

Shine Bright, My Star

“I’m sorry ma’am. I’m afraid that your son doesn’t have much time left,” the doctor says as he puts his hands on the woman’s shoulder in comfort. The woman shrinks away from his touch, clutching her chest as the tears streamed down her face.

“No. I mean, thank you. It’s—I’m sorry, but can I just have a moment?”

The doctor nods his head then turns toward the door. He hesitates in the doorway, hands resting on each side. He turns his head and opens his mouth to say something else but walks out the door.

The mother sits down next to the frail boy in the bed, resting her hands on his arm. Her son, Julian, breathes shallow breaths and fights to keep his eyes open. Soon, he will become tired from the effort and fall back asleep for a few hours. This is her hope each time he closes his eyes.

“Please,” she says, “allow him to open his eyes again today.”

Logically, she knows deep down that his time is coming with each passing day. She wants him to keep fighting and keep taking the medication, but one day Julian said he didn’t want to anymore. He was tired of fighting, and every part of him ached. The disease was too aggressive. They’ve tried both traditional chemotherapy and radiation, and they tried clinical trials and natural therapies. Nothing stopped it from growing. Nothing can rescue him.

“It was only a matter of time,” she says to herself.

It was three AM when the mother wakes up. She looks around and sees a man sitting in the room's corner. He is dressed in an all-black, perfectly tailored suit, including the gloves that were covering his long fingers. His face is slate and unremarkable, almost as if it were made purposely forgettable. He rests his hands on his lap, patient and serene.

The mother can’t move. Her eyes are locked on to his as her body locks into a defensive position. The man in the chair uncrosses his legs and sits up with a massive elegance.

“I don’t mean to frighten you,” the man says. “I am only here to take the boy home.”

Instinctively, the mother places her hand on her son, shooting both hands out as she tries to protect him the best she can. Her hands are shaking, and the tears from earlier have begun once again.

“Who are you? I’m calling security!”

“You can, but they won’t see me. I just want to talk for a moment,” The Man says.

She sits up and slowly places her hands on the chair as if she had braced herself for impact. Silent and still, she waits for the man in the corner to speak. He leans in and places his hands on his face. His eyes search her up and down as she shifts in her seat.

“What is it about humans that makes you cling to life so much? Death is the natural order of all things that have life within them.”

“So, you think it strange I don’t want my son to die? He has barely thrived, and I couldn’t protect him from this. I protected him from everything I could, but not this,” the mother says to him.

“I don’t think it strange. I find it fascinating.”

“Fascinating?” She says, placing her hand on her chest. Her eyebrows furrow.

“I do,” the man in the corner says, “you humans go on living your lives knowing that, despite all the things you will achieve, it doesn’t matter. Other animals don’t display the same reverence for life that humans do.”

“But why children? Why take ones who have experienced little of anything? Why my son? Why?” The mother says into her hands.

“It isn’t my choice. I must do the job I was given,” he says to the mother, rising from his seat. He carefully starts making his way toward her with his hand outstretched. She recoils from his advance, trying to keep a distance from his hand.

The man stops. He looks over to Julian lying on the hospital bed, laboring to breathe. He reaches out to Julian, but stops short, his hand hovering. He places his hand down and looks back at the woman.

"I envy humans. They can experience life in all its beauty and tragedy. They get shaped and molded by life, while I cannot. I am stagnant. The only thing I can do is my duty, to take that very life I envy away from everything they love. There's no substance to what I do."

“Are you saying you aren’t the Angel of Death? You came to take my boy to heaven, right? That’s the only place he could go. You don’t have to take him now, right? Please, let him stay with me instead. Help him.”

The man watches the mother dab her eyes, then blow her nose. He crouches down in front of her and wipes her tears. The man watches the streak of liquid travel down his finger.

“I wish I could feel this,” he says.

The Lady stares at him while he muses over the tear. She motions for the man to move out of her way, then stands.

“Can you take me in his place? Please tell me I can take his place!”

The man places his hands on her shoulders and brings her into an icy embrace. He strokes her hair, intertwining small strands between his fingers. He breathes her in slowly, trying to savor these new features to memory.

“I’m sorry. This does not work that way. If I were to take you in his place, his body would still be suffering. Eventually, the outcome would still be the same. I do not have the power to give life back to a person, only to take life away.”

The mother sobs into his chest with everything she had, using death as a buffer for her screams of anguish. The man stands still with his arms around him. He let her continue until she was empty.

She steps back, wiping her eyes. The mother looked down at her son, and asked, “will he be okay in Heaven?”

“There is no Heaven. He will go back to the universe, and that energy will give life anew. There will be peace in rebirth for Julian.”

The mother stands over to her son and hugs him as tightly as she can. She kisses him on his forehead and caresses his face.

“I love you, Julian. You are my star, and you will always burn brightly in my heart,” she said into his ear. A final kiss, then she nodded to the man.

The man raised his hand and places it on Julian’s. For a moment, nothing happened. Shortly after the life support alert beeps, the doctors arrive at his room in less than a minute. He looked Julian over, checking his vitals. The doctor shakes his head.

“Call it,” he says.

“Time of death: 3:33 am. Cause of death, natural causes via cancer.”

The mother sits still in her chair, looking forward. She sees the man kneeling in front of a small pillar of light. She smiles as tears run down her face.

“Goodbye Julian, my bright star. Shine bright.”

The man looks at her one more time before guiding the light out of the room.

“Don’t worry, Julian,” he says as he places the light within his chest, “you will shine bright.”

