

It looked like white Christmas this year.

Diane stepped out of the van, her hand gripping the car for balance. Her foot sank into the snowbank, the cold biting through the thin fabric of her slippers. She clenched her jaw as the chill seeped up her ankle. Wet socks, just great.

“Mom, here, let me help you.” Leigh’s voice was quick and stern, pushing back against the frost. Her daughter hurried around the car, plunging both her feet into the snowbank now.

“I’ll manage,” Diane said, waving her off. She stepped wide onto the sidewalk, the snow resisting her. “Go find parking. Don’t get a ticket.” Her voice was sharper than she intended, but she knew how bad the parking had gotten. After the first snow especially, when did it all begin?

Leigh hesitated, just as Diane knew she would. Her daughter’s face tightened, the way it always did when she thought she could shoulder everything. Diane adored that strength but worried about it, too. She raised a good girl, but it was still a mother’s job to worry.

Leigh had lost her job this year. She never complained much about it, but Diane could see the weight Leigh tried to hide. It was in the hurried way she moved, and the shadows under her eyes.

“Just go in there and take a number,” a voice called from under the canopy, abrupt and hollow. Diane turned to see a man in a hospital gown, leaning against an IV pole. His face hidden behind a puff of smoke as the bitter smell curled toward her. “It’ll be a while.”

Leigh looked uneasy, but Diane refused to let her daughter stand in the cold any longer. She pressed forward, relief washing over her as her foot came free of the snow.

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“Name?”

“Diane Paul.”

The woman at the desk barely looked up. Her hair was brushed back, and she typed slowly, each key pressed with deliberate precision, one finger at a time. Diane watched her and thought of herself—how the world had moved past her in ways she could never quite catch. Technology, especially. The kids were better at it. They always had been.

Everything was online now. COVID had made sure of that.

The thought of those years came suddenly. The way it had all seemed distant at first—a problem for other places, other people. Then, suddenly, it wasn't. People died. The government told them not to leave their homes. The doctors canceled her colonoscopy, said they'd call when things settled.

She was still waiting for that call.

A nurse came to check her blood pressure, draping a warm blanket over her shoulders. Diane eased herself into the hard plastic chair, her back pressing firmly against it. The chair was uncomfortable, but she didn't say so. Leigh hovered nearby, pacing in quick, restless strides.

"Sit down, my dear," Diane said, nodding to the empty seat beside her. Her voice was soft but carried a note of apprehension. "You're making me nervous."

"Someone will need it," Leigh replied without looking at her. Her fingers moved to her neck and began to scratch. A habit from childhood. Diane could still remember slipping mitts over Leigh's small hands in the summer, her daughter's protests muffled by the scratchy cotton.

"How are you feeling, Mom?"

When did it start? Two days ago? Three? The pain had come on suddenly, sharp cramps that doubled her over. She'd thrown up her lunch and blamed the salmon from Costco. It had seemed reasonable at the time. But the pain lingered, then dulled, and Diane might have let it go if Leigh hadn't insisted.

"It's not normal," Leigh had said, already pulling the car keys from the hook by the door.

"I'm sixty-eight," Diane had replied, tugging at her seatbelt as she settled into the passenger seat. "Nothing's normal." The belt resisted, and she had to yank harder to get it over her stomach. When had her stomach gotten so big?

Leigh leaned over to help despite Diane's protest. It was her way. Leigh looked more like her father than Diane, but that patience, that kindness—that was hers. Or at least, that's what others had said.

"Can't hurt to get it checked out," Leigh had murmured as she started the car.

Diane knew who Leigh was thinking of.

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John.

He'd been sixty-one when he collapsed in the driveway. Her husband. Her love. The father of her children. He was a strong man, solid in a way that seemed permanent, though of course it hadn't been. He worked every day, fixing cars, speaking broken Spanish to their neighbours. He smoked, always outside, because Diane couldn't stand the smell. Every evening at 6:30, she'd call him in for dinner.

