

Mina

No one listened to Mina when she told the teachers that her head hurt, right back there, behind her eyes – that her legs were heavy and her knees buckled under her. I believed her, of course, but we were both so small, and our voices weren't loud enough. This led to her in a hospital bed and me in a waiting room, on a chair way too high. My feet didn't reach the floor. I imagined that if I leant far enough forwards I would fall and fall and fall. I tried to stop thinking about it.

I looked around the white room. A big clock was ticking on the wall, but the tick-tocks didn't match the beat of my heart. They were slower, louder.

Dad had put his jumper around my shoulders, but now he was asleep on the chair next to me. He was sleeping. I didn't know exactly how long we'd been sitting there, but I knew it was a long time.

How can you sleep, Dad? I wanted to yell. *When I don't know what's gonna happen to my best friend?* I looked at the door Mina had been rushed through. It was still closed. The back of the plastic chair cut into my side. I curled up on it, putting my arms around myself, holding me, grounding me.

The clock on the wall kept ticking.
I crossed my fingers.

"I'm gonna tell you a secret," Mina said. It was past ten and hospital rules said I wasn't supposed to be visiting, but some nights I hid in Mina's closet and snuck out when the nurses had said good night. No one knew I was there, it was just her and me. We lay close together under the covers, hiding from the metal smell. Mina's mum tried to hide the smell

with candles. The bed was clearly not meant for two people, but we always managed to make room. I looked at her and shuffled closer.

“It’s a bit gross, though, so you have to promise not to tell anyone.” She shook my hand like we were business women making deals. I nodded. “You know how I get chemotherapy, right?” I didn’t like that word. It was too big for her mouth. “They put this tube in my arm, right here.”

She pointed to a penguin plaster I hadn’t seen before, but I wasn’t surprised. There were new plasters every day now. “Then the medicine just goes into my body to eat up all the lymphoblasts.” She stumbled over the last word. It was a hospital word and I could hear she’d been practising it. Then she leaned in closer so our foreheads were almost touching, and lowered her voice. “But the medicine isn’t very smart, and it doesn’t only eat its own food. Sometimes it affects other things than just the bad cells, and do you know what happens?”

She tried to sound like the grown-ups, using words she’d heard the doctors use, but I could see her eyes twinkle. I knew that mischievous look – Mina’s someone’s-holding-hands-in-the-playground-look. I leant in even closer, curious and anxious of what was to come. “It makes my pee so thick that mum has to pour water in the toilet before flushing!”

The tension was gone in an instant and I felt a giggle rise up in my throat. I tried to stifle my laughter but it didn’t work. We laughed and laughed, until the laugh turned into wheezes and whistles. Mina’s always been really good at whistling, but as always, I couldn’t make a sound. That made us laugh even more.

“I’ll teach you to whistle one day, Lily,” Mina said, in between giggles.

Under the covers I crossed my fingers she would.

“I’ve never been on top of a hospital before,” Mina said. I almost couldn’t see her; Mum had wrapped her up in every single scarf and jumper and blanket we could find. We’d reached our goal; we were watching the stars. After Mina got diagnosed she’d found this new fascination for them.

Maybe it’s because she thinks she’ll be one, I thought to myself, before shaking my head. *Nope, won’t think about that.* Just getting up here had been an adventure.

We had walked in a line; me in front, Mina in her wheelchair, then Mum, making sure not to knock and IV stands over. We had to be quiet. Mum and Mina waited around the corner as I snuck up to the reception desk, keeping watch of the receptionist. A phone rang somewhere and she moved from her seat. Quickly, I motioned for Mum and Mina, and as if it was a new Ferrari, Mum wheeled Mina’s chair past the reception and into the lift.

We giggled the whole way, trying to stay quiet. We were ninjas, spies, secret agents, and getting to the roof was our most important mission. On the way, we were faced with locked doors, but Mum just told us she had a secret key – she tapped in secret numbers, on every secret keypad we walked past. We didn’t question how she knew the codes. For all I knew, Mum was an undercover hospital spy.

Finally, we reached the top floor and Mum opened the last door. I swore the air felt a bit thinner up here, like on top of the Kilimanjaro or Mount Everest. I’d never seen the city from this high up before, and I could see Mina hadn’t either. We were so close to the sky and the city looked so small.

“It’s pretty,” Mina said, the lights from the billboards and the buildings reflecting in both the metal of her wheelchair and her eyes.

“Yeah, it’s quite the view,” Mum said. She held a tight grip on me with one hand and Mina’s chair with the other. Mina’s eyes darted from the cars to the street signs to the billboards and back to the cars again.

“I know they’re just cars,” she said, pointing at the busy streets below us, “but they kinda look like stars too, don’t they?”

Please don’t turn into a star, Mina, I thought, gloved fingers crossed behind my back.

I couldn’t stop thinking about that night on the roof. Mina had wanted to go back, to do it again, but Mum always had to say no. After a while, I understood why. From one day to the next there were more plasters on Mina’s arms than there used to be, and suddenly I was always caught when I tried to hide and stay the night.

