

The Merciless Lady

Irma “Margarita” Velazquez

I met this lady once. I was at a Disney Park, Animal Kingdom if I remember correctly, and I was buying two of those ice cream treats that are shaped like Mickey Mouse for my sister and I when I heard someone aggressively demand a cigarette from some distance behind. The scene was quite heavy, so I looked back while waiting for my change and I saw her, this lady, screaming at her daughter. She kept yelling, “I need a cigarette, I need a cigarette, give me one right now” and her daughter was trying her best to calm her without conceding. “You already had one, and cigarettes are not good for you. I’m not giving you one,” she said, but the lady would not listen.

I took the change, grabbed the two treats from the cashier, and politely gave her my best “sorry, thank you.” With my head down, I walked toward the lady and told her, “Don’t worry, let’s go on the fun rides together, it’s okay,” but she did not relinquish her fight. I remember the confusion on her face, brows quizzed together, eyes looking around like she did not know where she was or what was happening. Moments later she came back to her senses, held my hand tight, and walked me to a ride line.

My last encounter with this lady was at my father’s childhood home. I opened the master bedroom door and instantly saw her. She was lying down in a hospital bed—those electric ones that recline up and down—and made no reaction to my arrival. I greeted her, terrified on the inside but keeping my chin up for my family, and walked to her side. I held her hand, lowered myself to meet her gaze, looked her in those empty eyes, and said “hi, it’s Margarita,” but she made no response. Family members came and left to the kitchen to socialize, but I stayed in the room until it was just me. I was alone in there, despite the fact that there were two breathing bodies. I was frightened and heartbroken. The lady, though...

she was there in her full might. She looked strong and victorious, mocking me so as to say, “I won.”

That lady was Alzheimer’s, and slowly but destructively she took my grandmother’s life. Between the first day I met her and this last encounter seven years had trespassed, and seven blue years they were. The first few years, when my sweet grandmother fought her back and resisted, I tried to push her away. I would spend hours with my grandmother, asking her to tell me stories and trying to make her remember minute details, as if that could stop my worst fear from coming true. I was innocently naïve. The less successful I felt, the less time I spent visiting her; I feared what I would encounter if I crept up on the monster that was progressive dementia. Every time I locked eyes with her, part of me broke because while maybe for a millisecond our eyes crossed, she did not see me. And so one day, I found myself sitting next to that reclined bed in my grandmother’s bedroom—a place that had symbolized safety and unwavering love for me all my life—, looking at those glorious eyes and finding no one home. This day I saw it all: nerve connections faltering, brain cells dying one by one, brain shrinking by the minute. I remembered the original symptoms I had not in the moment been alarmed by, like the paranoia and lack of behavioral skills, and realized what they had taken my grandmother to.

The human body is phenomenal. It’s capable, strong, powerful, and it opens doors for us. Yet in one instant, it can lead us to doom. Cells die, systems fail, signals stop getting transmitted... ladies like the one I met are born and then we become nothing. My grandmother went from not being able to finish a story, to not being able to finish a sentence, to not saying anything at all. She wrestled the thief of minds that is Alzheimer’s until her muscles tired out. She held

onto me until it was no longer possible, and for that I both thank and salute her. To hold my grandmother’s hand, the sweetest woman I ever knew, and not have her hold it back... that I blame on the lady.

The day after my grandmother died, in the middle of cold and rainy February, the sun came out, the temperature rose, and people were happy on campus. The sweet sound of conversation and laughter filled the cafeteria, the quad, and even the classrooms. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that the two events happened sequentially, and though I am incredibly sad that she had to leave this world so much sooner than I had expected, the clear skies and joyful crowds of this day reminded me of the sweetness of my grandmother and to always approach life like she did, cheerful and lighthearted.



My name is Irma Velázquez—but I go by my middle name, Margarita— and I am a junior in the Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences studying biology and history. I’m from San Juan, Puerto Rico. My special talents are limited but my interests are many; I enjoy being with friends, petting strangers’ dogs, going to the beach, sitting in the lawns on campus on sunny days, reading for fun, spontaneous plans, meeting new people, Harry Potter, baking banana bread for my friends every Sunday, creating cool outfits, hyper fixating on one song and listening to that song only for two weeks, going away to the beach with my friends for the weekend, and hanging out with my grandparents. I aspire to work as a gynecologist in my home country Puerto Rico, but my true goal is empowering women from disadvantaged communities in their bodies and health and ensuring their access to healthcare that is responsive to gender.