

Second Place – Informal Essay

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Beads

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The sun streaming through the window hits the jar of beads just right. The light glows through the glass, making you wonder if the beads are tiny specks of broken glass or giant marbles, waiting to be scooped up.

A little hand reaches to take the lid off the jar and the beads are dumped into a pile on the floor. The little hand belongs to a precocious strawberry blonde toddler. She is immediately drawn to the pink beads. There are small smooth ones; there are larger bumpy ones. Pink is her favorite color.

I run my hands through the other beads. Beady blacks and brilliant blues. Tiny beads painted with a smiling sunshine face. Yellow, green, brown beads.

The little pink-loving girl is enamored with the beads. They have been off-limits for most of her life but as a big – and curious – two-and-a-half-year-old, I think she’s ready to see them up close. They are hers, after all. I hold them up to the light slowly, one by one, and explain each one tells the story of courage, hope, bravery, and resilience – among so many other things.

And though she’s big enough to jump into a swimming pool; to climb the front steps by herself; to recite her favorite book line for line and say “no I don’t want to” six hundred times a day – though she’s so much bigger and stronger now than she was at birth, I don’t yet tell her the truth behind each bead.

I don’t yet share how the beads started to show up day after day in our hospital room. A surprise and a delight to this bleary-eyed, grieving new mom. Something cheerful! Something hopeful! My mom, the toddler’s “nanny” bought a beautiful jar to put them in. She took beads that spell her name and strung them on the front. She glued fake flowers to the top. It became a beautiful centerpiece in a cold, sterile place.

I don’t yet share how my girl received a new bead every time a nurse pricked her little foot to

draw blood. One bead for a dangerous spinal tap; another for a scan of her brain for signs of bleeding. A bead for an x-ray, another as we lowered her oxygen then brought it back up; another as we weaned her from a feeding tube. Beads for visits from the eye doctor; for physical therapy; for surviving, fighting, living, breathing just one more day.

I don't yet share how the beads piled up, little by little, bringing me great joy at my daughter's progress – and great sorrow, that we needed beads at all. It's amazing how many beads fill a jar when you're born nearly three months early at 1 pound 14 ounces. When you're in the fight of your life in intensive care at the hospital.

I wonder, had I received my own bead jar during that trying time, what it would look like.

A bead for every tear, every sleepless night, every hard-fought battle – multiplied times the 70 days and nights we spent in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Would I get a bead for haggling with health insurance over the costly hospital stay? How many beads do you get for emergency c-section recovery – learning to walk, sit, stand again? Which beads represent pumping milk from a tired body; sleeping days and nights on a stiff faux-leather green hospital chair; staring at your child in an isolette, aching to hold her but knowing your touch could hurt her?

Beads for dashed dreams – an unexpected delivery, the end of a career, changed relationships and a broken heart.

So many beads. So many battles.

I pick up a blue butterfly from the bead pile. It's not necessarily a bead, but it's just as beautiful and meaningful. It belongs to my girl's twin sister; born early as well, but without a chance to earn her own beads. A butterfly who earned wings to heaven instead.

How can such a colorful, cheerful jar hold so much of my heart?

It's warm in here as the sunshine spills onto everything. The beads are reflecting beautiful light

all over the room. My girl is starting to get bored; she's putting the beads back into the jar quite unceremoniously. I find myself saying "careful! These are special!" But then I realize, this isn't her story yet. Today, these beads mean nothing to her.

My mom has told me countless stories of my childhood; things we experienced together. Do I remember that earthquake on my 7th birthday? Getting lost at Disneyland? Maybe, but not really. Stories upon stories that make up the fabric of a family. Joy, trauma, experience, and heartache – some mine, some not, but all passed down, generation after generation.

My girl is already growing into her own person with her own story. I pray every day my heartache isn't hers; my trauma isn't hers. But like these beads, the stories are told and untold, collected, sorted, tossed. Alone they mean nothing but together, they tell a powerful story. Who's story is yet to be determined.

As the beads *plink, plunk, clack* back into the jar, I realize maybe these beads, these tiny glowing stories, have changed color before my very eyes.

Maybe the blue beads that told the story of bravery in the face of pain, now simply portray how far we've come. Maybe those tiny sunshine beads that told a story of courage in the face of fear now depict a warm, sunny, lazy morning – a day I could only dream of during our tense hospital days. Maybe those pink beads that told a story of resilience, when the odds were stacked so very high... are now just pink, the color of her pillow and her nails and her blanket and everything else these days.

I think the butterfly will always be the butterfly.

The beads go back onto the shelf. The tiny, not-so-tiny tornado girl whirls off to the next activity. And so do I. The beads are part of our story, our family fabric; but they're changing colors before our eyes, becoming something new in each passing season. Telling a new story with each new day.

I can't wait to see what color the beads are tomorrow, and what stories they tell.

For now, they are once again a beautiful centerpiece – no longer in a cold and sterile place but

in a home full of love, healing, and happiness. And in a room that is very pink.