

THE QUARRY

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We all fall down

‘He tried to eat his family.’

‘Did not.’

‘Did too. When the porters came to collect the bodies, his parents had bite marks on their arms and legs. His father even had a chunk of flesh missing from his thigh.’

‘You’re lying.’

‘Am not. It does that to you. Turns you mad.’ He leant forward over the counter, his lip curling upwards.

Maggie gripped her little sister's hand and attempted to steer her towards the door, but Anabel was adamant.

'No it doesn't. I'll bet you haven't even seen an infected person.' Anabel pouted, cocking her chin upwards.

'Have too seen one,' he called out after the sisters as they left the bakery.

Maggie tucked the loaf of bread under her arm. The baker's son had dug it out of the waste barrel for them and the bread was heavy, the crust burnt and blackened, but it was the only food they had managed to find.

On Saturday mornings the town square was usually filled with market stalls, the air warm and woody with the smell of roasted chestnuts. The shop fronts would hum as people pushed past one another, silver coins clutched in outstretched fists as merchants bottled ounces of milk, counted out apples and weighed slabs of meat. But today, most of the shops had been boarded up and the stalls abandoned, the meat just left out on hooks to rot, swarms of maggots tunnelling their way through the browning flesh.

The rest of town wasn't much different. Doors had been sealed shut and marked with crosses, the gloopy paint drying to the colour of blackened blood. On one door, someone had scrawled something above the cross. Maggie looked up at the writing as they walked past: 'Lord have mercy upon us,' the letters bleeding tears of red that had dripped and hardened on the wood.

Around the corner, Maggie and Anabel passed someone huddled in the shadows, their body encased in a pile of blankets, a single square of cloth tied over their mouth. Anabel stopped, staring down at the hunched over body.

'Don't look.' Maggie wrapped her arm around her sister's shoulders and led her down the adjoining laneway.

'They don't really eat people, do they?' Anabel asked. Her earlier confidence had disappeared, reminding Maggie of just how young her sister really was.

'He was just trying to scare you, making up silly stories like he always does.'

Anabel scrunched up her face, trying to hold back tears. 'But what if I get sick and-'

Maggie stopped and knelt down in front of Anabel, her hands gripping onto her sister's arms just above her elbows.

'Stop this,' Maggie said, her voice cracking. 'You're going to be fine, you hear me?'

Anabel nodded, a thin trail of snot bubbling from her nose.

Maggie sighed and grabbed the small knife that she always kept in her pinafore. At the next house they passed, Maggie hoisted herself over the front gate while Anabel watched wide-eyed from the laneway. Maggie ducked across the front garden, rummaging through the undergrowth until she spotted half a dozen carnations growing beneath the boxwood. Their stems had drooped but the flowers were still intact, the white petals threaded with pink. Maggie gathered the flowers in her fist, slicing them off just below the blossoms with her knife. She then pulled the ribbon from her hair and knotted the frayed satin around the flowers, holding them together in a bunch.

'Maggie?'

Maggie emerged from behind the bushes and clambered back over the gate, her pinafore freckled with splotches of dirt.

'Here.' Maggie bent down and tucked the carnations into the front pocket of her sister's dress.

Anabel frowned and reached into her pocket, her fingers closing around the bunch of flowers. 'What are these for?'

'Make sure you keep them with you,' Maggie said as they continued walking. 'I remember mother saying how the smell of flowers can help ward off the sickness. It'll keep you safe.'

That evening, Maggie and Anabel split the bread between them on the floor of their bedroom. Beneath the burnt crust, the innards of the loaf were tough with grit, but Maggie didn't care. She demolished her portion while Anabel picked and prodded at hers, pulling off tiny pillows of bread and letting them dissolve on her tongue.

A rat scurried across the windowsill, its whiskers twitching as its nose darted backwards and forwards, sniffing at the air. Anabel smiled and pulled off a chunk of her bread, crossing the room and holding it out in her hand. The rat sniffed at the bread timidly before grabbing it in its claws. Anabel giggled as she watched the rat eat, its front teeth gnawing away hungrily at the crust.

The sound of retching echoed through the house and Anabel froze, her breath hitching in her throat as the rat hurried outside through a gap in the windowpane. Maggie got up off the floor and walked out into the kitchen. She pressed her ear against the adjacent door and listened. Through the cracks in the wood, she could hear a rattling cough, the wheezes thick and tacky with phlegm.