But that evening had been different. Leigh had been coming over and asked for beef barley soup. Diane had been in the kitchen, chopping carrots, when she heard the scream.

Everything that happened after seemed like a haze, the ambulance's flashing lights, the sound of scissors cutting open her husband's shirt, his favourite shirt that said "world's best grandpa." Diane wanted to tell them to save the shirt, but she knew better.

And she sat in the waiting room like tonight, with Leigh pacing next to her like tonight. Finally the doctor would come out, Diane could not remember what the doctor looked like, was he young? Old? Tall? Short?

“I’m so sorry.”

He said to her quietly.

She would sob, hold her daughter tightly, and reply: “Don’t you be sorry, you did your best.”

What was there to be sorry about? Leigh would rant to people all the time, about how it was a preventable death, how it would’ve been different if John had a family doctor to monitor his blood pressure and bloodwork. They had lost their old family doc, Dr. MacDonald, about five years ago, when he finally retired at the age of seventy-nine. Leigh put their names on the list for a new doctor, but their request was like a pebble thrown into the ocean, not even an echo returned.

Diane was not too concerned with not having a family doctor. She was healthy, for a sixty something year old, nothing more than the occasional cold is pretty good. There are people other than her who need a family doctor more, people like John. Let them have a doctor before her.

Perhaps it’s not that bad. Diane looked around the congested waiting room. No one had been called yet, or perhaps she was too tired to notice. A child, seated on his mother’s lap, was wailing, a deep cut on her forehead.

“Here sweetie.” Diane reached into her pocket and found a candy cane. But the boy was in too much pain to notice her voice. His hands reached out, grabbing at his mom’s face. The young mother shook her head, and wrapped her arms around her son.

“Santa will bring you Bluey toys if you be a good boy.” the mom whispered.

“I DON’T WANT BLUEY!” The boy kicked and screamed, “I WANT OWIE GO AWAY!”

People were staring now, exchanging glances, murmuring. The mother hunched over her child, rocking him gently, her whispers dissolving into his cries.

“You are a good boy...be a good boy...”

Perhaps it was the mother’s voice, or perhaps she was exhausted from the wait. Diane pressed her chin against her chest. Her eyelids were getting heavy, and the voices around her became more muffled. A mother’s sigh, a child’s cry, and a spouse’s prayer, they all became intertwined in a cloud of sounds.

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“Ms, you can’t sleep here.”

A sharp voice. Leigh answered before Diane could even lift her head.

“Where am I supposed to sleep then?”

Diane opened her eyes to see her daughter standing toe to toe with a nurse. How long was she asleep? She could taste her own breath. The fluorescent lights whirled, and the crying boy sitting across from her was gone.

“It’s probably best to go home and rest, we don’t encourage visitors to sleep in the hallways,” the nurse’s glance shifted between Diane and Leigh, “it congests the ER.”

“You know what congests the ER? Patients waiting for 17 hours to be seen!” Leigh was not backing down. Diane could see that her eyes were bloodshot.

“I apologize, it’s just that we are very short-staffed, and the ER sees patients based on urgency...” the nurse’s voice thin, exhausted, “If your mother can wait, it’s probably best to book an appointment with her family doctor.”

“We don’t have a family doctor!” Heads turned towards them as Leigh screamed. Her words came like a wound ripped open. “No one here does, where are we supposed to go? No one would see her, and she hasn’t eaten in two days!”

But it was more than that, it was more than not having a family doctor. Diane knew her daughter all too well. It was seeing her own father die before her because they didn’t have regular check ups; it was losing her job despite being a loyal employee for over fifteen years; it was standing before a judge and having to justify every date she had been on in order to get visitation rights to her own child.

But it was even more than that, it was believing that she was immune from suffering, because she had tried her best, the best tax-paying, law abiding citizen who treated others with kindness and respected their dignity. Good children get gifts, and only the naughty children would get coal – Diane taught her when she was young.

It was the last straw, like Brutus' knife, the most fatal, but not the cause of death.

