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# CARETAKER

CAROLINE HONE

*It's okay, it's okay. Everything will be just fine.*

These phrases, as if echoed by a broken record player, repeated continuously in my head—or so I thought. They reached my lips and I whispered the assertions under my breath, as if speaking them out loud would make them true.

*Hurry, book the car service. Faster. She's in pain.*

I could hear these thoughts, not wanting to reveal the pit I sensed in my stomach or the breathlessness I felt, as if the air had been shoved out of my lungs. I could hear the music surge back to life; intermission had ended. Clearly we were not staying for the second act.

*Okay, done. Car is on its way. How's mom?*

She sat hunched over to my left, arms clutching her side, eyebrows furrowed, teeth clenched. My two younger sisters hovered next to her. “Will mom be okay?” “Yes of course, it's mom.” She's strong, she's invincible, she's our mother.

*How can this be happening?*

Just a few hours earlier in the day, the four of us huddled around a table at that Italian restaurant; in between forkfuls of cheesecake, we declared it the best day of summer. Chatting on the train ride into the city, wandering along Fifth Avenue, wiping away the tears from laughing at the displays in the SNL exhibit—I guess a Broadway show to end the day would have been too perfect.

*Was it something she ate? Too much physical exertion? Any relation to her colon surgery just four months prior?*

I strapped her into the front seat, and we began the grueling forty minute drive back to my grandparents' house. I alternated between stroking Natalie's shaking hands and drying the tears streaming down Grace's cheek, rarely removing my eyes from the car's side mirror, in which I could glimpse my mother's pale face.

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*It's okay, it's okay. Everything will be just fine.  
But would it be just fine?*

Back on campus the following week, my mother called to declare that she needed to have her gallbladder removed.

*Another surgery? This soon after the last? Hadn't she spent enough time in the hospital, enough time feeling sick, enough time being the patient?*

A mother is meant to be the caring one, not the one in need of care. Visiting her daily in the unfamiliar New Jersey hospital the week prior, I felt like the mother.

I'll get some ice for your ginger ale. Let me put the socks on your feet, they feel cold. Need to use the bathroom? I'll help you stand. How are Nat and Grace coping?

For a moment, I could understand my mother in a way I never had before. I understood why she lies sleepless at night when Natalie is stressed about homework—she assumes the tension Natalie feels. I understood why she gives Grace Motrin at the first mention of a headache—she doesn't want her to feel any more pain. I understood why to this day, she insists on coming to my annual doctor's appointment and listing the items of concern that she has documented since the last visit: she wants no symptom to go unrecognized.

I understood what only a mother can truly feel: the worry, the fear, the love. I understood that when my mom assures me that "it is okay" and "everything will be just fine," that there may be a piece of her that doesn't wholly believe it. I suppose that no one, not even my mother, can truly know what to expect, because sometimes, life is as unpredictable as a gallbladder attack in the middle of a musical.