

In the Moment

By Anna Shaffer

The water relaxed Natalie's tense shoulders and cleared her buzzing mind. She sighed as the it splashed on her face. She wanted to stay there forever. Turning off the shower, she grabbed her towel and headed towards her room. She slipped on the dress that fell above her knees and clung lightly to her curves. She smiled at her reflection and went into the bathroom to finish getting ready.

She pulled out her expensive makeup, the kind that she rarely used, and wasn't timid in using more than she ordinarily would. She wanted to look perfect.

•

The doorbell rang as she grabbed her jacket. She rushed over to find Andrew in a navy sweater and khakis grinning at her. He brushed his curly brown hair away from his dark brown eyes.

"You look beautiful tonight," he said, taking her hand as he led her to his red Volkswagen.

"Thank you."

Blood rushed to her cheeks as she slid into the car and waited to start the night. As they pulled away, she wondered what would happen tonight. Would it turn out the way she hoped? Her palms began to sweat and she wiped them on her dress.

She smiled when Andrew rested his hand on the armrest and held her hand. He gave her a quick glance and a small, reassuring smile.

•

Natalie opened the door to the nursing home and entered where she had been to so many times during the last year. She gently shook her head as her mind wandered back to the first days there.

"Glad to see you again," the receptionist said smiling. "Are you here for your mother?"

"Yes."

"She'll be happy to see you."

Nathalie welled up with guilt; it had been weeks since she had last visited. Work had been hectic lately and she never had a night off.

"Thanks."

Natalie felt Andrew squeeze her hand and, even though her insides were racked with nerves, she blushed and looked away. They walked down the narrow hallway until they reached an open door. Sitting in a small room was a woman with gray hair rocking in her chair and staring at a TV. Natalie approached the woman and knelt down in front of her, gesturing for Andrew to do the same.

“Mom?” she whispered, unable to make her voice louder.

Her hands began to sweat. Her mother looked thinner and more distant than the last time Natalie had seen her. ‘Where had these last weeks gone?’ she thought to herself, gently laying her hand on top of her mother’s.

“Mother? It’s Natalie,”

Her mother continued to look blankly through her. Natalie looked at Andrew desperately.

“You’re doing well, Nat. Keep talking to her.”

Natalie looked back at her mother and sighed.

“It’s Natalie. Don’t you remember me? I’m your....”

Tears started to well up in Natalie’s eyes as she remembered a day that had stayed with her since she was little.

Natalie came home from school with a grin. She got off of the bus and waved at the bus driver, and then at her mother who was standing on the driveway. Natalie ran into her mother’s open arms.

“How was your day, sweetie?”

Natalie let go of her mother and grabbed her hand as they walked back to the house.

“It was good. A boy pushed me down the slide, though. Look at my chin.” Natalie pointed at her band-aid which covered a bruise from her fall. Her mother shook her head and tapped Natalie’s nose.

“Well, we can’t have that, can we?”

“It hurt! Mommy, why do boys do that?”

Her mother stopped and smiled at her bright-eyed daughter.

“They do that when they like you, sweetie.”

Natalie’s grin grew as her mother pulled on her hand to keep walking.

“Hey, mommy?”

“Yes, sweetie?”

“Will you be at my wedding?”

Her mother laughed.

“Of course I will be! Why would I miss it?” Natalie hugged her mother’s arm as they walked back to the house.

“I don’t know. Just wanted to make sure.”

Tears rolled down Natalie’s cheeks as she gently squeezed her mother’s thin, pallid hand.

Her mother smiled.

“That’s right. It’s me. I wanted to check in on you. I’m sorry that I haven’t been around lately. Work has been very hectic. I’ll try to work on it, okay? I’ll try to be here more.”

The hope Natalie had felt vanished like thin air after several of seconds of silence. She rubbed her mother’s hand as if in doing so Nathalie could transfer some life from her to her mother.

“Mom, I want you to come to my wedding. Do you remember Andrew? He proposed to me at that tiny Italian restaurant you used to take me to when I was a kid....on my birthday,” Natalie started to choke up, “I want you there at the wedding, Mom. Remember when I was a kid and you told me never to give up when I got sick? Don’t give up mom, please.”

More tears rolled down Natalie’s cheek as she recalled how her mother was always there for her. She stood and gave her mother a hug. Her mother was stiff, but her arms slowly wrapped around Natalie. Natalie kissed her mother on her cheek.

“I love you, mom. And always will.”

Natalie knelt and held her mother’s hand. She froze in her position, watching her mother silently suffer. It was pained her to watch her mother like this, unable to help her. She saw a sparkle in her mother’s eyes, and knew she was in there somewhere, desperately trying break out of her prison.

“Keep fighting, Mom.”

Natalie stood and Andrew kissed Natalie’s mother on the head.

“I hope to see you there, Mom,” Andrew said.

Before Natalie left, she turned around to face her mother one more time.

“I really want you there. Please don’t give up.”

•

Natalie walked down the aisle as the music began to play, filling the church with life. People stood and smiled as she walked past them in her long white dress that trailed along the floor. She took her time walking up; the importance of this day was sinking in. Her palms were slick with sweat. When her eyes met Andrew’s, she smiled.

The priest directed them to exchange vows and kiss. The kiss was sweet; filled with passion and love. When the kiss broke, music sounded. Natalie looked out into the crowd that filled the church, knowing that one spot was empty. She looked to her father who smiled back. Her eyes traveled to the empty seat next to him.

Refusing to let the moment ruin her wedding, she walked down the aisle with her new husband and smiled at her family and friends.

•

At the reception, Natalie and Andrew greeted their guests that had attended their wedding. They were whispering as one of Natalie's relatives gave a sheepish smile.

"I'm sorry to interrupt."

"Don't worry about it, Emily. We weren't talking about anything important."

Emily's shoulders relaxed.

"Oh, good. I just wanted to offer congratulations on the wedding. It was a beautiful ceremony."

Natalie and Andrew grinned at each other.

"We're glad you enjoyed it." Natalie was very stressed. She thought it would be too long."

"Oh, no. It was perfect."

Natalie looked at the table and gave Andrew's hand a sharp squeeze.

"It was almost perfect," she stuttered.

Emily's eyebrows knitted together and she looked around the room.

"Oh, my condolences. I'm sorry about your mother, Natalie. She would've loved to see this."

A small tear rolled down Natalie's face.

"I know. She would've."

Emily hugged Natalie tightly and left, and then left, leaving the newly wed couple alone. Natalie looked up to the skies above, knowing her mother was watching. I love you, mom.