

THE QUARRY

Neah Bay

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Trigger Warning: mention of suicide

Neah Bay, Washington, 2019

Alana felt a soft sense of dread and apprehension settle in the pit of her stomach as she drove into the familiar seaside town. She was now twenty-three years old and hadn't been back to this place for four years. She had been able to avoid coming back with excuses of having to work and her busy study load. If her family wanted to see her, they came to Vancouver where she lived. She knew they understood how painful it was for her to come back, but this year her mother had pleaded for Alana to return and she couldn't bring herself to say no as she had on countless other occasions.

Her nerves increased as she passed the familiar sign "Welcome to Neah Bay". She slowed the car down and took a few deep breaths, reminding herself that she could do this. Even the sight of the familiar pine tree forest, which used to be one of her favourite things about this place, failed to placate much of her anxiety.

The drive home felt familiar the closer she got. She passed by familiar shops and sites. The smell of saltiness and pine wafted through her rolled down windows. It was as if nothing had changed and yet many things had. How many times had she walked these streets? It felt as if she had never left.

A few houses painted with bright primary colours came into view. Her home was painted green. She stopped the car and sat in silence for a few moments. After four years, she was home.

Her mother was in the kitchen washing dishes when Alana entered the house and her Dad was sitting at the small, round table with his coffee and morning newspaper.

‘Alana,’ her mother smiled as she pulled her daughter into a hug, wiping away a few stray tears as they pulled apart.

‘So she’s decided to come home,’ her Dad said pulling her into another hug.

‘Hey Dad.’

‘Derek come say hi to your sister,’ her dad called out. A few moments later her younger brother climbed down the stairs to meet them. He’d grown much taller since she’d last seen him. He had let his dark hair grow longer so that it flopped messily into his eyes. Dark, seemingly black eyes bore into hers and it reminded her of the reason she hadn’t come back for years. She pushed down the lump that had lodged in her throat and smiled, greeting her brother with a ‘Hey’, but her mind felt like it was millions of miles away and for a moment she was transported back in time...

6 years previous...

Alana stared into black eyes; for a moment she was reminded of the deep pools of water that could be found along the rocks at the beach, except these ones were never-ending. They belonged to her cousin Ben who was giving her one of his rare smiles. She hadn’t seen him smile in so long that she continued to stare as they walked home from school.

‘What are you so happy about?’ she demanded, squinting her eyes as she looked up at him.

‘Emma’s coming home today’ He shrugged. She’d forgotten about their friend coming home from her family holiday. Alana suppressed the urge to roll her eyes – he was like a lovesick puppy when it came to his girlfriend, but she was glad he had someone who made

him happy, who could pull him out of the dark moods he got into so frequently. She didn't blame Ben though. He'd been through a lot.

They finally reached Ben's house and she noticed a car parked on the curb outside his home. The car door opened and out stepped a girl with dark blonde hair and piercing green eyes. Ben started to run and Emma laughed as he picked her up and spun her around. He put her down and kissed her lightly before pulling back to smile at her as if he was looking at the sun. Alana caught up to them and again rolled her eyes, but tried hard to suppress a smile. It was rare to see Ben happy, but Emma always seemed to bring this side out of him.

'You guys are gross,' she commented dryly, responding to their outward display of affection. Emma pulled away from Ben to pull her friend into a hug.

'Don't be jealous, I still love you too,' Emma teased.

2019

Alana blinked and fought back the tears that threatened to surface. Derek looked so much like Ben. She had seen her brother a year ago and he hadn't caused this reaction in her. She supposed that coming home brought up all these feelings for her. She stayed in the kitchen making small talk with her parents as long as she could before excusing herself. She went to lay down on her bed and drifted off into an uneasy sleep.

