

Have Strength

I'm weak, and I'm tired, but not from the cancer. In fact, I am hesitant to believe the doctor's claims that the cancer is progressing. It's crazy to me that my body is losing this internal battle by devastating measures, and I don't feel so much as a stomachache. No, what's weakening me is the strength I must exert externally. My daughter refuses to admit that my time has come. She won't even speak of it with me. I don't know how to handle this. I've never been in this situation before, and I won't have a second chance to make it right. Do I force her to sit down with me and go over finances for the funeral and run through the belongings she wants and the ones she wants to donate? Does she want my house, my car, my jewelry, my art, or my furniture? If not, does she want to sell it after I pass, or should I sell it all before I die so she doesn't have to part with these things? I've tried talking to her. She won't hear any of it. I don't think she's ready to say bye, and it's killing me faster. I feel the need to act healthier around her and be energetic. I am forced to keep up this charade of health so she can continue to pretend that this is not happening, but it is. It is happening. I love her, I really do, but she's killing me. I take myself to the doctor and endure the negative news alone. I take myself to the treatment center, sit alone, and hold my own trash can. I'm sick for days afterward, and I never throw a call her way because I don't think she could handle seeing me like this. I want to protect her from reality, but time is ticking, and sooner or later, she'll need to acknowledge where this is going. I was startled by the doorbell. I inhaled deeply, stretching the muscles that clench my chest tightly.

"Coming, sweetie," I called. I stood up and glanced at the mirror. I looked well today, not too pale. I smiled weakly and walked towards the door. "Come in," I continued to smile until she entered.

"Mom, you'll never guess what happened at work the other day!" she said as she slammed her purse on the chair. "I got a promotion," her hands clasped together sweetly, like a child who has just been complimented on her dress.

"Oh, I'm so proud of you." I leaned in and kissed her on her soft cheek. Her curly blonde hair smelled sweet like fruit spray and gently tugged at my false eyelash as I pulled away. "You know, I'm

always so proud of you, Jessica.”

“Guess what else,” she quickly spat out in an attempt to control the conversation.

I paused and looked at her beautiful large eyes. They were elegantly painted with a thin black line that curled up at the corner of her eye. Her brown eyeshadow enhanced her bright blue iris, which surrounded her dark pupil, which constantly dodged left and right in order to avoid direct contact with my line of sight. “What else, hon? Oh, and would you like some water?”

“Yes, please,” she sang. “So,” she sat down at the table, eagerly waiting to spill her gossip.

“Beth is pregnant! Remember that girl I hate who has a slew of on and off again boyfriends! I swear it’s like she has a quarterly rotation. Gerald has January, April, and August, and Dylan has February-”

“That’s crazy, sweetie,” I set her glass firmly down on the wood table. “Can we talk?”

“Um, sure,” her eyes watched me closely.

I placed my hand on her delicate shoulder, “I went to the doctor, and my treatments aren’t working,” I said calmly. “The doctor says there are other treatments to try to maybe, slow the spread, but the cancer has spread into my brain.” I paused and watched her absorb the information. She brought her small hands to her plump lips. She rubbed her fingers across her eyelids, swiping the overwhelming flow of tears.

“Mom,” she whispered weakly.

“Sweetie, there is nothing more we can do.” I stood up to comfort her, but she sat back in her chair and glared at me.

“What do you mean? Aren’t there other treatments? He said there were other treatments! Is there a surgery? Anything?”

“No, treatments for a cure. Everything at this point is just to help slow down the progression,” I sat back down slowly. I was surprised she was still talking to me about this. “Sweetie, this is a very aggressive cancer. There isn’t much we can do.”

Her eyebrows hung low. “Try something else,” she sneered.

I sat back in shock. My mouth opened, but no words came out.

