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Instructive Absence

Being the daughter of an accomplished mom and the sibling of an extremely intelligent sister, there were always difficulties when I was growing up. Mom was a pediatric neurologist and geneticist with multiple achievements, such as being on the Best Doctors in America list for nearly three decades, and my sister will soon start graduate school to earn her doctorate in analytical chemistry. I, however, preferred the presence of animals over humans, nearly failed seventh-grade science, and did not plan on attending college until my sophomore year. Academics was never something that Mom and I could bond over, unlike my sister. I did not care about school, and I could not understand why I was supposed to care about my future when it seemed so far away. My mind worked differently than hers, but, unable to realize that, she simply believed I was not trying. It seemed as though half of our conversations ended with her yelling at me with a condescending tone. Her idea of encouragement was humiliation and shame, not support and compassion. "How come *I'm* able to understand this better than you even though *you're* the one taking the class?" was a constant question that arose whenever she helped me study, and I came to believe that I was not capable of living up to her expectations. I quickly doubted my abilities, and my confidence seemingly disappeared. I learned that in order to live with my mom, I needed to hide myself from her, both physically and mentally.

My friend dropped me off from school, and I entered the unfamiliar but homey walkway. While I had only lived there for a few months, it felt like home because of my dog, Sugar, who greeted me after every long school day. I dropped my backpack down in the middle of the walkway and noticed a slip of paper with Mom's illegible handwriting. I rolled my eyes as I continued to play with my dog and acted as though the paper was not there because I wanted to start my afternoon routine. I lay on the floor as my dog fell back asleep and began to watch my phone to block out the world. As my mind relaxed, I remembered the note Mom left for me. I huffed as I walked over to see what the daily chores were: empty dishwasher, wash plastic dishes, vacuum living room, fold two loads of clothes. I knew that Mom would be back from work within an hour, but there was not enough time to complete the list. It was nothing new, for I rarely tried to please her OCD-like demands. Thirty minutes later, Mom pulled into the driveway as I ran with my backpack to the kitchen table. I heard her yell at the dog to move while I pretended to be stuck on a math problem, and as she entered the kitchen, the criticism began.

"Have you finished the chores?" she asked.

"I got started on a couple of them, but I wasn't able to get all of them done," I replied.

"Why not? You've had two and a half hours. They should all be done," she said as I felt her glare at me.

"I had to start my homework," I said as she started to inspect the living room.

"Why is there still dog hair on the floor?" she asked.

"Sorry, I must have missed it," I said.

"You couldn't tell that there was white hair on the dark brown floor?" she said as she went to the closet.

I rolled my eyes as I held my tongue and thought, "You vacuumed the house at two this morning, and you'll just vacuum it again later tonight. I might as well have vacuumed the floor to prepare it to be vacuumed again." The sudden noise of the vacuum let me know that, once again, I had not met her expectations. I heard her footsteps as she left the closet, which signaled the start of our next argument.

"Have you finished your homework?" she asked.

"Not yet. I still have a little bit left. Would you mind helping me study for my science test tomorrow?" I asked.

"How much do you have left?" she asked, ignoring my request.

"I'm not sure, but some. Would you help me study for science tonight?" I repeated.

"Yes, but how come you're not done with your homework? You should have been able to finish it by now."

"I just have a lot. School's been--"

"God, get out of my way you stupid dog!" she yelled as I heard my dog's paws scurry across the floor.

"Be thankful for the dog," I thought as I comforted Sugar, "because she's the only reason I'm still here."

"Explain it back to me," she said.

"Wait, what was the second part?" I asked for the fifth time.

"Oh my gosh! How can you not understand this? We've gone over it so many times. Even I understand it, and I'm not the one who needs to know it!" she said as she stared at me.

"I'm sorry. I just can't remember that one part."

"No, you're just not trying."

"Yes I am! I just don't understand that one part!"

"No, you can't explain any of it to me." Our argument escalated, and we began to scream at each other.

"Why can't you understand this?" she yelled as I started to tear up, which frustrated her even more.

"I don't know. I just don't understand the way you've been teaching it!"

"It's not my problem that you're not trying hard enough!" she argued back. The house erupted as we screamed at each other until we furiously went to our rooms, and we did not acknowledge each other until the following afternoon.

Winter break came earlier than I hoped, and the house became hell. My sister was home, so the tensions rose even higher; we never talked while she was at college, and Mom and I began to fight nightly. Mom's inability to express her emotions because she believed they made her vulnerable was the reason we fought. No one could break the barrier she put in place because she would not allow others to hurt her, and she involuntarily helped me form my barrier. Her criticism came in the form of verbal and emotional abuse, and she constantly used my heart against me. My emotions fueled her anger, and she hurt me in ways she knew would hurt the most. Her ability to hurt me with my emotions taught me three lessons that have always stuck with me: First, I was wrong. Second, I should hide my emotions because they did not matter. Third, I did not matter, which became engraved in my mind.

"Christmas is coming up, and I don't want us fighting in front of the family," Mom said as she prepared a casserole for Christmas dinner.

