

The Light In the Darkness

by Anna Perrin

Find the light in the darkness. That's what my grandfather told me just before he died. "You can find it Lisa dear, if you just try." Two hours later, he was gone. Just like that, his life was carried away with the breath of the wind. What light can be found in darkness though?

I stare moodily at a spot on the wall, my chin resting in the palms of my hands. "Lisa?" my teacher prompts. "The answer?" "I'm not sure," I answer with a sigh, tugging at my long, black hair. "Not sure?" she asks with a look of dismay on her face. "We just reviewed the chapter, and you're not sure? Look again Lisa." I sigh heavily once more. I don't care about this stupid chapter or this stupid subject, I think. It's not like I get good grades anyways... but I still flip through the textbook reluctantly.

The bell rings. "Class dismissed," the teacher calls. I get up from my seat and walk out of the door quickly, avoiding everyone's eyes. I catch a glimpse of a group of girls laughing and talking, and I stare at them wistfully. Snap out of it Lisa, I tell myself. It's not like you could ever be popular. I trudge over to my next class, low-spirited. Slumped in my seat, I wait for the chime, the beautiful chime that ends the day. When the wonderful sound fills my ears, I leap out of my seat and hurry out the door, not even looking back when someone calls my name. I don't look back the whole way home.

I get home and drop my backpack on a chair. I say hi to my brother, who is busy watching cartoons, then rush past him to a nearby room. Gingerly and carefully, I touch the doorknob, unsure if I should go in. All of a sudden, I hear a weak voice. I swing open the door and find

my mother lying in bed. "Come Lisa," she says hoarsely, motioning to me. My eyes almost fill with tears. Mother's weak, pallid face just peeks up above the blankets that cover her. She looks worse today, I think sadly. Her almost transparent hands are clasped on her chest. Her ragged, coarse breathing resonates throughout the entire room. Her eyes, once so starry and bright, are now dull and glassy.

"I fear I may be leaving you soon," Mother tells me bitterly, yet her voice sounds as sweet as chimes twinkling in the sunlight, as children laughing on a hot summer day. No! I think. You can't leave us! "Cancer won't take you away!" I exclaim determinedly. "I'm almost certain it will," she says again bitterly. My eyes brim with tears and they tumble out in a cascade. "But you can't leave us!" I say in between sobs. "What will I do without you?"

My fingers linger over the bruises on my arm, black and blue. In my mind, I see a whip and Father's angry face, his eyes like darts. I feel a sharp pain in my arm, like knives stabbing it repeatedly, and I almost expect Father's face to be looming over mine, telling me what a useless disappointment I am. With a stab of pain in my heart, I suddenly know that Mother doesn't even realise what Father is doing to me. I shake away the horrible feeling and stare into Mother's eyes. A shawl is wrapped around her, and her golden hair, like waves of the ocean, fall around her face, emitting a dull glow around the room. "Don't go," I say, almost begging. "I need you!" "As do I," she says with a sad smile.

Just then, Father storms into the room, breaking the peaceful moment. His eyes narrow questioningly at me, almost as if asking why I'm there, then he gives a warm smile to Mother. My heart starts to beat faster and I can feel rage rising in me, wanting to lash out. "How are you, my love?" he asks Mother. "Oh, I'm afraid my days here will be over soon," she answers with some difficulty. Father sits next to my mother and starts giving her medicine, talking soothingly to her and completely ignoring the fact that I'm here. I take this

as my cue to leave and walk out the door. Mother smiles at me rather weakly, but I don't have the strength to smile back.

Days, weeks go by without the doctor saying anything about Mother's condition, yet almost every single day he comes over to our house, always leaving while muttering to himself. Everyday, I sit in class, not caring what is being taught to me, not knowing what the next hour will bring. In my spare time, I sit next to Mother's bed, reading a book to her or singing, and sometimes sitting in silence, wondering what life will bring us when Mother is finally better.

Then on one chilly, spring morning, the phone finally rings.

I dash down the stairs two at a time at the sound of it, my backpack in one hand and my jacket in the other. My wild, black hair trails behind me, the result of two weeks without combing it. It's the doctor, I think. I don't know how, but I can somehow sense it. The question is, will it hold bad news or good news?

