

Only a Sacrifice Will Do

“Mom!” I yelled.

The empty aluminum platter span wildly as I rushed over, glass crunching below my feet. Her eyes were open but they were not seeing me. The doors behind me shook as my dad rushed out of the kitchen and knelt by her side.

“Cindy, call 911.”

“B-but—” I started to panic. My dad placed a heavy hand on my shoulder.

“Cindy, call 911.”

I obeyed, and in a shaking voice, I told the operator that my mom collapsed, that I don’t know what happened, she’s awake but not alert, she needs help immediately.

When the ambulance left, I turned to pick up after the worried customers, some of whom had paid and left generous tips without receiving any food. Eunho, our part-timer, started to clean up the glass.

Dad was at the hospital with my younger brother, and I left the restaurant at 2am, having spent the past hours alternating between cleaning and staring into space.

Dad came home an hour later. He carried Yoon, who was already sleeping, into bed, and sat down with me at the kitchen table. His eyes glanced toward the coffee maker.

“Cindy.”

“What’s going on dad?”

“Cindy.” He breathed deeply. “Your mom, she’s sick.”

“Yes, but-”

“I need you to calm down, dear. Look at me, and take a deep breath.”

I was sobbing. I tried to calm myself.

“Cindy, this isn’t going to be easy to hear, but you need to know, so that you can be strong.”

I nodded.

“Cindy...” his voice trailed off. “They say it could be cancer.”

My throat caught. Dad sighed, and continued.

“We don’t know yet, but your mom’s not going to be able to come home for a while.”

It took a long time for me to stop sobbing. Dad patiently waited, as he awkwardly placed an arm around my shoulder.

“Cindy, I’m going to come off as a little cold, but I need you to understand, okay?” he said, after I wiped my tears.

“Cindy, now that your mom’s in the hospital, we can’t just press pause on everything. Your brother needs to go to school, you need to go to school, and I have to take care of the restaurant. You understand, right?”

“Yes,” I said, even though I did not understand.

“Good. And we need to somehow make up for the fact that mom’s in the hospital, and keep things running so she doesn’t need to worry, right?”

I nodded.

“Cindy, can you manage a few extra hours?”

“Of course,” I whispered.

“We’ll discuss the details tomorrow... and another thing. Could you take Yoon to school and pick him up from now on?”

I paused.

“Cindy?”

“I’ll do it,” I said.

“Good.” Dad nodded. “Do go to bed. It’s late.”

The next day, I woke up at 7 and panicked, realizing I would be late. Then I remembered I had to take Yoon to school anyway.

After waking Yoon, I made him a sandwich and packed his bag. Checking the clock every couple of minutes, I rushed him out the door to the bus, also grabbing my bike at the same time.

By the time I arrived at school, it was already 10 minutes into the 2nd period. I tried to ignore the stares of my classmates. It was my first time being late.

“Hey, Cindy,” Lucia whispered, leaning over to me.

“Yeah?” I replied.

“Is everything okay back home?”

I hesitated.

“Not really,” I said.

Lucia stared intently at me.

“Hey, if you ever need—”

“Miss Morales! Eyes up here.” My teacher tapped the whiteboard with her marker.

“Sorry, Mrs. Gonzalez!” Lucia called. She looked back at me and mouthed, “Talk to me later.”

After school, I rode my bike to the restaurant. It was quieter and emptier than usual.

I grabbed my apron from the counter in the back. I sighed and took out my notepad and pen while heading to the front desk.

“Good afternoon, Cindy,” Eunho said while passing by with a tray full of *banchan*, or Korean side dishes.

“Hi, Eunho.”

I glanced at my phone. I had two hours until I had to pick up Yoon. Then I’d be here until dad got out—probably after midnight.

We got Logan, my older brother, to come back from California. But even after an emotional visit at the hospital, he didn’t offer to put his dental school on pause to help out at the restaurant.

“So... Logan, how’s dental school?” I asked, while preparing breakfast.

Dad stood stiffer than usual in the corner of the kitchen, holding his coffee.

“It’s what it is, you know, lots of teeth.”

I laughed, and glanced towards dad, wondering if he’d ever ask the question.

Dad sat down awkwardly at his spot at the table and set his mug down.

The room was silent for a few seconds.

“Son, it’s important that you stay humble.”

Logan nodded without taking his eyes off his plate.

“Son, the moment you stop being humble is when you fall.”

I smiled, having heard our dad’s lessons before.

We needed help at the restaurant. But as the morning wore on, dad never mentioned it—and when I brought up the subject, he only chided my brother to focus on his studies and stop worrying about the family.

Logan didn’t really pick up that dad probably meant the opposite. And a few days later, he flew back to Los Angeles.

“Cindy, come here,” dad called one day.

I walked into the living room.

Dad sat in the living room, staring at his laptop without typing anything.

“What’s that?” I asked, looking at the computer.

“The books,” dad answered. “You know, the financial things.”

I was no genius at finances, but even I could tell dad was having a hard time with this. He squinted and clicked at a few random numbers, then he turned to me.

“I think it would be best if you manage these,” he said.

I froze. I would manage the books? I barely knew anything about accounting. But I knew dad was already busy with mom’s role at the restaurant.

“I’ll give it a try, but-”

Dad nodded and handed the computer to me. He put a hand on my shoulder, then left without another word.

