

THE QUARRY

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Morgan

Creak. I pull my blankets up to my chin and listen to the Milkman's symphony. The gate strains as he makes his way into their front yard, trundling up the steps of their veranda to leave four glass bottles of milk. He stomps back down to close the white picket gate behind him, careful not step on the perfectly manicured lawn as he slouches over to the next house. Each time a gate is opened it reveals its squeaky hinges and I find a sense of comfort in this irritating flaw in our neighbourhood. I brace myself for the Milkman's entrance to our neighbour's front yard, but there is an extended silence.

My chest fills with a sudden nervous flutter and the blankets surrounding me begin to feel like a straight jacket holding me down. I fling them off and rush to my window. I slowly pull back the curtain and my vision fills with white. The domes have made it to our street.

Suddenly, a gap appears in the dome and three figures slowly emerge. I can see a man in a white suit, the black tie around his neck draws my eye to his throat and I am filled with hate. Next is a small woman, loose strands of red hair peek out from the curlers that cover her head. Her pink nightgown is pulled in at her waist by the arm holding her. My eyes move up to the tall figure beside her, his eyes the same blue as Tenille's. I strain to look past the tall figures that are her parents, desperately searching for a sign of Tenille's red hair and kind smile.

'Tennile!' I scream. I press my hand against the glass, as though I can will it to disappear. I want to run outside and rip through the dome, save Tenille from whatever horrors she is about to face. But my legs feel like they are stuck in ice, burning and stiff.

'Wake up Nathaniel,' I slap myself. 'This is just a dream. Snap out of it.' But nothing changes. My window is still filled with the white material and the gap in the dome remains sealed. But the slap has done something else and my legs are once again free.

I run to my bedroom door and fumble with the doorknob. 'Shit,' I scream as I punch the door. Finally, I get the door open and run down the stairs, taking two at a time, not at all concerned with falling down. With a click I unlatch the front door and am temporarily blinded by the glare from the dome.

I will my vision to clear as I seek out the two people I have questions I most need to see.

'Who was it?' I pause between each word. The calmness in my voice terrifies even me. Tenille's parents just stare at me. Their stupid dumbstruck faces make me want to scream. Their slippers shuffle backward as I move toward them.

I repeat the question, this time a little louder. I'm close enough now to see their eyes darting around, looking for any chance of escape. This only makes them look guilty.

'Who was it?' I'm screaming now, shoving her dad. 'She would never have a writing instrument and you know it. Don't pretend like you don't know what I'm talking

about.' I turn to Tenille's mum and look straight into her eyes. Her dad seems like he's going to make a move to stop me, but he's abruptly taken away by a white suited man.

'I know it was you.' I whisper. 'Tenille saw you with your precious diary. She told me all about how you would write in it when you thought no one was home. What did you do? Hide it in her room and call them?' My head turns toward the men in the white suits.

My head snaps back to my arm as a sharp pain radiates down it and I see Tenille's mum clutching my bicep, her fingernails digging into my flesh.

'You think you're so clever; that you know everything. You know nothing Nathaniel.'

She releases my arm, but reaches up to my sleeve and gently brushes away the creases.

'Soon no one will remember her.' She whispers into my ear. I clench my jaw and my hands form fists, my knuckles turning white.

'Nathaniel?' My mum calls. She is running across the grass of our front garden towards me. Her face is a mirror of the sadness and desperation I feel. Tenille's mum drops my arm and backs away, moving towards her husband.

'I'm so sorry, Nathaniel,' she takes me in her arms and holds me against her; I can feel the steady beating of her heart. I suddenly drop to the ground, falling from her arms. She bends down and holds me whilst I weep. In the distance I can hear the Milkman's symphony.

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All this crying is so boring. So she's gone, big whoop. She's not dead. But I guess they don't know that. I can see my big brother crying and my mum crying and Mr Smyth crying and Mrs Smyth not crying. She really needs to try harder than that if she wants to look normal.

I have had to put up with this family for eight years. It's exhausting trying to be happy and cheerful all the time. But soon I finally get to take my Circle Standard and become a Nineling. Mrs Smyth says she has big plans for me.