Before I can reach the phone however, Father snatches it up with his impatient hands. "Yes? How may I help you?" he asks with the air of a manager. "Oh really? Well, that's wonderful! Thank you so much for letting me know! Yes, thank you. Bye!" Father hangs up. I look at him, expectantly. "What?" he asks sharply. "Well, what did they say?" I question in an impatient tone. "It was the doctor. Your mother is getting better."

My heart leaps with joy and I relax for the first time in weeks. My eyes gleam with excitement and my heart feels light and free. "Really?" I ask with a thrill in my voice. "Yes really. Now hurry up for school, I don't want you to be an embarrassment to me." Usually,

Father's insults sting, but today, nothing can -or will- dampen my good mood. I skip all the way to school, all the while humming Sunny Day by Joy Williams.

When it's finally lunchtime, I expect to find something special or just something better for this special occasion. I'm disappointed though, because all I find is a soggy sandwich with a singular piece of cheese in it. I sigh heavily. Of course, I think. We haven't been getting a lot of money since Mother got sick, only enough to pay the bills and provide us with the essentials. Then I shrug. "It's fine," I say aloud. Besides, Mother is getting better, that's a treat in itself.

Remarkably, I get through the day without any daydreams and the teachers don't call on me a single time. I don't know if it's just unexplainable luck, but I don't care. I might have even scraped a B- on the Social test today. At the end of the day, I stuff my C+ geometry test into my backpack, along with my textbooks. I close my desk with a loud BAM and leave the classroom in a hurry. I need to see it for myself if Mother really is getting better.

When I escape the mob of kids from inside, I find, to my dismay, that it is heavily raining outside and a storm is brewing. Thunder cracks through the once-peaceful sky and lightning shoots down in all directions like bolts of electricity. My heart sinks. I'll have to walk alone in the rain. Pushing my already sopping hair out of my face, I trudge along the sidewalk in my sneakers, my feet making a SPLOSH everytime I put my foot down. The clouds are a deep grey and the rain feels like pebbles falling on me, a weight on my shoulder getting heavier and heavier.

Despite the rain and howling wind, I put a smile on my face, eager to see my mother. After trudging through the rain for about 20 minutes or so, I finally reach our apartment. Shivering slightly and soaked to the bone, I enter the building. My sneakers make a weird type of sound on the carpet, almost satisfying but not quite. I give a quick hello to Mr. Green, the old

elderly man that used to give me sweets when I was little. I then race to the elevator, my black hair sticking to the back of my neck like a long-lost friend not wanting to let go and say goodbye. I laugh. The idea of me actually having a friend, a close friend is so absurd. I mean, I used to have a good friend before Mother got sick, but then she ditched me for one of the popular girls. After that, I never told anyone else about Mother. I don't need friends, I think to myself. I can do everything alright on my own. I push the elevator button hard and zoom up to the higher floors, leaving a considerable amount of water in the lobby. The elevator doors slide open on the 5th floor, and I get out, quickening my pace. I can't wait to see how Mother is! I think. When I get to our door (5E), I push it open with anticipation coursing through me.

My little brother, Adam, is sitting on the couch, tears in his eyes. There are wet spots on his cheeks and he's crying loudly. At first, I think it's something that happened at school, but Father is also sitting on the couch looking deeply troubled and upset. Father never asks us about school. I timidly step towards them, my steps small. "What's wrong?" But Adam answers before I can finish. He looks me straight in the eyes, his ocean blue eyes from Father into my emerald green eyes from Mother. "Mo-Mother," he says in a shaky voice, tears trickling down his cheek. He takes a deep, steadying breath and goes on. "Mo-Mother is de-dead," he stutters. He looks away and continues crying, the tears splashing down his cheeks.

I stand there, frozen, paralysed with shock. No, no! This can't be true. This is all just a dream, all just a dream! I've dreamed of stuff like this before! I even pinch myself, just to convince myself that this isn't real. This is *not* happening, I pray. I'll just wake up and everything will be alright. But Adam keeps on crying, and now, my heart broken and shattered, I realise the truth. She really is gone, gone beyond this world.

