

Change In Management

Why was studying so hard?

One minute she was sitting down, notes in front of her with her mind ready to absorb all that knowledge. The next, she was messaging her friends or googling random things or watching videos of cute puppies and kittens.

Why was it so damned difficult for her to focus?

Wasn't like she was studying to get into university or anything, wasn't like her entire future depended on being accepted. No, looking at memes and screwing around with her friends was *totally* more important.

Sighing, Louise planted her face in her hands, fought down the urge to scream.

Why couldn't she be like her mother?

She tried for another hour before throwing in the towel, giving up on studying for the day. If her brain didn't want to work with her, there was nothing she could do. Maybe tomorrow she'd find the energy to get on with it.

When Jennifer, Louise's mother, arrived home that evening to find her daughter lounging and watching television, she tutted softly. Louise looked over at her, pushed down the guilt, smiled.

"Shouldn't you be studying right now?" Jennifer asked, eyeing her daughter dubiously.

"I finished," Louise lied. "All done for the day."

Jennifer crossed her arms over her chest, lips pursed and eyes narrowed. Before she could challenge the lie, Louise spoke again.

"How was work?"

All in all, not the best way to distract her scowling mother. But, given that Jennifer was a career woman, a workaholic married to her job, it was the best Louise could come up with on the spot.

Thankfully, though, it was enough.

While not fading completely, the scowl on Jennifer's face loosened. She walked over to the sofa Louise was sprawled on, took a seat next to her daughter.

"Not great," her mother sighed, slouching on the sofa. "The company is changing hands and downsizing. A lot of people are about to lose their jobs. I might be one of them."

"Not a chance," Louise smirked. "They'd have to be idiots to fire you."

A tiny smile pulled at her mother's lips.

Both of them knew how dedicated Jennifer was to her job, how committed she was. Likely, she was the hardest worker the company had. And she was unquestionably the most talented.

"Perhaps," Jennifer smiled. "Time will tell. And don't think I've forgotten about you skipping studying again. If you want to get into a good university, you can't slack off like-"

"I know, I know," Louise groaned. "No more lectures. Please. I know. I'll get it done, I promise. I just work a little slower than everyone else, that's all."

"Uh-huh," Jennifer rolled her eyes, unconvinced. "Wif you say so."

"Guess who still has a job!"

"The tooth fairy?" Louise asked, looking up from the notes on her lap. "Santa? Snow White and the Seven-"

"Me!" Jennifer half-shouted, ignoring her daughter. "Two thirds of the office gone, but not me."

"That's great, Mom," Louise said, eyes dropping back down to her notes, really not surprised in the slightest. "Told you you'd be fine."

"It's not perfect," Jennifer continued, "new management is restoring some old dress-code rules. Stupid stuff like women having to wear heels and skirts. And I won't have my

old position any more. I've been assigned as a personal secretary instead."

"Wait," Louise said, sure she'd misheard. "You've been *given* a secretary?"

"No," Jennifer sighed, she slumped a little, some of her energy evaporating. "They've demoted me. I'm going to be the personal assistant and secretary to one Mr Ross."

"That's not fair!" Louise shot up, notes scattering across the floor. "How can they just-"

"It's not," her mother smiled softly. "But it is what it is. I worked my way up from the bottom once, I can do it again. Sometime fate kicks you down, but you can always get back up. Getting upset and complaining about how unfair everything is will get you nowhere. You have to *act*, flow with the punches, keep moving forward. Don't worry, hun. I'll be back at the top before you know it!"

Ever since her demotion, Louise's mother had been coming home drained and exhausted. Back before, she'd always been tired, sure. But not like this. Back then, she'd always been able to smile and laugh. Nowadays, she looked like she could barely stand up straight.

So Louise had gotten into the habit of waiting for her mother to get home. Helping to bring a smile to her mother's face as she came through the door was the least she could do.

She stood there tonight with a small stack of university application forms in her arms. All filled in and ready to be sent out.

In her mind, Louise pictured her mother's pride. She imagined the questions her mother would ask, the answers she'd give. She'd distract her mother from thoughts of work, reinvigorate the woman and help her beat back the stresses.

Soon enough, Jennifer would earn back her old job. How could she not? She'd be at the top of the world again.

And, until then, Louise would be there to greet her every day.

A small gesture of solidarity.

When her mother arrived home that evening, though, Louise instantly knew that something was very wrong.

Her mother stepped into the house in a daze, eyes unfocussed. Her right cheek was bright red. She didn't seem to notice Louise standing right in front of her as she ambled into the house, shoulders sagging.

"Mom?" Louise said, voice catching as her role-model's gaze slowly turned to her – focussing for the first time.

The sorrow in that gaze, the betrayal, broke Louise's heart.

"Mom? Are you okay?" She asked softly. "What's happened?"

"I..." Jennifer said, voice low and tired. "I made a mistake. I talked back to Mr Ross. I was snarky and rude and..."

Her hand lifted to her red cheek.

"I didn't think he'd actually..."

