

## I Was Grandma's Ghost Writer



She slipped me a \$20 and said, “Let’s just keep this between you and me.”

And at that moment all I could think about was, “It is ‘you and *me*’ or ‘you and *I*’? Which is it? Now that I’m an official ghost writer I should know proper grammar, shouldn’t I?”

Not that I wanted to correct my Grandma’s grammar. But the fact that only the letter “r” separated the words “gramma” and “grammar” made me wonder if there was some much deeper meaning here.

Nah. I was way overthinking this. Especially because the writing that my Grandma was asking me to do had nothing to do with grammar—and everything to do with getting syllables and rhymes to work correctly.

My Grandma, Rose Glickman, was a very creative and talented woman. She went to an art college, which was highly unusual for a woman born in 1900. She also played the piano and loved to write very entertaining poems for all occasions.

In her later years, Grandma lived in a Miami Beach condominium. She was very well-liked in her high-rise building. It seemed that every week brought another celebration of somebody's birthday or anniversary—and Grandma would recite wonderful customized poems she had composed about the guest(s) of honor. It was always the highlight of these large gatherings of the building's residents. "Quiet! Quiet! Rose is going to do the poem!"

The poems were composed of rhyming couplets—and were always very clever in the way they included lots of information about the honorees. Year after year, the expectations for "Rose's poems" continued to be high.

However, she was starting to lose her stamina for the sheer volume of poems she had to produce. It's not easy having to continually find rhymes for things like 'Cincinnati' ('since she's chatty') and 'Doris and Steven' ('the score was now even') and every other conceivable name, city, hobby, profession, quirk, and other assorted customized information she worked into each poem.

My family lived on the Miami mainland—about 15 minutes from Grandma. One day she stopped by our house and asked if we could talk.....alone. She told me how much she loved writing these poems—but as she was going into her late 70's, it was starting to take a toll on her. And she wondered if I might be able to help her write one.

I was barely in my teens, but I was intrigued, flattered, and scared all at the same time. Grandma knew that I had *also* developed the skill of writing rhyming poems. So she thought I might be able to help her write a poem for a party being held at her building that weekend.

I said, "Sure!"—and with my first writing assignment in hand, I peppered her with lots of questions about the guest of honor.

I worked quickly, while she chatted with my parents. In less than half an hour, I quietly handed her a poem she could perform on Saturday night. And I wondered, "Would she like it? Would she even use it? And is 'all knowin' an acceptable rhyme for 'Sol Cohen'?"

She stopped by our house Sunday for dinner. She pulled me aside—and with a huge grin on her face told me that the poem was a huge hit. And then she slipped me a \$20 and said, “Let’s just keep this between you and me.”

I was floored. I had not been expecting any money whatsoever. And \$20 when I was fourteen was a lot of money. And, to top it off, she wanted to keep it secret. The queen of the “Four Winds Condominium” wanted to hire a ghost writer....and I had passed the test! And this clandestine ghost writing arrangement went on for years until she died in 1982.

I don’t know how many poems I wrote for her. I don’t know how much money I ultimately made. What I do know are three things:

First, this process opened my eyes to the power of customization. Grandma invited me to several of the parties where she read the poems—and the screams of laughter she got on the customized material was mind-blowing. To this day, my mantra is ‘the more specific the humor, the more terrific the humor.’

Second, it opened my eyes to the power of rhymes. This came in very handy as I began my journey of writing song parodies—most of which need to rhyme very precisely in order to succeed. To date, I’ve written and performed over 1,300 song parodies, almost all of which have some kind of rhyme in them. Rhymes don’t only *sound* good—they *feel* good.

Third, it opened my eyes to the possibility of writing for other people. I had always been comfortable writing for myself. But writing Grandma’s poems was the genesis of the idea that I could write in someone else’s voice. And decades later, I am still writing material for other people, in addition to writing for myself.

But Grandma was my first writing client—and, without a doubt, my favorite one. The work was steady, she was always appreciative of the product, and she paid....on time....in cash. Thanks, Grandma!