

Shining Star

By Priyanka Aiyer

On May 27th, Lily Carter was ten years old, and her birthday wish was still unfulfilled.

From the outside, Lily looked like a pretty average girl. She had waist-length, straight black hair and wide green eyes. Her favorite class in school was art. On a rainy Saturday, you could find her next to the window, listening to music or reading or perfecting a song on her beloved guitar.

She was an only child; some people said being lonely fueled her passion. Lily loved all cats, and as far back as she could remember, she had been begging her parents for one.

Today, her parents were supposedly taking her out for a birthday dinner, but after driving for 45 minutes and arriving at a place which looked to Lily suspiciously like a farmhouse, she was sure something was up.

Nonetheless, she followed her parents up to the brick house and rang the doorbell.

A stout, red-cheeked woman with her hair in a loose bun appeared at the door. "Mr. and Mrs. Carter?" she said. "I've been expecting you!" She pinched Lily's cheek cheerfully. "Well, let's go!" She bustled out and they followed as she went to the barn. Lily, who by now had a pretty good idea what was going on, looked at her parents, who were grinning like a couple of cats that had got the cream.

Sure enough, when the woman threw open the barn doors, Lily was greeted by her favorite sound in the world: cats meowing.

The barn was musty and dark, with high rafters and hay underfoot. Lily scanned the place and her eyes met a pair of suspicious, baby blue ones.

After staring at Lily for a moment more, the cat stood, and Lily's breath was taken away by the four tiny balls of fur bounding towards her.

They were all beautiful, she admitted later, but it was the one who had stayed in the corner that had caught her eye.

The kitten purred softly as she picked it up. The woman smiled at the look on her face. "You, girl, have found your cat."

The rest of the night was a blur – the car ride home, in which the cat snuggled into Lily's arms and a smile never left her face... the debate over what to name the her... and the night, when the kitten cried and cried whenever she was left alone in the box designated as her new bed, and Lily's parents finally broke down and let her sleep with Lily.

That was the most blissful birthday of Lily's life.

"Michael! You're granddaughter's here to see you!" the nurse at the hospital said cheerfully. The old man gave no indication he had heard her, but stayed with his back to the small room, facing the window. Lily stood in the doorway as the nurse pulled back the curtains, letting the sun into the dimly lit room.

"Hi, Grandpa," Lily said.

He gave no answer, and Lily sighed.

Her grandfather had been in the hospital for a month now. At 78, he had had a severe stroke, and was now paralyzed from the waist down. Now, he was bitter and depressed, and refused to respond to her.

He had been happy and fun, his blue eyes always twinkling. Now his curly grey beard had a matted, uncombed look to it, his face gaunt. He refused to do therapy for his

paralyzed legs, and he complained all the time. All Lily wanted was her old grandfather back.

As she stood there, an mewling came from inside her bag.

Lily's new kitten was gentle, and very much a "lap cat," but also loved to play. Now Lily wondered if she had really made the right decision in convincing her parents to let her take the newly named Star with her on her visit to her grandfather.

Well, I can't very well pretend there's nothing there, Lily thought. "I brought someone to see you, Grandpa," she told him, and his nurse cooed when she saw Star's sweet face. She wheeled Lily's grandfather around to see Star.

They looked into each other's eyes.

One saw an old man who would have been tall if he was standing, with a thin face, and tired, defeated eyes.

The other saw a young kitten that wouldn't have been tall even if she was standing, with sparkling blue eyes, a brown muzzle, brown ears, a brown tail, and a white body.

Lily broke the spell, picking Star up and placing her on the old man's lap. He scowled, but made no attempt to push Star off. The kitten looked up at him and purred sleepily. Now that she was out of the bag, she was happy, albeit tired. This seemed as good a place to take a nap as any. She curled up and fell asleep.

Lily giggled. "Aw, Grandpa, she *likes* you!"

He looked down at the sleeping figure and raised his hand to pet her, barely forcing back a tiny smile.

From then on, Lily always brought Star along on her Friday visits. The kitten entertained the old man and made him chuckle with her capers.

On the third Friday, Lily's grandfather asked her to "bring the cat next week, will you?" He assured her he didn't care about Star, anyway, but at least when she was here, the nurses didn't bother him.

On the fourth Friday, Lily brought her guitar and played a couple of songs for her grandfather as Star slept on his lap.

On the fifth Friday, Lily brought her paints and paintbrush and did a watercolor of Grandpa and Star. His nurse helped him hang it in his room.

On the sixth Friday, his therapy doctor stopped her in the hallway and told her that he had caught Grandpa in his room trying to do the exercises he had assigned to help his legs grow stronger.

No one could deny that slowly but surely, Lily and Star were helping the old man heal.

