



My Sparkly Valentine

by Tiffany Brandt

February 12 2023 8:00 AM

BUZZ MAGAZINE - On February 14, 1926, a squalling baby girl entered the world in Centralia, Illinois. The lovely mother, her pale blonde hair and crystal blue eyes gathered aside her handsome husband's dark curls and callused hands. All the wondering is now settled. Here she lay, Juanita Marie Rhodes.



This first child was her mother's daughter, a tiny fair maiden. The white house where she drew her first breath, some referred to as a shotgun house. So slight, you could fire a round from one end through to the other with a gun.

The railroad worker became smitten with the young lady at a local dance. I have no doubt he had to be not only patient but persistent to win her hand in marriage. The beautiful and only remaining daughter of parents with old-world values and four protective brothers, she was their treasure. There would be no need for them to fret, Forest adored Alma.

The new family swiftly settled into their forever. Juanita's head full of blonde curls toddled around, her parents were delighted. I daydream of the snippets no one can speak of. They must have made plans, sipped coffee side by side at the kitchen table, and lay nestled together every night as Juanita dreamed in her crib.

Their love story would end in tragedy, although the twinkle of them that remained would sparkle for ninety-six years. She shone like the first ray of dawn. The matriarch of my family is my Grandma Juanita.

Soon enough it was evident by Alma's rising bump, their family would welcome another baby. The plans she made for her baby that winter, were soft diapers, dresses, and bonnets. Maybe she secretly wanted a boy, as we all ponder but never say as we wait to discover when we have one and not the other.

Come spring Alma delivered a darling son named Donald. Juanita curiously peeked at her swaddled brother, pink and slight. Alma struggled to fully recover from the delivery, thinking the culprit was having two babies in quick succession.

One afternoon their family welcomed company for a visit. The couple and their children were anxious to see sweet Donald, a bundle of squeaking with that new baby smell on his tender head of blonde fuzz. Juanita was tickled to have a playmate for the day.

The visitors' son had been unwell, and his incessant cough remained. Juanita would soon become sick, and dreadfully so. She contracted whooping cough. Her strong little body would fight the virus, but Donald became gravely ill. Their precious baby boy choked and gagged, whooping cough stealing his breath as his parents helplessly watched him gasp for air.

Their son Donald died; they only kept him for six weeks. Time enough to fall madly in love and his mother's arms to ache hollow. I have a letter left behind from Alma that she wrote shortly after she buried her child. She commented that the pictures taken of Donald at his funeral should have been closer, but they were still good. That's all that

was left to hold. A black and white picture of her baby swaddled, laying in an unbearably tiny white casket on her front porch.

Unbeknownst to them all, Alma's heart was not only broken but failing. As a child, she had a bout of rheumatic fever that would rob them all of the fate they pined for. Her heart valves leaking, and delivering babies was the final blow her heart could not withstand. Alma lay dying with her young devoted

husband at her side.

Forest conceded to Alma's deathbed plea. Juanita would be raised on her parent's farm. Alma asked that Forest promise her that he would never take Juanita away. Alma's parents were preparing to bury their second, and last daughter. She now knew of the suffering her mother and father felt firsthand. In his love for her, Forest promised.

Forest buried his only son, and six months later he buried the love of his life. Juanita would remain with his in-laws. Coming home from work to silence. Where once

a beautiful blonde twenty-four-year-old woman stood at the stove simmering dinner, the toddler squealing and running for her daddy's arms, a newborn baby's cry. Now...only barren emptiness remained.

Forest was a man of his word, he kept his pledge. Juanita's grandparents wanted to

officially adopt the child, he would not allow it but he kept his word to Alma. He never took her from them. There were times he was not allowed to see his daughter, he would turn and leave. I regret that Juanita lost her chance to have a relationship with her dad. I am certain that her grandparents did the best they knew how to do.

