

A Love (Un)forgotten

By Kerstin R. Kost

It's been about ten months since my grandma fell and about eight months since she has seen the inside of her home. It's been about two weeks since I've seen her but it's been about five years since the last time she remembered my name. It's been hard seeing someone I love so deeply go through such an awful thing, but I've learned to look at the good things and try to find ways to learn from the bad. My grandma has Alzheimer's Disease and I'm not at all ashamed to admit it—I'm proud and I'm blessed. I'm blessed to be able to spend every weekend with my grandma and I'm proud to have a mother who can care so much for someone who doesn't even remember her.

Beginning in June, I started to go with my mom every weekend to care for my grandma. The first time I went, I was excited to see my grandma but I was terrified to see her disease. The stories I'd heard boggled my mind and I was nervous to see them come to reality. When I walked through the doors for the first time, I knew what I was getting into—my mom had told me five months worth of stories—but in all honesty, I never imagined things would be as difficult as they were.

I always imagined this nursing home to be just like any other nursing home. A nursing home where the adorable, old ladies pinched your cheeks when you walked in the door and told you how cute you looked, even though, *cute*, was something you were called five years ago. My grandma's nursing home is very different, however. It is a place that when you step off the elevator, you see people wandering in the halls because they have forgotten which room they are going to and a place where you hear people mumbling to themselves because they have lost the

ability to speak. It is a place that when you accidentally bump into someone's wheelchair, you are told to, "Get the hell away, you son of a bitch," instead of a polite, "Oh don't worry about it, sweetie." It is a place that has shaped who I am today and a place that has shaped what kind of nurse I will be in the future. It has influenced me so much, not only because of what I was able to do for the patients, but more so from what I learned from my mom—patience, love and dedication. I have learned things from my mom that no book will ever be able to teach me—and for that, I will be forever grateful.

Our days begin on Saturday around 8:00 A.M., which is just in time to enjoy breakfast with my *real* grandma. In the mornings, my grandma is usually very calm and loving and she always has a smile, glowing on her face—it's the one time she is *herself*. The one time that I get to see who my grandma really is—a kind, loving, and compassionate person. She is a person that would never say a bad word about anyone and a person that would be embarrassed if she knew how her disease acted toward others. She was the mom that always helped with class projects and the woman that never said a swear word her entire life. Until, that is, her life was taken over by the horrible disease of Alzheimer's.

Putting my grandma to bed is by far the most challenging part of the day. Right after dinner, my mom and I wheel her back to the dreaded, Room 312, praying the whole time for an easy night. As we approach the door, the swear words begin flying like bullets from a gun.

"Where the hell are you taking me you dirty rat? Get me out of here." "You damned son of a bitch, who do you think you are?"

If my mom and I are lucky and have a good night, the swearing will usually only go on for fifteen minutes. Those fifteen minutes, however, feel like an eternity because it takes every ounce of patience and willpower in my body not to give up and leave her side. I keep hugging

and kissing her every couple of seconds because it seems to suck the rage right out of her and then she can listen to what we are saying. My mom and I keep repeating to her, “Come on, you’re almost to the bed, just move over a few more inches.” When she finally gets into bed, we let her rest for about fifteen minutes and then try to convince her to let us wash and change her. This is also a time for my mom and me to take a break and regain the strength *we* need, both mentally and physically, to put up with her disease one last time. Some nights, putting her to bed works right away and she may even help us, but other nights we are dodging fists like a boxer in a ring. The key is to have patience and never rush her because the only person who can make her do anything is herself. Trying to make her do things, only angers the disease, which in turn, makes our job even harder. In the end, after all the name-calling and the emotional and physical strain, the disease settles down and lets a little bit of my grandma back out.

Then around 8:00 A.M. the next morning, my mom and I repeat the same process over again—the whole time praying for the strength to endure another day. And thanks to God’s amazing grace, we always make it through. It’s *never* easy but it’s what has to be done and in the end, there is always a lesson to be learned and a good story to tell. Over time, my mom and I figured out the key to survival is laughter. We learned to laugh at everything—not out of dishonor or disrespect, but out of sanity. There is no way that someone could do what my mom and I do every weekend and survive without laughing. For example, when there is a spelling bee and everyone is shouting out different letters because they can’t hear or because they are still fixated on the first word they heard, you have to laugh. And when you see a woman empty out her purse every night because she is looking for her keys, you just laugh. Or when you see a woman with a high heel on one foot and a tennis shoe on the other foot, you laugh. You laugh because it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter what shoes people have on or whether they spell the

word “mountain” correctly—what matters is that they are enjoying themselves and the people around them. These are the things that cannot be learned from a book—they must be experienced first hand and seen close up. I’m stronger now because each patient at the nursing home has taught me a different lesson on life, each of which will be forever cherished in my heart. The biggest lesson I have learned, however, isn’t from the patients, but from my mom.

My mom’s love and dedication for my grandma is phenomenal and is something I truly cannot explain. She has gone every weekend for eight months, yet, every time she goes it’s like the first. The attention and dedication my mom gives to my grandma and all the other patients is something that I envy. Through all the hard times, my mom has never given up on my grandma and has never complained once. She will admit that it’s hard work, but she always follows with, “I cannot wait to see grandma, I love her so much!” This type of love is not just everyday love. This type of love is patient, it is kind, and it is endless.