

Hannah

“Shh, sweet girl. You sleep.” Sherry pressed her face against the crown of Hannah’s head and kissed her. She inhaled, smelling her daughter, breathing her in. Burning tears pricked the corners of Sherry’s eyes. “The doctor will be in soon. Rest.”

Sherry hummed a lullaby, caressing a lock of one of Hannah’s pigtails and sat back in the chair, watching her daughter sleep, motionless, in the hospital bed.

Hannah looked so pale.

“Like a porcelain doll,” Sherry had posted to Facebook two days before.

She straightened the blankets around Hannah, avoiding the tangle of tubes taped to her daughter’s arms and chest.

Her phone chimed and she snatched it from the bedside table, bumping the silver vase next to it. The vase tottered, but Sherry caught it before it toppled to the floor. Her heart thrummed in her ears and she glanced at Hannah.

Still asleep.

She replaced the vase without making a sound, running her finger along the inscribed message before checking her phone.

“Already over a hundred likes on the picture we posted this morning, baby.” Sherry kept her voice low. Hannah didn’t stir.

Sherry stroked Hannah’s leg as she scrolled through the comments.

“I have a three-year-old, too,” a man wrote, commenting on a photo Sherry had posted of a bird flying toward a rising sun, with the caption: *This too shall pass*. . . “I can’t imagine what you’re going through. Sending love and prayers.”

Sherry tapped “Like” on a comment posted to a selfie she took that morning, wrapped in a blanket, staring, bluerie-eyed at the foot of her daughter’s hospital bed, captioned: *Though I’m surrounded by a sea of doctors, nurses and patients... I’ve never felt so alone.*

The comment was, “Sherry, I know what you’re going through. My daughter has cancer and I often feel hopeless and alone. But you’re NOT alone. Keep reaching out! Keep sharing your story!” The woman had also sent Sherry a personal message with her phone number and an invitation to call any time.

“You’re such a strong mommy!” Another woman wrote beneath the close-up picture of Hannah’s braid, captioned: *Makeover at the hospital.* “I’ve been following you since Hannah’s first battle with the flu. I just can’t convey the. . .”

Sherry looked up at the brown-tinged ceiling fighting a new onslaught of tears that threatened and shook her head.

“People are so kind, Hannah,” Sherry whispered. “These people have never even met you.” Her gaze dropped to Hannah’s tiny form, outlined beneath the thin hospital blanket.

“But,” she cleared her throat. “But they all love you, baby. Everybody loves you.”

Sherry’s eyes shifted to the closed door of Hannah’s hospital room.

Except for your despicable excuse for a father, Sherry thought.

Her mind drifted to the first time Hannah got sick.

“It’s a cold,” Daniel had kept saying. “I’m sure she’ll be fine. Just give her some Tylenol.”

Sherry had lain on the floor of her daughter’s room all night, checking to see if her fever had gone down, listening to Hannah’s quick short breaths and thick wet, hacking coughs.

“We’re going to the hospital, Daniel.” Sherry had wrapped Hannah in a blanket, her daughter coughing, struggling to breathe. “It’s 4 am. She’s not getting better.”

“Fine.” Daniel had heaved himself out of bed and followed them to the car.

Sherry’s phone chimed again, bringing her back to the present, wincing at a sudden pain in her lip. She dabbed it with her fingertip and winced again, pulling the self-facing camera up on her phone. Three red lines formed a moon shape around her bottom lip. She tucked it under her top teeth, the lines on her lip aligning with her front teeth.

Sherry stood and paced the stone floor tapping her phone against the palm of her hand. She bit her lip again, feeling the pain but biting harder. She opened Facebook again, scrolling through the comments.

A new comment had been posted to a picture of Hannah taken two weeks before she’d gotten the flu that first time.

The photo captured Hannah, autumn sunlight reflecting off her golden curls, and her face turned up to the camera with an open-mouthed grin. Her two front teeth jugged forward.

“Mommy, watch me fly in the sky.” Hannah’s voice rang in Sherry’s mind as she thought back to that day in the park, watching Hannah run with childish abandon, her arms flung out wide.

“Oh no, Mommy! I’m crashing!” Hannah screamed and spun in a circle, then threw herself backward onto the grass.

“Oh no, my love!” Sherry had run to her and crouched. Hannah’s eyes were closed though giggles bubbled from her lips.

“Whatever shall I do?” She’d pressed the back of her hand against her forehead and threw her head back. “How will I go on without my Hannah?” She’d pretended to sob into the back of her hand.

Hannah sat up and pulled her mother’s arm away from her face, her bright blue eyes piercing Sherry’s heart. She’d cupped her chubby little hand around Sherry’s cheek and said, “Mommy, I died. But I came back for you.”

Then she’d smiled. Her mouth open, exposing those two bucked teeth. Her cheeks full and her eyebrows raised.

Sherry had never seen anything more beautiful. She’d yanked her phone from her back pocket and snapped a picture before the moment faded.

“Doesn’t look sick to me,” the comment read. “Bet she isn’t sick at all. Bet you’re one of those bitches pretending your kid is sick just to get attention. Where’s your GoFundMe page?”