‘Should we give her some?’

Maggie turned around to see Anabel standing behind her in the kitchen. Her hand was outstretched, the remainder of the bread sitting on her palm.

Maggie shook her head. ‘She’s fine. Come on.’

‘But she hasn’t eaten all day.’ Anabel moved closer to the door, her hand reaching out towards the doorknob.

‘I said she’s fine, ok.’ Maggie smacked Anabel’s hand away and grabbed her by the shoulders, forcing her sister back inside the bedroom. She slammed the door behind them and Anabel ran to her bed, her back to Maggie as she buried her face in her pillow.

Maggie sighed, leaning her head against the wall as she watched Anabel’s shoulders shake and tremble.

‘Anabel-’ Maggie began but she couldn’t think of anything to say. After a minute of silence, she opened her mouth to speak again, but decided there wasn’t anything she wanted to say anyway.

Anabel’s muffled crying eventually stopped, her sobs levelling out into deep even breaths as she fell asleep. Maggie lay awake on the other side of the room, her eyes fixated on the ceiling. Their mother was getting worse. Every so often, she would heave and splutter from her bedroom and Maggie would glance at Anabel, praying that the sound wouldn’t wake her.

Maggie lifted her head and peered down at the foot of her bed where a small leather suitcase lay half packed, an assortment of clothes spilling over the edges and out onto the floor. Maggie didn't know how the sickness spread but she knew that it spread fast and once you got it, you didn't have long left. Within the week, half of the town was sick while the other half were too scared to leave their homes, and not just because of the sickness. At night, Maggie had watched from her bedroom window as gangs of men moved through the streets of the town. Mainly peasants from outside the town walls, they rioted and plundered as they pleased, breaking open cells in the local gaols and setting fire to the homes of the town officials. Maggie knew the streets weren't safe at night, but she could no longer be sure that they would be safe inside either.

Maggie got up and stripped the moth-eaten blanket off her bed, bundling it up and tossing it on top of the pile of clothes. She then grabbed a handful of candles from the table by her bed, along with a fire striker, and slipped them into the suitcase before clasping it shut. Maggie felt her chest tighten as she glanced over to Anabel's bed. She was still fast asleep, a string of drool running from her mouth, glistening and bubbling down her chin.

'Anabel.' Maggie shook her sister to wake her.

Anabel rolled over and blinked, her eyes heavy with sleep. 'What is it?'

'Come on, get up.' Maggie pulled back the covers and Anabel sat up, squinting as she looked out the window.

'What are you doing? It's still dark out.'

'We have to leave.' Maggie grabbed Anabel's hand, helping her up off the bed. Maggie handed her sister a cardigan before bending down to slip her feet into her boots.

'Why? What's happening?'

Maggie steered Anabel outside of their bedroom, stopping briefly in the kitchen to check they had everything they would need.

'Maggie? Where are we going?'

‘We should have left yesterday,’ Maggie said as she fumbled with her bag. ‘It was stupid of us to stay, we can’t risk staying in the same building as someone who’s infected when we don’t know how it’s spread.’

‘But Maggie, that’s Mama.’

‘She’s dying Anabel, how can you not see that? And if we stay, we might die too. And I’ll be damned if I let that happen.’

Anabel stared at Maggie blankly for a moment before shaking her head as she took a step back towards the bedroom. ‘We can’t leave Mama, Maggie.’

Maggie turned away from her sister, pushing her nails deep into the flesh of her palms. Without warning, she slammed her fist against the wall of the kitchen. Anabel flinched as one of the wood panels cracked, the pots and pans from above the grate knocking against one another from the force.

‘Fine,’ Maggie spat, flexing the fingers on her now aching hand as she took her coat off the hook by the door. ‘Stay with her if you want. I’m going.’

Maggie swung the front door open. As she stepped outside, she stopped herself and looked back into the kitchen to see Anabel still standing there by the grate.

‘You coming or not?’ Maggie sighed, her voice softening.

Anabel nodded tentatively and with a glance at her mother’s bedroom door she followed her sister outside. Just as Maggie began to pull the door shut, Anabel turned back around.

‘Hold on,’ Anabel said as she disappeared back inside the house.

‘Anabel, come back. We don’t have time.’ Maggie spun around to look down the street, her eyes scanning the shadows for any sign of movement.