Diane reached towards her daughter. Leigh wept, her long winter jacket pooled over the hospital floor.

“It’s okay honey, I’m okay.”

“Code blue, trauma bay one.” A woman’s voice echoed above them. The nurse turned sharply, stepping around them.

“They are busy, others need them more.” She knew what code blue meant.

They had called it for John.

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“The doctor will come discuss the results with you.” The tech said to her, gesturing them to leave.

Leigh sat across from her in silence. The fight drained from her body.



“Go home, get some good sleep.”

“I’m fine.”

She knew why Leigh would want to stay. We have to advocate for ourselves. Her neighbor said it to her after finally receiving a diagnosis of MS. She waited seven months for an answer in agony.

“I’m fine.” Diane insisted. Her hand pressed hard against Leigh’s shoulder. “I’m fine, it’s probably just a stomach bug. Plus, you gotta be home for Christmas, for Henry. He needs to be with his mum.”

Leigh went silent. Diane had used her trump card. The love of a mother passing from one generation to the next.

“You have to go, the court would like to see you there to spend Christmas with him.”

Diane nudged again, “It’s the right thing to do.”

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She slept on and off. The nurses woke her up for bloodwork, then took her for more tests. People came and left, and Diane sat in the waiting room as the clock struck midnight.

It was now Christmas.

How Diane used to love Christmas.

Toys and books for being a good girl. Her brother, the naughty one, always got coal. Until the year he didn't—he died on Christmas Eve, drunk behind the wheel.

Diane stood by the fireplace holding his coal filled stocking, and vowed that she would do it right.

And she had.

She celebrated Christmas with her kids, turkey, mistletoe and all. She watched her diet, took her walks, and never drank or smoked. Church every Sunday, and during COVID she prayed for the safety of everyone. She wore a mask, and got all her shots.

How a life would pass by in the blink of an eye. Her brother, parents, John, they would all pass away, leaving her behind. Perhaps this was the punishment of being too careful.

Maybe, if she had thrown caution to the wind, she wouldn't be sitting here alone.

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“Ms Paul? Diane?”

She opened her eyes to see a young man in whitecoat standing over her. His face hidden behind a mask, but with kind eyes that danced between her and the patients sitting behind.

“I’d like to talk to you about your test results. We found some mass in your intestines, and with the blood in the stool, vomiting and weight loss. We would like to do a biopsy and have you admitted to the floor.”

He danced around the words for a bit, but Diane knew what he meant. She knew what was behind that mask and the kind eyes.

“I’m sorry,” said the doctor.

And what should she reply with? It’s okay, it’s not your fault. She said it when they apologized for John’s passing, and now, the same apology, for what will become of her.

But how could she? How does she even begin? What words can be used to describe the feelings you get when the love of your life passes before his time? When you sit at the dinner table facing that empty chair every night thereon? When someone tells you that they’ve beaten cancer while yours metastasizes? When you lose your baby and hear a newborn’s cry from the next room? How is it fair? How is it just? How could this happen?

She had been good. It was the betrayal of believing—believing that if you did good, if you were good, suffering would pass you by.

“It’s just...not fair.”

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“I’m sorry.”

How many times had he said those words this week? This shift? This hour?

Dr. Chan looked at the woman weeping before him, and took a deep breath in. He had done this many times, more times than he’d like. Most cancer patients find out about their diagnosis in the ER now, often showing late-stage symptoms. His colleagues and he would shake their heads as the pathology report appears on screen, and say it loud enough for the universe to hear:

“It’s always the good ones.”

"Doctor, would you do me a favor?"

He turned back.

She had straightened in her chair, her hands twisting the thin hospital gown. A plea disguised as an ask.

"My daughter will be here soon. Would you tell her it’s nothing?"

A pause.

"It's Christmas, and she's had a rough year. She worked so hard—applied to so many jobs, took care of me." Her fingers clenched tighter. "She's good."

A breath.

"She deserves a good Christmas. It's only fair."