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Review of “My Sister’s Keeper”

INTRODUCTION

For my Honors Contract, I will be writing a detailed film synopsis of the movie “My Sister’s Keeper”, directed by Nick Cassavetes. This film tells the story of a young teenage girl, Anna Fitzgerald, who was born for the sole reason of being a genetic match to save her dying, older sister – Kate Fitzgerald. The inspiration for this movie is based on a true story about the Nash family - Molly Nash (Kate Fitzgerald) was born with a genetic disorder called Fanconi anemia or FA which according to PubMed is characterized by bone marrow failure, acute promyelocytic leukemia, solid tumors, and developmental abnormalities (Green, Kupfer). As this is a rare condition, the Nash’s were forced to decide how to move forward and inevitably choose to genetically engineer a baby in an effort to save their child – and there was born Adam Nash (Anna Fitzgerald).

This synopsis will walk through the storyline of the movie, as well as my personal opinions on various ethical matters, the progression of character development, themes, and how this film impacted me emotionally. This film is critical to watch within the Radiation Oncology community as we see not only the medical procedures but also the family dynamics surrounding a cancer diagnosis. Overall, watching this movie and writing an informed review will allow me to be a better radiation therapist as I am able to reflect on the moral and emotional situations a

cancer patient goes through. And in doing this, allows me to have a better grasp and further understanding on how to give care to the best of my ability.

PLOT/STORYLINE

The opening line of the movie states, “When I was a kid, my mother told me that I was a little piece of blue sky that came into this world because she and Dad loved me so much. It was only later that I realized that wasn’t exactly true. Most babies are coincidences...They’re accidents. I, on the other hand, am not a coincidence. I was engineered. Born for a particular reason, [I was made] to save my sister’s life.” These moving words stood out to me. I held onto them throughout the movie as Anna explained her understanding of her role from birth. She knew she was created to save her sister’s life and that her life would be spent sacrificing not only her organs and tissues but her life – not being able to do all that she wants. Anna further details the family dynamic so far in her life. Initially, the family involving Anna, Jesse, Kate and their parents are illustrated as happy. The family eats dinner together, making jokes, playing with bubbles, jumping on a trampoline, gardening, laughing – everyone is happy, everything is perfect. Except for one thing, Kate is dying. Beneath the illustration of this family’s happiness, each family member knows how fragile their time is and that at any second their whole world could come crashing down and it did. Starting the movie out this way sets the stage for the entire story, foreshadowing a very emotional battle that the family goes through when having a child who is dying.

The first main storyline speaks of Kate and her illness - at the age of 13 years old, her health worsens, and she goes into renal failure. For Kate to live, Anna knows that she is going to be looked at to donate her kidney as she has been spare parts for her whole life. The second main

storyline is how Anna goes to a lawyer to sue her parents for medical emancipation for the rights to her own body. Throughout the film, there are other subplots that are intertwined that allow us to get an additional depth to other characters and relationship developments. One subplot that was noticeable was that Kate met and fell in love with a boy whom she had met during her chemotherapy infusions. She has a lot of her firsts with him; they go through hardships together, they attend prom, and he ends up passing away while they were dating. This subplot I believe is a very personal but an important part of the movie because you see the ups and downs Kate has in her life but there is also a message shown that “it is better to have loved and lost than to never have loved”, spoken by Arthur Henry Hallum (Roden). This can be a crucial thought process and an important mindset to have to fulfill your life especially with someone who goes through the daily challenges that Kate does.

Another important subplot included Alexander Campbell's, Anna's chosen lawyer, epilepsy condition within the court scene. While Anna had thought the trial had seemed like forever, there was a particular scene where the emotional tensions were at a high. Anna was on the stand when it was revealed by her brother that Kate wanted Anna to start this trial because she had wanted to die. At this time, Campbell's service dog was barking as this news was being unraveled. No one, in the courtroom nor the audience, had realized that the dog was for seizure alerts and was trying to notify Campbell he was about to experience one. Although being separate from the court case, this subplot really made the connection between Campbell and Anna more special because they both face the personal battle of not having control over your own body and their life. Anna couldn't make medical decisions and was forced by her parents to be a donor all her life, while Campbell was an epileptic. Even after Kate's passing, Campbell still came to check on Anna and was there for her which exemplifies their relationship.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