Suddenly, rage overcomes me. "You killed her!" I shout at Father, anger shooting out of me with every word. "You killed her! The doctor said she was better this morning, but now she's dead!" I know this isn't true and that he actually loves her dearly, but I can somehow still see

Father with an evil glint in his eye, killing her, taking my beautiful Mother away from me. It's the only explanation. Father's sombre face turns livid and he steps towards me, his eyes as cold as ice. "How dare you?" he says quietly, but every word is filled with anger and rage. "I would have never done such a thing. And in case you didn't know, the doctor informed me later today that they mixed up the lab results. She was actually getting worse." His face is contorted with rage and he grabs a belt from the table. I leap back, but he is too quick for me. He swings his arm back and whips me with it. Adam gives a small gasp of surprise. I don't feel the pain at all though. The tears finally come. I now know that Mother will never be able to comfort me in hard times ever again.

There's a sudden pain in my heart and I feel like I've been stabbed. I give a great, shuttering gasp and tears pour down my face. There is a lump in my throat and I try to hold it back, but I can't. My tears leave a trace on my skin, like water on a dusty surface. My hands are shaking and trembling. I kneel on my knees, sorrow and grief splashing down my red and blotchy face. The birds outside, in the once howling storm, chirp sadly, as if they can feel the pain in my heart. But they never will.

After what seems like hours, I get up shakily. I feel like I just got beaten up, over and over again. I look at Father. His face is still livid. Why isn't he crying like me? I wonder. I run to my room, leaving Father behind, the belt hanging loosely at his side. I bury my head in my pillow and the grief in my heart creeps out again. I sob loudly. What will I do without you Mother?

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BRING! BRING! BRING! I open my eyes and roll over on my bed. I haven't been able to sleep for the last few nights. For the past few weeks, we have been so busy with Mother's funeral and friends and family coming over to visit that I feel devastated and overwhelmed. After proceeding downstairs, I find that Father is already on the phone with someone. " Yes, I

feel so too. Well, I assume we will proceed with this today, is that correct? Yes, she is going back to school today. Well, thank you. Yes, you too!" CLICK! He hangs up. I peer at him from the top of the stairs. Who could he be calling this early? I wonder. "It was your teacher," he tells me in an icy tone. My heart skips a beat. "They've decided to move you to a different class. A, well, a *special* class." I roll my eyes. Father would call a plain cheese sandwich special if he had to. "And?" I ask in an equally icy tone. "That's all! Now get ready!" he snaps. And I run off to my room to get ready for the worst day of school ever.

When I arrive at the school, looking sullen-faced and sulky, the principal is there. She greets me. "Hi Lisa!" she exclaims in a way too cheerful tone. "Hi," I mumble back. "Now, I'm sure your father has informed you about this class. You see, you have experienced quite a lot of loss in your life. Your grandfather and your mom." My eyes sting and burn at the way she casually added Mother to the list. "This is a class to help kids who have experienced some events in their life." I nod, staring at my feet. "Just follow that group of kids there. And Lisa..." She kneels next to me. "It's going to be okay, 'kay? Just, try and make some friends. We will get through this together." I nod through blurry eyes and she walks off to some other students. I follow behind the group of kids cautiously, not wanting to be seen or talked to.

We finally reach a bright classroom at the end of the hallway. I follow the group inside and am slightly overwhelmed by its positive energy. The walls are covered in posters with positive messages and the colours are vivid. The bell rings loudly to announce the start of class and I take a seat in the very back. The teacher goes to the front and asks us to firstly name something great we did today. I skip my turn and the teacher seems fine with it. We introduce ourselves to the class and the teacher introduces herself. I force myself to do some of the group activities before we start learning.

