

THE QUARRY

Another Sense

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My father once told me he knew something was wrong the moment I was born. He said I cried too loudly. They couldn't take me anywhere: shopping malls, parks, the more people there were, the worse I became. I would scream and cry and fuss; nothing could make me relax. He said I emerged from the womb determined to spite him—that I had always hated him. But I didn't, how could I? I was an infant. It took me years to accept that he would never love me. He'd decided against it the moment I uttered my first words because he could never understand them:

'Too loud.'

The world was just too loud for me.

Eventually, I adjusted to larger groups of people. I didn't really have a choice. When my kindergarten teacher said I had socialisation issues, my mother defended me. She insisted it was because I hadn't been to preschool. If only it were that simple. It would take me a long time to learn that there were certain things I shouldn't say out loud—things that would make people angry.

‘What do you mean you don’t like anyone, Ella? You just said you like Billy.’

‘What’s the point of silent reading if everyone’s still talking?’

‘Oh, Jeremy stole your chocolates, Miss. He’s laughing about it right now.’

My classmates called me a tattletale, my teacher labelled me a compulsive liar. But Mama refused to believe them; she pulled me from that school and found a new one. But the teacher there accused me of cheating. Soon, I was changing schools every six months. Somehow things just kept getting worse.

When I was eight, Daddy told Mama he was going to work, but he told me he was going to a hotel with Helen. I didn’t know who she was, so I asked him about her later and he got mad. He told me he didn’t know what I was talking about, but when I mentioned the name of the hotel he almost looked scared. He begged me not to tell. He told me that I wouldn’t understand, that my mother wouldn’t understand. He took me out for ice cream and that made Mama smile, so I thought it was okay.

I didn’t tell her the truth until he left us for good. Mama had no words when I finally admitted it, but by then she didn’t have any tears left either. Pretty soon after that, she told me we were going to a doctor. At first, I was happy. I thought the doctor was for her; I knew how sad she was, I knew what she smelt like, so I thought she was getting help.

‘No Sweetie, the doctor is for you.’

My father was a doctor, so I’d never been to anyone else, let alone a psychologist. I was sitting on a beanbag surrounded by stuffed animals, while Mama sat on a rickety chair, listing my problems for at least an hour.

‘She’s a very sweet girl, very smart... But I know something’s wrong. Her teachers’ say she plays games with them in class. She’ll say she can’t work out a problem but the moment they sit down with her she knows all the answers. She can’t go to school assemblies or the park. I thought it might be sensory overload, so I bought a few books. But it doesn’t seem to matter how loud a place, she just can’t handle it.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Alexandra please, we’re here to be honest with the doctor. You know you don’t like—’

‘Mama I didn’t mean what you said. I meant what he said.’

‘Excuse me?’ the doctor said, face crinkled with confusion, ‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘Yes you did,’ I told him. ‘You said it’s Asperger’s. I read Mama’s book and I don’t think I have it.’

I still remember feeling like I was the only person in that room that was making sense. Mama seemed happy when I spoke up, not because she agreed with me, but because the doctor had just witnessed what she’d never been able to explain. It took three sessions for him to finally admit I was right. After that, he didn’t seem to have anything else to say. We went to see at least twelve more doctors, and a priest, before Mama finally gave up. She used to say that there had to be an explanation. She’d say it over and over like it was the only thing binding her to this Earth. She needed something—something to make me make sense.

One doctor was convinced I was schizophrenic, another said I was an autistic savant. They threw around every personality disorder they could think of from borderline to histrionic. They tried ADD and ADHD but nothing could explain me away. One doctor said I just had a wild imagination. He said that this is what happens to children raised by single mothers. Mama didn’t hear the bad word he called her, but I did. I hit him for that and we had to leave. But she needed answers, far more than I did. Every misdiagnosis made her shatter like the glass that surrounded her.

She needed someone to tell her that it wasn’t her fault. That *I* wasn’t her fault. But it was too late, too quickly it was too late.

