

Collateral Damage
By
J.E. Clarke

FADE IN ON:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - MORNING

A heart monitor BEEPS rhythmically. Labored RASPS through a tube.

A muted TV displaying cable news flickers over a hospital bed. In it lies:

Intubated teen ERIC. Sensors cover his head and torso like plastic leeches. His chest rises. Falls. The forced breathing, his only sign of life.

Red-eyed JESSICA (40s) holds her son's hand tight. Dressed in wrinkled nurse scrubs and a mask, she sits as close as the chair will allow.

She snuffles. Can't rub her nose. Tries to suppress the emotions. Can't.

Snuffle. Beep. Breathe. Snuffle... a melody of misery. Until a hand descends on her shoulder, interrupts.

Jessica looks up at nurse LAURA (50s). Laura's cartoon mask contrasts a solemn ebony face - fringed by hair slowly surrendering to gray and time.

Laura rubs Jessica's shoulder, voice soft.

LAURA

Jess - it's OK to have second thoughts.
I'll tell Dr. Rudner you've changed your
mind. Tear up the paperwork myself.

Jessica's eyes drift to a second monitor, labeled "EEG". This display has no peaks or troughs.

JESSICA

Why wait and drag it out? Eric's not...
here anymore.

Choking back sobs, Jessica caresses Eric's arm.

JESSICA

Sweetie, I'm so, so sorry. This is all my
fault!

LAURA

Baby, no. Don't go there. You know
reactions like this are rare. You, me,
Rudner... No-one's to blame, or could
have known.

JESSICA

My instinct was right. I should have just said no! What kind of mother am I?

LAURA

The *good* kind. You did it to protect him. All this... was just an act of God.

Tears stream down Jessica's cheeks.

JESSICA

So now I have to give my son back to him? This young? It's not fair!

LAURA

(sighs)

It isn't. Not much is, these days.

JESSICA

No more talking. It's time.

LAURA

You sure? There's no rush.

JESSICA

He deserves peace now. Pull the plug.

Laura does. The heart monitor flatlines. BEEEEEEEEEP. Fighting back her *own* tears, Laura hugs her friend.

LAURA

Stay as long as you like, baby. Me and the girls will be right outside.

Frozen in grief, Jessica nods. Sits rigidly at Eric's bedside as Laura leaves.

The TV flickers. Jessica numbly glances up.

At a mute TV broadcast and banner: "JAX virus mandates at 1 month mark. Governor Herring to hold press conference this afternoon on decreased statewide fatality rates."

Underneath the text, GOVERNOR DAVID HERRING (53) flashes a million watt politician smile.

Jessica kisses Eric's cheek. Her eyes harden.

JESSICA

I'll do right by you, baby. Now.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - AFTERNOON

Herring holds court behind the podium. The bustling room before him: packed. Some wear masks, others not.

REPORTERS juggle microphones. Civilian SPECTATORS jostle for a clear view.

The MONITOR behind Herring bristles with charts: "Jax Virus Fatalities." "Vaccination Compliance Rate."

An unmasked Herring grins ear-to-ear, aims a laser pointer at that second chart.

HERRING

The state's immunization rate's ninety percent. We're Number One, nation-wide!

The audience claps. Herring talks over the roar.

HERRING

We're back to normal, baby! The economy's rebounding... schools, too. Thanks to my "Jab the Jax" campaign, we've got that pesky Gamma variant on the run!

One skinny REPORTER thrusts a mike towards the stage.

REPORTER

Governor Herring, do you have any comment on this week's civil liberties protests?

HERRING

(scoffs)

Regarding the passport initiative? Anyone opposed to such common-sense legislation needs to reexamine their priorities. Look at the data, folks. The new mandates are a success!

JESSICA (O.S.)

At what cost?

Jessica elbows through the crowd. Attendees around her recoil. Still in wrinkled scrubs and masked, Jess stands out. And her expression in her eyes screams: Don't touch.

Storming to the stage, she glares up at Herring. Surprised, the governor lances down.

HERRING

Cost? Well, my bean counters estimate the initiative roll-out at half a mill, max.

For the state budget, that's a drop in the bucket. And the lives it saves are worth infinitely more than that.

JESSICA

But what about the lives you *end*?

Herring's good humor melts into a frown.

HERRING

What channel are you with, Ms. -

JESSICA

My name is Jessica Summers. I'm here for myself. And my son.

She reaches abruptly into her scrubs for *something*. A SECURITY GUARD steps forward. Is she reaching for a gun?