Finally, the bell for lunch rings. It is the first time in forever that I'm actually glad to go to lunch. Suddenly, a voice calls my name. I turn around fast, almost as if I'm expecting an

attacker. It's a girl. She has hazelnut brown hair that goes down to her shoulders. Her eyes are the same emerald green as mine and she's wearing a warm smile. Somehow, she looks vaguely familiar. I narrow my eyes. "Go away," I tell her. "Please," I add. But she doesn't budge. "Look, I know what you're probably thinking," she begins. "You don't!" I snap, cutting her short. "Please, just let me finish," she begs. I agree warily, seeing that she isn't going to leave anytime sooner. "I know you probably won't like me, seeing as Jennifer ditched you for me, but..." I stop packing up. "But what?" I snap. "I don't want to talk to anyone. And where is your *bestie* anyways?" "She ditched me too, once she found out my parents got divorced. I'm living with my dad now," she explains. "And I'm sorry about your Mother."

I suddenly break down, weeping and wailing. My cheeks are wet again and my hands are on my face. She holds me in her arms tightly and also begins to cry. We sit on the floor, both of us swallowed in our own grief and sadness, trying to find a way to swim back up to the surface.

After it seems like all the tears have been drained from me, I stand up. The girl follows suit. "Rosemary," she tells me. "Lisa," I state. We both shake hands and head off to lunch. I smile slightly, feeling the happiest I've ever been today. The light shines through the windows when we walk along the hallway. I didn't know that it was this sunny today, I think, surprised.

In the cafeteria, we pick an unoccupied table in a corner. Rosemary goes off to buy her own lunch and I watch, jealous. All I have for lunch is a sandwich. By the time Rosemary comes back, I'm already finished and my stomach is grumbling hungrily for more. "Here." She slides a tray over to me "I got this for you." I look at it in surprise. No one has ever done anything like this for me before. "Th-thanks!" I exclaim, just as Rosemary begins eating from her own tray. I stuff the flavours in my mouth. It tastes way better than what we have at home. After swallowing a huge mouthful, I say, "I haven't had this for such a long time. Thank you so much!" "If you like I can buy you another one tomorrow." She smiles.

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The learning is done for the rest of the day and I feel loads better than I did this morning. Having a new friend beside me brightens my day up a whole lot. Although Mother's death is still fresh in my mind, I have got to admit that it doesn't hurt as much as before. I'm still really sad, but not like before.

Outside, the air is filled with the buzz of life. Flowers in many different, vibrant colours bloom. The bees, so lively and energetic, dance in the air, delicately landing on flowers. The days become hot and the sweltering heat almost becomes unbearable.

I'm planning on going to the park after the bell rings, but Rosemary suggests we should go to the music room. I follow her in doubt. I can't sing, I think. She dashes over to the music room, taking large strides.

We enter the music room and I'm actually kind of curious to see what's happening inside. There's a poster on the wall that says: *PLAY! Come and join now to act with your friends!* I back into a wall. Nope, I think to myself. You can't act. You could never do that. But Rosemary gently grabs my hand and guides me. "We should do this." She looks me straight in the eye and looks dead serious. "And why should we do this?" "We have to do it! We are required to do one leadership or acting thingy. I've looked at all the other ones and they all SUCK. We'll be doing the exact same play. C'mon, please just give it a try!" She looks at me with adorable puppy eyes and I just can't say no. I nod and she squeals a little. "Great! We just have to sign up! They've already written the parts and we get to pick our own. Then, we practice! Practice is 3 times a week. Also, I decided I'll be one of the main characters, if it's still available." I nod weakly, very overwhelmed and regretting my choice.

The sign-up sheet is taped onto a wall in the back. Rosemary is delighted to know that the character she wants is available and she quickly leaves, telling me she'll be outside. I honestly don't know what to pick! I think. Maybe I could just leave? I decide against it. Rosemary is the first friend I've had in a long time and I wouldn't want to lose her.

My finger traces all the names until it lands on one: Lillian. Mother's name. I trace the letters and feel them in my mouth. They taste sweet like honey and smooth like silk. They flow like waves of the ocean. The letters and the harmony, they all feel perfect in my mouth. The description box beside the name says '*Main character along with Rose. She is on an adventure to find her friend after they are separated*'. I hesitate. Do I really want to be the main character and have all the spotlight? I wonder. I mean, it's something Rosemary would do, but not me. But Mother would want me to do it. With this hopeful thought in my head, I bravely write my name next to Lillian. I can do this, I think with determination. I think of Mother's bright, starry eyes and her beaming smile, and I know that I'll make her proud.