Sherry felt something drip down her chin as she read the comment a third time. Red droplets splattered the phone’s screen.

She read the comment again.

“Asshole!” She flung the phone away, hearing it skitter across the floor under the bed. She got up, heading to the door. “Where’s the goddamned doct—”

Sherry’s hip slammed into the end of hospital bed. Her gaze snapped to her daughter. Hannah’s head rolled to the side, but she didn’t wake up.

Sherry tiptoed to Hannah’s side and checked the tubing.

All still connected.

She scanned the monitors. She had no idea what any of them did, but none of the alarms were sounding.

Sherry recalled that first night in the ER. The monitors wouldn't stop alarming. Every time a doctor or nurse walked out of the room, another alarm would go off.

"Just a cold, Daniel?" Sherry's eyes had burned into Daniel's from across the room after the fifth alarm. Doctors and nurses rushed into the room. "Just a goddamned cold?!"

He didn't answer. He'd just turned away and watched the doctors work on Hannah, his fingers stuffed into his mouth, sobbing like a fucking child.

"And why didn't she get a flu shot?" She had screamed at the coward, charging toward him. "Why, Daniel?!"

She'd felt someone grab her arm.

"Because YOU'VE never gotten the flu. Right, Daniel?" Sherry resisted when a nurse tried to pull her back. "She don't need no stinking flu shot! Right, Daniel?!"

Another set of arms had wrapped around her middle and pulled her into the hall.

"No, wait." Sherry's eyes had darted around the hall and back into the noisy hospital room. "Let go!" The doctors and nurses standing around Hannah blocked Sherry's view of her. "Hannah needs me!" She'd twisted toward Daniel. "Daniel, tell them!"

He'd said nothing.

A doctor or nurse had closed the door, then. Barricading Sherry from her baby.

Daniel had almost killed Hannah.

But *Daniel*. Had. Left. Her.

Just walked out on his wife and daughter.

"This isn't my fault, Sherry," he'd said the day he abandoned them, a few weeks after they came home from the hospital. "I hate that she got sick. It kills me."

Sherry had sat with her back to him, bent over Hannah's bed, straightening the covers. There had been no improvement since bringing her home.

"But you're losing it, babe."

She'd felt his words ooze down her back like cold semen and shivered. She ran her finger over the inscription on the silver vase by Hannah's bed.

"All those people you're talking to online? You're just buried in that phone, Sherry. We need to talk about what we're gonna—"

She'd launched herself from the chair, spinning around toward him, her teeth gnashing into her bottom lip.

"I have to share her story! People need to vaccinate their children. Hannah would be okay right now if we'd vaccinated her." She'd stared into his face. His stupid, pathetic face. "If you'd have let me vaccinate her."

"Dammit, Sherry." He'd stepped into the room.

"And *those people*..." She'd moved between Daniel and Hannah's bed. "*Those people* love us."

"Sherry, I love you. Those people don't give a shit about you."

"No! I know what love is, Daniel! And *those people*, they love me. And they love Hannah."

Daniel's gaze had drifted to the foot of Hannah's bed, his eyebrows furrowed.

"Sherry..."

"Daniel, stop. If you can't support me..." She'd gestured to Hannah. "Support us."

Daniel's eyes had darted from Sherry to the bed and back again. "Then we don't want you in our lives."

“I can’t keep doing this, Sherry.” He’d rubbed his forehead, then turned and left the room. Left the house. Left them.

In the hospital room, Sherry kneeled to the floor and crawled under Hannah’s bed to retrieve her phone. Blood spurted from her bottom lip and dribbled onto her sleeve as she reached for the chiming lifeline. She unlocked the screen while she lay on the floor, and tears trickled down her cheeks as she read the comments from “those people” in retaliation to the filthy troll who had insulted her.

Insulted Hannah.

Comment after comment tore into him. Sherry clamped her hand over her mouth as a laugh rippled through her after reading: “Shut your stupid face, you fat fucking loser. I bet your mom wishes YOU would get sick and die so you’ll get the fuck out of her basement.”

Sherry clutched the phone to her chest and scooted out from under the bed. She climbed to her feet and checked Hannah. Still asleep. She glanced at the door and checked the time. The phone chimed again. Her breath caught when she saw that the troll had the nerve to comment again.

“Then where’s the pictures, huh? Where’s the sick kid? I only see pictures of this attention-seeking bitch, motivational posters, or pictures that ‘just so happen’ to not include the kid’s face? This shit is fake, dude. She just wants your attention and your money.”

Sherry typed: “I don’t even have a GoFundMe page, you mother fucker!” Punching each key with angry determination. She stared at the comment. Then deleted it.

“I won’t exploit pictures of my suffering daughter for your sick enjoyment, you grotesque maggot!”

She deleted that too.

She heard approaching footsteps in the hallway and stood.

I am going to demand medicine, she thought. Medicine to make her better. Medicine to keep her from suffering. I will make them listen this time.

The footsteps drew nearer.