Anabel re-emerged a few minutes later, her cheeks wet with tears.

‘What was that for?’

Anabel stared at her feet, her arms folded protectively across her chest.

Not wanting to loiter on the street any longer, Maggie decided not to press for an answer. She brushed her hand across Anabel’s cheeks, her thumb catching the last of her sister’s tears as she locked the front door and slipped the key into her pinafore.

The sisters hurried down the street, ducking down the narrow laneway that bordered their house. As they walked, Anabel slid her hand into the now empty pocket of her dress, her fingers toying with a single flower petal that had fallen from the posy.

Maggie made sure to stick to the shadows as she and Anabel wound their way through the labyrinth of cobblestone alleyways. Once they reached the town square, they stayed away from the open centre, instead moving from stall to stall, careful to keep themselves hidden. As they passed the stonemasons tent, Maggie thought she heard the distinct sound of metal on metal, followed by the patter of footsteps. She glanced back over her shoulder, glimpsing what looked like a shadow disappearing behind the alehouse. Maggie grabbed her little sister's hand and, linking their fingers together, they slipped away behind a nearby house, following the path that ran between the buildings. As they neared the end of the next street, Maggie heard the footsteps again, the sound closely followed by the echo of muffled voices.

'In here.' Maggie ducked across the street towards the church. The door at the back of the building hung limp on its hinges and she pulled it open easily, hurrying Anabel inside before securing the door with a table that she pushed across from the nave.

The church had been pillaged, just like the rest of the town. Everything of value had been taken, the altar stripped bare of its ornaments and the stained glass windows splintered with jagged edges where they had been smashed in.

Maggie rested her hand on Anabel's shoulder as they walked down the aisle and towards the door by the altar. Upon reaching the door, Maggie removed the knife from her pinafore, carefully slotting the blade into the gap by the lock and prying the door open.

'Come on.' Maggie bent down, letting her sister climb up onto her back. With Anabel's arms wrapped securely around her neck, Maggie climbed up the narrow staircase towards the loft.

Just like the nave, the loft had also been raided, the room bare but for two white clerical robes that hung limply from hooks behind the door. Letting Anabel down, Maggie flicked open the clasp on her suitcase, rummaging through the tangle of clothes before pulling out her blanket and handing it to her sister.

‘Try and get some more sleep. We’ll be safe here for the rest of the night.’

Anabel nodded as she took the blanket from her sister.

‘You understand now, don’t you,’ Maggie said as she bunched a selection of clothes into a makeshift pillow for herself. ‘You understand why we had to leave?’

Anabel’s brow furrowed as she nodded. ‘I think so.’

Maggie gave her sister a small smile. She couldn’t expect her to understand everything, she could barely comprehend it all herself. But as long as Anabel knew she was trying, that was all Maggie needed her sister to know.

While Anabel burrowed herself beneath the blanket, Maggie lit a candle, pooling the hot wax on the ground and standing the candle upright, the fabric of the clerical robes casting ghost-like shadows across the walls in the newfound pool of light. She sat down next to Anabel, brushing a strand of strawberry blonde hair off her sister’s face as she drew the blanket up to beneath Anabel’s chin.

As Maggie lay down, she rolled over onto her side, wrapping her arms around her legs and drawing them to her chest. She closed her eyes but instead of black she saw her mother, lying alone in her bed, her skin masked with puss-filled boils. Her eyes had sunk, the bloodshot whites barely visible beneath the swollen lids. As she blinked, a drop of blood oozed through the slit, dripping through her lashes before pooling in the hollow beneath her eye. Maggie could hear her voice as she called out for her daughters through the empty house, her voice growing weaker and weaker with each cry.

‘I’m sorry,’ Maggie murmured against her skin as she felt her arm grow wet with tears. ‘I didn’t know what to do.’

As their mother took her final breath, the smoke began to filter through the floorboards of the loft. The rioters had lit the fire in the nave, tossing scraps of alcohol-soaked cloth through the empty windows of the church. The pews caught alight as the flames travelled down the carpeted floor, adding fuel to the already growing fire. Within minutes the flames were licking at the walls, the rafters collapsing as the fire hollowed through the wood, engulfing the church in a single blaze. As the sun rose and the fire died to glowing embers, the girls’ bodies were

barely visible, buried beneath a blanket of smouldering rubble. They were still lying next to one another, Anabel's arm linked through Maggie's, entwined even in death.