The weeks go by fast with all the practising for the play. Rosemary and I get closer and closer. At home, it feels the same, just without Mother. I sometimes feel the need to have a good cry, so I lock myself up in my room. Surprisingly, when Rosemary is at school, I don't feel the need to. Father has stopped whipping me and he looks tired these days. He is often quiet and constantly wears an empty expression, holding a ghostly shadow. The burning fire that used to be in his eyes is now lifeless and gone. The person that used to play with me, accused me of being responsible for Mother's sickness is now gone, all just a memory that someone can only hold.

I have gotten more used to the kids in my class and they are all really nice. We sympathise with each other and I realise that some kids have it even worse than me. For the first time in

what seems like forever, I have real friends. It feels like a hidden power and strength inside of me that keeps me going and gets me motivated.

The days get chillier and chillier, winter's way of saying that it's coming. Rosemary and I spend a lot of time in the park, just hanging out. On one particular warm day, we are hanging out on the swings. Suddenly, Rosemary reaches into her pocket and pulls out a bracelet. "What's that?" I can't help asking. She doesn't answer and instead slips it on her wrist. She pulls an identical one from her pocket. "These are friendship bracelets," she explains. Rosemary hands it to me. "I have one and you have the other. I want you to remember me always, but especially during the play. I know the play is a little hard for you, but I have complete faith in you. And I want you to remember that." My eyes fill with tears, but this time they're happy. "It's beautiful," I whisper, and I really mean it. The bracelets are made of string and woven together. The letters BFF are written in the centre. I trace them with my finger. Then I get off the swing and hug Rosemary. "I'm so grateful to have a friend like you," I whisper in her ear. Rosemary absolutely beams.

It's the day of the play and I'm so nervous. Like, so, so nervous. Rosemary, on the other hand, is so, so excited. "Everybody will be watching!" she exclaims. "Aren't you excited?" "Yup," I lie. "Very excited right now." My hands are sweaty and I feel light headed, like I'm going to faint.

I'm wearing a lilac dress that I borrowed from Rosemary. It feels as smooth as silk and as light as a feather. There are flowers pinned in my hair, a deep, vibrant purple to match the dress. My shoes are black and smooth, shoes that I could never afford. Rosemary is

wearing an emerald green dress with a single sunflower pinned in her hair. The green contrasts nicely with her short, brown hair. She looks as though she is a fairy, gracefully dancing through the sky. Suddenly, I hear a voice. "Ladies and gentlemen. Please welcome on stage our wonderful actors and actresses. I now present to you, *The Voyage!*" The crowd explodes with cheering and I feel my insides squirm around uncomfortably. *The Voyage!* is about two girls who are best friends but they are separated from each other. Rosemary and I are those two girls: Lillian and Rose. They are on a journey to find each other and discover the real meaning of friendship and love along the way.

Rosemary is on first. She goes on the stage eagerly and I can hear her singing through the curtains. It sounds really good, like fairies dancing and twirling around in the dusk of the morning. There comes a duet with a different girl and they dance and sing together on stage, all in perfect harmony. When it's my turn to go up, I get so nervous and forget my lines, but then I peer at the woven bracelet on my wrist. A sudden surge of courage and faith shoots through me and I feel brave and confident to go on. I forget all about my worries. In the last scene, Rosemary and I are both on. We sit down at a table and look at each other. I use all my willpower not to laugh. "Dear friend," I say. "We finally meet again. How overjoyed am I to see you." "As am I," she replies. We raise our glasses and say, "To friendship, to love, and to hope!"

The light reflects on the glasses and I see a twinkle in Rosemary's green eyes. The words that Grandfather once told me suddenly ring in my head. "*Find the light in the darkness. You can find it Lisa dear, if you just try.*" I have tried Grandfather, I think in my head. I have. And at that moment, I know that friendship has given me strength and courage. I have finally found the light in the darkness.