

Memories of my grandmother, with her plastic apron, with her crippled fingers in her favourite pink mittens and with her seat in the kitchen is the definition of strength.

It was in that apron that she cooked all my favourite meals without ever having been asked. It was those crippled fingers that taught me how to braid my own hair. It was those pink mittens that remind me now, as a young adult, to dress warmly now that it is getting colder. And it is in that chair in the kitchen that I received the greatest lessons ever spoken. She taught me the importance of carrying oneself with class and dignity. She taught me that while some may view stubbornness as a negative trait, it was really a mask for perseverance. She taught me to always show others respect, and to always thank those who deserve to be. And she taught me to always have dreams, and that no matter what, if I fought hard enough, they'd come true.

Like so many of you, in her thirties she was diagnosed with Scleroderma. And like many, she was told that she would not live very long.

She lived with the disease for almost 50 years.

It was during those 50 years that my grandmother became a lifelong activist for the possibility of hope, and a bleeding heart liberal in the truest sense of the term. It is with Scleroderma that she embraced heroic suffering out of heroic love; embraced heroic joy out of heroic struggles; and embraced undeniable stubbornness despite unimaginable burden. And now the torch is passed on to me, which is why I must break my silence and let her story be known.

You would never know she had borne any hardships from this disease from the way she carried herself. Even with Scleroderma my grandmother made it seem as if she had every gift, including the gift of a idyllic and magnificent life. This was because my grandmother had never let anyone truly see her struggle. And it has taken me months after her passing to find out just how truly ill she was, despite the monthly hospital visits and final daily scares.

In fact, I grew up with a grandmother who was the first to sympathize towards another, but refused (and rather stubbornly so) to be sympathized towards. She did not let anyone do for her what she can do for herself, even after she went partially blind. But more than anything, I grew up in the presence of a woman so strong in perseverance with a stubborn vice.

But what I will hold on to the most was her benevolence. She was the first to love and the first to laugh. In the midst of all her suffering she loved. She loved with more enthusiasm than most people could possibly ever express. She demonstrated this love right up until the moment she took her last breath. Love that flowed deep in my core, love that knew no boundaries or diseases, love that was accepting of life's hardships. She continued to endure suffering to be with her family up until the moment God gave her no other choice. They say that those who possess such love would not

question dying for those that they share that love for, but my grandmother was never one to fit into stereotypical cliches- instead she lived for the ones she loved.

When doctors had their doubts, she laughed at them. When people talked about there being no turn around, my grandmother did not give up herself and chuckled. And when I cried and questioned at her hospital bedside, she giggled and talked about our future. Throughout indescribable pain, she maintained a view to continue to live in this world.

There were little glimpses of her spirit that fought through the fog. It was in the way she puffed out her cheeks when I asked her if she was hungry, the way she still attempted to hide tissues up her sleeves, and in the way she laughed when I mentioned my baby cousins.

You could always count on my grandmother to have a righteous reaction to every sorrow, every joy, every heartbreak. To your every success and failure she bore an empathetic and enlightened witness. She gave you exactly what you always needed, asking nothing in return.

When you were sick, she made your favourite chicken soup.

When you were excited, she told you how excited she was too.

And when you grew up and went away to live your life, she went on merrily and lived hers with her husband until she saw you again.

And sometimes, when you were homesick, she'd complain you didn't come home nearly as much as you should have, but it was a superficial complaint, because you always knew that you were profoundly loved.

She remembered salient details about all the relatives, called you when your celebrity crush was on Oprah, and gave you all of herself, freely, liberally, always (leading to all her grandchildren believing they were her favourite).

But above all, my grandmother continued to be the pillar of hope. She brightened every room she went into (intensive care units, included), leaving yourself striving to be a better person in her sainted presence, led by her example. There were many times Scleroderma should have taken her from me, even days before it eventually did. But the reason my grandmother proved medical science wrong can be found in her stubborn spirit; the same spirit that stood up to anyone with an opposing opinion, the same spirit that wasn't afraid to put someone in their place, the same spirit that was left untouched by the horror of Scleroderma.

The love she had showed was a sacrifice. And her will to live should serve as a constant reminder of the amazing thing our minds are powerful of doing. Scleroderma should have taken her years ago, but she lived because she wanted to live.

To my grandmother, life is meant to be lived. It is meant to be enjoyed. It is meant to be won.

With Scleroderma life is not an easy race. You will want to quit. You will give up on hope. You will be less than perfect and your faith will shatter. But your tomorrow will come.

I know this because my grandmother's tomorrow had.

Scleroderma may have been responsible for my grandmother's death, but she did not allow Scleroderma to take away her life.

And it does not have to take away yours.