

Shooting Star

The winter wind slapped the cheeks of twelve-year-old Naomi and her mom, Lina. They were cuddling up in a frayed, threadbare blanket. They gazed up like artistic owls at the night sky, which was inked with thick heavy strokes of midnight blue and ebony. The clouds were dense, drifting lazily above them. Yet they were still hopeful to catch a glimpse of the Ursid meteor shower.

Late December, they would hike up to their favorite spot on Castle Hill to view the spectacle. Lina carried their homemade telescope made from paper towel tubes and old scotch tape in one hand, clutching Naomi's clammy trembling hand in the other. On particularly chilly nights, when they could see their breath turn to fog, they would bring a mug of watered-down Missy's Hot Chocolate from their secret stash.

The two lived in a trailer park. The 500-square-foot home was a scene of neglect: piles of unwashed laundry, unpaid bills scattered across the kitchen table, and thin bed sheets hanging across the windows as curtains. The worn wobbly dining table, covered with a tattered and stained tablecloth, served as their dining area, Naomi's homework space, and where Lina managed their meager finances. The winter frigidity always managed to seep through their paper-thin walls and cheap vinyl flooring—but what choice did they have? Naomi's dad had left them with nothing when she was three, and they were doing the best they could.

Naomi rested her chin on her mother's bony shoulder, letting out hoarse coughs as she struggled for air. Asthma as a kid segued to her being diagnosed with idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis (IPF), a rare pulmonary disorder with no cure. Lina wrapped her arms around her ailing daughter, gripping her like an octopus.

"Mom, how do you stay so strong?" asked Naomi.

Lina reached into her pocket, pulling out an old photograph. The photo showed a woman with silver strands of hair posing on the beach with her arms wide open; her eyes were glimmering with childlike excitement:

“This is Audrey, my mother—your grandmother. She was diagnosed with ALS just two months after this picture was taken. At first, her symptoms started small: she occasionally stumbled here and there, endured muscle twitches, slurred her speech, and had trouble eating. Each day, she seemed to slip further and further away from me.

When ALS had eventually seized her voice, I curated handwritten notes to her every day, so she could respond, despite it becoming increasingly difficult for her to even move. Every night, I also sang her “Rewrite the Stars”—her favorite. Her eyes would light up like a meteor shower when I sang ‘And why don't we rewrite the stars? Changing the world to be ours.’

When she lost the ability to walk, I wheeled her through the park, competing with the skateboarders flying up and down the ramps. But the highlight was always our monthly visits to the local flower shop. I’d select the most vibrant dahlias, lilies, and peonies and arrange them in her lap. She’d run her fingers over the petals, admiring the various curves and tactility. She really loved plants.”

Lina’s fingers lingered on the photograph, tracing the outline of her mother’s joyful expression. Closing her eyes, she floated into nostalgia.

FLASHBACK: Four Years Before Grandma’s Passing

The sunshine shone brightly through the window of the kitchen, casting a warm glow on the pots of succulents, violets, peace lilies, and orchids. Lina’s mother, Audrey, was down on her knees hovering over the potted plants; her hands were covered in soil, and a look of intense

concentration plastered on her face. She gently lifted an orchid petal with a single bony finger, her hand trembling as she brushed over the petal. The creases on her face softened as the corners of her lips curled upward. She admired the edges of the petals, a soft baby purple—her favorite color. The hue enriched as it reached the center.

Audrey paused for a moment, then tried standing up to reach the watering can. She gripped the side of a chair and pushed herself up, her weak knees trembling as though she was being pressed down by the Earth.

“Mom, let me help. I know it’s tough for you,” Lina suggested, reaching out an open hand. Audrey shook her head firmly, swatting Lina’s hand away. Managing to lift herself halfway, her legs succumbed to gravity, as she faltered down to the stone-cold floor. Audrey summoned all her remaining strength, pushing herself up until she stood erect. As she stood, her breath steadied, and she grinned, triumphant. Lina smiled at her mother.

I wish I could see this every day, Lina dreamed, dreading the inevitable paralysis that would steal her mom away. She watched aimlessly as the sparkling droplets of dew on the window slowly evaporated.

PRESENT DAY

Floating back from her bittersweet lapse into memory, the clouds began to clear. Naomi marveled at her grandmother’s persistence. Her mother too was like an oak tree, unwavering after each strong gust of wind, growing tall and resilient. Just then they bore witness to an endless orchestra of glittering light; there it was, the sublime Ursid meteor shower. It was as though Audrey was communicating with them, more lovingly than ever.

“I took her to every doctor, but we just didn’t have enough money for frequent physical, occupational, and speech therapies that would help manage the symptoms. Before I knew it, her motor cells had progressively degenerated; like a shooting star, she was gone.” Naomi wrapped her arm around her mother, awestruck by the appearance of millions of twinkling stars, filling the sky like glowing lanterns. Somedays, they would be lucky to see a shooting star whiz by. One second it was there, and the next, it was gone in the blink of an eye, like a bright flash of lightning. A flash of hope in a world filled with grief.

As the cold of winter penetrated through the night, Naomi’s dry, persistent cough echoed like a thunderous drum, a thousand hammers pounding on her throbbing chest. Each breath was a tireless battle for her frail, deteriorating lungs. She felt as if she were drowning, trapped under the dense layer of mucus, desperately trying to catch a breath.

She had been on the waitlist for a lung transplant, but her condition was worsening each day even with oxygen therapy. For months, Lina visited doctors, pleading with desperation for a more permanent cure. Never failing to hold back tears, she’d beg: “Please, my daughter needs help. She’s very sick, and we can’t wait any longer for the transplant. Is there *anything* you can do?” Her gaze was hopeful, yet bracing for disappointment. Time and time again, their eyes sprung directly over to Lina’s mudstained jacket, her frizzy, straw-like, split-end hair, and the thin layer of dirt on her face, shaking their heads with sorrow: “All we can do is wait; there are so many others even younger than you waiting too, we’re so sorry.” Lina watched as her daughter’s condition worsened, becoming unable to even talk. All she could do was gently stroke Naomi’s back and reassure her that everything would be fine.

“Mom?” Naomi croaked.

“Yes?” said Lina, taken aback by surprise.

“Promise me you’ll stay strong, like you did with grandma,” said Naomi.

The night wind carried away her final breath, sweeping her into the sky. Lina clung onto Naomi’s lifeless body, squeezing her own eyes shut, feeling once again, as if the universe had sucked everything out of her. She gazed up at the night sky, her eyes fixed on the brightest star that seemed to be calling her from afar. Lina remembered the lyric her mother loved: “And why don't we rewrite the stars? Changing the world to be ours.”