"Ok," I said as I rolled my eyes when she looked away from me.

"Can we please just not fight these next few days and forgive each other?" she asked.

"Sure," I lied as I thought to myself, "How could I forgive her? After she's put me through hell, I'm just supposed to instantly forgive her?" Even though we agreed, my anger and hatred towards her continued to grow, and four days after Christmas, Mom and I never spoke again.

"Tell them to hurry!" Mom yelled as my sister talked to the operator. I watched as Mom turned blue and lost consciousness.

"Go wait by the door for the ambulance!" my sister told me. My feet started to run without me as I ran through the hallway toward the front door.

"Mom? MOM!" I heard my sister yell. I forgot my orders and ran back to Mom lying on the ground as my sister began CPR. A few minutes later, the ambulance arrived, and I watched as the strongest, most unstoppable woman lay helplessly on the ground while the medics tried to revive her. My sister and I stared at each other.

"It's gonna be alright," we told one another as we held each other. We both knew it was a lie, but we had to believe it. Everything had to be alright.

Our family arrived at the hospital, and my sister and I were depleted. We had just watched our mother die. I entered Mom's room and saw the machines she was hooked up to. The most resilient woman I knew now required tubes to help her breathe. I grabbed her hand, laid my head on her chest, and did what she hated the most: I cried.

"I'm sorry," I said as tears fell down my face. One final hug, one final kiss on the head, and one final "I love you," and Mom became nothing more than a memory. The day after New Years and the day before my sister's birthday, Mom died.

"Your mother was the strongest woman I knew," a woman said to me at Mom's service. "She loved you so much," she said as she hugged me.

"Thank you. She did," I lied as I tried to pull away from her. "You clearly did not know her," I thought as the woman walked away.

"I'm so sorry, but please know that your mother loved you. She always talked so proudly about you and your sister," another person said to me.

"What is happening? Are they at the right service?" I thought. The next fifty people greeted me with the same words, and I was so confused. After her service, I continued to think about what everyone had said to me.

"You know what was weird?" I asked my aunt later that night. "Everyone kept telling me how much Mom loved me and always talked about me."

“Well, she was proud of you,” my aunt replied, “even if she never told you.”

“But we had such a terrible relationship.”

“I don’t know if Mom told you this, but every night after you guys fought, she would call me on the phone sobbing. She was so upset.”

“Then why didn’t she ever show me that she was upset?” I asked as my mind processed the possibility that Mom truly did care.

“Because she didn’t know how to.” My aunt’s words stuck with me, and I realized that if Mom had let me see her cry, I would have known that she cared and that emotions are not a weakness.

The next few months after her death are a blur. I got up and continued to live, but it was as if my mind stayed in Mom’s room at the hospital. My life changed significantly over those few months, and I relied on my dog to cope. She had been with me for ten years and allowed me to escape my depression, but one week after my birthday, she unexpectedly died. My emotional barrier crumbled, but the numbness remained. She represented my life before Mom died, and her death forced me to admit the change in my life. Because I always avoided my emotions, my attempts to express them hurt me physically but caused more pain to those who cared about me.

Mom’s birthday arrived, but I did not mourn her. I considered myself an ungrateful daughter who did not care that her mother died, but my inability to grieve was because I was still in shock from my traumatic losses; I could not properly express my emotions because I would admit to myself that I felt vulnerable, which Mom taught me was unacceptable. I physically punished myself, so I could feel some sort of pain, and the critical voice of Mom continued to grow more powerful as the month went by. “You’re not smart enough, you’re so selfish, you can’t do it, you’re not worth it,” raced and repeated through my mind for years, and after Mom died, the words became deafening. I was lost in life because there did not seem to be anyone who could guide me, and I did not allow myself to ask for help because I was embarrassed. The amount of guilt I felt from not forgiving her before Christmas was unbearable, and exactly one month after Mom’s birthday passed, I attempted to overdose. I did not reveal my attempt to anyone until a month later, and it was then that I realized the amount of anguish I inflicted upon myself and my family. The physical scars became permanent, and my health was in jeopardy. I told myself that I was not worth it, which prevented me from reaching out to the overwhelming support people offered me, and Mom made me believe that I was a burden. “I don’t want to waste their time, they have more important things they need to do, I’m not worth it,” remained in my mind over the years, and because I learned that the easiest way to avoid conflict with Mom was to hide from her, I believed that I needed to act that way towards everyone.

People who lose a parent constantly think about how their parents will not be there to watch them graduate, walk them down the aisle, or meet their grandkids, but I wonder if my life would have been worse if Mom was alive: our nightly fights, the constant verbal and emotional abuse, the everlasting humiliation. Not being able to meet her expectations and fighting with her every night took a toll on my mental health from a young age. If Mom was still here, would I? Would I have tried harder to ensure I did not survive my attempt? Would I have run away? Mom was supposed to provide protection and love, but her inability to be vulnerable made her emotionally absent. I learned to suppress and conceal myself, and although I miss her, only after her death have I begun to understand and accept myself.