

November Rain

by Daniel Shen

Turn Away

I used to think I had six months left the day I turned thirteen. Turns out I was only off by a couple years.

It's not the kind of thing you can say out loud. Especially when you're still walking, still breathing, still turning in your homework like everyone else. But sometimes, you just know. Not in your brain — in your bones. Like your body's a house with cracks no one sees, and something inside is leaking out, slow and quiet.

At home, silence wasn't peace. It was punishment. It settled in after the shouting, thick like smoke that didn't want to leave. Dad didn't hit me often — not with fists, anyway. He was more precise than that. He used words. Silence. Disappointment.

"You're late," he'd snap as soon as I walked through the door.

"Practice ran long."

He'd narrow his eyes. "Don't fucking lie."

"I'm not."

Then his voice would drop — quiet, cold. "You wanna try that again?"

Mom never dared to intervene. She'd just tighten her grip on whatever she was holding like it might escape her if she let go.

The only place I felt okay was in my music. The songs were dumb, maybe. Stupid. But they made me feel like I was still here. So I kept writing. Kept hiding behind melodies no one heard. Kept counting down days I hadn't been told to count yet.

Because the truth is — you start dying long before your body gets the memo. It was a Tuesday when we went to the hospital.

The place smelled like bleach and resignation. Everything was too white — the walls, the coats, even the plants looked like they'd given up.

The doctor said my name. "Jaime..."

Then came the blur: aggressive, terminal, cancer, six months.

Six months.

I stared at the clock ticking behind his head, each second louder than the last. I didn't cry. Didn't speak. Just sat there while Mom cleared her throat and asked something about treatment. The doctor answered with timelines and percentages. I didn't listen.

On the way out, she squeezed my shoulder. I leaned in.

We sat in the car for a while, engine running, heat humming. No music. No words. That night, I didn't write any songs. Just stared at the blank page in my notebook until it started to look like a mirror. Eventually, I picked up my pen and scrawled:

*"What do you do with a borrowed sky,
When the sun's not yours to keep?
What do you do on borrowed time..."*

The words just stuck there, for the first time in my life. I didn't know what it meant. Maybe I still don't. But it felt real.

And weirdly, I felt... relieved. Like someone had finally said it out loud — Yes, it's ending. You were right to feel broken all along.

The ache had a name now. An expiration date.

I didn't tell anyone at school. I mean, what would I even say?

Hey, can I borrow a pencil? Also, I'm dying.

The Rooftop Girl

I found the rooftop by accident.

The stairwell wasn't labeled, and the door had one of those rusty push bars that looked like it hadn't been touched in years. I thought it might be locked — kind of hoped it would be — but when I leaned into it, it opened with a groan like it hadn't been asked to move in a long time.

Outside, the air hit different. Colder. Freer. The sky was smeared with dark heavy heavy-looking clouds. I didn't expect anyone to be there. So when I saw her, sitting on the edge with her knees pulled to her chest, I froze.

She didn't look at me right away, as she tossed a pebble over the side, watching it disappear.

"You're not supposed to be up here," I said. I didn't know what else to say.

She shrugged. "You're not supposed to be up here too."

Fair.

I stood awkwardly for a few seconds, thinking I should leave. That this was her place first. But then she patted the concrete beside her without looking at me.

So I sat.

We didn't talk at first. Just listened. The wind. The hum of the city down below. A distant siren from a world that had abandoned us.

She had a bandana covering up her hair and a hospital bracelet on her wrist. I tried to glance at it, maybe catch a name. She pulled her sleeve down.

"Don't bother," she said. "It's not really that interesting."

"You don't know what I find interesting."

Now she looked at me. Noticed me.

"I don't think you look that sick," she said.

"Neither do you."

She smiled at that. A real one, small but real. "Maybe we're just good at pretending."

We sat for a while. I told her I came up here to get away from the beeping machines and the fluorescent lights. She said she came to feel like a person again.

Not a patient. Not a project.

Damn.

She looked at me then, eyes narrowed, like she was reading a page of me that she'd seen before.

"You talk like you write things," she said.

"Songs."

She smiled again. "Knew it. You've got the 'tragic songwriter's type vibe.'"

I didn't know what to say to that. So I asked, "What's your name?"

She paused. Then shook her head.

"Not today."

"Why not?"

"Because then it gets real. Names make things real."

She said it like a rule. Like something she'd decided a long time ago. And weirdly, I kinda understood.

The sky was starting to turn purple, and the wind nipped at us as she told me her stories. She laughed about stealing pudding cups from the cafeteria.