I have a deep respect for the way Forest handled himself. As he stood on the porch hearing that he was not welcome, did he know that his daughter peeked through the slit in the curtains at her daddy? Humble that he was, there was no rage, he offered no scene. Juanita knew her daddy wanted her, that he came for her. She was never forgotten by him. She slept at night with those beautiful thoughts floating in her mind.

Juanita had a delightful childhood there on that farm, her family loved her grandly. Her grandparents had done well farming and she never wanted anything that she can

recall her mentioning. She would choose dress styles from store windows that she fancied and her grandma would sew them for her. They bought her a piano and lessons to accompany it. Music would become her lifelong love.

Her only lack was siblings, she was lonely. She swore that when she married she would have a house full of babies, and that she did. In 1946 Juanita married her sweetheart, a handsome young Marine returning from World War II. In one year, they would be sitting in a car outside the mouth of a coal mine in Centralia. It was a cold and drizzly day, snow began to swirl in the wind. They waited for the names of the dead.

The conditions in the mine were notoriously dangerous. The owners had been threatened repeatedly with reports of flagrant safety violations to no avail. The bottom line won out every time. Men with pocket change separating their families from destitution rarely scream of grievances. There were two men waiting to replace anyone that complained.

Forest remarried and had six children with his second wife Lela. Their firstborn son died in infancy. Lela begged him not to go to work that day, he reminded her as he walked out the door that they needed the money. The miners' wives lined up in front of each man's locker and sat on the bench. They waited to see who would leave a widow. Lela would leave a widow.

Forest died with one hundred and eleven men that day. Men who needed to buy coal for their stoves and salt pork for their plates. He was forty-five years old. It seems so odd to say he was only forty-five. Dare I say, he had two portions of sorrow in the short time he spent on this earth. The mine exploded roughly half an hour before quitting time on that dismal day. Thirty minutes later, those men would have walked through their front door asking "Honey, what's for dinner?" as their children clipped close at their heels in greeting.

My grandma said she could not mourn for her father, she never really knew him. "My Dad didn't die in the explosion. He died from carbon monoxide" she mentioned. It grieves me that he lay there, knew death was coming for him. I am certain his thoughts were not for himself, but for Lela and his children being left without him.

I wear Alma's wedding ring. Forest placed it on her finger and promised her forever on May 5, 1923. A little of their forever lives on, and will never leave. I look down at it and contemplate the loss, to remind myself to live. It is my most prized possession.

Even though I have never laid eyes on the woman in the flesh, my great-grandmother Alma, we have all felt the loss of her. How queer to miss what you have never had, but we somehow always did. A peculiar muscle memory of knowing. The lost link between the mothers and daughters within our maternal chain.

For someone who had quite a few reasons to carry a chip on her shoulder or feel sorry for herself, Grandma Juanita never did. She didn't have an easy life, but she sure had

a good one. I think sometimes we confuse the two. I believe much of her contentment came from the acceptance of what would be. Sounds remarkably simple.

She was a woman of great faith and joy. She and her husband raised six children and adored oodles of grandkids. Over the years she was a teacher at musical kindergarten, taught piano, and was the organist at church for eighty years! Of all the years that I have spent in her company I can say that I have never heard her cuss, speak ill of anyone, or complain. EVER.

My dear Grandmother Juanita died this past year. The little sparkly Valentine baby who was born all those ninety-six years ago. Our family stood shoulder to shoulder at her grave beneath clouds black and swirling. The pastor's hand threw the first dusting of cold earth onto her coffin.

Our voices raised in singing the hymn she chose "This Body in the Grave We Lay."

I closed my eyes to ponder her joy in heaven. My Grandmother Juanita was wrapped in the arms of her mother, Alma. She found the one her heart has longed to hold for almost a century.

"This body in the grave we lay

There to await that solemn day

When God Himself shall bid it rise

To mount triumphant to the skies"

This story originally ran in the February 2023 issue of The Prairie Land Buzz Magazine
<http://www.thebuzzmonthly.com>.