

Granite

“Are you sure you want to do this,” her mother asked Kate as she leaned her head against the car window. “We can always come back another time, you know.” She wasn’t listening. “Kate...”

“Yeah, Mom. I’m sure.”

She ran her slender fingers through her hair, straight and dark. She did this a lot when she was nervous.

“You know it’s not going to change anything, right?” her mother asked.

“Yeah, I know,” she answered, annoyed. “It’s just something I really need to do.”

She buried her hand into her coat pocket and the sharp edges of an envelope pricked her skin and sent a spike of panic up her spine. The envelope, right there in her pocket, made *it* seem real to her for the first time. This was really happening.

There was something else in her coat pocket, buried underneath the envelope. It was smooth and round and she closed her eyes as she rolled it in her palm. It hit her again, this time a little harder. This was really happening.

The brakes groaned as the car slowed to a stop and she opened her eyes. She reached for the door handle when she felt her mother’s cold fingers grip her wrist tightly. She turned to her mother and looked in her eyes; they were just like her own, wide and brown with shades of green at the center.

“If you need anything...” Her mother paused and her hand slightly trembled as she tightened her grip around Kate’s wrist.

“Mom, I’ll be fine,” she assured her, kissing her on the cheek. “I promise.”

Her mom nodded and slowly loosened her grip as Kate climbed out of the passenger seat. Kate watched the car pull away from the curb, turn left down the road,

and finally disappear out of sight.

The air was mild and a gentle breeze lapped at her hair as she fumbled to tie it back, out of her eyes. It was just cool enough to wear a jacket, but in a few weeks, she knew it would be too warm for one. The flowers were already starting to bud and the grass was spongy and green under her feet. Maybe she would walk here from school next time when it got a little warmer. It was only a mile or two, she told herself. But in the back of her head, she knew that there wouldn't be a next time.

The grass squished beneath her sneakers as she walked across it and she admired the way the sunlight made the granite and marble seem to glisten and shimmer around her. She made her way to a wooden bench next to a small dogwood tree that was just beginning to bloom in pale shades of white and pink. She looked at the tree fondly, it reminded her of the one she had planted with her step dad when she was seven. She used to love waiting anxiously for it to blossom during the spring so that she could pluck a few of the flowers and enclose them in the plastic sheets of her scrapbooks.

She smiled slightly as she remembered walking barefoot through her backyard collecting flowers and digging for stones, worn and smoothed by the stream that carved through her yard. When summer came, she would sit on a small wooden bridge that crossed the stream and dip her toes in the water. She remembered sitting there for hours reading and playing with the small grey fish that disappeared during the winter but always managed to find their way back to the stream every summer to her bewilderment. She remembered her mom used to tell her that it was the same fish every year, so she named them. There was Vinny and Margaret and Bartholomew and dozens of others, all of which she drew and wrote about in the mountains of scrapbooks she used to keep in

her room. Now they were piled up in boxes in the attic of her mother's house.

She stood up from the bench and her eyes scanned her surroundings. There was granite and marble and people all around her, but she was alone. Her eyes were drawn to one object in particular - a dark grey granite stone beneath the dogwood tree. She knew that was the one.

She read the name on the flat front surface of the stone - "Richard Saunders," and the hairs stood rigid on the back of her neck. For a few moments, she couldn't do anything else but stare at it, and she strangely felt as though it had eyes of its own, piercing through her with its gaze.

"Uh, hi." She said shakily, finally finding her voice. "I'm Kate."

There was no response.

"I know we haven't really met, like, formally or anything..." she said.

Again no response.

She suddenly felt stupid and turned her back on the stone. She ripped the tie out of her hair and ran her fingers forcefully through her dark locks. She wanted to go home. Shoving her hands in her pockets, she turned to walk away from the stone, from "Richard Saunders," but the envelope in her pocket paralyzed her where she stood. She couldn't leave, not yet.

She sat down beside the stone and leaned against the trunk of the dogwood tree. She pulled out a pack of Marlboros from her front pocket and lit a cigarette after a few moments of struggling against the wind.

"Mom hates it when I smoke," she told the stone. "But I'm eighteen now; my birthday was last week, April 6th. You know that, right?"

