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KISMET

As I climbed the stairs inside my mother's home, my fear became palpable. The anxiety in my stomach ascended into my chest. My legs carried me forward. As the eldest of the family, I had to be strong. I could hear the television, its omnipresence a malevolent force. Women hawked cheap jewelry on the QVC Shopping Network. Sally Jesse Raphael fretted, Connie Chung droned.

My sister, Beth, was lying on a thin mattress on the floor, at the foot of my mother's king-size bed, wearing a football jersey, shorts, and sneakers, no socks. Her head was propped on a pillow.

She turned her head and looked at me. I walked over and kissed her hello. She looked tired and exasperated. My mother lay in the bed, on her side, on top of the blanket. Her head was turned away from the six-foot projection television, her eyes closed. But I knew she was awake, as she always was when I visited. She reminded me of a hospital patient—flat hair, no makeup, puffy face. She opened her eyes and gave a tepid smile.

"Hi, sweetheart, when did you get here?" she offered.

I kissed her, told her I'd just arrived, and asked her how she was doing.

"I didn't sleep too well last night."

"Why didn't you take your sleep medication?"

"I just don't like the way it makes me feel," she replied. My mother had stopped nearly all her medications weeks earlier. They weren't working.

"I brought you some sorbet, some frozen yogurt, and fresh strawberries. Are you hungry?"

"No dear," she replied, "But why don't you have some. I'll taste yours."

My sister continued to stare at the television. She was listening to our discussion, but I knew she was weary of the daily struggle to get my mother to eat something. Hearing my voice, my mother's live-in nurse, Camille, entered the bedroom. She smiled at me, a black woman's radiant smile, showing her concern with my mother's diet. Camille had boundless patience, reflecting her southern optimism and charm.

"Carmel, why don't you let your son make you one of his yummy frozen shakes. You didn't eat a thing last night."

My mother grimaced, "Oh, no, I don't think I could eat anything, but you have some, honey."

“Maybe I’ll have some later, Mom.”

As I sat in a chair next to my mother’s bed, I felt anxiety envelop my skin, a clammy perspiration beginning under my suit. Camille retreated to her room. I turned to my sister, who was still facing the TV.

“Are you working today?”

“I only have to go in if my beeper goes off.” Beth was a New York State Trooper, a member of the K-9 unit. Her partners were two large German Shepherds. One was a bomb-sniffing dog, the other a narcotics dog. That dog made me nervous.

The lighting in the bedroom was dim. Across the room I could see through the window, the neighbors playing tennis, their court whites reflecting the bright sun. It bothered me that they were laughing. My mother had not left the house for months, except for trips to Sloan-Kettering Hospital. Three years after surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation, her cancer had metastasized and spread to her pancreas, liver, and kidneys. She now had permanent plastic tubes entering and exiting her abdomen; chemotherapy could be pumped in and cancerous ascitic fluids drained daily by Camille. I turned my attention to the yellow roses on my mother’s nightstand. I had brought them the day before, and they were starting to open. Next to the crystal vase of roses sat my baby shoes, bronzed, still luminous and unaging after forty-five years.

I feigned attention toward the woman dangling a charm bracelet on the QVC channel. I resented her intrusion. I looked at my mother’s collection of small mirrors on the wall behind the television. She had been collecting them for years, yet it seemed to me that I noticed them for the first time. My gaze rested on a mirror mounted amid a mosaic of red and cobalt-blue stained glass, which I had given her when I was still in high school. In its reflection, a lone tennis player practiced his serve.

“Mom, I’m going to make a frozen yogurt shake. Will you have some?”

“Go ahead, sweetheart, I’ll try a little of yours.”

“Beth, why don’t you come with me.”

“Fine, I’ll be right down, but no vitamin supplements in my shake. They give me gas.”

I went downstairs to the kitchen and began assembling the ingredients I had brought with me—yogurt, sorbet, milk, and large, glossy red strawberries. Beth walked into the kitchen.

“How’s she doing?” I asked my sister.

“Not too well. We had a little accident last night.”

“What happened?”

“Well,” my sister hesitated. “Mom had to use the bathroom. It was three o’clock in the morning, and I was helping her. I lost my grip and dropped her. And then I couldn’t lift her.” She was embarrassed. “She’s bloated and heavy from the ascites and steroids. The blood clots in her legs have spread, and she has no strength left. She’s like dead weight.”

“I wish you wouldn’t use that term.”

“Sorry.” She paused, then continued, “Anyway, she started to cry, and I started to cry, and so we both sat on the floor sobbing.”

“So what did you do?”

“I went and woke up Camille and the two of us managed to get her to the bathroom and then back to bed. Mom didn’t get hurt, but she was mortified. She can’t support her own weight. Neither of us slept last night. I’m exhausted. Mom is in pain all the time. She tosses and turns all night. She’s not sleeping at all anymore. And neither am I. I can’t go on like this.”

