around the hoop, and curled gracefully into a back bend with the other hand and leg hanging in the air.

She hung her legs on the top of the hoop, grasped the bottom of the circle with her hands, and turned inside out. She balanced, curled into a crescent in the hoop, and balanced on one leg so she looked like she was fitted inside a moon, her fingers and toes curled up in balls.

In the wings, Ryann mouthed, "Fingers and toes!"

Rose released the grip on her hands and feet, made pointed stars from her fingers and toes.

Ryann brought his hands together at his heart, shot a gaze upward and mouthed, "YESSSS."

The audience cheered.

Rose climbed to the top of the Lyra but forgot what she was to do next. She slipped on her socks. The audience waited.

"I can't look," moaned Margaret and covered her eyes with her hands.

It was eerily quiet. A ripple went through the crowd. Rose climbed down into the hoop, looked at Ryann in the wings.

Ryann dropped into a split. The song played:

Maybe sometimes we feel afraid

But it's all right, the more you stay the same

The more they seem to change, don't you think it's strange?

Rose climbed back up on top of the hoop, glanced at Ryann. The Lyra spun and swung in circular flight patterns as Rose's legs reached into a split, balanced on top of the ring.

Larry air pumped his fists from the audience.

Rose hung backward by her knees off the Lyra, placed her hands on the floor, hung there, hesitant.

"You're done, honey," Margaret's fingers gripped Larry's like steel bands. He winced.

Rose dropped her feet to the stage floor and stood. She walked to the front of the stage.

Rose was in the spotlight. The applause got louder. Rose stood still on stage and stared at the audience, her big teeth in a wide smile and her jaw

muscles in just the right place. She was supposed to bow like a professional and walk off.

"Come here," Ryann pleaded quietly from the wings. Instead, Rose jumped up and down, clapped her hands, and brought down the house. Larry and Margaret rose out of their seats.

A tress escaped from Rose's bun to curl toward her face, bright as starlight. As she was suspended in time and radiance at center stage, the music played on:

*"I hope you get your dreams
Just go ahead, let your hair down
You're gonna find yourself somewhere
Somehow."*