One sunny day, Lily was relaxing in the garden as Star played around. She was engrossed in a new book she had just gotten from the local library, and so didn't notice when the kitten decided to test her climbing skills on the fence.

Star perched precariously on top of the fence and, with the skill of a gymnast, leapt onto the other side. She meowed happily at her cleverness and Lily looked up in time to see her kitten walking onto the street just as a car came speeding along.

Lily screamed and sprinted to the sidewalk as the car hit Star and kept going.

She ran onto the now-clear road to the motionless kitten and gently picked her up. Miraculously, the kitten was still breathing, although her eyes were closed.

"*Mom!*" Lily yelled, racing into the house. "Mom! Star..."

Her mother took one look at the kitten and said, "Lily, get a box and get into the car. We're going to the vet."

Lily didn't need telling twice. She found a box and was in the car in less than a minute, which was the time it took for her mother to get the car keys. They sped off to the vet's, who sighed in relief. "Thank God; she's alive."

"But she's unconscious!" Lily practically screamed.

The vet frowned. "Yes, she's probably in shock. But the worrying thing is that I think her two back legs are broken. I'll have to do some tests to see if she has any internal injuries, and then put her back legs in a cast."

"But will she be okay? Will she die?"

The vet hesitated. "I can't tell you anything for certain right now. She'll have to spend the night here; I can let you know in about three days whether everything's all right."

Lily gulped, forcing back tears.

Her mother intervened, saying, "Lily, sweetheart, let's go home. I know you're worried, but Star is in good hands. There's nothing you can do here. Why don't we stop by the pet shop on the way home and get her a new toy?"

And Lily reluctantly followed, with many backward glances at the vet and Star.

On the seventh Friday, Lily walked into Grandpa's room as usual. He was reading a book – it was the first time she had seen him do it since the stroke.

He waited for her to take Star out of her bag.

When nothing happened, Grandpa grunted, "Where's the kitten?"

"She... she got hit by a car."

Her grandfather visibly paled. "Is she all right?"

"We won't know until tomorrow," Lily told him.

He turned his back on her and threw his book, hard, on the bed, and Lily heard him muttering, "Stupid cat. Has to go and die on me."

On the eighth Friday, Lily walked slowly into her grandfather's room.

He was facing the window, in the same position that he had been in when she had first brought Star.

"Star's here," she announced, pulling the kitten with a flourish out of her bag.

The day she had gone to the vet's to get the verdict, he had greeted her with a huge smile on his face and the announcement that although her kitten's back legs were indeed broken, the rest of her was, extraordinarily, fine. She was incredibly lucky.

After she had come home, Star had been a little drowsy for the first couple of hours, but after that did magnificently pulling herself along with her front legs, or crying when she wanted someone to carry her. She was her old lively self.

The old man stared at the kitten for a couple of seconds. "She's okay?"

"Yes, she is!" Lily was on top of the world, practically dizzy with happiness.

"She's so... happy," he remarked, watching her bat at a loose string dangling from the blanket on his bed.

Lily smiled fondly. "I know! I thought she'd be grumpy, but she's really making do with what she has." Lily looked meaningfully up at her grandfather, who seemed lost in thought.

He nodded slowly, and when he looked up again, she could see a fire in his eyes, and she could imagine what was going on in his mind: *If a cat can do it, why can't I?*

The next Friday, she came with Star again, and found her Grandpa's therapist smiling broadly. "You'll never believe it!" he told her. "Your grandfather asked me for more exercises for his legs! His nurse told me she's had to stop him from doing them late at night! He told me a joke the other day! It's a miracle!"

Lily went to her grandfather's room and peeked in. He was waiting for her in his wheelchair with a wide grin on his face.

"Hi, Lily! Is Star here today?"

Lily pulled out her kitten, who meowed cheerfully at the sight of Lily's grandfather.

"You know, I've been thinking. That little cat, well, she's so happy-go-lucky, it's infectious. You know what I mean?"

Lily nodded.

"And since she was in that accident, she hasn't changed one bit. If anything, she's gotten even more optimistic. So I was thinking to myself, well, if that little cat can be so happy all the time, what am I doing sitting here feeling sorry for myself, right? I decided she and I, we're going to heal together."

Lily smiled and shrugged and giggled out of pure joy all at the same time.

Exactly two months later, Lily brought Star on her final visit to the hospital. All of the staff who had in any way helped Grandpa were there to see him off. Lily took Star out of her bag and the kitten teetered precariously, struggling to walk after two months with her legs in casts.

At the same time, Lily's grandfather stood up from his wheelchair with a huge smile and walked with the help of a cane.

And everyone in the room cheered for the old man and the little girl with the kitten who had brought him back to life.