Master Isaiah really knew what he was doing when he created the test. All you have to do is draw a circle. Simple right? Wrong. Draw a perfect circle and you are thrown out of Mallar because they think you are insane and dangerous. So I figured it has to look weird and not like a circle that should be enough to pass. The only problem is that they stick a big needle in you before you take the test so you go into, like, some sort of trance thing. But that's where Mrs Smyth came in. She failed the Circle Standard, but no one ever knew because she swapped her circle with someone else and they disappeared forever. So now she steals writing implements and gets kids that she thinks are special to practice drawing imperfect circles, or sometimes gets them to sometimes just fill a whole notebook with perfect circles to get it out of their system.

I think I'm up to notebook number seven. I need lots of practice at not being perfect.

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Two months have passed since Tenille disappeared and I seem to be the only one who remembers she existed at all. Whenever I mention her name or start talking about a memory I have of her, everyone just looks at me like I've gone crazy. Especially my sister Morgan, who has been acting really strange, but that could just be because she's nervous.

In a couple of weeks she will take her Circle Standard and become a Nineling. She's been spending a lot of time in her room with her door closed. I can hear strange scratching sounds coming from inside her room and every now and then she will let out a frustrated cry. Mum thinks that she's just tidying her room, but I don't think that she's right.

'People of Mallar.' Master Isaiah's voice booms from the speakers in our house.
'Please make your way outside to welcome the Ninelings. Each one has successfully passed

the Circle Standard. Please help me in congratulating them as they march through the streets. I look forward to their contributions to our fine city.'

The smell of springtime fills the air as we make our way out the front door. The sudden clean air and warm sunshine makes my fears seem ridiculous and they melt away.

Before long the sound of cheering and chanting can be heard. The sounds of muffled footsteps begin to build and before long the streets are filled with a new batch of Ninelings. The sound of their tiny footsteps mirrors the sound of soldiers marching towards battle.

Soon the Ninelings begin to pass by. Their little faces are beaming. Some are jumping up and down with excitement, breaking the illusion that a perfectly trained army was marching towards Mallar, but they were quickly put back in line by their parents who are all proudly watching from the crowd.

Morgan stands in front of me. I find it hard to believe that this sweet little girl, wearing a blue and white checked dress, could be anything but cute. She is waving so enthusiastically to her friends that I am afraid her arm might act as a propeller and she will take off into the air.

Suddenly, there is a slight change, almost as though a ripple passes through her. It is so subtle that I may have missed it if I hadn't been looking directly at her. Morgan is staring straight into one of the Nineling girl's eyes. She moves her hand to her neck and at first it looks like she is scratching, but her thumb extends out and draws a straight line across her throat, her head slightly tilted to the side, her face blank. Any remnant joy has been wiped away. Morgan moves her hand from her throat to her ear in an effort to appear inconspicuous. The joy that she had showed earlier returns to her face and she continues waving to her friends as they pass by, as though nothing has changed.

I can't move. I am pierced by fear and my body goes into immediate fight or flight mode. The tell-tale signs of fear begin to appear. Sweat forms on my brow and my breath quickens. My heartbeat is so loud and fast in my chest; I am sure everyone around me can hear it. Clearly someone does, because in the next moment Morgan whips her head around to look at me.

'You okay big brother?' A huge grin spreads her lips wide. It would have seemed like a cute gesture from a little sister to a big brother, but after what I just witnessed I see it as a warning. All I can see is her mouth, full of teeth.

I reach forward and touch my mum's arm to get her attention.

'Mum, I'm just going inside to get a drink.' She gives me a quick nod and then goes back to waving and smiling at the children, pulling Morgan to her and giving her a big hug. 'This will be you next year,' she announces to Morgan, squeezing her so tight her shoulders are forced up to her ears.

The next morning at breakfast I can't look at Morgan the same way. The threat that she made to that little girl is still etched in my mind. It plays over and over on a loop.

'Nathaniel?' I am snapped back to my kitchen, where Morgan sits opposite me munching on her piece of toast with strawberry jam. 'What are the white domes for?'