Starting off with Anna, we are quickly able to see that she cares very much for her family and her sister but also feels the pressure of being so depended on to keep her sister alive. We learn throughout the trial all of the different procedures that Anna has gone through in her life to help her sister live. The doctors had started taking parts from Anna right when she was born. According to the movie, they took cord blood as an infant, did white-cell transfusions, took bone marrow, lymphocytes, injections to add more stem cells, and then they took them too - all of which she had to be hospitalized for. It is obvious that Anna was created for the sole reason of helping Kate survive even as Anna grew up. Anna's internal conflict is wanting to save her sister as she is one of her best friends, but she also desires bodily autonomy and does not want to have that expectation of always sacrificing for Kate. Not only does Anna have these two things to think about but she also wants to respect what Kate wishes which is wanting to die. While Anna sits on the stand being questioned by her mother, she has a flashback of Kate taking drugs as she was trying to overdose and kill herself. This is a very important piece of information as this whole trial started so Kate could die in the first place, in which her mom did not want to see. Knowing this, Anna's character is really all about sacrifice and the love that she has for her sister. Even when her mom believes she is being "selfish" and betraying her family, we come to learn she started this trial as Anna was not being selfish but rather out of love and respect for Kate.

Kate Fitzgerald has a lot of struggles and inner conflicts – something a 13-year-old should not have to think about at her age. Early on, Kate has had to deal with the rare diagnosis of FA which can be brutal to live with. According to Cleveland Clinic, along with the chemotherapy and radiation therapy from the cancer, FA also causes fatigue, anemia, pale skin

color, difficulty catching their breath and many more symptoms that not only cause her to be too tired to carry on with daily activities but also requires her to be hospitalized frequently. Her sickness defines her life, and she knows this. Despite this, she wants to live a life filled with happiness and love. However, as she starts to get worse, she understands her final prognosis but notices her parents struggle seeing it. She watches her parent's marriage fall apart, her siblings be alienated by their parents as she is the main concern, and is an overall burden to her entire family. We learn near the end of the movie, that Kate had told Anna to start a court case to sue their parents to the rights of Anna's body and win so Kate won't need a transplant and essentially die sooner. In doing this, she is sacrificing herself for her family's happiness – she does not want to be that burden as she has noticed the emotional toll her sickness was putting her entire family through.

Sara Fitzgerald, the mother of Kate and Anna, has sacrificed her entire life – she quit her job as a lawyer and her life revolves around keeping Kate alive. We see that Sara is willing to do anything to save her daughter including overlooking her other children and potentially ruining her marriage. She goes to all of these different extents even ridiculing her youngest on the stand in order to save her oldest daughter, which inevitably strains the relationship between her and Anna. Although Sara's actions seem harsh, we know her motive is rooted from the fear of losing her child. At first, I personally did not agree with the actions of Sara, but I think the court scene with Sara on the stand gave me a better understanding of her actions. Sara had been on the stand during the trial as Campbell was hashing out all of the details of Anna's medical history – he had listed procedure after procedure and what all they entail. In his conclusion he questioned Sara after hearing all of the procedures added up if she had thought she had taken it too far. Quoted from the movie Sara had explained, “That of course no one wants to be poked and prodded by

needles, and you can call me awful for doing that to my child. But you know what, it is not as awful as sticking another child in the ground.” As Sara did agree she had taken this whole thing too far, she had to think about her whole family and for Kate it was life or death. We see the motherly need to do anything for her child; however, I believe there is a point to where you need to do what your child wants – even if it is dying. Before Kate’s passing, I think the relationship between Sara and Kate took a turn as they had a very special moment of Sara finally accepting what Kate wants. The audience can understand that Sara was mad at the world because she couldn’t help her daughter, she didn’t want to hear it, and she inevitably didn’t want to let her little girl go. Once Sara had accepted Kate’s wishes, they have a conversation where Kate shows her mother a collage she had made of pictures and funny quotes to share memories of their family. Another meaningful part of the movie was when Kate had said “Do you remember the summer I went to camp, before I got on the bus you told me to take a seat on the left side right next to the window so I would be able to look back and see you there. I get the same seat now.” This was to show that Kate would always be looking over her and their family. Later that night Kate had died. This moment she had made with her mom was a good time of reflection for Sara as Kate comforts her through the grief process.

