

THE QUARRY

Caged

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She stared outside of her small window that she had to kneel on a chair just to see out of. The window was placed unnaturally high, and nearly impossible for even her tall figure to see out of. Valerie watched the other kids from her street run after each other with large smiles plastering their sweet faces. Every day she would watch the same group of kids run past her window and wonder. She wasn't sure what it was like to go outside other than for her trips to the hospital, let alone have friends. Though, she could only imagine it was better than being locked away.

'Valerie, get down from there. You'll hurt yourself,' her mother cried out, her eyebrows furrowing so far down her forehead that her eyes were almost hidden by the folds in her skin. Valerie turned away from the face of her mother and laid her eyes back on the kids having fun.

'Relax mum, it's nearly impossible to hurt myself. Sheesh.' Valerie looked back over at her mum, who rolled her eyes. You see, her mother was paranoid. To her, anything could open up its mouth and swallow her precious little daughter alive. Just because she was sick, and unlike the other kids around her, that was no excuse for Valerie to live in a cage of her own house.

Now, her mother wasn't cruel. She just thought she was protecting the only real thing she had in her life. It hadn't always been like this, in fact, they used to be what their

neighbourhood would call the 'perfect' family. Then Valerie got sick when she was twelve and her father made a run for it, taking Valerie's little sister alongside him, leaving just Valerie and her mother behind in this great big house.

'I'm not leaving until you get down.' She rolled her eyes and jumped off the chair.

'Happy?'

'Very.'

'Now, do you mind leaving?'

Her mother nodded her head and swiftly left the room. She only wanted her to leave so that she could get straight back on the chair and look back out the window. She shouldn't have to live like this, but in a way, she had accepted it and chose just to watch others enjoy their lives and be left wondering what it was like.

In a way, her mother was trapped in their house too. For four straight years she had not left Valerie's side. She would take her to doctor appointments, stay overnight or for months at a time with her at the hospital and hold her hand as she fell asleep, fever like. There were other times, though, where Valerie would be at home doing well and she had clear memories of her mother locking her bedroom door for days on end, only entering to give Valerie her medication, check up on her, feed her, then leave again. Every time she would leave her bedroom, her mother would always come back with a red, splotched face, deep purple bags underneath her eyes and dry cracked skin.

When Valerie managed to look back out of the window, the kids had disappeared, and the street was quiet once more expect for the few birds that flew past the window, and the occasional adult who would walk past. Valerie smiled when she spotted their neighbour, Winifred, the old lady with her black, short haired Chihuahua, Rudi. The dog was probably almost as old as Winifred.

Once Winifred was out of her view, she gave up and jumped back off the chair. She thought she'd better be safe in case her mother came back through the door to yell at her again. She seemed to do that a lot, but she just knew what Valerie was like and that she'd more than likely make her way back up the chair. It was actually strange she hadn't come back in here already, but she shrugged her shoulders and jumped onto her bed, making a sinking dint in her mattress in the shape of her body. Valerie snuggled her face into her pillow and hoped she didn't hear the voice of her mother re-entering her bedroom.

With her face snuggled into her pillow, Valerie thought back to the days when it wasn't just her and her mother. They would eat together at a table every night, where Valerie would watch her younger sister shovel food down her mouth with a cheeky grin as her mother and father would stare at her with rolling eyes. Her sister's response would always be to continue shovelling her food down her mouth, so much so that it would occasionally dribble onto her chin. Then Valerie's father would stand up and point a finger at her sternly.

'Jessica Sinclair, you better be more of a lady when you eat otherwise you will not get your desert.'

Jessica would give her father puppy dog eyes before shovelling food back into her mouth. Valerie would be sitting beside her sister doing her best not to laugh and egg on her bad habits and stubbornness. That was before. This is the now. The slow strangle of overbearingness that had exploded long ago.

A sudden knock on their front door caused Valerie to raise her head from the pillow with a listening ear. She heard the creak of the door and slowly stood up, as not to cause the blood to rush to her head. She opened up her own door and wandered into the hallway, remaining hidden by the curve in the wall. All that could be seen was the back of Valerie's mother and a mysterious figure that was dressed in dark denim jeans with shiny black shoes that came to a point at the toe.

'Paul?' her mother spoke. Valerie's eyes widened, and she backed away in response. As she backed away, Valerie knocked her heel on the side of the wall creating a loud enough noise for her mother to turn around, revealing the straight face of Paul. Her father. His sandy blonde hair replicated the short locks that sat on top of Valerie's head. His bright green eyes were always the first thing that a person would notice about her father. Valerie's were much like her mother's blue eyes, though they did have a slight mix of green throughout them and had always thought she looked more like her father.

'Valerie?'

'Dad?'

Valerie remembered the last time she saw her dad. Four years ago. They were at the doctor's office, with Valerie sitting between her mother and father, waiting for the doctor to come back into the room. Valerie never thought she was there for anything serious, but then again why would a twelve-year-old jump to conclusions about something small that was

happening? Valerie had gotten tests done, but she had assumed they were just being careful and checking everything. Not that they would find anything in those tests.

‘Acute lymphocytic leukemia.’

The moment the doctor’s told her those words, was the moment Valerie assumed her father decided he would up and leave. Well, she gathered so by his reaction when they left. Valerie remembered the quietness that surrounded the family upon exiting the building, she could still smell the stale air. Nobody spoke a word until the three of them got inside the house, ten-year-old Jessica at their Grandma’s.

