



**YWCA**  
EDMONTON

A TURNING POINT  
FOR WOMEN

## Three Lessons

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After a sleepless night, three trips to the commode, a lung-wrenching bout of coughing and a heavily assisted hobble to the breakfast table, Mama whispers a prayer before the morning meal: “Thank you for our food, our family...and sunshine,” she says, as a smile creeps onto her thin lips. Her gaze rests on the sunlight streaming through the open curtains, her worn face serene, her blue-grey eyes bright. The porridge dribbles down her chin now, as her muscles slowly switch their allegiance to arthritis and multiple strokes. I push my creaky chair back from the table and walk to the kitchen to get her a glass of milk, aware that the roles of server and served have now switched. My eyes catch an official-looking form on the counter, signed by my uncle. The words “Do Not Resuscitate” tumble off the page into my chest, slowing my heart before jumping back up and catching in my throat. I swallow hard and rejoin my grandmother at the table.

Between my own bites, I sneak glances at Slava Skerl. Her hands are thick, still strong, smooth and transparent. Her hair, grey with dashes of white, no longer fully covers her head, yet is still carefully combed and curled. She looks up and states matter-of-factly, “you will have more,” in her heavy Slovenian accent. “No Mama, thank you, but I’m full.” There is a pause; neither of us knows what to do. We both understand that after I refuse seconds, she will rush off to the kitchen, fetch a steaming pot, and return with serving spoon in hand, “a little more, a little more, you are a growing boy,” she will insist, and I will relent. Our eyes meet. I look away and scramble out of my seat, “well maybe I can fit in just a bit more,” I say as I move past her hunched frame and into the kitchen to fill my bowl myself. I pass her walker and try to imagine her as a twenty year old woman, trekking through the Alps to escape mass killings in Yugoslavia, journeying towards an uncertain future.

This woman, mother of ten, grandmother of sixteen, is now lying in a hospital bed, surrounded by her nine daughters, slowly, painfully, drawing air into her lungs. A nurse enters the room and leans over the bed to check Mama’s condition. Unaccustomed to being taken care of, she nevertheless accepts her new role with grace and gratitude, making every effort to thank those who adjust her pillows, squeeze her hand, and sing softly at her bedside. It has been two days since she has eaten or drunk and her words are coming slowly now. She stirs, her mouth moving, trying to pull the words from her heart. “Make...sure...” Mama mutters to her daughters, “you...get nurse...some lunch.”

My grandmother left me with three lessons: 1). Love others selflessly 2). Be grateful for every moment 3). Never, ever, let your guests leave hungry.

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