"It's not like they'd care anyway," I said. "We're dying—moral compasses aren't really built for people like us."

She just smiled, a soft, funny-looking kind of smile, and nudged me with her shoulder. "Maybe," she said, "but I'm still going to pretend it matters."

And for the first time in a while, I wanted to believe her. So I told her about a lyric I once scribbled on the back of a prescription slip.

"If I disappear, will the world blink? Or will it just keep staring?"

She didn't say anything to that one, just closed her eyes and leaned her head back. We didn't hug. We didn't promise to meet again. But the next day, I went back to the rooftop. And so did she.

Still no name, and still pretending it didn't matter.

But something was beginning, and I think we both felt it. As we sat there in the fading light, she leaned back on her hands and looked up at the sky.

"You know," she said, "it's kind of beautiful up here. Even if the world feels like it's ending."

I looked at her. Really looked. There was something in her eyes — not denial, not delusion — just... light. Like maybe, even now, she believed in something better than this.

"I don't know how much time I have left," she said, "but I'd rather spend it watching sunsets than counting down days."

She smiled at me then — soft, warm, and real.

"Come back tomorrow. I'll race you to the edge."

Days That Matter

We never said it out loud, but the rooftop became our place.

It was the one spot in the hospital that didn't smell like medicine. Up there, the world felt a little less heavy. We sat on the same patch of concrete every day after lunch, next to the old vent that hummed like a lazy machine.

She always beat me there. Legs crossed, with some snack in hand she definitely wasn't supposed to have.

"You're late," she said once, tossing me a pudding cup.

"Was getting my blood drained," I said. "Didn't sprint."

She smirked. "All just excuses."

We didn't talk about our illnesses. That was the only rule — it wasn't one we ever said out loud, just something we stuck to. If one of us looked pale or tired or coughed a little too hard, we didn't acknowledge it. Instead, we talked about anything else.

Music. Movies. The nurse with the weird haircut.

Once we tried ranking the worst hospital meals, but gave up because everything tied for last. I brought my notebook most days. She'd eye it like it was a secret she wanted to steal.

"Let me read something," she said one afternoon.

I hesitated. Then handed it over.

She flipped through slowly, no reactions. Just quiet focus. Then she looked deep, up into my eyes.

"These don't suck," she said.

"Wow. Thanks."

"No seriously. They're kinda good. They're" — she hesitated, leaving me stand on the edge just a bit longer — "honest."

That stuck with me. Not because she liked them — but because she read them like they meant something. Like I meant something.

Sometimes we'd talk about things we wanted to do. She said she wanted to live in a city where no one knew her.

I said I just wanted to make it to 18.

Neither of us said it like a wish. More like some kind of half-joke we both knew wouldn't really land.

One day, I brought my guitar. Just once. It was old, crack in the fretboard, and hadn't been tuned properly in weeks. She made me play anyway.

I played a verse of something unfinished. She didn't say anything while I played. Just sat with her chin resting on her knees, carefully listening.

When I stopped, she looked at me differently. Not in awe or anything — just... still. Like something inside her paused.

"You're better than most of those songs on the radio," she said.

I smirked. "Is that your way of saying thank you?"

"It's my way of saying I'd listen again."

We didn't talk much after that. The sky was starting to shift — grey slipping into pale orange. She pulled her hoodie tighter around her and leaned her head back against the wall. I sat next to her, close but not touching.

Then, without a word, she leaned over and rested her head on my shoulder. I froze for a second — not because I didn't want it, but because I did. More than I realized. Her weight was barely there, but it felt like the gravity had shifted. My pulse jumped. I didn't move.

"Is this okay?" she asked quietly, without lifting her head.

"Yeah," I said.

It was more than okay.

She stayed like that for a long while. Her hair smelled faintly like lemon shampoo. Her breath slowed. I didn't say anything. Didn't want to break whatever this was.

I just wanted to let it be.

After a while, I turned slightly, careful not to move too fast.

Our faces were close. Closer than they'd ever been. Her eyes opened, met mine. No smile.

Just... softness. A quiet kind of question.

I almost kissed her. She almost let me. But then she turned her face, just enough to rest her forehead against mine. And that was it.

Not a kiss. Not nothing. Something in-between.

We sat like that until it got too cold. Until the nurse paging system echoed faintly from below. She pulled back slowly, her voice barely above a whisper.

"You know my name doesn't matter, right?"

"I know," I said. "But I still want to."

She didn't answer. Just stood, hands in her pockets, and looked out over the city. "Come back tomorrow?" I asked. She nodded.

And I did.

But she didn't.

Gone With The Wind

The rooftop was empty the next day.

