

Out of Stardust

by J. Lin

Nor woke, as always, to a dark room smelling of the lavender she kept in little bottles to perfume the otherwise stank air. Outside, she could still see the edge of the moon hanging there like a lopsided smile. The early summer wind blew in and stirred the faded floral curtains. Off in the distance there laid the ocean, a roaring blue ocean that she could almost smell, if she closed her eyes tight enough.

Her sister's toddler Ava began screaming about some injustice in the next room, repeating words only she could understand. Her sister Issa was constantly worried that her two and a half year old child didn't want to speak in real words that she would painstakingly repeat to her.

Yesterday at dinner, Issa picked up a spoon and said to Ava, "This is a SPOON."

She then picked up a fork and tapped at the sharp points. "This is a FORK."

Ava looked at her mother rather judgmentally before going back to picking at her plate and stuffing her chubby cheeks with bits of potato.

Ava enjoyed her own secret language too much to give up on it.

Whenever Nor and Issa used to have a bad day when they were children and later, teenagers, their mother would say to them, "Did you know that we are all made out of stardust?"

As children, they thought it a fascinating concept. As teenagers, they rolled their eyes as dramatically as possible and went on

lamenting about the mean girls with their stylish clothes and the handsome boys who went out with the mean girls instead of with them.

Whenever Ava was especially sad, Nor would say the same thing to her. Sometimes it worked, perhaps from Nor's sheer sincerity. Sometimes it didn't do anything. Nor patiently waited for the day Ava would understand these words.

When their mother left them to walk into the ocean one summer morning much like this morning, Nor was eighteen and Issa twenty. Issa was the one more shaken up, she being two months pregnant and needed maternal consultation. Issa, despite being twenty, waited for their mother to come back home, standing their in the doorway for hours at a time.

While she waited, she fed the chickens who squawked all around her. While she waited, the sun dipped lower and lower into the sky. While she waited, the neighbors looked over at them sideways with pity and murmured comments.

Nor for some reason wasn't surprised. She knew someday soon their mother would vanish. Where to, she didn't know. But she believed to a better place. Her mother had suffered enough. She deserved much more than this. She deserved a magical city at the bottom of the ocean. When Nor imagined heaven, she imagined this. At the end of her life, she would join her mother at the bottom of the ocean.

Issa at three months pregnant didn't know if she should abort it, adopt it off, or keep it. Nor decided to make the decision for her. Issa was so shaken up. She wasn't thinking clearly at all. Nor said, "Keep the baby. Forget about the father. He is going to end up back in jail for drugs anyway. We will make it work. Just the two of us. Well, the three of us."

Nor filled a bucket with water and splashed her face first, wincing at the intrusion of the coldness. She wiped the dust from her eyes. She gathered her hair into a loose bun and put on a red lipstick. Oh how she loved a good red lipstick. Not that it mattered at her job. A job full of women in ill-fitting clothes, drained faces and tangled hair.

She dressed in clean clothes, ate two apples, and drank a long glass of tea. Issa had fallen back asleep on the couch with Ava in her playpen staring into space. Nor gave Ava a big kiss and Ava responded with another made up word, which she said with as much sincerity and seriousness as a two and a half year old could put together.

Nor locked the door quietly behind her and walked downhill toward the bus stop, being careful to avoid the puddles of mud from yesterday's rain. The first lights of day were beginning to show amidst all the gray and purple of the night. Today, the sky chose streaks of clementine-orange to greet the early workers.

She was never the only one at the bus stop even though it was only 5:00 am. In fact, some days it was so crowded that she had to stand squeezed between breasts and biceps, trying not to lurch forward with every wide turn and abrupt stop.

Thirty minutes or so later, she got off at the factory stop. The factory was a four-story brick warehouse with multiple chimneys coughing out smoke, located on a slight uphill, overlooking the wheat fields and the cows grazing. When she arrived at the door, the machines were already clanking and the managers were already impatient.

She murmured her good-mornings to her co-workers and took her seat in front of the sewing machine. She stretched her back, rolled her shoulders and took a deep breath. The fabric of the shirts she was supposed to put together felt coarse underneath her fingers.

Hours later when she arrived at her boyfriend's doorstep, she was in a less than cheerful mood. He was drinking again, watching wrestling on tv. Cigarette butts and empty bottles were littered about. "Hi beautiful," he said, without looking away from the screen.

"You went to work today?" she asked even though she knew the answer.

"A few hours."

"That's it?"

"I have enough for this month's bills."

"Oh." She sat down next to him and looked at the big, greasy guys trying to choke hold each other.

"How was work?" he asked.

"The same. Fine. It's work. My sister wants to move out of that neighborhood. Says it reminds her too much of mom. Makes her sad."

"She's spoiled."

"How can you say that?"

"Because you spoil her."

"She has a baby."

"That's her responsibility, not yours. You work all these long hours and what does she do?"

“She works too. When she can. It's fine. We're fine. We just want to move. That's all.”

“I thought you were moving in with me.”

“I can't leave her and Ava.”

“What about us?”

“We're fine too. Aren't we?”

He looked at Nor and smiled with his brown eyes shining just the way she loved. “Always.”

Some days were like this. But other days, they fought with these same empty bottles, scattering them all around the house. At her home, Nor never had a temper, never yelled, never complained. Here with him, he drove her crazy. She broke things in rage. She cursed like a construction worker.

She spit out awful things at him. Sometimes she had a good reason, sometimes she didn't. Sometimes he let her win, sometimes he didn't.

Whenever Nor ended things, he would call and promise to do better, no more drugs, no more drinking, no more girls, no more living on just enough money to not get kicked out, no more of his stupid friends.

Nor had lectured Issa about being with someone like this, about procreating with someone like this. But here she was, repeating the same mistake. Perhaps it was in the family. It was the same with their mother. The same with their grandmother. There was something wrong with all of them.

By the time Nor came home, the moon and the stars were out. The birds were flying in formation home. The crickets were chirping their usual song. The neighborhood dogs were snoring in hidden corners and kicking their legs in imaginary chases. Issa was asleep again in her bed with a magazine about celebrities spread out on her stomach.

Ava was in her crib nearby, still awake. Nor picked her up and smoothed the sweaty hair from her forehead. They sat down at the dining table and out of humor for her sister, Nor began to teach her niece words. "This is a BOWL. This here is a TABLE. You're AVA. I'm NOR. Those are STARS. That is the MOON."

Ava nodded along, but she didn't repeat anything. As the baby was drowsing off cuddled tightly in her lap, Nor whispered to her once again that, "We're all made out of stardust."

