

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/2

Danielle Cooper
Never Give In

"She had eyes like Princess Diana. Beautiful blue." my Aunt commented, as we looked at the photos we had gathered for my grandmother's funeral. The light in her eyes never faded, even towards the end. They say that eyes are a window into your soul. My grandmother's showed her strength. Her never-fading determination to fight.

"We all have been given our cross to bear" she would tell me, "this is mine".

She never cursed her illness. Never complained about her pain. When you walked into her home, it was all about you.

"Did you eat yet? How about a drink?", she would ask, even from the hospital bed we had set in her library, when we all knew she couldn't walk anyway, even if she used all of her strength. The cancer was winning, but she simply refused to give in.

Us grandkids called her Amma, a name she received from brother when he tried to call her by her name, Anna, as a toddler. Amma was young when she passed. She had just turned sixty-four that October. She was thin and fragile from many years of her illness, but she was stunningly beautiful and still looked ten years younger than she was. Amma was a stereotypical southern Italian grandmother. She cooked too much, talked too loudly, and swore in both languages. She taught me to dance "the grape dance" (the movement used to squish grapes for wine), to make the perfect meatball, and to live with no fear. The only thing louder than the way she laughed was her personality. Anyone she ever met had shown up to her funeral. The funeral directors had to hire police detail to direct the traffic and the line to the casket wrapped outside the door.

When I think back to those days, my chest tightens, and tears fight their way through. Even twelve years later, it still affects me the way it did moments after she passed. Amma is, and will always be, my greatest role model. There is one thing that has always stuck with me, that has been so key to my treatment of Bipolar II and alcohol addiction; and that is to never give in. To never give up. There is always some fight left in you, no matter how tough things seem.

Amma went through countless surgeries and several different forms of chemo and radiation. She managed to smile and laugh through it all as if it were an annoying cough that could be fixed with a bit of honey and whiskey, an old school Italian remedy my family swears by. Her doctors and nurses adored her; she made every person smile regardless of how she felt that day.

To this day, I believe Amma waited for me to say goodbye before she let go. I was only thirteen at the time. For weeks, I refused to go into the room, sitting outside the door, scared of what would come. On November 7th, I finally walked into the room and sat next to the bed. She couldn't speak, slipping in and out of consciousness. My Auntie Joanne and my mother had pulled up a few chairs and were watching tv. During that time, Amma had been watching Food Network nonstop. I remember

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earlier that month she spent the day making fun of each chef, which was funnier than normal since she took her teeth out.

I don't remember the show, I wasn't paying much attention to it anyway. As I sat next to my grandmother, knowing that soon these moments would be over, I grew scared. I didn't know what life would be like without her. For the last thirteen years, I lived next door to my grandparents and spent most of my time with them. The thought of that missing broke my heart. Nine o'clock came too quick and it was time to go home for bed, I bent over and kissed her on the cheek. "I love you Amma. Goodbye." I went to sleep that night, not knowing those were the last words I would ever get to say to her. Goodbye...how fitting.

Amma taught me to laugh at life and to find the good in every situation and everyone. Even on my worst days when the white walls of my hospital room were closing in. When my own thoughts were suffocating me and pushing me to my limits. I hear her words repeating in my mind: "we all have been given our cross to bear". Never give up, never give in.