

THE QUARRY

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Pieces Apart

The photograph sat in a wooden frame on the foyer table. It showed my family, standing in a park by the beach. Even then Alice appeared fragile, like she could blow away in the wind. Mum smiles, content and relaxed in loose white linen pants and a kaftan. I'm wearing a short white dress, squinting at the camera, wrapped under dad's arm. Dad's white shirt is pressed against his chest by the wind. His smile is friendly and his eyes reflect the sea. His other arm is wrapped around Mum; he towers over her small figure. My sister Alice is standing separate from us, hunching her shoulders away from the camera. She gives the camera a small smile. We look like sisters; we're both tall and blue eyed. We almost look like twins in that photo, except her hair is strawberry blonde while mine is stubbornly mouse brown. It was taken a few months before she was admitted to hospital. Mum's free arm is reaching out as if to pull Alice closer to her, but there is a clear gap between the three of us and her.

I turned from the photo and I took a deep breath, looking at my reflection in the foyer mirror. I walked down the hallway and into our kitchen, where my Mum was bobbing a tea bag in a mug. I quickly said goodbye to her and grabbed my school bag.

‘Ellie, why don’t you invite a friend around on the weekend?’

I shrugged in a non-committal way. I didn’t want to explain to my friends why my sister wasn’t at home, or why I didn’t feel like going to parties or outings.

‘Remember tomorrow we have to be up early to get Alice from the airport.’

‘Yep I know’, I said over my shoulder as I headed for the door.

At school, the courtyard was packed with my old friends. I smiled at a girl in my Maths class. She raised an eyebrow at me and turned back to her group of friends. They burst into giggles. I retreated into the shade of the gym and sat down, leaning back onto the cold brick wall. I closed my eyes against the glare of the sun and tried to pretend I was somewhere else. My old friends were giggling again; I kept my eyes firmly closed, in case they were looking my way. Suddenly, I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. Will sat down next to me.

‘Hey. How are things?’ He smiled his causal smile. Will was tall, slim and strong. He had brown hair flecked with blonde. I caught his eye and he winked. His eyes were a startling green. After four years of friendship, I was still struck by those eyes. His shoulder brushed mine and I felt a warm shiver down my back.

‘Fine. Yeah okay. Alice is coming back from Melbourne soon.’ I replied.

‘I hope she’s doing well.’ He said, looking down at the concrete.

Two years ago when Alice spent weeks in hospital, attached to metal poles by drips and feeding tubes, Will was the only one I would talk to. I remember the late nights; Mum and Dad taking shifts trudging to and from the hospital, carrying overnight bags with clean clothes and memories from home. I would stay awake

watching the television flicker in the dark. When it was turned up all the way, so that the noise echoed throughout our big house, I could relax. When I was alone the house seemed eerie and I would toss and turn, unable to sleep. I would call Will, and we would talk for hours and watch the same shows. The rumble of his deep voice over the phone was always comforting.

The shrill ring of the bell interrupted my thoughts. Will jumped up and grabbed my hand, helping me up. The rest of the school day was a blur. Will was the only person who spoke to me. I was almost grateful to be left alone with my thoughts.

The next day I set my alarm for six; I was anxious to see my sister after months apart. Mum chatted all the way to the airport, more nervous and excited than I was. The airport was crowded with families, couples and friends. Airhostess's heels clicked on the tiled floor. A few people dashed past us towards a gate, their suitcases rolling behind them. A pleasant voice made an announcement over the PA system. We walked towards the gate where Alice would be arriving. Mum kept looking at her watch.

A few minutes later I saw Alice's strawberry blonde hair amongst the arrivals. As she got closer a coldness washed over me. She was wearing a long dark trench coat that flapped around her knees. The collar was pulled up against her neck as though to ward off the wind, though it was a warm October day. Her clothes swamped her; under the mass of fabric her tiny frame was still painfully apparent. Her fringe was swept low over her eyebrows. Her skin was the colour of skimmed milk. Shadows gathered under her eyes. Her cheeks sunk steeply into thin lips. She looked like she did the last time. She stood awkwardly a few feet away from us, fumbling with the sleeves of her coat.

I could almost feel my mother's heart break. Her whole face seemed to fall, sagging into itself. She slumped under the crook of my dad's arm.

Dad's smile was faltering. 'Let's get your bags then.'

These were the only words spoken between us while we left the airport. During the car ride home, I sat in the back seat gripping the door handle. Alice stared resolutely out the window, as cool and still as china. Mum hummed a little too loudly, trying to fill the awkward silence. Dad busied himself with the GPS system, though there was only one road home.

That night I watched Alice stare at her lap while her dinner turned cold and congealed. I looked at my mother closely and noticed for the first time the tiny creases etched into the corners of her mouth. Her eyes were glassy, threatening to spill over with tears at any moment. Dad's cheeks turned red with the effort of remaining calm. Alice tossed a few peas around her plate.

When Dad spoke his voice was low. 'We know you haven't been eating. You've probably eaten the bare minimum all the time you were in Melbourne. We're not stupid Alice. That was our one condition. You go to Melbourne only if you maintain your weight.'

Mum put her hand on Dad's arm.

'I'm fine,' Alice's said adamantly.

'You are not fine,' he said, clattering his knife and fork down on the table. I studied the wall tiles on the other side of the kitchen. Mum gave a small choking sound, almost like a sob. She shot Dad a desperate look, imploring him to stay quiet.

'She is fine. Just very stressed. With the internship, staying somewhere unfamiliar and having to make new friends,' Mum said.