As I examined the screen, I only saw unintelligible numbers and words. I clicked on another tab. It looked exactly the same as the last one. I sighed and went to YouTube to find videos. I watched a video that said “How to Start Bookkeeping For Beginners”, but it only left me with a headache. I sat in my chair and opened a tub of ice cream. It was going to take a while to get used to this.

After a week, I decided that bookkeeping was too difficult for me. I regretted not taking an accounting class. I should’ve listened to my mom when she told me to take it at my school.

I decided to ask for help. But I’d have to ask my dad for permission first.

I walked into the kitchen, where my dad was busy making *juk*, a Korean porridge, for my mom.

“Hey dad?”

“Yeah,” he replied.

“Do you think we can get someone from church to help us out? Like Jeongyoon-*jipsanim*?” I asked, using her church title, meaning “deacon.”

Dad stopped chopping vegetables. I held my breath. There was no reason for dad to say no.

“No, Cindy. This is our business. Jeongyoon-*jipsanim*’s already doing enough for us and your mom,” he said. I bit back a sigh and nodded.

“Okay. Yeah. I get it.” I walked back to my room, a little disappointed.

Back in front of my desk, I opened up Excel again. I wanted to sleep for two days straight and just forget everything. But I accepted that I couldn’t rely on anyone to help, and that keeping the books was now fully my responsibility. I stretched my arms and went to YouTube. I would take notes on the videos this time, and try to remember the terms. Then I would try to make a model similar to what my mom had created before.

A couple of hours later, I had finally recreated my own Excel spreadsheet. I was pretty proud of myself. Even though I knew that I was only taking baby steps, I still felt like I accomplished something.

I switched tabs to my weekend homework. I saw several posts from my teachers concerning the SATs and college. College had seemed so close, but for reason, it now felt more distant. I wished I were like Logan, who was absorbed in school. I wondered if I would be able to live his life next year, after going to college.

It was already mid-October, and I was behind on completing my personal statement and supplemental essays. Glancing up at the tasklist I wrote and stuck on the wall facing me, I realized I should have completed my final draft already, written a first draft of my diversity statement, and organized a list of all the shorter essays that colleges required.

I opened up the CommonApp and a Word doc to make this latter list. I'd already put down Amherst, Baylor, and Brown... working on colleges starting with "C," I opened up the University of Chicago tab.

"What does Play-Doh have to do with Plato... what?" Stressed as I was, I suddenly felt irritated, and angrily copy-pasted the UChicago essay prompts into the Word doc.

"D... Duke." I went to the Duke tab.

Compiling the essays took more time than I thought, and it was midnight by the time I was done.

I soon faced the reality of my situation. I had no time to work on my applications, complete my homework, learn how to effectively manage a small business, and work as a server from 4:00 past midnight. I found myself scrabbling through my textbooks whenever I had a moment, but had to run out whenever the bell jingled, signaling that another customer had to be served.

Eunho initially offered to take up more work, but he was only there a few days of the week, and I couldn't ask him to take over my work while being paid the same wage.

Dad had to manage the kitchen by himself, and he seemed to get older by the day, waking up at 5 to head to the restaurant and prep ingredients, and moving between the restaurant, our home, and the hospital—even as mom's condition weakened.

There was no sign of salvation—no rest to be found at some point where I would be able to put down my responsibilities and work on high school things, like the rest of my classmates. I had no one to blame: not dad, not myself, and definitely not mom—but it was hard to be grateful as the early decision deadline came closer, and I was nowhere near to finishing even the first of my apps.

One day, dad asked if I would take a week off to work on my apps and do the homework that had piled up, while he handled the restaurant himself.

This lasted three days, as customers found themselves being served 15 minutes later than usual; on days that Eunho couldn't make, there was no one around to fill water cups or take orders, and dad couldn't run between the hall and the kitchen without overcooking or burning the food on a regular basis.

I was still no expert in bookkeeping, but I was quick to find out that it didn't simply consist of keeping track of the financial ins and outs, because our profit margin seemed to decrease by the day, until we were faced with a deficit, given rent, cost of ingredients, utilities, and all the seemingly minor costs that added up to the fact that we could not hire another worker, and moreover, that we were officially in debt.

Dad and I struggled on, knowing that the little money we made kept Logan and Yoon in school, and more importantly, it kept mom alive.

The state forgave many of the costs of mom's chemotherapy, but I wasn't able to go through each of the endless insurance forms, and secure the fee forgiveness that we needed.

Christmas came and went. We spent New Year's at mom's bedside.

It was mid-February when I gave up the idea of college. I had missed most of my deadlines, and I knew that there was no way that I could leave dad to take care of everything and just go to school.

Mom and dad urged me strongly to leave things to them, and go to any college that accepted me. It was only when I admitted that I had been lax in my college apps, and that I didn't complete many of them, that they agreed to a gap year.

I soon found myself at community college taking Accounting 101 a few weeks after a high school graduation where high school students were celebrated for their accomplishments—high GPA's, captaining sports teams, Science Olympiads, scholarships to top schools, publications, and everything else that marked a successful high school student.

But with the summer came freedom, and I rested on hope: hope that I could keep our family business afloat with my new accounting skills, hope that my experiences this past and current year would make for a stronger personal statement—hope that life will be normal when mom gets better.