Valerie wasn’t entirely sure on the exact words that were spoken, but she remembered the way her parents were whispering to each other as though there was some huge secret that couldn’t be said in front of her. Nothing much actually happened until they all went to bed that night. Valerie was lying awake, staring at the ceiling where paint had begun to crumble. Valerie remembered that her father had been meaning to re-paint the ceiling for weeks but had never quite managed to get to it.

She could picture the sounds of her father’s footsteps on the creaking floorboards as he shuffled through the hallway, a suitcase rolling behind him. That was the day he left, and neither Valerie or her mother had heard from him since, other than from their Grandma who had to tell them he’d taken Jessica with him, and now—here he was. At their doorstep.

‘Hi Beth, Valerie.’ Valerie looked at her mother who was wearing a frown and her eyebrows furrowed into each other causing the familiar folds of skin to appear.

‘I have to go,’ her mother squeaked. She turned around and ran past Valerie. Moments later Valerie and her father both heard the loud slam of a door.

‘What are you doing here? It’s been four years Dad.’

Her father shuffled his feet and moved closer into the house.

‘I know. I couldn’t come back. I couldn’t be around you while you were sick.’

Valerie stared at her father, a single tear running onto her pale cheek.

‘I’ve come to take you away. You deserve a better life than this Valerie.’

‘You have no right,’ Valerie whispered at her father, another tear slid out of her eyes, the previous one touching the edge of her lip. As much as Valerie had longed for the outside world, she couldn’t leave like this and she couldn’t leave her mother. They’d only had each other for the past four years. That was a long time to be alone. She stared between her father and the slightly ajar door. The warmth of air welcoming a slight calming sensation despite the tears now flowing from her eyes and into her mouth. She peeked a flock of birds that flew across the orange and yellow sky and disappear in an instant. Her father continued to stand

there, every so often inching his way further into the house, the door creaking shut in a slam as he moved forward another inch. Valerie flinched and stood back, her blurry eyes on the timber floorboards where a bloodied stain sat.

‘I know it’s been a long time and I have a lot to make up for, but I’m ready for you and your mother to be back in my life. I don’t care what it takes. I’m not walking out of your life again.’

‘I can respect that, and I want to see my sister, but I can’t do this with you yet and I don’t think mum ever will. You know just as much as I that she’s not the person you left.’

Her father nodded his head and looked to the floor.

Valerie thought back to her mother before her father and sister left. There was one moment that stood out.

Valerie was ten and her mother had dragged both her and Jessica to the shops so that they could pick out new outfits for Valerie’s eleventh birthday party. At the time Valerie didn’t care much about what she wore, but her mother had adored buying them cute outfits, and she often enjoyed dressing them in matching outfits. Valerie kind of gathered her mother had wished she’d had twins. She was always obsessed with that type of stuff with the two of them.

While they were out shopping Valerie had walked past the pet shop and spotted a small grey cat that had fur sticking up in a frizz.

‘Mum, look at the frizzy cat,’ she had said. Her sister and mother turned around and looked at the cat. An “O” shape forming on her mouth.

‘It’s so cute,’ Jessica had said.

‘Do you want that cat Valerie?’ she had asked, and of course Valerie told her she did. So, her mother strode in and bought the cat for her birthday even though she had already gotten Valerie a present. Valerie hoped that one day her mother’s pain would disappear, and she could be that mother to her again, but Valerie wasn’t naïve. She knew she needed help.

Sometimes Valerie would see bits and pieces of her old mother, like how she held her hand and refused to leave her side while Valerie was really sick, but those moments were becoming rarer and that left Valerie feeling more alone and caged than ever.

‘I can understand that. I realise now what I’ve done to this family. I scared myself into believing that I would lose my daughter and I couldn’t live with that, so I ran and gripped

onto the child who I knew I could have forever, and that's the biggest mistake I've ever made.'

'Thank you for admitting that.'

Behind her, Valerie heard footsteps that sounded like the clang of heels against their floorboards and turned around to see her mother wearing her old favourite pair of heeled boots that reached the knees. She hadn't worn them since her father had left. Her mother's face was blank in expression, her greying hair tied up in a messy bun. There was no sign of tears or redness. In fact, it looked like her mother had applied makeup to her face.

'Hi Paul.'

'Hi Beth.' Valerie stared at the two of them and wiped away the loose tears from her face.

'Did you want to stay for dinner?' Valerie's father stared at her with a raised eyebrow, his green eyes locking with her mothers. Her father was about to answer when the phone rang. At first, they ignored it but when it continued her mother let out a low sigh and rushed to pick it up. Her heels making the same clanging noise against their floorboards.

'Oh, hi Doctor Roberts.' Valerie snapped her head to stare at her mother and tried to read her expression. It was blank as she replied with a couple of yes' before hanging up the phone. Valerie knew these expressions all too well though. Her father looked at them both, confused.

'It's back again,' her mother spoke, but she already knew before the words had come out of her mouth. Valerie let out an almost in-audible sigh and fought back the tears that welled up in the back of her eyes. What was life worth living as a caged animal anyway? Just because her father had returned to be in her life didn't mean it would change her mother.

'But they assured us that I was in remission?' Valerie questioned, confused by the outcome of her tests after having felt so good about her health for the last few months since they had told her she was in remission from Leukemia. This wasn't the first time she'd been in remission, though. In her whole sixteen years of life, and over the past four years, Valerie had been told she'd had cancer once, and that the cancer had come back now three times so why did she expect anything different?

Valerie looked away from the watchful eyes of her parents and looked out of the large window at the side of their house. Across the street there was a house with their lights on, and inside Valerie could see a bird in a silver cage with its wings flapping about the place, sitting on the window sill. The tears that were stuck behind her eyelids made a reappearance and slowly dribbled down her face. She was this bird, and that bird was her.