Jessica pulls out a PHOTO OF ERIC, holds it up. Flashes it at the crowd - then back to Herring and the stage.

JESSICA

This is Eric. He turned 14 last month.

HERRING

Congratulations, Ms. - or is that Mrs. - Summers. I'm sure your family's proud.

JESSICA

Eric died this morning.

Herring droops. Thinks he gets her point now.

HERRING

Ms. Summers, please believe me when I say everyone in this room feels your pain. The Jax virus has stolen so many loved ones from us all. That's why I've personally guaranteed the second wave of vaccine boosters will be-

JESSICA

My baby didn't die from Jax. It was thrombotic thrombocytopenia.... I'm a nurse, but in layman's terms that's swelling in his brain. From blood clots caused by the vaccine you mandated, Sir!

Audience members GASP. Herring tenses. He and the Guard lock eyes. Herring waves him back subtly.

HERRING

Let the woman speak. These are trying times.

(to Jessica)

No-one can blame you for being upset.

JESSICA

I'm not blaming myself... any more.

HERRING

The CDC's assured us the vaccine's safe.

An AIDE rushes over, whispers in Herring's ear.

HERRING

(backtracks)

Of course, no medicine can ever be one hundred percent risk free. But in times of crisis, I have a responsibility to act for the greater good. As a nurse, I'm sure you understand.

JESSICA

As a nurse, I taught Eric to be careful: for himself. Others, too. Since this pandemic began, he's worn a mask. Everyday, everywhere... except at home. Even in instances when YOUR administration claimed it was "safe" to take it off!

A few reporters chuckle. Jessica whirls around, points out unmasked attendees in the room.

JESSICA

Look. People who do this could be spreading Jax right now!

Herring reddens. Impatience flares.

HERRING

They're vaccinated.

JESSICA

Which doesn't mean they can't be infected or transmit!

HERRING

We followed the science. As we should.

JESSICA

As a health professional, I follow science too.

So I know why the FDA requires long term trials. To protect us from potentially dangerous unknowns!

HERRING

(chuckles)

"Unknowns?" That's speculative fear-mongering.

JESSICA

Do Vioxx, Chantix or DES ring a bell?

HERRING

Well, surely you trust the CDC, at least?

JESSICA

In medicine, you shouldn't "trust" anyone blindly. We don't know everything. That's what data collection's for!

HERRING

Don't make perfect the enemy of the good. We can't wait for Jax to kill us all.

JESSICA

Masks are very effective. Risk free. So my Eric wasn't endangering anyone. It would have been fine to wait and see. But you had to force that mandate through?

The crowd erupts. Herring holds a hand up: "Stop."

HERRING

With all due respect, the "Jax Jab" isn't being "forced" on anyone. That's anti-vax disinformation.

JESSICA

Anti-vax? Diphtheria, polio, measles... I inoculated Eric for those myself!

HERRING

Which means we should all do our part and get the Jax Jab, too. But vax or not, the choice is yours.

JESSICA

Unless you want to go to work. Attend the schools you opened - after ending remote alternatives. Or if you need to go to the doctor for anything else at all. In order to live life, you forced that risk on us.

HERRING

A minimal risk, in most cases.

JESSICA

Is that your "call", Governor? What about other kids like Eric? Or anyone harmed by unexpected side effects, years from now? Will you hold yourself criminally liable for those lives? Or are they just collateral damage to you?

Herring sighs. For him, this has gone on long enough. Jumping down from the stage, he force-hugs Jessica. Camera flashes FLARE to capture the photo op.

HERRING

Ms. Summers, what happened to your son is a tragedy.

JESSICA

Don't talk in the passive voice. If anyone murdered my son, it's you.

HERRING

(to the crowd)

For me, Eric's story drives the point home. In this horrible pandemic, public health must *always* be our top concern!

He hugs her tighter, hisses in her ear.

HERRING

Let's talk in private. Now's not the time.

JESSICA

Yes, Governor Herring. For Eric - it is.

Jessica pulls a SYRINGE from her scrubs, stabs it into Herring's neck. He yells - more in shock than pain.

HERRING

What the hell was that?

JESSICA

(shrugs)

I'm a medical professional. Don't you trust me? It's for the greater good. Wait a few years, and find out.

Security descends on Jessica. Swarmed, she disappears. Reporters close in, take pictures. Herring stumbles back, hand to his neck. Shivers in sudden, existential fear.