

Here is what you do when your daughter becomes addicted to a graphic, disturbing, immortality-promising video game:

1: Take it away. (This will end in tears and a broken monitor.)

2: Tell someone. (Useless. Where you see paranoia and cult-like obsession, they see typical teenage anxiety.)

3: Nothing. (This will end in the game taking over your house, destroying your relationships, and poisoning your daughter's mind.)

If only these options were effective. If only we had chosen transparency over secrecy. Maybe then our daughters would still be alive, safe like swaddled newborns, undoubtedly and completely ours.

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This is how it began. My daughter had never seen death before. This was my fault, of course. When she was very young, I hid it from her, concealing creatures caught in traps or replacing pets that suddenly died. Once, at the age of nine, she walked in on me slaughtering a pig in the barn. Within seconds, Sarah was crying and running to the house, little feet trampling my flower beds.

The guilt was immediate. The pig had been her friend. Ever since watching *Babe*, she'd been training him for shows. I could do nothing but comfort her.

"I'm sorry about today," I said that night, stroking her head.

"It's fine." She sniffled. "What's gonna happen to him now? Where is he?"

I hesitated. "Gone."

"Where?"

"I'm not sure. What I do know is that it's up to us to remember things that die. That way their spirit lives on."

"I'll remember him forever," she whispered, leaning into my arms.

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I'll never forget the day I told Sarah I was dying. We were sitting at the kitchen table when I decided then was the best time to say something. I'd known for three days. Three days for the doctor's words to settle in my mind.

"I need to tell you something."

"Yeah?"

"I'm... unwell."

"You're sick?"

I sighed, deciding to rip the bandaid off. "I have pancreatic cancer. Stage two." I expected her to cry, break down, maybe even scream. Instead, her face remained as emotionless as before.

"How long do you have?"

“There are treatments. Everything will be ok,” I said, despite the statistics having already been laid out before me.

“*How long?*”

“Up to five years without intervention.”

She sucked in a breath. “I’d be twenty.”

We stared at each other for several long moments. “I feel fine,” I finally said. “Heck, I thought I had a *cold*. I’m not going to die. I’m not. You aren’t worried, are you?”

“Of course not. I have homework, okay?”

“Okay,” I whispered, keeping my voice steady. Only when she left did I begin to cry.

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The game came to our house shortly after. At first, I was relieved, thinking Sarah had finally found a healthy outlet. I bought her a headset, paid the game’s fifty-dollar fee, and gratefully accepted the kisses she offered in return. Life was great. But Sarah quickly began to change. First, it was her chores; dishes stacked haphazardly in the sink, laundry soured in the wash. Then, she stopped spending time with me, interacting with her friends, and leaving her room at all. I drew the line when she fell behind in school.

“Sarah, I think you’ve grown a little too attached to this game,” I said as she came out of the bathroom.

“It’s not *just* a game, Mom.”

“What is it then?”

She looked down.

“Exactly. This needs to stop. You haven’t been acting like yourself.”

She didn’t stop though. I was forced to become the patient mom: soft words gently coaxing her to dinner. The lenient mom: bribes of cash producing completed homework assignments. The angry mom: fists banging on a locked door, half baked threats flying from an irate mouth. By then the game had taken over her room and the adjacent hallway. Long black tendrils manifested from her door, wedging through the cracks, keeping it firmly shut.

Finally, I pleaded.

“Sarah? Honey, can you hear me?” I asked, ear pressed against the door.

A moment passed. “What do you want?”

“I just want to talk to you. Can you come out?”

“I’m playing.”

“You’ve played for long enough,” I said, futilely twisting the doorknob. The tendrils tightened in warning. “Listen, I need to see you. Even for a little bit. I don’t have much time.”

She sighed. “Alright, alright. Just give me a minute. I have to finish this round.”

“Thank you. I love you, sweetheart.”

“I love you too, Mom.”

In the following hours, I waited for the telltale signs of her leaving her room. When they didn’t come, I felt ashamed, first at her and then at myself.

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A nightmare destroyed me a few weeks later. I saw: cancerous weeds infecting my body, killing me, myself being buried, myself being exhumed, Sarah being buried, Sarah being exhumed, Sarah as a child, as an adult, as she is now, me opening Sarah’s door only to find her missing, the tendrils having taken over everything, all dark and disgusting and dead. Finally, I saw the pig I slaughtered many years earlier (except its eyes belonged to Sarah) and I felt myself raising the ax—high, high, high—ready to strike. Then, I woke up.

In the cold sweat of an uncured dream, I knew what I had to do. I wouldn’t fail her again. Carefully, I rose from bed and slipped on my house shoes. Tiptoed down the stairs to the living room. Gingerly sat before the computer. I typed in the website, paid the fifty-dollar fee, and created a password. As I logged in, I felt it. Transformation. Myself as a greater version of myself. My daughter as a greater version of my daughter. I remembered what she once whispered through the door, stubbornly separated by those damn tendrils.

“It’s just like you said, Mom. Death. Life. Remembrance. All of it. The game scatters pieces of you throughout everything; people’s memories, records, even nature. That way you never die. True immortality.”