“Try something else, Mom,” she demanded. “Why are we even talking about this. Obviously, try something else-”

“I don’t want to!” I barked after gaining my bearing. “I don’t want to,” I repeated quietly. I tried to make eye contact, but she looked at her lap and began picking at her jeans. “Jess, I’m tired. I’m tired of being sick from the treatments. I’m tired of not seeing you for days after my chemo because you can’t stand seeing me ill. I’m tired of my useless treatments getting in the way of me seeing you. Please, I don’t have much time left.” I placed my hand on hers to stop her from incessantly scratching her jeans. She stiffly looked up from her lap. Her sobbing eyes met mine. “I’m sick of suffering alone. And I’m sick of fighting this losing battle, all so you *feel* like I may live.” I leaned in and clearly stated, “I am not going to live through this.” I watched her head drop to her hands. I felt so awful watching her sob. “Jess, I want to see you. I want to spend time with you. I need you to understand that I am dying, Jessica.” She pulled her heavy head from her hands and looked up at me. Her lips pursed and snot dripped down her face. She shook her head and looked away.

“God damn it, Mom.” She grabbed a napkin and dabbed her eyes. She heaved a deep breath before continuing, “Why can’t you do this for me? Why can’t you at least try?”

“I’ve been trying,” I interjected defensively.

“Try again,” she persisted as she wiped the snot from her upper lip.

“No,” I said dryly. “No. You don’t get to ask this of me. I’ve already done so much. I mean, for Christ’s sake, I am dying in silence for you. Maybe I would be open to trying something else if I had a support system, but I am doing this all alone.” I take a deep breath. I didn’t want this to turn into a fight. “I know this is hard for you,” I calmly say with a hint of resentment, “but you need to accept this so we can move on. We need to discuss finances. You need to go through my stuff and show me what you want and what I should get rid of. I know it sounds stressful, but it’s better to do this before I pass. Trust me.” I try to grab her hand, but she quickly pulls it away. “I’m sorry.”

“If you were sorry, you would try again,” she jabbed.

“I’ve already given so much. I don’t want to.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want my last few weeks to be full of suffering.”

“You’re so selfish,” she said coldly. I was baffled and left speechless. She watched me fumble for words before continuing, “You don’t want to suffer for a few weeks here and there? Giving up means I have to suffer for the rest of my life!” Tears began streaming down her face again. “I am losing a huge part of my life. You are my mother! You are a part of me. The cancer is going to take your life and leave mine in shambles. Nothing is going to be the same. Holidays, birthdays, just normal day shit! It’s all going to be screwed up. I don’t know that I can do this. You need to try again.” She slammed her fist on the table like a child throwing a tantrum.

“Sweetie,” I leaned over and squeezed her trembling hands, “please, if you accept this now, it won’t be as hard later. I miss you. I feel like I haven’t been able to be with you. I am constantly worried about having to hide myself behind makeup and wigs. I stand up straighter and clench my toes, so my legs don’t shake while I’m sitting. I mean, by the end of our visits, I am just relieved you are leaving! I am exhausted. I can’t do this anymore- “

“Are you kidding me? You have a time limit on your suffering! Once you-,” she paused, trying to avoid saying the word die, “once it’s over for you, that’s it. I am left suffering forever, Mom. I don’t have a time limit on my suffering. I mean, how long will it take me to learn to live with this? I can’t believe you could ask me to be okay with you giving up!” She paused, her eyes red with rage and lids heavy with tears, “Yes, put on makeup, wear wigs. Do all you can to protect me from this because I’m scared, and I need you to protect me.” She smeared her tears across her face. “Protect me one last time, Mom. I’m not ready for this. I’m so scared.” She sobbed in her hands. I stood up and hugged her wet head to my stomach. I shushed her softly as I rubbed her shoulders, and I considered what she was saying. None of this was fair for either of us. How could I expect her to carry me through the hard

times? She was right, I am her mother, and this is the last opportunity I am given to protect her. I should try to see my situation as a gift. One last time, I will protect her before leaving her to fend for herself.

“So,” I sat back and wiped the last of my tears, “How is Beth?” I watched her head lift slowly from her hands. “Who knocked up that hussy?” I smiled.

“Oh, mom, you’re so bad!” she chuckled, wiping away her tears. As she began talking about Beth, I watched her ease a bit.

She continued pretending we never had that conversation for the rest of the night. Every laugh and joke eased her a little more. After our visit, I led her to the door and hugged her goodbye. As I shut the door, I saw her glance over her shoulder at me one more time. It was a look of concern, love, and admiration. I smiled and closed the door. I slowly walked to my couch, exhausted from pretending I wasn’t exhausted. I held my hands to my face and wept. I just want it to be over.