It was loud that day. I could hear her in the next room, screaming for someone to answer her. I went to check on her and she was lying in bed, dry-eyed and staring at the ceiling like she had been for days. I asked her if she wanted to talk about it, but she told me she was fine, she just needed some rest. I didn’t blame her, neither of us had slept in three days. She didn’t because she couldn’t, I hadn’t because she hadn’t. She promised me everything was going to be fine, but I could still hear her pain. I couldn’t ignore it; it hammered into my skull and my heart screamed like a wounded anvil. So, I checked on her a second time, then a third. I didn’t check a fourth... I should have checked a fourth. But instead, I stuffed my ears with tissue paper and prayed to every god in existence for it to be silent.

And then it was.

Everything felt cold and for the first time, it was peaceful. I could still hear the whispers of the world, but they were so far away. I cried because all of a sudden, I could breathe. That night, I slept more serenely than I ever had in my life. And when I woke up, it was still quiet. And that was beautiful. There was a part of me that thought that this was what control was.

That maybe it had finally stopped. There was something that could make the world go quiet, I could be what my mother needed me to be. A normal child who didn't need doctors, who could make friends. A girl who couldn't hear what no one had said.

I ran to tell my mother the good news. To my surprise, she had slept peacefully too. All she needed was a bottle of pills.

My father didn't take me in after the funeral—he refused. He told his new wife that he didn't want me getting into her head or their baby's. He had a new daughter now, so he set me up in a crappy apartment and never looked back. He paid my rent remotely and wouldn't take my calls. He told me that as soon as I turned eighteen he wouldn't be legally responsible for me anymore. At fourteen, he was counting down the days until he could be rid of me for good.

I can't tell you how loud that apartment was. There were fifty people just on my floor and they all just seemed so busy. My neighbours were nice to me at first, they'd bring me leftovers and offer to help me with my homework. By then I had learnt to only respond when I could see someone's lips moving. But it's impossible to catalogue what someone has and hasn't told you. I started to wonder if it was even right for me to hold back. I knew their pain, their struggles, their grief. Why should I let someone suffer in silence when words might make the world a little bit quieter?

The landlord came to see me, he told me to move out. The other tenants complained, he said. I was disturbing them, he said. I had never been more desperate in my life. I knew my father wouldn't take my calls even if I was homeless. It was like there was something buried in my chest, something alive and thrashing. Maybe it only came into being in that moment or maybe it had always been there, threatening to burst free. That was the first time I saw true fear; it burned in my landlord's eyes and his mind descended into howling chaos.

Yet somehow, I made it go quiet.

I told him I wasn't leaving and he agreed. I told him that the people complaining about me should be evicted and they were. Suddenly, I had someone who was incapable of turning me away—who couldn't tell me no, who couldn't hurt me. That was all I'd ever wanted. For the first time, I had a voice in this screaming world and now one wasn't enough. One of my teachers was next. Then a classmate, then a neighbour, then anyone who tried to silence me. I couldn't win anyone over with affection or kindness. I had tried loving the world and it did nothing but break me to pieces.

The very thought spread through me like wildfire because I knew its source. I knew the one who had begun it, who had stolen my voice—It was time to take it back.

‘You’re going to tell me the truth, Father. I’m tired of your lies. You knew what I was and you prayed for it to destroy me.’

He stared back at me with those big brown eyes, the one’s strangers used to tell me I’d inherited. Seeing him look so trapped was a joy I had never expected. He was so flustered, so panicked. For once, I had the upper hand and it was a power I never knew I craved.

‘Alexandra, you need to leave now,’ he tried to sound confident, but his voice shook with every word, ‘My family will be home any moment. They know to call the police if they see you.’

I could hear his mind racing at a million miles a minute, desperate for me to accept his lies. He couldn’t figure out how I’d found his home, let alone how I’d made it inside. His eyes were locked on the safe on the wall, wondering if he could make it in time.

