

The Empty Chair

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The Empty Chair

Abbi Cook

Dear Grandma,

I miss you. I think about you all the time and still can't believe you are gone. You were the best person I have ever known, and you touched so many lives when you were here on Earth. To make your passing a little bit easier, I like to think about all of the memories you have left me. My favorite memory is of all of our family get-togethers. I would walk into your ranch house with your door left wide open, because anyone and everyone was welcome. I would turn to the right and immediately be greeted by you. What I loved most was that you and grandpa always made sure to coordinate your outfits. Whether it be a purple top and grey pants or a red top and khaki pants, you two always matched. This was something I always looked for when we would all get together. I remember coming up to you, and receiving the best hug-the kind that you never wanted to let go. You would then tell me to "go," our secret language for, "go to the golden apple bowl sitting on the end table." It was the bowl that held the peanut butter M&M's. I would take a handful before my parents would be finished greeting the rest of my family and run into the kitchen. There, I would begin to shove the candy into my mouth.

Every sports season, every dance, every play, you were there. Every time I was over I had seen it on your calendar in the kitchen for the past few months that you were going to attend the event. After every game you would give me a hug and tell me how proud you were, and every time you would tell me what I needed to work on-whether that be my ball handling skills or how I should get around a defender-because you were not afraid to tell me as it was. I loved that you treated me as an adult and never a child, even when I acted like one. You were my idol long before I realized how much I looked up to you.

I remember the day I was told about your illness. I was sitting on my couch doing my homework after school. Dad came in and sat down on the couch with me. I thought it was odd because he had such a distraught look on his face and was staring into blank space. "I have some news for you and I'm not going to hide anything from you." He then went on to tell me how you

were sick. I didn't know it, but you had gone into the doctors the week before to get your chest looked at for a cough you had been having for the past couple weeks. I knew something was wrong because you missed my lacrosse game that week, but I didn't think much of it. Dad then told me that what we all thought was a harsh cold had turned into Stage III Lung Cancer.

After receiving the news, I sat there, not making a sound. I was paralyzed. I always heard of cancer, of people having it and surviving. I also heard of people not winning the battle and passing away. During this I heard that the words that you had cancer, but it wasn't processing through my mind that your time left on this Earth was starting to tick away, faster and faster each day. I was trying to envision you at my games cheering me on, or happily cooking our family dinners while we all sat in the family room enjoying everyone's company. I didn't get it, you were never sick, you were invincible and I had never seen you take one day off. For heaven's sake, you delivered Meals on Wheels at age 80 to people ten years younger than you. You even went to the gym everyday with grandpa, so I knew you were in great shape. Why was this happening? This was not supposed to happen, not to you.

The next couple months were a blur. Days were going by in a haze and quite frankly, I don't remember most of it. The moment your illness started to sink in was two months after we were told about the diagnosis. Dad had shielded me by not letting me see you while you quickly started to decline, he wanted to make sure I didn't see you in your moments of weakness. I was thankful for that, because all while you were declining, I was still able to think of you as the healthy individual you were just a couple months ago. However, those moments of weakness quickly turned from hours to days to weeks. Since Dad shielded me, I didn't have enough time with you before you passed and because of that I became lost for a long time. It made no sense why you were such a big part of my life, yet in your time of struggle I couldn't be a part of yours. A piece of me will always hold regret not having enough time with you before you left us.

My recitals began to have an eerie feeling to them once you fell ill. The chair next to grandpa started to become empty, an image I struggle to get out of my head. I remember looking at him, wearing his green shirt and khaki pants, all while imagining you wearing the same outfit. It broke my heart seeing him alone, knowing you were in bed at home, lying there in pain. My parents finally decided to let us see you when your illness began to progress significantly. The medications weren't working anymore and you were becoming far too weak for surgery. Your quality of life was declining and Dad told me that they just wanted you comfortable. The cancer had spread, and it spread fast. You were slowly fading away.

The day I came to visit you I was a mess. You couldn't tell from the outside, because I was trying so hard to hold it all in. I walked in and saw everyone standing outside, their faces red from crying. I knew I was going to

see you, but I thought I was going to see your old self. I walked through the doors, and like a wave, the realization of what was going on hit me. Up until that point I had known what was going on, what was happening to you, what was happening in you. But I hadn't seen you since you had become extremely ill. As the wave of realization hit me, so did the emotions. Tears flooded my eyes as they locked with yours. You still looked at me the way you did after my games, but your body was not the same. Tubes upon tubes were connected to every part of skin open on your body. Your hair was patchy and your skin was translucent. I walked up to you slowly, tears still flowing. I remember you outstretched your hand and looked at me with peace in your eyes, assuring me you had accepted what was going on. It was almost with that one look I understood that you were okay with leaving the world, but I still wasn't.

I hated that you had brought in a priest that day to recite a prayer for you, reassuring you of your Catholic faith and what is to come once you pass away. I didn't want you to be okay to let go because I wasn't ready for that to happen. In a way, I had built up a wall around the fact that I could lose you, because I thought you would be in my life forever. I thought you would be at my graduation, watching me walk across the stage. I thought you would be at my wedding, like you were at my cousin Kate's wedding. I thought you would see my first child be born. I thought you were invincible and you would always be here to be my grandma.

Being in that room with you was the hardest thing I have ever had to do. You were in my life since the day I was born. Next thing I knew, I was the one in the hospital as your life was being taken away. I couldn't help but think, why are you being taken away now? What could you have possibly done wrong to have been diagnosed with such an awful disease? I hated the fact that this disease existed, and that it was taking you away. After visiting with you that day, I shut down. I stopped talking to my family and friends that reached out. I missed school for days, only leaving my bed to eat and go to the bathroom. My hair became knotted and I became weak from laying around day after day. I was lost.

Having you in my life was the best gift I could ever ask for. You were the glue holding our family together. Now that you are gone, I realize how thankful I am for what you left us. You left our family with knowing the value of family. I was scared when you passed away that our family would never be the same, but those family get-togethers that were put on hold when you were sick are happening again. It was your house that we always gathered at, but now it is at mine. And for Christmas last year, the words "I Love You," were taken from a card you gave me one year for my birthday and were made into ornaments. They were handed out as gifts to each family to hang on their Christmas trees. It was so special because that was your favorite holiday and now we will always be able to have you with us during that time of the year.

The only thing missing is your golden apple bowl being filled to the rim with candy.

Death for me was an idea that never hit home until it took you away from me 3 years ago. Losing you is a memory that will always linger in the back of my mind, no matter how hard I try to push it away. Going through this experience has not only changed me, but our family's dynamic as well. We have figured out how to remain close, even though it was incredibly hard after you left. Now that I look back on it, you never stop to see who is really holding the family puzzle together, until that puzzle piece is lost and never found again.

I miss you more than I have missed anyone. Your passing still is the most difficult thing I have ever gone through, but knowing you are at peace and out of pain is enough to make the image of that empty chair go away.

I love you.