‘Yes that’s right. I really had no time to prepare meals when I was over there,’ Alice replied carefully. ‘But now I’m back home it will be much easier. I’ll be back in my own place with my old routine. Don’t worry Dad, it’s not like before.’

That night, hours after I heard Alice’s car drive away, I could still hear the murmurs of my parent’s conversation downstairs. Mum was speaking in a hushed, earnest tone, overcoming Dad’s intermitted injections. I heard him say, ‘I know, I know,’ and ‘yes’, before going quiet. I didn’t understand how either of them could have believed her. I felt like she was slipping away again.

Two weeks later, I caught the bus to Alice’s apartment. She had been avoiding our calls, leaving short text messages saying she was really busy at work. I wanted to surprise her, and to see that she was doing well like she said she was. It was a small block, four apartments all with narrow balconies bordered with glass walls. Alice’s door was closed but unlocked. I walked in and called her name. I walked down the hallway, passing her bedroom, and a pokey laundry room. I remember hearing a strange humming noise that grew louder as I continued down the hall. It was a soft mechanical whirr. A withering pot plant sat scrunched in the corner. It was then that I found the source of the noise. Squeezed in between the couch and the television was a treadmill. The treadmill belt was racing and rolling, and whirring to itself. Alice was crumpled between the treadmill and the wall, her legs squashed awkwardly beneath her. One white limb was caught on the treadmill belt, flopping uselessly. Her arm was blazing red and grazed. I couldn’t see her face; her cheekbone was pressed into the carpet. I quickly turned the machine off. I bent over her and moved her arm away from the belt.

‘Alice?’

A towel had fallen from the treadmill, and was slightly tangled around her.

‘Alice wake up,’ I shook her a little.

Her eyelids fluttered for a moment and she shifted her weight. It was then that the towel came off her.

Her bones were stretching and straining against her skin. I could see every ridge in her body, every dip and rivet. She tried to move again and I could see bone scrape against bone. Her skin was like paper, red raw in places from the treadmill belt and so pale. Her fingers were tinted blue. Through her sports bra, her shoulder blades protruded from her back, as though straining against the confines of her skin.

I don’t remember leaving the apartment, but I remember crying to a woman on the street, ‘please help my sister’, wondering how anyone could help someone so intent on hurting themselves.

She was taken straight to hospital; the nurses told my mother she would have to stay there for some time. I took four days off school, ignoring Will’s calls. I spent the days wrapped up in a blanket, watching mindless television shows. On Friday I decided I couldn’t avoid school any longer. I had walked half-way through the car park before I saw him; he was leaning casually against the wall of the gym. He rushed towards me looking relieved.

‘Alice is back in hospital.’ I said.

We started walking slowly towards our first class.

‘I’m sorry.’ His voice was low and his eyes stayed locked on mine.

‘I feel a bit guilty...that she has to be there while I’m-’ I searched for the word ‘healthy.’

He nodded.

‘I’m visiting her this afternoon,’ I continued.

He grabbed my hand and I felt safe, like I was anchored to something steady.

That afternoon I drove to the hospital with my parents. Mum gave me a reassuring smile as I left them in the waiting room and walked down the linoleum hall to Alice's room. I hesitated by the door before knocking lightly, as though I was visiting a stranger.

'Alice?'

I walked slowly into the room. Alice had a private room. The walls were painted a relentless oatmeal colour. A small window looked out onto a park that bordered the hospital. Alice was curled up under a white cotton blanket. I tried to not look at the tubes that connected her to the IV pole that sat like a permanent resident in the corner.

She was facing away from me, looking out the window. Her hair was limp and lank. I reached out and tentatively brushed a strand from her face. She recoiled from my touch like she had been burned. She looked up at me with fierce hollow eyes, before turning and facing the window again. I backed out of the room, dashed down the hallway. There were people congregated around the elevator so I headed for the stairs, racing down two at a time. A few minutes later I walked quickly from the stairs to the main exit, dodging wheelchairs and visitors. Outside the automatic doors I took a deep breath of fresh air. I pushed down a familiar sense of rising panic. I wasn't going to let myself fall to pieces. A few minutes had passed before I saw him. Will was leaning against a tree near the entrance to the car park. People weaved in and out around him. I walked to him and he wrapped me in his arms.

'You don't have to stay here,' he said. I felt his voice vibrate against his chest. His hand stroked my head, and my tears started flowing. I pulled back and looked up at him.

‘Yeah. We can go now.’ I gave him a wobbly smile.

He laced his fingers through mine and we walked up through the car park.

Later I opened the front door and stepped through the threshold, with him following close behind. I walked into the kitchen and saw Mum standing in the kitchen. She turned when she heard our footsteps. Her smile reached her eyes.

‘Alice told me you’d left. I’ve been talking with your father. I’m going to be home more for you this time’. She said.

I walked towards her and engulfed her in a hug.

‘We’ll be fine’ she whispered into my hair.

I pulled back and nodded. I walked over and sank into the couch. Will wrapped his arm around me.

‘You can come and stay with me for a while, if you want.’ His voice was soft. I looked into his eyes and was tempted.

‘I think I’ll stay. I want to go back to the hospital again, maybe not tomorrow but soon. I’ll just sit with her. Even if she hates me, I’ll just sit for a while.’

I knew I would still visit her, even if she flinched when I touched her. Alice was caught up in the circle of her own hateful thoughts about herself. My thoughts were clear. I couldn’t stop her from hurting herself, but I could be there if she needed. I knew that I would be fine, that despite the damage done, I would be strong enough to piece together the gaps.