

The Crack

People walked around one another as if they had previously rehearsed the most efficient and visually appealing way to get where they needed to go. A man in a business suit stopped to allow a girl to run in front of him while her parents trailed behind to make sure they were on the right route to their gate number. A woman behind the well-dressed man avoided his suitcase by steering to the side while she ate a sandwich with one hand. Everyone was in the process of leaving their worn-out habits here and I imagined that even the thought of stepping on the moving walkway was enough to make people move with a purpose in their step. There was reassurance that, if not them, something would be pushing them forward.

I saw this scene play out from the entrance of the airport with my feet planted firmly on the ground. We stood side by side and I shivered whenever someone stepped through the airport doors. I was in a state of icy indifference to this place of leaving and all its brief inhabitants. The night before a trip had often felt like an otherworldly experience to me. You're not where you're meant to be; where you've meticulously planned out each day for the next week, but everything is packed away in its exact spot. My suitcase never looked like that before a trip. I didn't belong here. My life felt like it was haphazardly thrown in whatever pocket could fit it, except there was no landing to expect. No clearing of the aisles and keeping your seatbelt on until you could safely start the real reason why you took the trip in the first place.

Alex placed a nametag on his suitcase that had a border with the word "Hello" written in multiple languages. He had bought his plane ticket only two days after making the decision to backpack across Europe and somehow his confidence never wavered. I envied his confidence.

"I can't believe this day finally came," he said, laughing. His feet were turned toward the multitude of suitcase wheels and their owners. "I've been planning it for so long that I was starting to think I would never leave."

I grimaced and shifted my textbook to my right arm. "Of course, I can't imagine how horrible that would have been." My voice, quiet. I did my best impersonation of a smile that had no reason to be fake.

His grin gradually wavered and his eyes glanced at the textbook I held close to my chest. I hadn't had an answer when he asked me why I insisted on bringing the book with me to the airport. It was because I might have time to study, I told myself.

"Listen," he started. "I'm really sorry that I'm going to be gone for your graduation. I wish it hadn't worked out that way. I am really proud of you"

I bit the inside of my cheek. It was a bad habit I picked up over the last few months. My teeth formed over semi-healed scabs that would no doubt start bleeding again.

"Well," I said. "I did move up my graduation date and you couldn't have known that when you bought your ticket." I paused. I had moved my graduation date after he told me about this trip. I didn't have a choice; all my friends had completed college by our anticipated graduation date, and I was still stuck after changing my major four times. How was I supposed to know there was so much science involved in Psychology? I only settled on my final major because a counselor had seen my multiple class changes and suggested I pick a dependable degree for job security. My indecisiveness scared everyone. I had stared at the counselor blankly and told him to declare my major as Economics.

“You don’t have to worry about it”, I whispered. “This trip is way more important.”

“I wouldn’t say that it’s less...”

He suddenly looked at his watch and involuntarily let out a dramatic gasp.

“I’ve got to go, but I’ll message you when I land.”

He reached out his arms quickly to pull me in an embrace which I half-heartedly reciprocated. He fit in well with the rest of the crowd when he finally ran to catch up with those strangers who were all there for the same purpose. The wheels on his suitcase melded in with the others and I quickly lost him.

“So how was it?” my sister asked as she turned the car onto my apartment street. I was transfixed with the gentle sound of cars passing by us and I had to go over what she said in my mind to process its meaning. The drive from the airport had been carefully navigated with talk about my upcoming graduation party. I thought we had both silently consented to keep the conversation away from anything that faintly resembled cobblestone streets. My tongue licked the sores in my mouth. My sister has always been observant. I let out a long exhale before responding.

“Oh, it went well. We talked for a little bit and then he left. He seemed really anxious to go so I’m happy for him.”

Take another breath. Whatever I needed to do to avoid her stare. It's dangerous to take your eyes off the road even for a moment. I was about to tell her that when she finally answered.

"Right. Well, you know you can always talk to me about anything." She smiled.

Of course I knew that. You know how I knew that? Because she never let one week go without telling me that simple sentence. I can remember a simple obligation. Instead of answering I pushed another button on her car radio to switch the station and she sighed loudly.

"Will you just decide on a station?"

My finger froze over the next button I was about to carelessly push. I hovered over the controls one by one, looked at Cassie, who was keeping her eyes forward, and settled on the off button.

As she parked her van in front of my apartment, she looked down at me and I forced myself to keep eye contact with her accusing blue eyes. When was the last time she blinked?

"Jane", she said, "remember I told you that you can come with us when we go to New York this summer. I know it's not London or anything, but I would much rather you come with us than go off to a different continent alone. Also, I know I've told you this, but I just worry"—she looked out her window so that I had to stare at the back of her head. "I just worry about what could happen especially after—"

"After what happened with mom," I finished, irritated she would use her as a strategy to keep me in a designated place.

“Also, I don’t think you have the kind of money to run off to Europe like Alex does.”

