

The scorching sun glared overhead as the sleek black car pulled up beside a rusted gate. Rumbling to a halt, the car doors opened and several people clambered out: my grandmother, my mother, and I. Shielding my eyes from the burning sun, I peered up at the house in front of me, surrounded by a gate with spikes at the tips. We were visiting our sick Guma, who was my great aunt from my mother's side of the family. I had never seen my Guma before, but I was excited to meet her.

An elderly woman came to the door, the guarded caution in her dark eyes switching to glowing warmth when she recognized us. I stared at her in confusion, accepting the gentle embrace she welcomed us with. Was she Guma? "Come in, come in," the old woman invited, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

Flinging off my flip-flops, I stepped inside the house, sighing with relief at the welcome sensation of air conditioning. Suddenly, I drew back in sheer horror, letting out a terrified gasp when I saw her. In the middle of the room, a skeleton lay on a plastic chair. No, it wasn't a skeleton—it was *alive*, barely. Papery white skin clung to her faltering frame, and I could see every single bone outlined sharply against her flesh. Her eyes were sunken deep into her face, and they were a pale gray color, all life drained from their depths. I could see her heartbeat throbbing in her neck, rapid and irregular. A choking noise gurgled in her throat with each painful breath, and her chest heaved, fighting for air. She was on the brink of death, barely clinging to life.

The lady who answered the door wasn't Guma—*this* was Guma.

My mother rushed forward, tears spilling from her anxious eyes as she grasped the figure's bony hand in hers. I didn't dare get close to Guma, afraid that I would inherit some sort of contagious disease that caused death from her. But I watched in fascination and bewilderment as my mother and my grandmother crowded around Guma, murmuring words of comfort and pity. I could see Guma's jaws moving ever so slightly, as if she were trying to say something, but she was so weak she couldn't get the words out. She stared blankly at the wall, hardly acknowledging my mother and my grandmother as they comforted her like she was a newborn baby, stroking her hair and gripping her hand.

"Mom," I whispered, stepping forward to shake my mother's shoulder. She turned to me, her eyes swollen and red, her face streaked with dried tears. "Mom, why is Guma so important to your family?"

My mother gazed thoughtfully at me for a heartbeat, then she settled down onto the couch. I plunked down next to her and looked expectantly at her. She stared into the distance for a while, her dark eyes brimming with memories, until finally she

turned her sorrowful gaze to me. “Let me tell you who I remember Guma as,” she began. “She wasn’t always like this, you know.” She paused, weighing her next words carefully, before launching into her story.

“When I was younger, my Guma was very close to me. My mom had four children to take care of and was always very busy, so my Guma took part in the role of looking after us. I remember how at night whenever I couldn’t sleep and my mother was too exhausted to tend to me, my Guma would come inside my room and comfort me, rocking me to sleep.

“My Guma will never forget the time when I was a misbehaving baby, and I became so furious that, in the heat of my anger, I grabbed her dangling earring and pulled, hard. The force of my yank ripped a line down her ear, and the wound never healed properly. To this day, there is still a scar cutting down her earlobe.

“As a child, my Guma would always tell me about her pitiful life, complaining about how her mother had never sent her to school and how nobody ever cared for her. I grew so sick of hearing her complaints that I begged her to be quiet, but she always repeated herself. Now, I realize that all she wanted was for somebody to listen to her life and truly understand her.

“Think about the places outside your home you go to in life: the mall, the swimming pool, the beach, a hotel, school. My Guma has never been to these things. In fact, she has hardly ever been outside her own house. When she was a child, she didn’t go to school, so therefore she couldn’t write her own name, count, solve math problems, or even know her own age. Another major thing that was an obstacle in her life was that she couldn’t ride in a car. Whenever she did, she always complained about the ‘smell’ or the rocking movement of the car and felt like she was going to throw up. Because of her incapability to ride in a car, she couldn’t go places very far from her own home.

“When she was younger, she was always very physically weak. When she walked, her feet shuffled across the ground in a slow, awkward movement, as if each step was painful. She always was lacking in strength. But she still helped out around the house. Every day she hung the clothes outside to dry, swept the floor, and did several daily chores to keep herself busy. Although she didn’t do a perfect job at it because of her disabilities, she played an important role in keeping the house clean.

“Once, I brought my Guma several books and tried to teach her how to read them. She actually did quite well. She was a fast learner and I taught her some basic words before I grew bored of teaching her.”

My mother hesitated for a heartbeat and sighed softly, her eyes flaring with sorrowful memories and pity for the painful life Guma had been through. She glanced at the faltering frame sprawled across the chair, tears streaking her face. “Well, that’s really all I have to say,” she concluded. “Guma has lived such a hard life, and it’s sad to see her die, knowing what she has been put through. It’s a tragic end to a tragic life.”

I stared at Guma for a moment, then turned my gaze back to my mother, finally understanding the unbreakable connection that bound my mom and my Guma together. “Thanks for telling me, Mom,” I said. “I wish all the best for my Guma, and I hope she lives a happy afterlife.”