Brian Fitzgerald, the father of Kate and Anna, has his own conflict between wanting to support his wife with the treatment decisions of their oldest daughter but also wanting to support what Kate’s final wishes are. The relationship between Brian and Sara Fitzgerald started off very loving, raising a happy family despite their oldest going through a cancer diagnosis and being so sick. Throughout the majority of Kate’s treatment and life, Brian has been the quiet parent who just goes along with what Sara believes is best; however, there comes a point where he believes Sara has gone too far and decides to take it into his own hands even if it means potentially

blowing up his marriage. He decides to take Kate to the beach as that is one of the last things she wants to do, and I believe this is one of the most beautiful and memorable scenes as Sara comes to join the family in the afternoon at the beach. In this moment, everyone was happy like how it was before Kate got sick.

THEMES AND MESSAGES

The most prominent ethical dilemma that created this film was whether or not it is moral to birth a child for the sole purpose of being spare parts to save someone else otherwise known as a savior sibling. This dilemma can spark the debate that doing this is immoral or unforgivable as the genetically engineered baby would have to get procedure after procedure without any way to fight for themselves. The so called “savior sibling” or a “designer baby” would donate almost everything ranging from blood, organs, and other tissues to support another life. I personally think this specific case in “My Sister’s Keeper” is not necessarily a black and white situation as I see both sides. More specifically, the parents did not have many options in order to save their baby girl. According to the movie, “Everyone inherits two sets of chromosomes containing HLA genes. Unfortunately, there’s only 1 in 200 chance that parents and their children will be perfect histocompatible HLA matches.” Kate’s parents weren’t a match. Jesse, her little brother, was not a match. It was also known that getting a transplant from an unrelated donor from the national bone-marrow registry was risky, so Kate was running out of time. Although debatable, an expert in bone marrow transplantation recommended a sibling bone marrow transplant, as these have the greatest possibility of success. According to Dr. John Wagner and the Seattle Times, in order to do this, the Nash family could use an in-vitro fertilization (IVF) to produce several embryos, then genetically test all of them for both FA. If this ended up working for the family, they could

choose a healthy embryo, have a healthy baby, and use the baby's umbilical cord blood as a source for Molly's bone marrow transplant (Marcotty, Wagner). Once the parents knew of this option, they realized creating another child would be the only way to save their baby girl. I think being relatively new parents, this choice can be hard on anyone. I personally believe this could be a good decision to help save your child if there are no other options or potential donors; however, there could be a cutoff point within the baby's life in terms of what all this child would be sacrificing.

Another ethical dilemma that caught my attention was the disagreement of treatment and overall care to Kate Fitzgerald by the parents. On one hand, the mother has sacrificed a lot of her life and would do anything possible to save her child. She is solely focused on saving Kate's life – no matter the cost. She did not want to hear what Kate and Brian were saying, she did not care that Anna was going through all this physical pain through procedures, she did not see Jesse's rebellious behaviors to get noticed, and she did not want to fix her marriage as she largely disagreed with Brian's opinions. On the other hand, the father was caught between wanting to support his wife and save their child, but he also wanted to respect his child's wishes. Kate had made it very clear that she wanted to live a fulfilling last few months and spend her time loving life rather than being stuck in a hospital knowing she would die eventually. Although, I do not have kids I can understand the mother's need to do everything she can to protect her child but by the end of this movie I would have to agree with the father. Cancer patients go through so much especially if they have a recurrence such as the multitude of procedures, transplants, radiation therapy, chemotherapy, hair loss, skin irritation, nausea, hospital stays and more. Once your child is to an age to understand what is happening to them and have already gone through the

effects of the cancer, they should be able to decide how they want to spend their life or when they have had enough. I would want to respect Kate's wishes no matter how they made me feel.

EMOTIONAL IMPACT

Anna, being the narrator at the beginning of the movie, is described as the genetic match for Kate and explains not only how she came to be but also all of the varying procedures and sacrifices Anna makes to save her sister. The movie opens up showing how happy the Fitzgerald family is as they all sacrifice so much and are hopeful in saving Kate's life as she is doing quite well. As the climax starts to occur, we see that Kate's health deteriorates and Anna seeks legal counsel for the rights to her own body. I was initially emotionally torn and sympathized for the characters because I understand why Anna would want to be legally emancipated for bodily autonomy. However, I also understand that Kate was dying, and the parent's had the overwhelming desire to save their child's life even as a baby. The feeling of anxiety and frustration continued throughout as anyone would struggle being in any one of these main character's positions making these decisions. As Kate was getting worse, and the trial was coming to an end – the audience and jury realized that Anna's decision to go to trial was much more complicated than wanting bodily autonomy for herself. Anna's sister, Kate, had talked her into starting this trial so she would not get the transplant and could die peacefully. This was very heartbreaking as Anna had felt like she had betrayed her parents – all of the pressure and hate and misunderstanding of not wanting to save her sister's life and of being “selfish” according to the mom - we now understand. The ending was very emotional because there were moments of both sadness and happiness. As Kate passes, the family endures both feelings of grief and acceptance. Near the end of the movie, the entire family is together in a quiet and peaceful