Alana jogged steadily along the beach, her shoes hitting the wet sand with solid thumps, which turned to wet squelches as she entered the forest at the end of the beach. Squelch thump, squelch thump echoed in her ears. She started to pick up speed, racing as fast as she could through the tall pines and wet bracken. Her feet seemed to know exactly where to take her as she ran through familiar surroundings. She soon reached the foot of the headland and didn't slow down as she ascended the tree-covered hill, eventually reaching a clearing from which she could look out onto the ocean. It was a windless afternoon and the ocean was glassy and flat, yet storm clouds were gathering in the sky and a few drops of rain were starting to patter on the ground. She stopped, doubling over to catch her breath. As she looked out at the bay, her breath caught in her throat for a moment as she spotted a pod of

whales breaching on the horizon. It brought back a memory that she hadn't thought of in a long time.

6 years previous...

'C'mon, we might miss them!' Her cousin called back to her as she struggled to keep up.

'They're not going anywhere!' Alana shouted back as she ran.

'Yes they are. They're migrating,' Ben replied. Trust Ben to not pick up on her sarcasm.

'Migration lasts for months, Ben.'

They soon reached the foot of the headland and she slowed to a jog as they climbed the hill. She finally caught up to her older cousin, who had stopped at the clearing on top of the headland and doubled over to catch her breath.

'Did we miss them?' she asked sarcastically, and then adding as an afterthought, 'You get weirdly excited over a bunch of whales.' Ben ignored her, his back rigid as he scanned the horizon.

'I swear I saw them when we were back on the beach...' he muttered to himself. It was a few minutes before he shouted out, pointing to a spot just beyond the headland.

'They're in the bay!'

Not 400 metres from where they stood were a pair of humpback whales that were slowly coming to the surface to spout water out of their blowholes. They were so close that Alana could hear the whoosh of the water as it left the creatures.

'Wow,' she breathed out.

The pair of them watched the whales for a further ten minutes as the creatures slowly left the bay to move further north. Ben turned to her with a rare smile and his unruly hair flopped messily into his eyes.

'Worth the run?'

'Definitely.'

Tears started to well up in Alana's eyes as she watched the distant animals jump out of the water before splashing spectacularly down again, white foam and sea spray emerging from the impact of mass to water. She hated Ben for what he did, not only to her but to his family, most especially to Emma. She didn't understand how he could've done it. Floods of memories she had tried to suppress for so long came rushing back into her mind, but one in particular stood out stronger than the rest.

6 years previous...

It felt like the same afternoon as countless afternoons before it. She'd just had her after school band practice and Alana felt happy and free as she walked down the pathway that led to Ben's house. He wasn't at school and she planned on giving him an earful for skipping school without her. They did everything together. The least he could do was tell her he wasn't coming. She decided to forgive him though, in the name of having a nice afternoon with him and their friends.

She opened his front door unceremoniously and kicked off her boots, where a whole pile of shoes were stacked messily by the door.

'Ben?' she called out. The house seemed oddly quiet as she entered the lounge room. 'Emma?' She knew her Aunt and Uncle would still be at work but normally her cousin had music playing loud or he and Emma would be watching television in the lounge room. Suddenly Emma appeared at the top of the stairs, but something was wrong; she looked white as a ghost and tears were streaming down her face.

"Alana," she choked out. Alana became alarmed at the sight of her friend and started to climb the stairs. Emma never cried and Alana felt an unexplained sense of dread as she saw how shaken up the other girl was. As she got closer, she noticed how badly Emma was shaking.

'Emma you're scaring me. What's wrong?'

Her friend shook her head and seemed unable to speak as a fresh wave of tears streamed down her face. She started to speak incoherently.

'I-I can't – I don't understand. I-I. He wasn't – He was fine. I just-.'

'Emma, breathe.'

The other girl started to cry harder and Alana pulled her into a hug, trying to reassure her.

'It's Ben' Emma sobbed into her shoulder, 'He's dead.'
Alana felt shock roll down her body despite her disbelief.
'What do you mean?'
'He-he killed himself.'

Alana could still feel the remnants of shock that had run through her body that day 6 years earlier. She let her tears fall freely down her face as she watched the whales for what seemed like forever. Finally, they stopped jumping and she turned to leave, with a new resolve to do what she had come back home to do; what her mother had asked her to do.