I freeze and scan the room for any signs of mum or dad. 'Where did you hear about them Morgan?' I whisper.

'I just remember the look on your face when Tenille's house was covered in that dome. Too bad she's gone. She was nice.' A sweet smile spreads across her lips. She pushes back her chair as she stands up. 'You know nothing Nathaniel.' Her voice is low and measured and it terrifies me. She turns and skips away.

Words escape me and I chase after her. *How does she know?*

'Morgan! Open the door. Tell me what you know.' There is silence behind the door. I reach down to turn the doorknob, but it's locked. 'Damn.' I clench my fist and pound on her door again, over and over, calling out her name. The sound has done nothing except draw my parent's attention.

'Nathaniel, what are you doing?'

'I just need to talk to Morgan.' My mother's face softens as she senses the desperation in my voice.

'How about you sit down with her this afternoon? You are both going to be late for school if you don't leave now.' She places a hand on my shoulder and directs me to the stairs. 'Have a good day at school sweetie.'

I grab my backpack on the way out and reluctantly start trudging off to school. I glance over my shoulder at my sister's bedroom. She's standing in the window, framed by two pink, chiffon curtains. Morgan doesn't move, or smile or wave. She just stares at me. I turn around and focus on my shadow as it moves ahead of me, quickening my pace to leave the image of my sister behind.

I can't focus on anything at school today except for what happened this morning. My teacher is droning on about algebra, but my head is swimming with questions. Should I tell Mum? Is Tenille still alive? Does Morgan know what happened to her?

The more I think about my sister's strange behaviour, the more I begin to realise she's behaving the same way as Mrs Smyth. Both are normally so kind and sweet, but that day when Tenille disappeared and she grabbed my arm was unlike anything that she has done before. The cruelty behind her eyes signalled her words as a threat. *'You know nothing Nathaniel.'* Her words replayed through my mind and I freeze. Morgan said the exact same words this morning.

Suddenly, I spring from my chair and it rocks precariously on its legs, threatening to fall to the ground. Every head in the classroom turns towards me.

'I'm not feeling well.' I announce as I lift the lid of my desk to retrieve my backpack.

'Okay Nathaniel, just go to...' but I don't hear the end of the sentence as I have already bolted from the classroom.

I run home, my feet pounding against the pathway and my backpack thumps against my back. Each perfectly manicured lawn taunts me as I run by. The perfection is too much.

1:00 pm on a Wednesday should place my sister in class, my dad at work and my mum at the grocery store. This is the only opportunity I would get to search my sister's room.

The sound of our gate creaking no longer fills me with comfort. It only reminds me of the horror of that morning. But as soon as the door closes behind me I am overwhelmed with relief. It creates an instant barrier between Morgan and myself.

I race up the stairs, two at a time and fling open her bedroom door. Her delicate chiffon curtain sucks against the open window as I enter her room. The pink pillows are arranged on her bed in the usual way, but I can see a small white corner peeking out from underneath them. *This seems too easy.* I push aside the voice and rush towards the pillows. This was it, Morgan's secret. I needed to know what she has been hiding.

I slowly open the front cover of the book, expecting to see a blank notebook, or perhaps a diary. We'd been taught that people used to keep track of their lives with forbidden pen and paper, instead of using computers like we do today.

I open to the first page and my throat goes dry. Adorning every page are circles, hundreds and hundreds of perfect circles. I drop the book and it falls flat onto the floor, opening up to the middle spread revealing even more pages, each circle mirroring the other. The breeze from the open window rifles through the pages as through they are moving by themselves; revealing their secrets to me. The sound of the turning pages mimics the sound of waves lapping at the beach and it lulls me into a false sense of security.

I pick the book up from the ground and flick through it. Every page is the same. There is barely any space left and almost all the white areas have been filled with menacing circles. I start turning the pages faster and faster.

That's when the curtain is suddenly drawn against the window. Someone has entered the room. I slowly turn around, my breath struggling to move in and out, as if it is getting caught between my teeth. Morgan and Mrs Smyth stand in the doorway.

'You shouldn't be here big brother.'