environment that they visit every year on Kate's birthday. Although Kate was no longer with them, there is a sense of love and closure. Each character has moved on with their life and went on to do great things. I believe although the emotional crescendos and climatic moments were heartbreaking to watch it was a good amount within the film since it truly is a common reality for patients and their families with a cancer diagnosis to go through.

PACING AND EDITING

I believe that the transitions between scenes and the use of editing very much contributed to the flow of narrative as there were many different switches between perspectives as well as different timelines throughout the characters life and when it involved flashbacks. The use of flashbacks was probably my favorite part when looking at the editing style. This technique created suspense, created tension, developed the emotional relationships between characters and mainly added pivotal context needed to understand the whole picture.

I think there was really only one scene that could have been better expanded upon which was the process and how the parents made their decision to engineer a baby could have been explained in more depth. With this situation, I really had to dive into the research in order to fully understand the reasoning behind the treatment options and how it was possible that birthing a new child could help cure their sick child. Reading articles about this situation, the Nash family was heartbroken and taken back by the reaction the movie was getting and the overall debate it was sparking. It is not every day someone makes a movie about your life; it should not be anyone's busy. I think the details of their decision and the medical reasons behind it could have been explained better for the audience to understand the two sides to the story rather than just saying the decision was immoral or unethical.

OVERALL IMPRESSION

After watching the movie, “My Sister’s Keeper”, there were a few moments that continue to resonate with me and those are the scenes that had the most emotional pull – in a good way. More specifically, the happier moments like at the beginning of the movie where the whole family is just in pure bliss. The second scene that I think about is when Kate gets dressed up to go to prom with her and her family is so happy watching her living a normal life. The last couple scenes that are really important are at the end of the movie when Kate lives her last wish of going to the beach with her family and then spending the last moments with each relative in order to help them grieve. These moments showed that love is what kept Kate going all of that time and in the end, love is what also made her sacrifice her life for her family’s happiness to move on.

The film does hold some personal and cultural significance looking at the major themes. The movie largely touches on personal sacrifices, familial love, and the trauma of a cancer journey which deeply connects the audience to the story. For families that deal with any type of illness, this movie and the family dynamics can be very similar and correctly portrays the challenges associated with an illness. The movie also incorporates cultural significance when speaking of the ethical dilemma of genetic engineering and bodily autonomy. As mentioned earlier, there was a debate brought up about not only using IVF and manipulating it to save someone’s life but also whether or not this child’s bodily autonomy is going to be compromised. This is shown within Anna’s life as her decision making was limited throughout her life until she decided she had enough and wanted to stand up for herself.

Watching “My Sister’s Keeper” was a very thought-provoking and tear-jerking movie. After doing some research, I watched the film a couple of times to analyze the flashbacks,

subplots and deeper meanings built in. The film made me understand all of the details, both good and bad, of what it was like going through a cancer diagnosis. Although, this movie spoke up a more extreme scenario speaking in regard to the advancement and rarity of Kate's illness as well as the process of engineering a child through IVF it did give the reality of a cancer patient's journey. Everything that the patient and the family goes through creates a both physical and emotional toll on the body in which no one wants to experience.

This movie offers very valuable perspectives for someone living with cancer and individuals who know someone in their family living with cancer. This can also be valuable for healthcare professionals working in the oncology community as the film helps them understand the challenges beyond just the cancer treatment. As a radiation therapist, you see the physical side of a patient but any emotional or familial challenges you don't see that burden that cancer puts on someone. So it is greatly important to provide compassion when giving care as you never know what someone is going through. In conclusion, this film served as a very powerful and emotional tool for me to not only explore the moral decisions within the oncology world, but it also helped me foster a deeper understanding in the importance of providing good communication and the best care possible to all of my patients as a therapist.

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