

Adult Category 3rd Place: *This Year* by Rita Collins

This Year

This year will be what it is. What is it then? It is a year of wonderment and deciding how to use each moment. It is a year of discovering new skills I hadn't even considered I needed before and pulling other skills out of my bag of life to be brushed off, oiled and put to good use again. This year will be a fascinating one to be alive. I want to make the best of it.

At least that's what Martha thought to herself as she waited for her son. Don had flown in with his wife to spend part of the weekend with Martha. An early birthday present he told her, but Martha assumed this was a weekend when they didn't have any other plans. Probably the real weekend of her birthday which wasn't until next month, Don and Laura already had tickets for a concert or reservations to have dinner with friends. But she would be glad to see them this evening regardless. Laura liked to regale Martha with all the things she was doing at work and her role on volunteer committees, and what her book club was reading and what the other women had to say about the book. Yes, Laura and Don had very busy lives and how fortunate they could find time to visit Martha.

Don ate, not saying much as Laura went on and on. He might ask an occasional question about Martha's health as though that was the only thing of interest in her life. If Martha mentioned a play she had gone to recently, or a lecture she attended, Don would look surprised and a bit disconcerted as though he wasn't sure he believed her capable of such activities. Then he'd nod and finish eating, thanking Martha for the delicious dinner and reminding her they brought a cake for dessert to celebrate her birthday. Laura would take out her phone to show Martha photos of their recent trip to the Bahamas while Don cleared the table. The occasions when Don and Laura visited weren't exactly what Martha would have liked but she thought it was a bit like the weather. You got what you got and no use complaining because truth be told, you couldn't do anything to change it.

As Laura droned on about the beach and the hotel and the wait staff there who really didn't seem to know how to set a table or make a bed properly, Martha nodded. She appreciated Laura making conversation, but Martha so wished there would be a pause where she could ask Laura something serious. How does Laura determine the quality of her days? How does she imagine their lives changing as Don nears retirement?

Martha tried to figure out how to commandeer the conversation to things that mattered more to her. Of course, she appreciated catching up on their trips and activities, but what did Don and Laura talk about when they weren't having dinner with Martha? Why did they decide to go to the Bahamas rather than taking a trip to say Peru? What did Laura really enjoy doing? She always sounded so busy but did she really like doing all those things, all those committees, all those social engagements? And then there was Martha's life which they showed no interest in. Usually Don and Laura flew into town, rented a car at the airport, and drove to Martha's for dinner. After dinner, they'd go to a hotel for the night. "Oh, we don't want to put you out," they'd say even though Martha had a perfectly comfortable guest room in her apartment. And the next day, they'd meet for lunch going to some place Laura picked out even though those places with 5-stars reviews tended to be "lively" and

noisy which made it hard to talk. Afterwards, they'd drop Martha off at her apartment, return the rental car and catch a late afternoon flight back home.

A bit like punching a card. No doubt Don felt he did a good job staying in touch with his mother. Laura most likely saw herself as a doting daughter-in-law who sent cards from their trips and remembered to send flowers on special occasions. They came to visit two or three times a year. Martha appreciated their efforts, but she always hoped somehow the three of them could manage better, have conversations that mattered, listen to what each other thought because she did assume both Don and Laura had serious thoughts about things. They just never bothered to share them with her.

Perhaps this coming year would be different, even though her birthday was still a month off. She considered what she wanted from this upcoming year, how she could shape the days, where she would put her energy and, perhaps, she could find a way to talk with Don and Laura about their lives, and not just their vacations, and to tell them more about hers. And even though it was a month early, when Don brought out the birthday cake with a single candle, Martha decided this was the time to try. Yes, it was a store-bought cake, and Laura was checking messages on her phone at the moment, but Martha reminded herself to make the best of it.

Don put the cake in front of Martha, then put his hand on Laura's shoulder as they sang "Happy Birthday" slightly off key. At the end, when it is expected one will pause for just a moment to make a wish before blowing out the candle, Martha looked at Don for longer than a moment, then looked at Laura and said to both, "Let's talk."

"Mom, at least blow out the candle!"

Martha smiled, blew out the candle and then looked at the other two while she explained her wish – even though the rule is not to tell your wish or it won't come true. She explained how she felt they often didn't seem interested in her life outside of the medical. She explained that she was curious to know them, not only details from their jobs or where they went on vacation, but what were their dreams for the future, what did they worry about, what is something new each of them would enjoy learning. She wanted to talk with them like they were friends. Was that possible?

Don sat there with the knife for cutting the cake in his hand, listening to his mother. Laura put down her phone and pulled out a tissue, wiping her eyes. She got up and went around the table to hug Martha.

"This is going to be easy," she said. "I want to learn about you."