No pudding cup. No girl.

Just wind and a light drizzle.

I waited longer than usual, strumming the edge of my notebook, pretending not to care. But something felt off. A kind of stillness in the air, like the sky was holding its breath.

So I went looking.

The nurse at the desk barely looked up when I asked.

"She's in her room today," she said. "She's... not doing great."

My chest tightened. "Can I see her?"

There was a pause. Then a slow nod.

"Room 432. Just for a little bit."

Her room was dim, lit only by the soft flicker of the TV she wasn't watching. She was curled up under the blanket, eyes closed, face pale. The hoodie was gone. Her hospital gown looked too big on her.

I stood in the doorway for a second, unsure if I should walk in. Then I heard her voice — soft, like paper tearing.

"You're late."

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. "I brought pudding."

She smiled without opening her eyes. "Chocolate?"

"As always."

I pulled the chair closer and sat next to her bed. She looked smaller somehow, like someone had taken parts of her away overnight.

"I didn't think you'd come," she said.

"I always come."

She opened her eyes just enough to look at me. There was a hint of the girl I met on the rooftop in them — stubborn, funny, bright. But just a flicker now.

"I don't think I'll make it back up there," she whispered.

I reached for her hand. She didn't pull away.

"That's okay," I said. "I'll bring the rooftop here."

She let out a soft laugh, barely more than a breath. "You gonna play your guitar in a hospital bed?"

"If I have to."

We sat in silence for a while. Her hand in mine. The machine beside her ticking like a slowed-down clock.

"I'm not scared," she said, suddenly.

"I am."

"I know."

She turned her head slightly, looking past me, toward the window.

"Do you ever think," she murmured, "some people exist just to remind you what you're still capable of feeling?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't.

"Don't forget me, Jaime."

"I won't."

"I mean it."

"I know."

She closed her eyes again. Her hand didn't move, breath starting slow, steady but gradually fading.

"You still won't tell me your name?"

"You've always known it, you just haven't realized it yet."

And then... she was quiet.

Completely.

Not asleep. Not gone right away.

Just quiet.

Like a song ending on a held note.

The next morning, they told me she passed in the night.

I already knew.

I went back to the rooftop anyway. Sat next to her spot. Looked out over the city we never got to explore.

I didn't cry.

Not then.

Not yet.

But I took out my notebook, opened up a blank page, and tried to jot down some lyrics:

"I sat where you always did, and the sky felt different.

Untitled

I stopped going to the rooftop for a while.

She wasn't there anymore. And I didn't know how to be there without her. She saw me in ways even my own parents never tried to. Maybe that's why it hurts this much.

I thought I should go to the rooftop. Every morning, I almost reached for my notebook, almost turned toward the stairwell. But something stopped me.

Instead, I wandered the halls like a ghost. Nurses stopped asking if I was okay. People fade fast in hospitals — even the living. I knew that now.

It took me a week to finally climb the steps.

The wind was colder. Sharper. The sky was washed-out gray, the kind of color that doesn't commit to anything. But it was quiet — the good kind. The kind that doesn't demand answers.

I sat down next to her spot.

Left the pudding cup she never got to eat.

And I opened my notebook.

It took time. I didn't write anything profound. Not right away. Just fragments. Lines she would've laughed at. Scratched-out metaphors. Half-rhymes. But eventually... something came.

*"You were always the quiet kind of bright —
the kind that lit up rooms without needing to stay.
You didn't give me your name, but you gave me something better —
a reason to write when I had nothing left...
and the sky felt different."*

The words came slowly, like the way she used to speak. No rush. Just truth. And when I finished, I didn't read it back.

I just sang it.

Softly.

No audience. No guitar.

Just the wind, and the sky, and the memory of someone who mattered.

The final line was the only one I didn't write down. I just let it fall from my mouth like it had always been waiting:

"The sky might forget your name, but I couldn't."

I left the notebook up there. Tucked it behind the vent we always leaned against. I didn't sign it. Didn't need to.

If someone finds it, maybe they'll read the song. Maybe they'll wonder who she was. Maybe they'll feel what I felt.

That's enough.

The sky darkened before I stood to leave. Clouds rolled in, slow and heavy.
Then came the rain.

Not a storm — not loud or angry. Just that soft, steady kind of rain that only happens in November. The kind that makes everything quieter. Closer.

I didn't move.

Didn't cover my head.

Just let it fall.

She would've liked it, I think— the way the world finally slowed down long enough to feel something.

I don't know how many days I have left.

Still not counting.

But I write more now. I play more. Not because I believe in miracles, but because I believe in moments.

And she gave me mine.