

THE QUARRY

Stained Glass Window Cracks

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Katie was young when I met her. She would still be young now. She wasn't a pretty girl, at least not by most standards. Her hair was a tangled mess, unbrushed for days, and her mouth was turned down like it had forgotten how to form a smile. Her skin was pale, and she wore baggy clothes that hid any shape to her. She was always fidgeting absently, twisting her hair, clothes, and even skin. When she was particularly anxious or uncomfortable, she would bite at her fingertips. Her eyes were always downcast, never looking at anyone directly. But when you did catch her eye, when you got the chance to look deep into them, there was a spark there. There was pain, sure, and it was washed out by the constant ghost of tears, but it was there no doubt. That relentless spark. A spark of life buried deep inside. I wanted to bring it out, to help her, but in the few short months I knew her I never did manage to work out how.

I first saw her standing in the back of the church. She was alone and seemed unsure of what she should do next. I had come in from the garden to get a glass of water. It was a scorching day and watering the plants did little for my own thirst. Standing in the light of the giant stained glass window, her skin was a canvas of colours, so beautiful, yet so cracked and broken. She crept slowly forward, each step precise and calculated, trying to make as little noise as possible on the old wooden floors. She sat down in the third row from the front and bowed her head, so her hair fell in front of her face.

Wanting to give her privacy, I quickly finished my glass and headed back towards the door. As I moved, I stepped on a loose floorboard. It creaked, not loudly, but loud enough that Katie jumped to her feet. Her eyes were wide in shock, and I could see tears streaking her cheeks. I stepped back instinctively, taken aback by her sudden movement.

‘It’s alright miss, you’re more than welcome here. I was just leaving anyway.’

She shook her head, stammered out what sounded like an apology, and backed away out a side door. The door swung shut with a gentle thud. I stood there, confused, watching where she had been just seconds before. But then I turned my attention back to the crocus flowers I had been about to plant. They would make a lovely addition to the garden, so bright and colourful when they bloomed, and I wanted to make sure I planted them in just the right spot.

I didn’t think of Katie again until the following week. This time, I was planting some Lily of the valley in the shade of the church, lost in thought about how—when they bloomed—they would spread across the dirt and make a beautiful white covering. Much better than the dead grass that had been there previously. The garden itself was quite a pretty little place. It had been built by the church community a few years back; there was a wide variety of plants, with winding gravel paths between them. I was constantly adding new plants, and caring and tending to the old ones. My goal was to ensure that no matter what season you came in, the garden was a beautiful wash of life and colour. Scattered amongst the garden beds were stones painted with an array of inscriptions—from kids’ drawings, to handprints, to bible quotes. Each one was done by a different person, and they all seemed to capture a little bit of their life and personality within them.

One of my favourite places was the rose garden, it had a lovely array of different coloured roses with a plaque in the centre that read: ‘a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.’ I was heading past there to fetch the watering can when I saw her. Sitting on the bench alone, vines creeping over the metal frame above her head, she was lost in her own world. There was a sadness to her face, not the same as I’d seen the other day with tears, but the sort that is a dull, constant ache in your very soul. I was overcome with an urge to help, to wipe that pain away.

‘You alright there miss? You seemed a little upset the other day.’

She jumped, eyes widening in shock. When she looked straight at me, up close, I was met with the full force of the emptiness on her face for the first time. It was so lifeless. Even the shock seemed not to sit properly on her. It reminded me of when a plant finally dies. Not

the brown that people assume is dead, but when it is actually properly dead. No colour or moisture left. She was like that; empty and colourless. Except for her eyes, they still shone a bright blue, as though they could not be dulled.

‘Fine,’ the word was dull, a whisper that lacked any energy. She paused for a minute and then said, ‘You remembered me?’

‘Of course I did. I make a point of remembering everyone I meet.’

‘I’m not worth remembering,’ the sentence jumped from her instinctively. She looked down at her hands and blushed. Her fingers pinched the skin on her wrist.

‘Everyone is worth remembering.’

She didn’t speak, just twisted her fingers harder around her skin. The tension in the air was strong.

‘My name’s Brian.’

‘Katie.’ She looked nervous, shifting constantly in her seat. Letting go of her wrist, she bit at her fingertips instead.

‘This is my favourite part of the garden you know,’ I said, trying to engage her in conversation and make her more comfortable. ‘Did you see that there? It’s a quote from Shakespeare. Romeo and Juliet actually.’

Her eyes followed where I was gesturing. She nodded slightly, acknowledging it, but saying nothing. I pressed on.

‘This couple that has been coming here for years planted the roses. Lovely couple, both English teachers. One at the high school and the other over at the university. Big fans of Shakespeare, but it is a fitting quote. Roses aren’t my favourite flower, mind you, thorns always getting in the way. What’s romantic about getting poked by a plant?’

I was hoping for a smile, but she just nodded slowly and stared at the plaque. It seemed she was not going to say anything. Maybe she wanted to be left alone? It’s not uncommon for people to come here just to think.

