

Garden of Stars

Author: Maddie Douglas

Grade: 8

Teacher: Amanda Witty

School: Leawood Middle School, Leawood, KS

From the very first moment of my life, I knew who my best friend was. Not my workaholic mother, who immediately made a three-hour conference call within minutes of my birth. Certainly not my couch potato father, who escaped from the hospital during the birthing process so he wouldn't miss the season finale of his favorite show, "Chuck." Definitely not my older sister, Claire, who pitched a fit so unbearable that the doctors nearly damaged my brain shortly after I took my very first breath. My best friend and closest family member was the one who took my newborn body into her arms when my mom was making her phone call, the one who sang me to sleep when my sister rampaged the entire hospital. My Grandma Rose will always be my best friend, no matter what the stars of life have to say about it. They're just stars, after all.

Rose has witnessed every accomplishment I've made and every milestone I've survived. She heard me speak my first word, "Rose," while my parents were both carefully absorbed in other not-so-important activities. She helped me take my first steps and watched as I continued across the kitchen floor to fetch my binky without her hands for support. Rose was with me when I broke my first bone, courtesy of a grouchy six-year-old Claire shoving my delicate four-year-old body down the steep staircase. She even took me shopping for new clothes to match my green cast on the way home from the hospital. My Rose celebrated Christmas with me year after year, being especially generous whenever my sister received gifts from my parents and I did not. She did not leave my side for five whole years, except at night when she returned to her house three blocks away. I later calculated how many days were included in five years' time. For the first 1,826 nights of my life, I cried myself to sleep.

I specifically remember my first day of kindergarten at Peach Tree Elementary School in Chicago. The very name of the school made me queasy, and I practically begged my Rose to let me skip education. She'd already taught me how to read and write, two areas in which Claire struggled. Secretly, I took great pride in being smarter than Claire, but I wasn't going to let satisfaction sway me from my hatred of leaving Rose for school. We argued for a long time, until I finally gave into her judgment of what was best for me. After all, she was the only person whom I could trust to care what was best for me. (The only reason my parents even bought food anymore was so their "Darling Claire-Bear" didn't starve to death, though how they could imagine that I had no clue. Claire's idea of a three-meal day included six meals of donuts and Diet Coke, leaving me with nothing to eat but leftover Spaghettios and the unlikely chance of finding a pear. I often ate lunch at Rose's place.) I finally surrendered to Rose's verdict, and she kindly escorted my trembling body to the fiery pits of Peach Tree Elementary.

Naturally, I had enemies at school from the very first step I took into the kindergarten classroom. Rose embraced and encouraged me outside of the door before she betrayed me by turning in the other direction. Sulking, I had barely stepped through the door when my shoelace got caught in the hinges, and I was catapulted into the easel beside the doorframe, taking down two students with me as I fell to the tiled floor. One of the kids, named Jason, turned around and threw his fist neatly into the crevice underneath my jaw, leaving a throbbing bruise the size of a golf ball on the left side of my chin. The other child, Marisa, began wailing so noisily that I was warily reminded of Claire when she once dropped her favorite Barbie doll in the upstairs toilet. My teacher, Ms. Krandall, happened to turn around and witness the destruction just as I hastily jumped to my feet, accidentally breaking Jason's nose in the process. The rest of the day went more smoothly, probably because it was spent sitting on a stool staring at a crack in the wall in the "no-no" corner. I've never liked school.

Outside of purgatory, I spent most of my time reading books at Rose's apartment or curiously watching her sing to herself as she worked outside in the garden. When I was seven years old, she eventually began asking for my help. Although I always enjoyed any chance to be more like Rose, I was also vaguely aware of the fact that her energy was leaving her a little bit more every day. Her muscles seemed to become sorer every hour. She was getting old. I watched as she skillfully demonstrated how to neatly rake the soil, how to gently plant the seeds and how to water the flowers with care. One Friday night when I had the rare privilege of staying the night at Rose's place, she took my hand and pulled me down to sit on the swinging bench on her roomy front porch. We sat there for a while, enjoying the cool night air and gazing soundlessly at the bright stars. She eventually spoke, surprising me a bit as her soft voice broke through the silent evening atmosphere.

"Now, Lydia," she began. "Look at how all of the flowers compliment the house so nicely." I looked.

“What would those flowers look like if we hadn’t cared for them so, if we just worked all day without a thought or sat inside while they withered and suffered? Would the house look as lovely as it does?”

She waited, so I softly answered, “No ma’am. But Rose, why do you care so much about the pretty flowers? Why do you love them?” She looked down at me thoughtfully and smiled.