The door reverberated slightly as Alana knocked as loudly as she could. The nerves that had been playing in her stomach since she'd arrived back home now increased tenfold and she almost turned to go back to her car, when the door opened and there stood Emma, her friend from long ago. Alana ignored the fear that had lodged itself in her stomach and swallowed down the apologies that were on the tip of her tongue. How do you apologise to someone you've ignored for 5 years?

'Hi Emma,' Alana forced herself to smile at the other woman who blinked in surprise.
'Alana.'

'I'm sorry, I should've called. Mum told me where you lived and I just—' Her excuses were cut off as she was pulled into a tight hug.

'I've missed you,' Emma said.

'I'm sorry,' Alana repeated lamely. She was about to go into a more in-depth apology when she was interrupted.

'Mummy!' A small boy who looked to be about four or five was pulling on Emma's shirt and trying to squeeze in between Alana and his mother. 'Mummy I'm hungry.'

Emma pulled away to answer her son. 'Okay, honey. Just give me a minute.'

Emma pulled lightly on Alana's right arm. 'Stay for a drink. Please.'

Alana felt herself nodding but she couldn't take her eyes off the little boy whose hair flopped messily into his eyes. Deep black eyes suddenly looked up at hers and the similarity between the boy and Ben was startling. This is why she had avoided coming back. A deep longing for her cousin lodged deep within her stomach like a black hole and she felt it tugging her, pulling her, to where she did not know. Where do you go when the person you miss is gone forever? Alana forced herself to look up at Emma.

‘He looks exactly like him.’ She commented. Emma smiled sadly.

‘Everyone says so,’ she agreed.

‘Just one drink?’ Alana asked.

‘It would mean the world to me.’

Emma was quiet as she poured the boiling tea into two large mugs.

‘Any sugar?’ she asked. Alana shook her head. ‘I forgot, you don’t really like things sweet, do you?’

‘Not really, no.’

The two women sat waiting for their drinks to cool down. Emma tried to keep up the conversation with small talk, but Alana was so overwhelmed by seeing her second cousin for the first time and by Emma’s presence that she was barely present in the conversation. Emma sighed and Alana refocused her attention on her old friend.

‘I’m sorry,’ she explained. ‘I was just thinking of Ben.’

‘You still don’t forgive him, do you?’ she said perceptively.

‘How *can* you forgive him?’ Alana retorted. ‘After he left you like that?’ Alana blurted out what she’d been dying to say for years. Emma was silent for a few moments before answering.

‘I didn’t forgive him at first. I hated him. He knew I was pregnant and still he left. I thought he loved me enough to stay...but over the years I’ve thought about it and have made my peace with it, if you could call it peace. I just think he must’ve been in more pain than I knew, perhaps more than I can understand.’ There was silence again and then Emma stood up suddenly, holding out her hand. ‘C’mon, I’ve got something I want to show you.’

Alana took her hand and followed her old friend down the hallway of this unfamiliar house. They entered a bedroom and Emma let her hand go to rummage through a cupboard that seemed to be full of junk. Finally, she emerged with a wooden box. She rummaged through the box briefly before pulling out a silver bracelet with what appeared to be a carved wooden pendant of a humpback whale. Emma sat down on the bed and held up the bracelet for Alana to see.

‘He finished it just before he died. I thought I’d give it to you when you decided to finally speak to me again.’

Alana was quiet as she took the bracelet into her hand. The pendant was small and intricately made and it stirred something deep inside of her.

‘I know you don’t like to remember him Alana, but I think maybe you need to in order to heal.’

Alana took a shaky breath. Part of her wanted to throw the bracelet down on the bed and run away, but instead she embraced Emma in another hug. Emma was right. Ben was gone but maybe instead of avoiding home and memories of him, she could remember the good things.

‘Thank you,’ Alana said. For the first time since she’d come home, she felt free.