‘Alright then, well you enjoy the garden. I need to get back to work, I’ve got some freshly planted Lily of the valley that needs some water. Plus, the cleomes need trimming before they get too tall. If you need anything, I’ll be around.’

‘Thanks,’ she said it slowly, seeming unsure of the word.

I began to see her often after that. At first, she would just sit on the bench, staring off at nothing. I would stop and chat to her, telling her all about the flowers in the garden. It seemed to interest her, and it was in these conversations that I first began to see the spark in her eyes. That little bit of life, and hint of a smile, forcing its way through. I guess that's why I kept coming back to her; I wanted to bring it out. It made me sad that someone so young would have so little life. So I would sit with her and talk.

After a while, she began to follow me around the garden as I worked. Not every time, but on days when she seemed just a little bit brighter. Over time, she started to ask questions. Always in the same dull whisper. She seemed intrigued by the garden and asked about how I knew which plants needed care. I told her that it was just something you learnt. It was in my bones. She seemed to like my company.

One day when I was trimming the Lily of the valley, which was growing nicely and getting close to flowering, I saw her sitting on the bench like she sometimes does. She looked sadder today than normal. Putting down my secateurs, I picked up my lunch bag and went to sit with her.

‘Strawberry?’ I offered her the container. ‘I grew them myself, in my garden at home.’

She took one wearily and bit into it. For a split second, I almost saw a smile. She took another.

‘They’re much nicer homegrown, I find,’ I said.

She nodded slowly.

‘I also have apples, from my daughter's farm. She moved away a while ago, but whenever she comes to visit she brings me a fresh box of fruit. The apples are my favourite.’

Katie took the apple I had offered her, and as she did I realised something. The spark in her eyes was the same as my daughter had had when she was Katie’s age. It was the life that had always powered her. Of course for Katie, it was masked by her pain, but maybe that's why I wanted to keep her company. Maybe a friend would help bring out that life?

The food seems to have raised Katie’s mood slightly and she followed me as I went back to planting. I told her about the Lily of the valley, and how I loved to see it flower. She watched it for a while before she walked away again. I didn’t see her for a couple of weeks after that. The next time I did, she was sitting on the bench again, wearing a jumper despite the summer heat, and crying.

Unsure what to do, I brought her one of the crocus flowers she had admired on our last trip around the garden. They had begun to flower, so bright and beautiful. She seemed to like the purple flowers most of all. It lay in her lap, her fingers wrapped around the stem. I offered her water, but she only shook her head. Then I pulled out some strawberries and blueberries I'd picked that morning and held them out to her, but she didn't even acknowledge them.

Not sure what else might help, I just let the silence linger for the longest time. Tears slowly ran down Katie's cheeks and my heart broke for her. I couldn't imagine what must be going on for her to cry so much. In hindsight, I could have asked—could have tried to investigate. But I guess I didn't even know what to say, and she never opened up on her own. That's part of the reason I like gardening so much. I always know what they need. I'm not so good at people. So we just sat there, together. Eventually, she turned to me and told me 'thank you,' in her quiet voice. Then she left. I watched her walk along the path and disappear through the gate.

That was the last time I ever saw her. A week later, her photo appeared in the back pages of the local paper, with some lines about her death. It said she'd committed suicide and we should send our prayers to her mother who had found her, and to Katie, so her soul would find peace. It was followed by the usual generic sentences, 'she was taken too young' and 'she was always so full of life, she had so much potential.' It all seemed very arbitrary to me. That wasn't Katie at all. They didn't know her, I don't think anyone did. I wish I'd tried to help her more. Maybe if I had of asked her more about her life, asked her what was going on or how I could help, I could have saved her. I scrunched up the paper and threw it down on a pew. She was gone, and a few lines in a paper by someone who'd never even met her meant nothing. Nothing.

I walked out to the garden. It was that day that the Lily of the valley I'd put so much care into flowered for the first time. That seemed wrong somehow, now she was gone, it felt like the flowers should be gone too. But that's not how nature works, in its cruel way. Katie was gone before she'd even got the chance to bloom. I sat on our bench, unable to move, unable to think about anything but picture her sitting in the same spot. She'd spent so much time there over the past two months, and never once had I asked her what was going on. All I did was talk about plants, talk about how I cared for them. I stared at the plants around me until the sun set and the garden began to fall dark.

The next morning, I came back with a fresh batch of plants, all various shades of purple, and my shovel. I began to dig in the dirt next to the church. Plant by plant, I lay them out carefully. The arrangement had to be just right. This was hers. This was how I was going to keep her alive. Once everything was planted, I took a stone and painted it for her, with her name and some of the flowers she'd liked most. I wasn't much of an artist, but it still sits there, looking up at the beautiful array of colours in the stained-glass window. All the cracks melting away to form a complete artwork. That was more like the Katie I had known, so many cracks but still a beautiful, young girl. She is part of the garden now.