She looked back at me and smiled. I knew that she was attempting to diffuse the time bomb I had placed on my life. There was nothing more important than not being in this city when that fuse goes off.

“I will though”, I said with a forced determination. “That’s why I got my degree.”

“I hope that’s not the only reason. I just think it’s a little ironic that you’re set on going to Europe when you have a fear of flying. A fear of doing anything alone. I know mom and you talked about going to see where she was born, but you always got really paranoid when we went to the airport for short trips. She won’t be with you now.”

She rushed out these words as if afraid I would interrupt, although we both knew I never would.

“It’s okay to just stay here.” She said.

Mother and Cassie would always reassure me that it wasn’t a big deal if I never went to the south of France, where my mother was born. Even though the three of us had always planned on going there together. Their assurances suffocated me and I would feel sick with the relief of not flying. My palms clammed whenever I thought of walking through a small door into a metal contraption with only tiny windows to look out and escape the space. If only there was reassurance the flight wouldn’t have turbulence. If only I knew a parent wouldn’t be smiling sympathetically at me while his child screamed for two hours straight. If only I didn’t have to mentally prepare myself for the short walk to the bathroom. If only, if only, if only.

Cassie tucked a strand of her blonde hair behind her ear and stretched behind her seat to pick up the purse she got from Paris. She stayed there for a week last year with her husband without visiting mom's hometown. Jewelry jangled on her wrists as she rifled through her purse to find her lipstick. As her left hand applied it, the ring on her finger was brought into the sunlight, allowing me a full view of the diamond. A stone like that had more than monetary value in my family. It had freedom. Freedom from questions that danced around what they really wanted to ask: Why get that degree when you could have a giant rock?

A few years back, before the car accident, my mother had asked if a friend of mine was married. She wasn't.

Mother had let out a sympathetic sigh. "That's too bad," she had said, "She's pretty enough." Her pale eyes met mine.

"It would help if she lost weight though."

I had looked down.

Cassie put the cap back on her lipstick and I looked down at my own left hand that was free of any jewelry.

"I have to go," she said and gave my hand a squeeze. "Your graduation party is going to be so much fun. You should enjoy it, Jane; your degree is a huge accomplishment."

The party will be unnecessarily extravagant, just like everything else my sister organizes. Was it really a big accomplishment?

Repetition might help. I am going to get a degree in Economics.

I felt something then. I felt both accomplishment and unexplainable dread at having earned this degree. The extremities met in the middle, and I felt something closer to apathy.

I walked into my apartment that hadn't changed since I moved in three years before. The floor was littered with boxes labeled in black marker to denote where the contents belonged. The television set stood on the floor and was displaying the disc menu of a movie I had watched too many times to count.

"Scott," I yelled. "You've been here all night and you couldn't bother to turn the TV off." I stepped over him so I could reach the switch

Scott's head rested on the floor, inches away from his bed as if the rest of that short journey would have taken too much of his limited energy. He let a puff of air escape him and lazily turned his head to me. I patted his head and his tail swayed gently from side to side.

I looked above the TV at the portrait of mother, who looked like an older version of Cassie, long blonde hair and a friendly glint in her pale, blue eyes. She looked like the last time I saw her, on the night of my wedding day. When I had called off my wedding at the last minute, she begged me to reconsider. My head had hurt; overwhelmed I couldn't feel any regret, and I tried to remember why I agreed to marry in the first place.

"Well," Mother had said, the glint lingering in her eyes. "This is good anyway, I never really wanted you to marry. Now you can live with me forever." I had to force myself not to

take a few steps back, away from her. She took a few calming breaths and forced a fabricated smile on her face.

I let her talk until she left my room. When I was alone, I sat there where I had grown up and first decided I loved to travel, even with my aviophobia. In that moment with my mother gone, my chest constricted with an emotion I couldn't identify. I felt consumed by a desire to prove this abrupt decision made sense. After all, there wasn't a lot of thought put into me marrying this guy anyway. My eyes stared at the wall. Someday I would do something, Something just for me. That was the last time I saw my mom and her pale eyes.

I imagined that this portrait version of my mom was one who had died before my doomed wedding, a marriage that may as well have been arranged, albeit without much resistance on my side. At least until the wedding day.

A faint meow came from around the corner, followed by a cat whose bushy tail resembled a raccoon.

"Oh good," I sighed. "Everyone is here now."

The cat jumped into my lap when I sat on the floor next to Scott, who quickly put his head on my knee. They both nudged my hand to pet them both, but I couldn't get my wrist to turn in either direction so we stayed in that position where no one was satisfied.

A month later I arrived late to my graduation party. The guests were walking leisurely underneath a banner with my name plastered in bold, neat letters. Across the room my sister conversed with different spheres of my acquaintances in one circle and I was again reminded of our mother, who always managed to laugh easily with anyone she met. It must have been my fault we fought over my doomed wedding. Cassie had written out what I should say to end that one-sided war, but it humiliated me to plagiarize an apology. Surely that would have made my words forfeit. What would be the point then? I knew that mother would see through my work I had simply stamped my name on with my untidy handwriting. I planned on meeting with my mother. I really did, but I hesitated when Cassie gave me an outline of what to say. It didn't matter. I was too late.

