

THE QUARRY

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Excerpts from Teagan's Notebook - Age 15

Writing

My grandma tells me I'm crazy
for writing poetry,
she tells my parents they're crazy
for running a bookshop,
for home schooling me,
for letting me waste time
collecting words in spiral-bound notebooks.

But I don't care what Grandma Hartigan thinks
because I know that I would die if I couldn't
put pen to paper, that my organs and my bones
would actually implode, and my muscles and skin
would cave in, and I would be nothing but
a twitching puddle of guts and gore.

So that's why I'm writing now:
bedroom door shut, toes curled
into my blue cotton bedspread,
writing fast feelings for Jon,
this guy who took me out
never returned my calls, the creep
said my dark curls needed
something stronger than hair gel.

I'm searching for the right words,
the right rhythm, the right form
when my door bursts open.

My pen streaks
across the page.

My mom, palms pressing into narrow hips,
meets my eyes with a glare.

You're supposed to knock, I yell,
slamming my notebook shut,
shoving it under a pillow.

*Didn't I ask you to help me
wash dishes, Teagan?*

Hang on. I'll be there in a sec.

Dad would never intrude on me like this.
He knows writing is more oxygen to me
than air.

He knows the web of quiet I need
to spin around me.

He understands my dreams
of writing a full collection of poetry,
of seeing my poems published
in a glossy covered book someday.

He's the one who tells me
to keep hold of my dreams
as he lives his own dream
of owning and running a bookshop.

No hang on – now, Teagan, Mom says.

You know your responsibilities.

Before I can whine another word,
Mom whips around and goes,
leaving my door open,
scattering
my thoughts
away.

Where We Live

Crystal Tower Condos

The Perfect Place

For You and Your Family.

That's what the billboard sign says
near the entrance by the pool

Perfect for some people I guess
perfect for pressed-suit professionals
who work overtime
perfect for well-to-dos
who own another home in the suburbs
perfect for people who hire
dog walkers and nannies and cleaners
but not so perfect
for
us

Grandma Hartigan bought this place
for Mom and Dad before I was born
two bedroom
one and a half bathroom condo
on the fifth floor of a high rise tower
in Arlington, Virginia's Crystal City
just south of downtown Washington DC

Perhaps it would be perfect for us
if we weren't home all the time
Mom and Dad have home schooled me
since I was eight
taking turns teaching me

(Mom in the morning
Dad in the afternoon)
while the other works
at Hooked on Books
our family-owned bookshop

Perhaps it would be perfect
if the traffic ever stopped
on the street below
if the other high-rise tower didn't block
the mid-day sun
if the air conditioner didn't always break
if our books didn't overflow
the shelf space

Don't get me wrong
there are things I love
about our home
the nearby metro stop
the long wide balcony
that stretches into the sky
the fact that Mom and Dad have let me
decorate my room with posters
and pictures and dream catchers
that they never make me
tidy up my books and clothes

But sometimes I dream of a yard
rooms like run-on sentences
windows that open on four sides

We'll get out of here soon

Dad always says

But *soon* never comes

and we are always

still

here

Last Bookshop in Virginia: A Syllabic Poem

I hurry out to help Mom,
darting down the hall, whirling
around the frayed and sagging
tan linen couch, where Dad sits

staring into his laptop,
looking like he's trying to
read some book written in a
language other than English.

Mom greets me with a tight-lipped
look. *You wash. I'll dry*, she says,
handing me a soggy sponge
and two yellow rubber gloves.

I dunk plates and forks and knives
into the soapy water,
scour grease and veggie scraps
from the oily frypan.

I am washing the last thing –
the tin Mom used to make bread –
when Dad clunks down his laptop
and staggers to the kitchen.

He leans into the counter
above the sink, and at first
he doesn't say anything.
But then he draws in a breath

as if he were trying to
suck all the wind from the sky.
I just read the news, he says.
Read About It is closing.

What? You're kidding, Mom breathes out.
letting her blue-plaid tea towel
drop to the floor. Even I
stop what I'm doing, gulp in

air. I don't need to ask what
this means. I already know
that independent bookshops
in this country are dying

faster than summer mayflies.
I know *Read About It* was
the only other indie
bookshop in all of DC,

and that our bookshop is now
the last one in Virginia,
the last one in DC, and
probably one of the last

in the whole United States.
I hold in my breath, hold in
my words, stare at the crinkles
caked in Dad's forehead, and scrub.

Why Bookstore Business Blows in 2014

Dad blames our location on a too-quiet corner on a not-so-busy street in Arlington, Virginia, the cracked and bumpy sidewalk, the bad parking, our rusty *Hooked on Books* sign, the non-stop traffic, the techno music blasting from the shop three doors down, the oak tree that blocks our entrance with its green-gold leaves, Ruperto, our Pilipino landlord, who won't let us break our lease so we can move the bookstore somewhere else, and of course the big Barnes & Noble store nearby and the online book stores (although Mom says they're not doing well, too).

Mom accuses the U.S. economy, the world recessions, how everyday things like bread and apples and toilet paper and shampoo have all shot through the roof, not to mention that it's almost cheaper to go on a luxury Tahitian cruise every week than to own a car, and the pesky new carbon tax that's made printed books extra expensive which is probably why we never see our once-loyal customers like Mrs. Benson and her three daughters and the school librarian Mr. Edwards who used to buy *hundreds* of dollars of books, and of course those Kindles and Nooks and iPads which have made it cheap as buying McDonald's French Fries to download e-books.

The Channel 9 anchor woman reports a different story, of rising illiteracy, changing values, how recent studies have shown that Americans in 2014 now have approximately two and a half minutes per day to read since we're too busy with multiple jobs and overtime and how we get caught in traffic jams and crowded trains just to come home to a dusty house, dirty dishes, drippy children, bills, laundry, and even kids are more stressed these days, with studies showing that average homework loads have doubled in the past twenty years. *And besides*, the anchor woman says, pulling out a white handkerchief from the inside pocket of her Chanel suit jacket to wipe the sweat off her brow, *Who even wants to spend all that time filling our heads with made-up stories and ideas, when our heads are full enough as it is?*