"He *hit* you?" Louise gasped. "Mom! He can't do that! Report him to HR, get his ass fired! He can't just go around slapping-"

"No," Jennifer said, a hint of firmness entering her voice. "I won't take this to HR. Not with the current climate in the company. They're more likely to get rid of me than him. No, I'll deal with this. I'll fix it and make it right."

"Mom, he hit you."

"I'm well aware, Louise. I was there. And I'll take care of it."

Louise opened her mouth to say more, saw the heat and strength in her mother's eyes. No words made it past her lips.

"I promise," Jennifer said in a whisper. Then she spoke in a louder, more confident voice. "What've you got there then? Did you finally fill in some applications? Well, what're

you waiting for! Where are you applying to?"

"I think," Jennifer said, looking Louise in the eye, "it might be a good idea if you hold off on university for a while."

Louise's eyes shot wide open.

"Not forever!" Jennifer said quickly. "You're definitely going to uni, that's not up for debate. I just think it might be wise for you to get some real-world experience before you do."

"What do you mean?" This was so weird. For months, years even, her mother had been encouraging her to study and complete her education. What was with this total flip in mindset?

"The world is a different place now than it was when I grew up," Jennifer sighed. "Back when I was your age, a solid education was the key to success. Places would only consider hiring you if you had decent qualifications. Nowadays, you can have all the diplomas and doctorates in the world, literally have qualifications up the wazoo, and it makes no difference. Employers these days only care about actual, tangible workplace experience."

"Okay..." Louise said, listening uncertainly.

"If you want to get ahead in life," her mother continued, "you need to have some official workplace experience under your belt. You'll need qualifications too, don't get me wrong. But it's the experience that'll land you with a nice job down the line. So, I think it'd be a good idea for you to come work with me, hun."

"Hold up," Louise said, eyeing her mother sceptically. "You want *me* to come work with you in the misogynistic hell-hole that's been slowly crushing your spirit over the last few months?"

"You make it sound worse than it actually is," her mother frowned. "It's fine when you get used to it. Nice even, in an old-fashioned kind of way."

"I dunno, Mom," Louise shrugged. "Why would I want to work there? I don't even think *you* should be working there. The way they treat you..."

"It's not that bad," Jennifer smiled. "Trust me. All I want is for you to be happy, Louise. For you to have the best start in life possible. Give it a shot. If you don't like it, you don't have to go back. That's fair, isn't it?"

Louise face-planted her bed, her body and mind throbbing.

Her first day as an intern at her mother's company had flown by in a blur. One moment, she'd been walking in the building wearing high-heels and a pencil skirt, the next she'd been sitting in the passenger seat of her mother's car – heading home at the end of the day.

Try as she might, she couldn't remember any specifics about the day. She could picture a water-cooler. When she tried really hard to remember, she could just about see the wide face of Mr Ross smiling down at her, his lips moving slowly. But everything else was a hazy, blurry fog.

She couldn't move her body, couldn't muster up the energy to undress herself. So she just lay there, face pressed to her pillow.

Tomorrow, she'd be expected to go back there.

Her internship was set to last six months, at which point she may – or may not – be offered a full-time position.

Not that she'd accept.

As soon as her internship was concluded, Louise would be returning to school – going to university to get her qualifications.

But... She *could* keep going with the internship.

If she wanted to, she could quit and never go back. But that'd make her mother look

bad, wouldn't it? It might even harm Jennifer's chances of being promoted out of her role as a personal assistant.

Louise couldn't quit. Not when it was her mother's job she risked harming.

Sighing, she closed her eyes. Welcomed the sweet oblivion that was sleep. If every day was going to be like this, a hazy blur in which she couldn't remember anything specific, the next six months should be easy enough.

Just as long as no-one slapped her.

"I've decided," Louise said, hands on her belly-bump. "I'm going to stay. They've offered me a full-time job. Assistant Secretary to Mr Ross. I'm going to take it."

As predicted, Jennifer grinned happily, clapped her hands together.

"That's *excellent*, honey!"

"What the point of going to university if I've already got a job lined up for me, right?" Louise smiled.

"I'm so proud of you!" Jennifer told her daughter, tears forming in her eyes. "I knew you'd make the right choice!"

"Mm'hm," Louise hummed, eyes lowering to her mother's protruding tummy. Pregnant, just like Louise herself was. They were set to give birth the very same week. What were the odds? "Besides, it'd be kinda irresponsible to go off to university and leave you to have to take care of the little ones yourself. This way, we'll have two sets of income."

Her mother stepped forward, arms outstretched with tears running down her cheeks.

Louise accepted the embrace wordlessly, wrapped her arms around her mother and held her close. Her idol since childhood, the woman she'd looked up to and emulated her whole life. And now here she was, living her mother's life and loving every moment of it.

In a few months, when they gave birth, things would be difficult. No doubt about that. But they'd get through it. Together.

"Come on," Jennifer told her daughter after their embrace ended. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, unable to stop herself from smiling. "Time to get to work. Don't want to keep Mr Ross waiting now, do we?"