

Dorothy

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Dorothy Skelton was probably the skinniest person I've ever known, and the most feisty. Ghengis Khan would have loved to have her in his cavalry. I can picture Dorothy riding the lightest horse, her long thin arms and legs dangling from a pencil-thin suit of armor. And the enemy would *run scared*.

Maxine called yesterday and told me that Dorothy died a few days ago. I felt sad, but not shocked.

I had known for about a month that Dorothy was in the hospital. When I found out, I pasted a note to my kitchen cabinet. It read simply, "Dorothy." That was my reminder to visit or call, send flowers or at least send a card.

I never got around to visiting or calling or sending my good wishes. First I was out of town and then too darn busy... and of course I knew Dorothy would get well again. Dorothy always got well again... because she was such a fighter.

When I learned she died, I was immediately filled with guilt. Why hadn't I made time to let her know how much I cared? Then I remembered that at least I prayed for her. And I believe wherever she is now, she understands all. I'm guessing I am forgiven.

I saw her in July, just before her latest bout with ill health. I had called her to do a volunteer project at the nonprofit agency where I'm employed. We worked together for a couple of hours, and were quickly back to our old ways: laughing at the world and at each other.

That was always how it was with us. Dorothy and I were never bosom buddies, but we had a mutual admiration that expressed itself in sarcasm.

Dorothy, you see, wasn't that "sweet" friend that movies love to portray: the woman dying young, bravely suffering, spouting wisdom and spreading love.

Dorothy drank. She smoked. In a private conversation with a friend, she used colorful language when it fit the subject.

Yes, she did die young (a couple of years older than me – that's young!). Yes, she did suffer bravely.

But when Dorothy spouted wisdom, it came on the tip of her sharp tongue. And she did indeed spread love, but it was tough love on her terms. Curmudgeon love.

Ask any kid who went to St. Mary's school for a quote from Mrs. Skelton. The answer will be: "Tuck in your shirt!"

Lots of teachers become blasé, but not Dorothy. Even after she had taught for decades, even when she was struggling with painful illnesses, she wouldn't let up on those kids. *Tuck in your shirt*, darn it!

She nagged because she cared. She never gave up. She never quit fighting.

When I had substitute teacher duty at St. Mary's, I'd often get a little care package from Dorothy sent via a student: coffee candy full of caffeine to buck me up. Or she might send a cup of coffee. Now that was love.

Once she told me she became diabetic in her teens. She was told she wouldn't live past age 30 or so. Boy, did she prove them wrong.

Dorothy had a vicious diabetes that affected her vision. It got to the point she couldn't drive at night, which made it hard for her on nights when there were parent-teacher conferences at school, and so on.

Because of her medical condition, Dorothy was never able to bear children. But that didn't stop her. She became a mother to several (I don't know how many) children who needed an "alternate" mother because of problems large and small. With those children came all the difficulties – and joys -- experienced by parents everywhere.

Dorothy really *knew* kids – through teaching and through nurturing them at home. When we worked together last July, Dorothy told me her first "grandchild" was soon to be born. She was as thrilled as any "blood" grandma.

And then there is Jim. Dorothy and Jim married sometime in the 70s, around when Mike and I married. That means they were married more than three decades. Like all marriages, theirs was not without its rocks and bumps. But they stuck and stuck, taking turns helping each other. They shared a creative vision and had the most beautiful back yard I've ever seen, filled with twisty paths and bridges and exotic-looking plants.

I asked Maxine about Jim. She said he's having a rough time. He's hardly been at work this last month because he's been so attentive to Dorothy. You hear about spouses who fall apart when their loved one dies, because they've lost a job: the job of caring for someone. Jim is the one who needs our prayers now.

About seven years ago, Dorothy had a kidney and pancreas transplant. Before that, she had been performing dialysis during breaks from teaching, at school! I don't know how she had the strength to drag herself there. And she taught junior-high age kids, not the easiest group.

The transplanted pancreas failed her, so her diabetes remained. But the kidney lasted and gave her these last years when she could enjoy a bit of retirement.

Then in August they discovered she had colon cancer. Time for a colostomy bag. Maxine told me that was the beginning of the end of Dorothy's fighting. How can you go four decades with one physical battle after another? How do you keep your spirits up when you rarely feel good?

I don't blame Dorothy for easing up. It's hard enough to fight the world when you're well. How do you fight when you're ill? Dorothy's sarcasm was probably her best armor in struggles harder than Ghengis Khan ever knew.

Last weekend, Dorothy had a heart attack. Her body couldn't take it any more.

"She must have weighed about 80 lbs.," Maxine told me.

"Was she ready to go see God?" I asked.

"Yes. She just wanted to sleep," Maxine said.

She lived just about a day after the heart attack. She knew it was over. Even for a warrior like Dorothy Skelton, the battle had to come to an end.

"I picture her in heaven with a light beautiful body," I told Maxine.

"Yeah, and no waiting for her. She gets skips."

Take skips? Probably. Shirt tucked in? Definitely. And no more need for armor.

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