When we first found out that my mother’s cancer had spread, my sister moved back home, putting her State Police cruiser in the garage, and her boisterous, high-strung dogs in the basement. The quiet, serene household became like a barracks—barking dogs, police uniforms hanging in closets, magnetic State Police logos dotting the refrigerator. We hired a full-time home-care nurse because my mother didn’t want to waste away in a hospital. She was tired of doctors, chemotherapy, radiation, waiting rooms, emergency rooms, and IV drips. She decided to stop the treatments that left her listless while her cancer spread unchecked. She wanted to be at home and kept as comfortable as possible. She didn’t want pain medications or sleeping pills because she wanted to be fully aware of each day in her life.

“Beth, would you ask the nurse to come down here?” I asked my sister.

She disappeared without a word.

Camille entered shortly. “Oh, honey, you’re making one of those wonderful shakes for your mother. Lord knows, she needs to eat something.”

“Camille, would you get my mother’s sleeping medication for me, please?”

“Honey, she won’t take that medication. You know that.”

“I know, Camille, but be a doll and get it for me, anyway.”

She smiled, shook her head, and left. After Camille brought me the bottle of sleeping pills, I set them on the counter.

“Child, I know what you be up to. And I am making myself scarce so that I don’t be no witness to your mischief.” Camille left the kitchen smiling, muttering, “Oh, lordy, lordy,” and laughing softly.

I filled the blender with frozen yogurt, chocolate sorbet, whole milk, and fresh strawberries. I took two sleeping capsules, opened them, and dumped the white powder into the blender. Then I hit puree. I made up a small bowl for my mother, rinsed the blender carafe, and made another batch for my sister and me. I brought the shakes upstairs, gave my mother the special recipe, and the three of us occupied ourselves with our shakes while QVC continued to ply us with synthetic rubies. Patiently, I encouraged my mother to eat. One spoon at a time, she slowly finished her small shake, and then fell asleep. I kissed her goodbye. My sister lethargically followed me to the front door. As I stepped into the sunlight, she said, “Thanks, now I can get some sleep, too.”

This scene had come to pass numerous times during the previous months. Beth, the law enforcer, couldn’t bring herself to drug our mother with sleeping pills. But I had no problem with it. I had convinced my mother that frozen yogurt, like turkey, had high levels of tryptophan. Actually, yogurt doesn’t have any tryptophan, but it sounded logical. Little lies had crept into our daily lives to hide a very big lie—that my mother would recover. The doctors told my mother there was still hope, my sister told my mother she wasn’t tired, the home-care nurse told me she had seen many patients recover from ovarian cancer. I kept busy at work, pretending my phone calls helped my sister and mother, and that I could be there as soon as work let up.

As I emerged from my mother’s house that day, I was annoyed by the manicured lawns of the neighbors, their flowering fuschia azaleas, the pristine condition of their sidewalks and driveways. I wondered what horrors lay behind these bucolic facades, what decay belied such wealth. I opened the door to my recently washed and waxed car and sank into the comfort and aroma of the leather seats. I drove away, watching neighbors tending their perfect lawns, walking their show dogs. I looked forward to heading to my office and losing myself in the chaos of work. I knew my mother’s disease would march relentlessly to its conclusion. I was returning to my laser treatment center in a building full of doctors, phlebotomists, patients, and therapists, none of whom could alter the events that had invaded my life.

After her initial diagnosis, surgery, and treatments, I had retreated to my safe world and conveniently trusted her care to the oncologists, radiologists, and pathologists. What exactly I should have done, I couldn't pinpoint. Yet this had happened on my watch. Maybe if I weren't working fourteen-hour days, going to the health club six days a week, caught in the vanity of New York culture, I would have sensed her impending decline. Perhaps I could have taken steps to impede her fate.

As I bore down upon the city, my pager went off. I glanced at the screen and saw my mother's phone number followed by 911. I exited the highway, made a U-turn, and headed back to my mother's house. I kept glancing at my cell phone, but hadn't the courage to call my sister. She never paged me with 911 unless the situation was dire.

I turned down the volume on the car's sound system, and drove to my mother's house in near silence. The revolutions of the tires and the sound of rubber meeting asphalt achieved a melodious pitch of its own, a mesmerizing Gregorian chant. The thickly wooded roadside gave way to an idyllic university campus where thousands of students faced their own crises.

I approached the turn for my mother's street, as I had done hundreds of times. Yet the landscape and nearby houses seemed different, more vibrant. I made the left slowly and deliberately in a large arc. As I neared my mother's house, time slowed. Three young girls jumped rope in a nearby driveway, the middle girl's braids rhythmically floating in mid-air. I parked my car on the street, leaving my mother's driveway open. The neighbors' tennis game continued. As I walked up to my mother's house, the barking, growling, and lunging of two German Shepherds reverberated from behind the front door. ☞