

The Worry Carrier

By Dudley

Kielee was barely seven years old when she began carrying things that no child should have to. She carried her younger cousins, Eric and Julia, on her hip when the adults were out in the field tending the garden. She carried grocery bags from the car when her mother's arms were too tired. She carried baskets of laundry that smacked her knees as she walked because "Mama needs some help today".

Most of all, she carried worry.

Kielee lived in a pink, three-bedroom house on two-acres with her mother, Shivon, her favorite aunt, Dana, and her two younger cousins. Eric was four and loved rockets. Julia was almost two and dared to follow Shivon anywhere... toddling after her like a little duck. Still, Shivon was everything to all of them.

Shivon worked hard, laughed as often as she could, and made sliced hot dogs in baked beans with rice seem like a gourmet meal. Every night, she put the kids to bed with a kiss and told them, "You are the best part of me." Kielee took her words to heart. She loved her mother with a fierce desperation... the kind that knows her mother will always be there.

Unfortunately, one day, things began to change.

At first, it was simple things. Shivon would oversleep and Kielee would have to make breakfast and get everyone ready. Even when she was awake, Shivon did not have the energy to do most of the chores and counted on Kielee to complete those tasks. When Kielee would ask if they could go outside and play kick ball, Shivon would smile sadly and say, "Maybe tomorrow, Honey." But, when tomorrow came, the answer was the same – maybe tomorrow.

Soon, Kielee began to notice that her mother wasn't laughing or smiling as much anymore. She noticed her skin was getting lighter, but the space under her eyes was getting darker. Then, she noticed that Shivon was coughing as often as she used to laugh. But, whenever Kielee asked what was wrong, her mother would caress her face and say, "It's nothing for you to worry about."

Aunt Vicki started visiting more to help cook and clean. Aunt Dana began coming home earlier to take care of Eric and Julia. The two uncles, Uncle Max and Uncle Nuri, began coming every week to mow the lawn, tend the garden, and help fix things around the house. Each of them told Kielee everything was fine to try to put her at ease.

Everything was *not* fine. By then, Shivon had confided in her daughter “You have to be my legs.” Just being happy to help her, Kielee assumed the responsibility without question.

One evening – on her way to get Shivon a damp cloth from the bathroom, Kielee heard voices carrying from the living room. “She shouldn’t know about any of this yet,” Uncle Max said mildly. “I agree. She is far too young,” muttered Aunt Vicki. “What if she asks?” Aunt Dana questioned. Uncle Nuri replied, “We’ll just tell her that her mom is tired. She’s only seven. She’ll be fine.” Kielee froze in her tracks to hear more because she knew they were talking about her and her mom. But, they stopped talking... almost like they knew she was there.

Kielee decided to go in anyway and pretend she was looking for a book. When she entered, everyone looked at her with the same plastered, sympathetic smile people use when they’re hiding something. Seeing that scared Kielee more than anything they could have said. She didn’t know what it was, but there was obviously something very wrong.

Weeks went by. Months passed. Without anyone saying anything - Kielee gradually became her mother’s primary care giver. She cooked, then brought Shivon food and fetched her water. She helped her bathe and get dressed. She brought her blankets if she was too cold. And she kept up with the time to make sure her mother took her medicine when she was supposed to. Even when Eric scraped his knee, Kielee was the one who found the bandages and kept him quiet so Shivon could sleep. Eventually, Aunt Dana, Eric, and Julia moved into their own place. But Kielee still took care of her cousins while her aunt was at work.

At the end of each day, Kielee would climb into Shivon’s bed before going to her own. She wanted to make sure she knew she was not alone. Finally, one night, Kielee got up the courage to ask, “Are you dying?” Astonished, Shivon lovingly looked at her daughter, but said nothing. The silence was deafening. Eventually, she whispered, “Yes.” “How soon?” Both of their eyes filled with tears. “The doctors aren’t sure, yet” she replied softly.

Kielee wanted to ask more questions because she still didn’t know what was happening to her mother. But something stopped her. Maybe she was as afraid of the answer as Shivon was to tell her. With that, she decided to just curl up next to her mother and listen to her heartbeat while she could still hear it. Somehow, it seemed slower. Yet, it was comforting.

As Christmas approached, Shivon became completely dependent on Kielee. She couldn’t cook at all anymore. She couldn’t even walk to the back of the house without stopping to rest. Not knowing when her mother would die, Kielee would wake up during the night to make sure she was still alive. Sometimes she would find Shivon sitting in the dark, gazing into the backyard.