This time wouldn't be like that first time Hannah had the flu. Sherry wouldn't be weak, trusting the doctors to care for Hannah. She would force them to heal her baby. She glanced over at her still child in the bed. So small.

"I'm not going anywhere this time, baby. Mommy's here."

That first time in the ER, after being removed from her daughter's room, she had thrown herself against the door.

Hannah had needed someone to be strong for her. That weak, coward, fuck of a father, hadn't known the right questions to ask. Which treatments to insist on.

Only her mother knew.

And they hadn't let her in.

"Hannah!" She had pounded and kicked against the door. "Let me see my baby!"

Sherry's eyes had fixed on the bald spot at the back of Daniel's head through the square window in the door. He wasn't asking any questions. He just stood there, his fingers shoved into his mouth.

"She can't breathe!" Sherry had spun to face the half-dozen the nurses who'd gathered around her.

A woman to her left had stepped forward. "Ma'am, we need you to calm—"

"Give her medicine! She needs medicine!" Sherry's hands had flown up to her head, gripping at her hair. "Why aren't you helping her?!"

Thick tangles of Sherry's hair swung from her balled fists, ripped free from her scalp. The alarms blared from her daughter's room, the doctors shouted orders, and she'd known Daniel was doing nothing.

"She needs me!"

No one had moved. No one had said anything.

"Please!"

She'd turned and flung her body back against the door.

"Hannah!"

No one had helped her. She'd been too weak. She didn't have the support.

But now, she had an army behind her. An army that would insist on the proper care for Hannah. They wouldn't fold their arms and comply, and neither would she.

The footsteps moved past her door and Sherry slumped to the chair and opened the message app.

Ten texts from Daniel.

Sherry narrowed her eyes. She hadn't heard from him since he'd left them. She'd blocked him on every social media platform. He didn't deserve to know what was happening with their daughter.

She opened the first message. It read:

"What the fuck is wrong with you?! You crazy fucking bitch! What the hell are you posting?"

She highlighted the rest of the messages from Daniel and deleted them. She looked over to Hannah, her eyes darted from the small figure on the bed to the vase on the table. She listened to the footsteps as they moved away.

“I’ll just have to give you my own medicine again, baby.” Sherry’s eyes poured over the little body in the bed, quiet and still.

“I know it makes you sleep. But at least you don’t cough.” Sherry stood and remembered Hannah’s hacking cough and labored breathing the doctors had refused to treat that first time they’d brought her to the ER.

But Sherry had found a medicine that worked.

“I’m a better doctor than they are,” she whispered as she approached the bedside table.

After they’d returned home from the hospital that first time, Hannah hadn’t coughed again.

Because of Sherry’s medicine.

But it made Hannah sleep.

Sherry had, of course, brought Hannah back to the hospital several times, but they’d refused to see her. Actually threatened to have her removed from the property!

But the doctors would *have* to see Hannah tonight. They’d have to acknowledge Sherry’s treatment. She wouldn’t let them ignore her.

She picked up the silver vase from the bedside table and ran her thumb across the inscription: *Hannah Marie Johnson*.

She’d snuck her daughter into the hospital basement and set Hannah up in one of the rooms.

After several searches, she’d gathered all the equipment that’d been in the room and remembered how Hannah had been hooked up to everything that first time. It all matched.

Now the doctors would come to her.

To help Hannah.

“We just have to wait.”

Until then, Sherry would give Hannah her own medicine.

She unscrewed the lid of the vase. Tufts of silt wafted into the air in hazy circles. Sherry inhaled the wispy drifts, knowing the medicine was good for her as well. She bent over the vase and peered inside. Gray soot filled the container.

Sherry pinched some between her forefinger and thumb and sprinkled the medicine onto Hannah’s head, and put the vase back on the table.

“Shh, baby girl. You sleep.” Sherry pressed her face against the crown of Hannah’s head and kissed her. She inhaled, smelling her daughter, breathing her in. Burning tears pricked the corners of her eyes.

Footsteps resounded in the hallway again, but Sherry was lost in her daughter. Her phone chimed but she let it fall to the floor as she climbed into the bed. She breathed Hannah in again.

The door opened and voices erupted from all around her.

She needed to be strong for Hannah and insist on medicine, but she could only press her face deeper, breathing her daughter in.

“Ma’am, get off the bed.”

Sherry clung to Hannah.

I won’t let go this time, she thought. I won’t leave you.

She felt hands grab her, but she buried her face in deeper, breathing Hannah in.

“Ma’am, let go.”

Mommy, I died.

“Let go of the doll, ma’am.”

But I came back to you.

Sherry heard someone bump the urn and the crash of metal as it fell to the floor.

“Hannah’s medicine!”

A roar ripped from Sherry’s throat and she flung herself around, rolling over whoever was trying to restrain her and dropped to the floor.

Hannah’s medicine had scattered across the bedside table and floor.

Sherry screeched and tore at her hair.

“She needs medicine!”

She threw herself onto the pile of soot on the floor, plunging her face into the ashes. She opened her mouth and sucked in a great gulping breath.