

Mama

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I always thought my grandmother had magic. Not that crazy, weird, voodoo, Santería magic. but magic that was fueled by love. She would feel weird or even upset if she even heard me I say she had magic. She was clearly against anything that went against her faith. But magic was in the way she treated people with kindness and respect. It was especially in her delicious cooking and secret recipes, which, to this day, my relatives cannot mimic.

Born in Humacao, Puerto Rico, she was the first child of thirteen. She moved to Brooklyn, New York in her 20's, during the early 1960s. She went with her husband, my grandfather, whom I called Papi, alongside my two aunts who were babies at the time. I have called my grandmother Mama since the day I could remember. She'd be in a crowd and I'd yell "Mama!" and she would stop everything for me. But this is not why she had magic.

Mama had a way with words. She could go into any room and be extremely confident. With an 8th grade education, she read stories from the Bible during Catholic mass, and often taught classes at the school whenever a nun was unable to. She always spoke with such grace and never stumbled. She had an elegance about her that I always wanted to copy.

Mama would always make dinner. Every single night. For everyone. And it wasn't no little rinky-dink plate. It was a meal that took you to heaven and back. The smell alone of her cooking would make you salivate.

As far back as I can remember, I ate nearly dinner every day with her until I was 16. She would cook for herself, Papi, my aunts, my uncles, my cousins, myself and whoever came by. It was as if she always made a perfect amount every time. Enough for at least two plates each and then some. It felt like Thanksgiving each time. She would make us all come to the table to share the meal. Mama would sit in front of the television instead, because by the time she ate, everyone else would already be finished and she would refuse to miss her 6 o'clock news on Telemundo. I would always wonder, how did she do that? You know, feed everyone with only one pack of meat and one cup of rice? Magic.

Mama was the type of person to give the shirt off her back for anyone. If she only had \$20, she would give you \$15. In her mind, if you didn't need it, you wouldn't have asked. She would make her last \$5 stretch, because she would say she was blessed to be put in your path to help. That's the type of woman she was. A woman who was so happy and grateful for life itself. Magic.

Often the Catholic Church would have bake sales and flea markets to make money. This was used for renovations or materials needed for the Nuns and Priests. If they called her, she would stop whatever she was doing. "Yes, I will come," she would say in Spanish. She'd run to her room, quickly get dressed,

brush her hair, and carefully put her infamous red lipstick on. She would walk by foot approximately two miles while carrying the prized food processor she got from Sears in the seventies. She would lead the volunteers, which included other church members and some Nuns, to make traditional Puerto Rican food, such as pasteles, alcapurrias, and pastelillos, to name a few. Food so yummy, she knew it would be a hit at the flea market. Mama was the type of woman who would never say no to helping her church or helping anyone in need.

It was when I was 15 that we noticed Mama acting differently. This was 2007 and Alzheimer's had started to take over her life. Mama was also diabetic. The combination of the two diseases began to change her life. Nonetheless, her magic was not affected. She began to forget if she had taken her medicine. Sometimes she would not take it at all. Other times, she would take double. It was weird seeing an independent woman all of a sudden having to rely on the help of others.

Her freedom of walking anywhere she pleased—to the church, her friend's house, even to Dunkin Donuts to get her favorite Boston creme donut—became a disaster. She would sneak out of the house, in spring jacket and sandals in 30 degree weather. She did not understand why it was cold because, in her eyes, it was spring. Moments like these broke my heart. Her mindset began changing. She started to forget a lot. But she always remained loving. My mother made sure we all lived together. My family has always stayed close: my grandparents were downstairs, while mom and I were upstairs. It was a good arrangement. I loved living with Mama. We would laugh and joke, sometimes we'd go to the nail salon, and other times we'd go out get donuts and Coolattas. Sometimes we'd even sneak to make our 1 am pancakes. She was my best friend. I loved her so much.

The first time she got lost was scary. We didn't realize she ran out of the house. Papi, my mom and I were asleep. It wasn't until Papi rang our doorbell like a maniac. "*Mi vieja se fue*"—my old lady has left. He didn't say that in a mean way. It's how they joked with each other. My old man, my old lady. They had a unique relationship. Over 50 years together, they shared many moments. That night, though, we spent hours looking for her. Not just us, but her church friends. We all scattered around the neighborhood looking for her. The search was terrifying. Again, she was dressed for spring but it was winter. It also didn't help that our neighborhood isn't too friendly.

When one of her friends found her, Mama looked lost and confused. The friend brought Mama back to the house, where everyone met back up. There were at least 8 people conducting this search. Mama was smiling. "Look all my friends came to visit me!" She didn't even realize she was missing. In her eyes, she went for a walk. She began making coffee, cutting cheese, getting out the crackers and little cakes. She loved to feed people and taking care of them, even when she had trouble taking care of herself.

Mama had a soul so pure that I know she's up in heaven, resting peacefully. Her smile, her grace, and her laughter are what I miss the most. And of course, her cooking because man, that woman could cook. She had a heart for giving. That was her magic.