One night, Kielee decided to ask her, “What are you looking at?” “Just the places where you and your cousins play,” she replied with a smile. “Why?” “Because, I know you’ll be there again, even

if I can't see you." "Oh, ok," Kielee assured her. But she still had no idea what her mom was talking about.

By spring, Kielee had turned eight. She noticed her aunts and uncles were showing up more often to take her mom to the hospital. They continued to do what they'd always done around the house, including speaking with hushed voices in the living room. Since they did not stay as long as they did before, Kielee found herself learning how to do more to take care of everyone. She played soccer with Eric and helped him tie his shoes. She put on sock puppet shows for Julia and taught herself how to make the best grilled peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the world.

While the adults consistently praised Kielee for her efforts, she did not want to hear them because she felt they were not sincere. She knew they were just saying what they thought she wanted to hear when she only wanted to hear the truth about her mom.

One day, Kielee finally got Aunt Dana alone in the garden and confided, "I know Mom is sick. What's wrong with her?" Aunt Dana gave her a kiss on the forehead and a long hug. Believing she was about to hear the truth at last, Kielee looked up at her with a smile of relief. Instead, Aunt Dana stroked her hair and said, "We're just going to take things one day at a time and see what happens." Frustrated, Kielee retorted, "That's *not* an answer! Why won't you tell me the truth? Why won't *anyone* tell me what is happening to **my mother**? I'm *not* a baby!" and ran back into the house.

As summer ended, Shivon's health continued to fade. She was so skinny that her clothes looked like garbage bags when she put them on. One warm night, Kielee heard crying in her mother's room. She tipped over to find it was actually Uncle Max shedding tears. "How is this possible? Grown men don't cry, just babies," she concluded. Still, she stood there to listen but couldn't understand his blubbering. So, she just quietly went back to her room.

Knowing that something must have gone terribly wrong, the next morning, Kielee laid her head on Shivon's chest and asked, "Do you know when you will die, now?" "Yes, Honey.... The cancer has spread and I only have a few weeks left." Those words hit Kielee like a frozen dagger in the heart. Shaking her head in disbelief, she began to slowly back away from her mother. But Shivon mustered the strength to grab her daughter and hold on for dear life. "I am so sorry... I wish I didn't have to say that to you." Kielee held on tight and began to wail. "I wish I could stay with you forever," Shivon assured. "Since I can't, we've got a lot of work to do."

The following weeks became precious to everyone. Kielee's aunts and uncles took turns coming over through the week, and everyone was there on Sundays. Shivon spent her waking hours composing letters for future milestones, recording stories from her childhood, and trying to look her best to take as many pictures as she could. It was almost like she was back to her old self again. Kielee started to believe that maybe everyone was wrong and her mom would be fine.

Two weeks after school started, Shivon passed away. Kielee was beyond devastated... and angry. Distant relatives brought food and flowers. Random people that she'd never seen before came by with more food and well wishes. Kielee could barely tolerate it. "Where were all of these people when my mother was alive and needed help?" she pondered in contempt. She wanted to hear nothing from any of them. They were not her mother.

Aunt Dana, Eric, and Julia moved back in to take care of Kielee because that was easier for everyone. But Kielee was not in the mood to be around them. Mostly, she sat alone in her mother's bedroom gazing out of the window. She began to imagine she was out there with her mom, playing like they used to before Aunt Dana came to live with them.

One day while in Shivon's room, Kielee had a frightening thought. "Who is going to help my mom while she's in Heaven?" She continued, "What if she's too tired to walk? What if she can't even stand up? What if she needs something to eat or drink? What is she going to do without *me*?"

The next morning, Kielee sprang out of bed to get dressed for school. She didn't even care that Aunt Dana made smiley face pancakes. She just wanted to get to the bus stop. But Aunt Dana wouldn't let her leave without breakfast. So, she wolfed them down, bear-hugged everyone, and exclaimed, "I love you guys!" as she bolted out of the door.

Kielee got to her bus stop, greeting all of her friends with the biggest smile she'd ever had. In her mind, she knew, "Today is a good day." She ran around playing with her friends until they saw the bus coming. As they lined up to get ready to board, Kielee slowly faded back - letting everyone else get in front of her. After the bus stopped and the doors opened, she ran around the back of the bus, and up the driver's side to the front so she wouldn't be noticed. When the doors closed and the engine whirred, she stretched out her arms and thought, "I'm coming, Mama!"