“I love those flowers for the same reason I love you, Lydia. Those flowers don’t hurt anyone; they do their best to make the world a better place. Just having them around makes people happier, though they are so neglected around the world.”

Her smile had been replaced by a grimace, her tone more serious. “Everything in this world needs to be cared for, Lyd, whether or not it’s alive. The horrible truth is, not everything is loved and taken care of. Everything needs nourishment and attention, though some things never receive either.”

I sat still, bewildered and impressed. She didn’t speak for quite some time, so I stared up at the stars once more. As I watched the sky, a shooting star flickered by, and a thought occurred to me. “Rose?” I asked tentatively. She gazed down at me in response. “Rose, who takes care of the stars?”

My question seemed to take her off guard, though her gentle, calm expression did not alter. “You do, baby,” She murmured tenderly. “You care for the stars because you take care of the world. You care for the people around you, even if they don’t feel the same.” She tilted her chin down knowingly. “You understand?”

I nodded wordlessly. She sighed and explained.

“Lydia, in my eyes, stars aren’t just balls of light and gas. I believe each star is its own constellation. A constellation is a picture the stars make, baby. I believe when people die, their souls become pictures in the stars. When you look at the stars, you can see people for what they truly are.”

At this point, I had already begun searching the sky, looking for people’s souls. My vision was becoming blurry, though, as tears obscured my view. “Rose?” I asked again. “Someday, will you be a con-ster-lu-tion?” The idea had just dawned on me, and it overwhelmed me completely. Slowly, she turned around and stared deep into my eyes. I could see her eyes beginning to prick as well; a tear trickled down my cheek.

“Constellation, Lydia,” she corrected me carefully. “And yes,” she continued, “I will be my own star.” Then, with a halfhearted grin, she added, “I suppose you’ll have to take care of me someday.”

I leaned into her, and for an endless time, silently contemplating the concept of “someday.” Someday came far too soon.

I was twelve years old when it happened. I had just begun attending junior high, a place that made Peach Tree Elementary School seem like heaven and angels in comparison. Despite my apparent dislike of school, my grades never faltered from an A average. Rose was always proud of me, even when I missed an assignment or two. She was seventy-five, not especially old for being a grandmother of a seventh grader. Her heart did it.

I woke up one morning and skipped to Rose’s house in an abnormally cheerful mood. I was so excited to tell her about my graded test, and I assumed we could talk about it over my favorite breakfast, blueberry muffins. Usually, I could smell her cooking all the way down the street. Galloping down her road, I sniffed the air to check the breakfast menu. Nothing. I stopped when I got to her front yard and took another whiff. Nothing. It wasn’t the lack of smell that made my stomach do a flip, but the lack of personality outside of her house. Her entire land normally emanated life and cheer. Not today.

The feeling of emptiness finally took me over, and I was running. I sprinted to her front door, harshly throwing it open in my attempt to see her as soon as possible. I found her, sitting in a rocking chair, her book fallen on the floor beside her. Aside from the book, she looked exactly how I had left her the night before.

I walked swiftly to her side, shaking her softly. “Rose...wake up.” Her eyes stayed closed. I shook her again, harder now. “Rose, please. Rose! *Wake up!*”

My hand dropped lifelessly to my side. My brain deflated, and all at once my body went numb. Subconsciously, I’d already known she wasn’t waking up. Helplessly, I stepped stiffly away from her cold form. I automatically picked up the phone to call for help, but stopped abruptly. Who could I call? I thought back to a time when Rose informed me about safety, and my frozen fingers slowly dialed the three digits. A kind voice picked up, exuding authority and calm at the same time. I vaguely remember her asking for the emergency, though it barely registered in my fried brain. The last thing I remember was my crackling voice squeaking “help.” Then my world went black.

I woke up in the hospital, momentarily forgetting the situation. Too soon, though, the memories flooded in. The doctor once again explained to me the horrible news. Although the information was clear, I don’t think it had made an impact on my brain yet. My soul was still numb, and every kind word spoken to me simply went in one ear and out the other. Everything I did was mechanical, every action automatic.

The funeral took place the next day; I didn’t cry. The tears I longed to shed were locked up inside me, surrounded by emptiness and what now felt like an anesthetic in my heart. My only feeling during the whole ceremony was an anger that brutally flared inside me at my family. My mom left during the funeral service to take a phone call.

When we reached the reception restaurant, my sister practically swallowed the entire buffet table. As for my dad, he didn't even *show up*. Apparently, there were some important reruns to attend to at home. Finally, mercy arrived, and the longest day of my existence came to its bitter end.