‘Your new wife and daughter went to the Hamptons for the weekend. It’s so sweet you bought a little summer home for them. It was Mama’s favourite place, remember?’

‘No, they’re at Cassie’s dance class,’ he spluttered, suppressing a gulp, ‘They’ll be right back—’

‘Don’t lie to me,’ I snarled in a voice I didn’t recognise before I walked over to his safe and began turning the knob, ‘You don’t think I can hear it? Your mind’s in a tailspin because you know no one is coming for you.’

The safe clicked open and from it, I pulled out his gun, ‘Lexi,’ he breathed, as all hopes of escape melted in front of him, ‘Put it down, let’s talk.’

‘Okay.’ I smiled, even as I began loading it with gloved fingers. ‘How about you tell me about Uncle Michel? We never got to talk about him.’

He repeated the only thing he had ever said about him, ‘my brother was sick.’

‘Sick? Sick? He was just like me and you know it.’

I could smell his sweat as I flicked off the safety, ‘I thought that he might be, but I didn’t know for sure. He—’

‘Hung himself, in a mental hospital. Was that what you were hoping I would do? Is that why you cut me off? So I would kill myself like your brother? Like my mother?’

‘Lexi—’

‘Stop calling me that, you gave up that right when you left.’

‘...Alexandra, just because I’d seen it before, doesn’t mean I knew what to do. I couldn’t help you, I felt like a failure, so I left and I’m sorry but—’

‘You let my mother think it was her fault,’ I hissed and the gun cocked with a sickening snap. ‘It was your genetics, you’re the reason I am what I am. It had nothing to do with her but you told her “it’s the mother’s responsibility to take care of the child,” while you busied yourself with your work and your affairs and your life outside of us.’

‘I couldn’t have known she—’

‘I don’t care! You don’t get it, do you? You still haven’t figured out what I am, have you?’

He spluttered and I couldn’t help but laugh, ‘I’m not a freak, I’m not a monster. I am evolution incarnate and I’m not alone. Mama’s last gift to me was making sure I knew that. You’re a doctor, maybe you’ve heard the stories? There was this guy in Yokohama, absolute sweetheart, called his grandmother every day but she’d been dead for three years so they locked him away.’

I stepped closer and he shuddered, ‘Did you hear about that fifteen-year-old in Siena? She was living twenty years in the future, there’s no telling the good she could’ve done. But instead, she was ridiculed until she ripped her all-seeing-eyes out.’

I grabbed his chin, wrenching it upwards until he was forced to look me right in the eyes. ‘Or the six-year-old, just over in Pittsburgh. He liked to make his teddies dance, but he didn’t need his hands to do it. You remember him, Daddy?’

I was standing so close to him now, that I could see the sweat being crushed in the wrinkles of his forehead, he was silent so I spoke again, ‘He starved to death... during his *fifth* exorcism.’

His mind became quieter and quieter, every thought grinding to a stop as I ensured he could do nothing more than to listen to me.

‘And what about me?’ I asked, before beginning to recite the explanation he had tried to rob me of, ‘Alexandra Priam, nineteen. Hyperthymesia. Telepathy. Mind Control.’

His breath quickened, his knees quivered, and for a moment I wondered if he was going to faint. ‘Wh-what?’

‘Didn’t know that last bit, did ya? Why do you think you haven’t run away? Why you haven’t called for help?’ a laugh escaped my throat, yet I didn’t know what I found so funny. ‘It’s because I removed the idea from your head. I mean, think of the possibilities, I could cure addiction in seconds, break apart toxic relationships, rewire criminals. I could hand my father a loaded gun and tell him to pull the trigger.’

‘Please... Please don’t...’

‘It’s my people’s destiny to replace your kind. What I want you to know, is that this is just the beginning. There’s a storm coming, we won’t be silenced. We won’t let people like you control us. It’s almost a shame you won’t live to see it because let me tell you, the new era of humanity is going to be beautiful.’