"Congratulations, Jane!"

Someone I knew to be a distant relative was suddenly in front of me and before I could respond she wrapped her arms around my body. It was an awkward hug. I didn't have time to process the proper motions and my arms were pinned against my body by her long figure. We began the usual script, going through all the necessary pleasantries. She politely asked about my internship I started with my new major and I gave her an answer that would satisfy anyone who asked with as forced a smile as she had. I understood that there was no point in explaining how, albeit successful, work was uniformly dull. There wasn't a way to explain that whenever more work was placed on my desk it was like I had rolled a boulder up a hill only for it to steadily tumble back down. It had become my heavenly punishment to bear. This stability was what anyone would want.

“You’re looking really good, so skinny.”

There had been a short lull in our dialogue that was quickly rectified with her statement. A humorless laugh escaped my lips. I had slimmed down because my sister had allowed me to use the treadmill in her basement. My apartment was in a busy part of town, and it had quickly become apparent I was unable to run in an outdoor space that made me cringe whenever a car’s owner abused the horn. Instead, I propelled my body into moving through a stationary manner and subjugated myself to the walls that never changed. The repetition forced me to recognize that my sister’s wall had a miniscule crack in my line of vision. My head would automatically want to glance away from the crack, but it was something I had to stare at, almost like I had no control. It was like staring at a terrible accident. A smell of burning rubber coupled with the sounds of a despairing ringing would penetrate my body and I would desperately run faster only to remain in that same corner.

There was a tapping sound pulling me back and I realized I had not answered my relative’s well-intentioned compliment, and she had started to run her fingers up and down the table with no apparent pattern. Her veins stood out in a dark blue on her hand and she took a shaky breath as she quickly glanced toward my sister and then back at me.

“Thank you,” I said. She smiled with an obvious dip in her shoulders and her smile relaxed.

I opened the door to my apartment, ignored Scott’s greeting, and quickly put dinner in the oven. There was food at the graduation party, but whenever I thought of grabbing

something in that room flooded with people, my stomach erupted in a painful knot. I waited on the couch and let Scott push his nose on top of my hand; the sink had not been turned off completely. Every few seconds, a drip sounded off in the kitchen. A small noise made big in this empty space. I began to count the seconds between each drip. Scott gave up on getting my attention and chewed on his stuffed animal instead, determined to turn each bite into a shocking squeak. In the kitchen, the cat swatted at a fly that landed in intervals, teasing the cat by hovering just within reach of her paws.

There was a harsh vibration against my skin and I jumped, making everyone turn to me. I gave Scott a reassuring pat on his head and looked at my phone while walking with a languid gait toward the kitchen. Alex had sent a picture of himself in front of the town he knew my mother was from. His face was stretched painfully in a grin, his eyes looked scary somehow and unfamiliar.

I felt my jaw go rigid and my throat strained with the effort of keeping my face in a neutral position. I lost count of the seconds in between the dripping sink, but I could still faintly hear its consistent rhythm. My phone slipped between my fingers and landed on its fragile side. Both animals lifted their heads toward the deafening crack. Children were now laughing outside the building, riding past on their bikes like every Saturday. A horrible smell invaded the room and I sluggishly went to open the oven. Billows of smoke occupied our space and everyone else retreated when the screeching of the alarm began to fill the already congested area. I lifted my phone. Webbed lines stretched across the entire screen, disrupting Alex's smiling face. My body slid to the floor. There was a faint scratching at the front door.

"Are you sure about this?" Cassie asked. She stared at me anxiously. We stood in the same place where I had left Alex.

"I'm sure." I hoped the confidence I had convinced myself of was seeping into my voice.

Cassie shook her head, unsatisfied with my supposed sureness.

"I can't believe you just e-mailed your boss that you're going out of town for who knows how long. You know they're not going to let you work there again when you get back."

I could feel a lecture form at her lips, but that speech was so worn-out that it died before it could get around her tongue and out through her mouth. She had faltered on the word "when", as if she thought another word would be more appropriately placed there. It was this falter of hers that made my palms begin to sweat.

"Oh Cassandra," I said. My hands rubbed against the rough material of my jeans and an involuntary sound escaped my lips. "Everything is going to work out fine."

She opened her mouth, but I stopped her before she could convince me. That was the part I hated. I knew even at the airport, a place where anything could happen, my sister could still talk me out of this decision.

"Please," I begged. "I've made up my mind."

She narrowed her eyes, but pulled me in for a hug. Alex also initiated our hug when he left.

“Take good care of my dog and cat,” I said.

I stepped away from her gently and walked with gaining speed to the security line.