

Still unshakable



My mom's MS is many things.

by Kimberlee Zabawa

"Do you need anything?" my mom asks.

We are shopping. And by shopping, I mean strolling up and down the aisles and shifting hangers, occasionally holding up some article of clothing — not because it's nice-looking, but because we delight in showing off our tackiest finds.

"No," I respond.

She comes around the rack, stumbles into the knitted sweaters, and steadies herself with a small smile.

"I'm drunk today," she tells me.

"I see that."

I step closer and link my arm with hers so she has something to lean on.

My mom is not drunk.

My mom was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2004, when I was 10.

Multiple sclerosis is, firstly, a storyteller. From the outside, it can look like anything. It can even look normal.

I think that's one of the reasons my mom doesn't use her handicap parking placard when we pull up at the next store.

"I'm fine," she says. "I don't need it."

The doctor disagrees. But he's not here to tell her she should save her energy when she can, regardless of how it looks when a fit-looking woman parks up front and walks into the store with no assistance.

I don't argue. No one's ever glared at me when I got out of my car because they didn't think I deserved to park there.

We don't use words like "handicap" and "disability." Not because we're scared of them, but because we don't need them. We live with MS. We're not afraid of anything. Except change.

Because MS is, secondly, a progressive disease.

"I went to the hospital the other day," my mom says like she was telling me she planted new flowers in the backyard.

I pause and wait. MS teaches you to be patient.

"My arm went numb," she continues. "I didn't know if it was a symptom or if I was having a heart attack, so I called your Granny, and she met me at the hospital."

MS is a tricky companion. You never know if you're experiencing a new problem or a new symptom.

"I didn't tell you because I didn't want you to worry. I was there a few hours, but they ran some tests and didn't find anything wrong with me. Or anything else wrong with me." She smiles that sneaky smile. "I have a funny," she announces.

I have a funny. I don't know why we say that. Maybe if we have a disease then we can have a funny, too.

I say "we" because MS is, thirdly, a family disease.

"So, I wasn't home when your daddy got home, and he was worried so he looked up my location through my phone's GPS. It showed I was at a hospital." She's laughing now. "He was just about to come look for me when I called to tell him I was fine."

I can imagine this. I see my dad sitting in that creaky chair in front of the computer. I can't see his expression clearly because of the glare on his large reading glasses. I decide it's funny, too — for the sake of my mental health.

"Do you need anything?" she asks again, still chuckling as we head to the front of the store.

When my mom goes to pay, the cashier asks if she found everything she was looking for. I try not to hold my breath as I count the seconds. One. She's processing the question. Two. I look at her face to see if she understands. Three. She is just distracted looking for her wallet.

"Yes, thank you," she answers.

I relax. Sometimes, she doesn't understand. People have to repeat themselves a couple of times before she knows what they're saying. I'm always on guard, ready to repeat the question or answer it before anyone gets flustered. Sometimes, I think this hurts her the most. More than the pain the disease causes.

My mom is not stupid.

When we leave the store, I pick her up at the front door. A cane sits next to the passenger seat. She pushes it aside to get in the car. She never uses it. Wants to put it off as long as possible, to cherish the feeling of autonomy.

MS is, fourthly, a thief — of independence, and of the life you used to live.

She apologizes for being tired as we head home.

"Sorry your mom can't keep up with you."

We can't do a lot of things together, but we can do everything that counts. In the end, the debilitating power of MS is no match for what it must leave untouched — an unshakable woman whose identity runs deeper than what the body can do.

"Do you need anything?" she asks as we leave.

Rain is falling now even though a sliver of blue sky is peeking through the clouds.

"No, I have everything I need."

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