About a week later, my parents received the will. My mom accepted it inattentively, not even reading the important print. Claire's greed took hold of her and she snatched the will from my mom to read her inheritance, excitement blazing on her face. I painfully fought the urge to either throw up on her new blouse or sock her so hard she'd be colorblind. Her enthusiasm faded, and her face took on an expression similar to that of a pit bull. Her flat gray eyes bored into my own eyes, glaring repulsively. She then proceeded to throw the paper to the ground, stomp on it, and run in the opposite direction. I rolled my eyes at her dramatic exit, carefully picking up the paper and smoothing out the new creases. My eyes, taking in the contents of the page, suddenly bulged wide. Rose had given me *everything*. The paper slipped from my icy fingers, gracefully drifting to a halt on the kitchen floor. My mind was overwhelmed, abruptly plagued with confusion and disorientation. Her jewelry, her house her garden... all of it belonged to me. I couldn't bear it.

I looked out the window to distract myself from my deteriorating life and saw the stars. They were winking at me, encouraging me to take hold of my life and turn things around for the better. I looked away harshly, disgusted. What did they know? They were just stars, after all.

Though my tragic life continued, the feeling of numbness didn't fade. My behavior changed, as well as my grade point average. I no longer tried to do well in school, lost of all motivation. I ditched classes regularly and took drugs on occasion. Naturally, my parents didn't notice, nor would they have cared if they did. I had no friends and certainly no love interests. My life was wrong, a flaw in the happy chain of society. At that point, I really didn't care.

It wasn't until tenth grade that my life changed. We were going on a surprise field trip, one I was miraculously allowed to attend. I sat alone on the bus while the rest of my chirpy biology classmates tittered about field trip locations. The place didn't matter to me, I just wanted to escape town for a while.

I drowned in my negative thoughts for a bit until the bus finally came to a stop. I strolled out into the fresh air, a sensation I hadn't felt in months. A certain fragrance was perfuming the air, one that tickled my nose and played with my memory. I started walking again, hoping to find the source of the smell and cure my curiosity. After about ten more feet, I stopped abruptly. *Oh*. Now I understood the smell and the reason for my abnormally fast heart rate. The aroma was flowers, an odor filled with traces of lilac, tiger lily, lavender, orange blossom, roses... I had smelled them before.

I walked through a large iron gate between two long concrete walls, and confirmed my suspicions. This place was a garden; I now had no doubt. The first hints of feeling were beginning to leak through my long-dormant heart. I restrained them callously, not willing to show any signs of emotion in public. I knew what I had to do.

I ran from the bus, but not to my normal destination. I sprinted for three blocks until I stood at the front door of her house. I pulled the familiar key from my jacket pocket, and bravely marched into my empty home. I cherished the familiarity, feeling the hope and happiness finally saturate my veins once more. It was then that I noticed the small envelope sitting on the very rocking chair that had ruined my entire life. I opened it carefully, not sure what to expect. It read:

Dearest Lydia,

The state in which you are reading this must not be positive, considering the time this note was to be delivered to you. For that I apologize, because I have known my time was coming for quite a while now. I didn't want to waste any of my time with you, so I kept my health conditions a secret. Your life is in your hands, Lydia, and I know you can turn it around without my help. Remember that I love you forever. If you need me, I'll be in the stars. Take care of me there, and take care of yourself.

Love,

Grandma Rose

The tears I had worked so hard to conceal spilled freely now. All of the numbness surrounding me was gone, replaced by an overwhelming amount of emotion. I sat in her chair for hours, drowning in the tears that consumed me at last. Memories flooded my mind, finally awakening my brain from its endless reverie. After a while, I dried my weary eyes and composed myself enough to check the damage outside.

No trace of life ever existing in the bare wasteland the garden was evident. My heart sank in despair as I realized this monstrosity was my fault, my burden. A burst of intuition suddenly enveloped me, and I knew what I would do. I would gain control over my sorrowful life, and I would turn it around. I would replant the garden that made life a better place to be. I would take care of the stars. With a smile, I realized that by caring for myself, I was caring for the stars.

I began to walk away when a flicker of color caught my eye from the desert garden. I bent down and examined the bright red rose; it was bursting with life and exuding personality from every angle. I grinned and looked up at the starry sky, wondering how one could possibly doubt the power of love when it came right down to it. I walked home in the dark, smiling grandly the entire way. I gazed at the garden of stars in admiration, and I knew why I felt so protected that night. After all, they're more than just stars. They're life.