There wasn't an answer, just the soft voice of the wind rustling the branches of the tree and the subtle swaying of the grass. She flicked the ash off the tip of the cigarette and watched it float away on cool breeze passing by.

"I took mom's maiden name. Hartmann. I just thought you should know."

She stared at the stone for a few moments. It was simple, dark grey granite with a polished face and rough edges. It sat there, unmoved, as if it hadn't even noticed the girl in the black pea coat talking to it as she smoked a cigarette. She felt invisible to it, and yet startlingly vulnerable. She took another puff of her cigarette.

"Look, Richard Saunders, what I really came here to say is..." She said, standing up. "Where were you?"

The stone said nothing.

"Where were you for all my birthdays? Where were you when mom couldn't find a job so we had to move in with my grandparents? Where were you when I *needed* you?" She squeezed her eyelids shut tight to try and stop the tears she had been holding in for eighteen years, but a single drop broke through and trickled down her cheek. She quickly brushed it off with a swift movement of her hand and wiped it off on her jeans. She saw no sense in crying over someone she had never met - or at least not formally.

"I know you're dead now, so I guess you have an excuse. But it doesn't make up for missing my childhood." She reached into her pocket and felt for the envelope, secretly praying she wouldn't find it. "And I really think you would've liked me," she added.

"I'm going to college in a few months; it's all the way in California. I'm not sure when I'll be coming home," she explained, but she knew she had no intent on ever coming back to the east coast.

The stone was silent.

“So I wrote you this,” she said, pulling out the envelope from her pocket. “*To My Beloved Father*” was written in cursive on the front and was crudely sealed shut with scotch tape. “It’s everything I thought you might want to know about me. My likes, my dislikes, my hobbies, my passions...everything. I wrote it all.”

She looked down at the envelope in her hand. Inside of it was her entire world, her entire eighteen years of existence. It was Kate Hartmann.

“I just want you to know who I am before I leave.” She said.

She pulled out the other object from her pocket. It was a small, smooth stone, dull red and fit snugly in her palm. She rolled it fondly between her fingers, admiring its humble brilliance. She knew its every curve and contour, its every crack and blemish. It was familiar to her like an old friend, or a favorite blanket or teddy bear. Except it was more than that. It was her mother and it was her stepfather. It was the dogwood tree in her backyard and the pink blossoms she adored. It was the flowing stream and the summers that seemed so distant now. It was home.

“This is my favorite stone; I found it when I was really little. I used to love collecting them from the stream we have in our backyard - there’s literally buckets of them in the attic. But this one,” she said, “This one is my favorite.”

She sighed and having nothing more to say, turned from the headstone to leave. It was just how she had pictured it in her head a thousand times before, but it didn’t feel the way she had expected. She stuck her hand in her jean pocket and felt something cold and plastic.

Still clutching the envelope, she pulled the lighter out of her pocket with a

shaking hand. With a quick flick of her thumb she ignited the flame and watched curiously as it swayed and flickered in the wind. Her heart pounded in her chest as she held the flame precariously close to the edge of the envelope.

She opened her mouth to say something, anything, to try to express the emotions swelling at her core, but realized she had none. She held her breath as she dipped the corner of the envelope into the flame, and was absorbed by the crinkling and shriveling of the paper as the fire washed over it like a wave crashing against the shore. The fire began to lick at her fingertips and she dropped the remaining part of the envelope. She stared at it unblinking as it smoldered and blackened on the ground until the flame shrunk and finally died without so much as a whimper. She was silent.

The small polished stone suddenly felt unbearably heavy in her delicate hand. Her hand was weary, not only from carrying a burden which was never rightfully her own, but from eighteen years of reaching out for something that was never there.

She let the stone roll off the tips of her fingers and fall at the heel of the dark granite tombstone, which loomed above it with its hunched shoulders and jagged edges.

There were no goodbyes, no softly spoken words. There were no tears, or sighs, or lingering sentiments. There was only silence. Silence and the numbness that settled in her chest as she turned away from the tombstone.

She waited a moment for something to draw her back. As stupid as she felt for thinking it, she almost wished the headstone would call out to her. She wanted an apology, an explanation. She wanted to hear her father admit he was wrong, and tell her that he was proud of her.

Her dark hair swayed with the chilling wind and she clutched her black coat tight

against her as she waited to hear her father's voice.

The stone was silent.