Everyone had tried to talk to me, to make me understand. Dad, Mina’s dad, Mum, all they did was talk. I didn’t want to listen. Mina would get better and we’d go back to look at the stars. I crossed my fingers for it.

Only, she didn’t.

I balled my hands up into fists and rubbed my eyes, hard enough so I could feel it hurt. *I can’t cry,* I thought, *I’m not the one who’s dead.* My skin was on fire and all the energy in my body raced from my feet to my head and back again with no place to go. I jumped up from my seat on the swing and kicked it. I hit the stand with my fists and raked my nails down it until they broke.

She left me here, I thought, *all on my own.* I managed to tip the swing set over but didn’t wait for the thud as it hit the ground. I searched for more things to break.

In two long strides, I was by the flower bed. My Mum’s pride and joy, those tulips she cared for so neatly. I stomped on them. I could hear the stems break beneath my wet shoes,

could feel them crush under my soles. I fell to my knees and started tearing the flowers from the ground, ripping them apart, crushing petals in my hands. The red bled from them and mixed with the evening dew and the blood from my fingernails.

Looking at my hands, my head started to feel dizzy. I realized that I'd forgotten to breathe. I looked at all the flowers. There wasn't a single tulip standing. I'd ruined all of them.

My shoulders hunched forwards as all the anger drained out of me. I picked up one of the tulip heads and held it in my palms with open fingers, careful not to crush it. It felt soft in my hands, like Mina's silk pajamas. I tried to straighten out one of the petals, took it gently between my thumb and little finger to remove the creases I'd made. I couldn't do it. I started to cry.

It was a different kind of crying. I didn't want to stop.

"Is it okay if I sit down here with you?" I didn't know how long Mina's dad had been standing there, hadn't heard him walk across the garden. Mina's parents had been visiting mine a lot after Mina died. Could I even call him Mina's dad anymore? Was he just Elias now?

He was still looking at me. I nodded. "You know," Elias said, sitting down, tilting his head towards the sky, "I think she's a star now, looking down on us, hoping we're okay." I didn't answer him, but followed his gaze. It was a clear night, even here in the city, and one star was twinkling brighter than the rest just over our roof.

I really wanted him to be right.

"Mina was very angry with us," he said. I looked down at my shoes. She'd told me that. "She was angry that we didn't want to tell her all the details about all the horrible things that were happening to her, and angry that we didn't tell you everything either." I blinked.

That, she'd never told me. "I guess we wanted to protect you, but we just ended up making even more of a mess, didn't we?" He looked at me with that crooked smile he normally made when he was late for picking us up from school.

"Her first night of chemo was the worst." He scratched his head as if he wasn't sure how to word it for me. "All the machines were beeping so loudly. It was late and we were tired and scared, but there was no way we would ever leave our baby in that hospital by herself." He sighed and I moved a bit closer to him. "She held my finger the entire night, and she gripped it so hard I had to ask the doctors if the chemo made her muscles cramp."

He laughed quietly to himself and I moved even closer to him, letting his warmth warm me too. "'No,' they said, 'it hurts in her sleep too.'" His grip around me tightened and he put his hand up to dry at the corner of his eye.

"What I'm trying to say Lily, is that," he cleared his throat before he could finish, "Mina was in a lot of pain, but she said that she couldn't give up because she didn't want to leave you alone."

I started crying again. Or was I still crying? I didn't know if I'd stopped in the first place. "You two had so many plans, and she wanted to be there for them." He hugged me closer. "She wanted to be here to teach you to whistle." I turned my face up at him.

"How do you know I can't whistle?" I'd only ever told Mina that, and she'd tried to teach me, almost every night at the hospital. Elias laughed louder than before and smiled down at me.

"We knew you were there, Lily." I looked down, pulling out the grass beneath us with my hands. "We didn't have the heart to tell you to leave." He dried away a tear that was hanging from my nose. "And it was lovely listening to the two of you talk all night about all the things you were going to do one day." He looked up at the stars again. "When Mina got sick we couldn't even bear to think about one day, anymore."

Minutes passed as we sat in silence in front of the ruined tulips. Elias chuckled to himself again.

“Mina couldn’t keep it in,” she had to tell us about the night you went up on the roof and looked at the stars and the cars and the city.” He smiled. “You have to promise not to get angry with your mum,” he had Mina’s mischievous look on his face, “but she did ask us before taking you girls up on the roof. She had the nurses on speed dial and we talked to the doctors about it, but it just seemed so important to Mina to think she had all these secrets, these adventures, you know?”

I didn’t know what to do when grownups were sad, but I felt like putting my arms around Elias’s neck was the right thing. He hugged me back, and the smell of vanilla hit me. He smelt like Mina, and come to think of it, he wasn’t Elias, he was Mina’s dad. He would always be Mina’s dad.

“You were so brave the entire time, Lily.” He held me so he could look into my eyes. “Thank you,” he said.

I nodded. We sat down again, and I put the end of his jacket around me. It was thick leather, worn soft, and it made me feel warm and safe. I looked up. Over us, the blues and greens of the night sky melted together. It was like the colours were dancing, and dotted all over the skies, the stars were twinkling, eager to join the waltz.

I crossed my fingers that Mina was dancing too.

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