

A Promise of Home

Zarya Smith, Fort Bend ISD

The car rumbled—deep, like a cat’s purr—as it passed an intersection and onto the freeway. Lola hadn’t said anything since she’d gotten in the car, and Alicia seemed perfectly content to allow the rumbling act as their music while they drove. Lola absently wondered where they were going, and how much money her baby blue twin-sized bed had sold for.

If Lola allowed herself to think, above the purring of the car and the gentle hum of the AC blowing warm air into her face, she might have spent her time panicking instead. But she trusted her big sister, more than she trusted herself, perhaps, and allowed the ambient sounds to lull her into a state between cognizance and slumber.

“Lala.” A gentle, methodical voice. “We’re here.”

Slowly, light flooded into the spaces between Lola’s eyelashes. What greeted her was a great smattering of flora and fauna, breaking apart to reveal a blazed trail of pebbles and dirt. To her left, sounds of cars speeding by.

“Where are we?”

Alicia shrugged. Something cold bloomed at the pit of Lola’s stomach, something she hesitated to call fear but made her anxious all the same. “You don’t know?” she accused.

Alicia smiled sheepishly, in no way a comfort to Lola. “I’ll admit, I didn’t really have a plan for coming here. But there’s a hiking trail right there, and I’ll bet something rewarding waits for us at the end.”

Lola glowered. “I didn’t pack any hiking gear. What if we get lost?”

Alicia’s smile widened, crinkling her eyes. “What if we don’t?”

The air was chill, but bearable on the way up—their thick coats provided more than enough cover to keep the wind from stinging. The sun was high in the sky by the time their hike had come to an end, and Lola was beginning to regret not eating breakfast. Sweat glistened on Alicia’s forehead, but not once had she faltered. It reminded Lola quite painfully of their mother.

“We’re here!” Alica called, teeth shining as she overlooked the precipice. Lola hastily clambered the rest of the way up, pulling herself over the last rock and—

Oh. Oh, wow.

The trees spiraled into intricate designs below them, tracing the path of the hills and inclines they had walked to get here. Though chill, the sun cast the landscape in a warm glow, sunlight reflecting and bouncing from green to green before, finally, returning back to the sky in which it pasted a fantastic blue. Lola's eyes followed the swaying of the trees in the wind, the path of a nearby stream leading into the horizon, and the speck of their car sitting on the side of the road just beyond some trees on their right. It was breathtaking. Finding herself unable to formulate a single thought for a length of moments, she finally asked, "How did you know this would be here?"

The smile never left Alicia's face. "I didn't."

The prickling feeling returned, drawing Lola's breath from her lips in a less pleasant way. "So, we're here on a whim?" she asked.

"Yeah?" Her big sister shrugged, a puff of steam sliding from between her lips and dissipating into the air. "I mean, we got a pretty nice view, didn't we?"

"That's not the point." Her sister's unbothered demeanor left Lola feeling almost as if she were the one being unreasonable. "We could've gotten lost. Or hurt. Or the trail could've ended, and we would've spent the last few hours hiking for nothing. Doesn't that worry you at all?"

"Well, it did," Alicia admitted with a huff of laughter, "before we got here, anyway."

Alicia's non-answer struck Lola in a myriad of ways, the most prominent being that it elicited a vague feeling of uncertainty. But Lola trusted her sister, so she shut her mouth and took in the view.

Long moments passed, punctuated by the chirping of birds and the chittering of wildlife nearby. She flicked an ant off of her shoe. "How long are we going to be here?"

She heard Alicia take a deep breath, imagining the puff of warm air that would then leave her lips. "As long as you want, Lala."

"Then, where to next?"

The silence spoke for itself.

—

Lola's eyes lingered on the people sitting on the sidewalks. Their tattered clothing, their downcast eyes, their disfigured spirits. She had never seen as many homeless people in all her life as she did that one day in New York City. She did not think they had yet walked a full block without seeing someone lying there.

“There are so many,” she said absently. Alicia said nothing.

That day, they watched *The Phantom of the Opera* on Broadway, ate the greasiest pizza Lola had ever placed into her mouth, and strolled through Central Park. Lola found herself enraptured by the city—though she didn’t really like the trash littering many of the streets—talking animatedly with her sister about areas they had recognized from TV Shows and films. They made an agreement to watch *Rent* and *In The Heights* when they got back to their hotel room. Now, they stood overlooking the city at the top of the Empire State Building. Lola couldn’t really see the stars, but the bright city lights amid the darkening sky were nothing short of magnificent. Lola stared out the glass for a long moment, mind lingering.

“Aren’t we also homeless?” she asked.

“Well, yes,” Alicia replied absently. “Why?” Lola shrugged.

“Won’t we end up like them?” The thought made something sharp settle in the pit of her stomach. “I mean, as far as I know, we don’t really have a plan for what happens after all this. Once our money runs out.”

Alicia stared off into the city for a long while. Lola was beginning to wonder if Alicia heard her above the bustling noise of New York City, when she said, “We have enough money to last us a while. I think we should be fine.”

Lola bristled. “That’s not really what I was talking about. What happens after we’re out? Are we gonna go back to Colorado and find jobs? Or stay here?”

“Sure,” Alicia said. “Whatever you want.”

Again, the non-answer brought about a feeling of uneasiness about Lola. She struggled for something more to say when the intercoms clicked to life and flooded the floor with sound, announcing the closing of the viewing area. Among the rustling of people shuffling into the elevators, Lola’s mind lingered on the faces of the people she saw sitting on the sidewalk.

She saw them when she closed her eyes, lingering like an afterimage.

—

Lola could never have imagined that she’d be able to walk into a fairytale. But, standing inside the Admont Abbey Library, she felt like teacups and candles would jump out from every corner and burst into song. The magnificent murals pulled her eyes in every direction, bright and saturated and beautiful, before allowing them to rest on the collection of books that littered every wall. Lola hadn’t been one to read books before they started this trip but, with all the spare time, she’d started collecting.

“Look here, Lala!” Alicia said, “I’m pretty sure this is the exact spot that the library in *Beauty and the Beast* was based off of.”

Lola gasped, eyes wide and bulging as her memory filled in the parallels. The swirling stairs, the upper level, the—well, the *books*! She felt nothing but giddy as she hastily picked a staircase and began the climb, smiling at her sister from above the railing.

“You’re right!” Lola exclaimed, hardly able to stop herself from bouncing up and down. “This is so cool!”

Alicia raced up the stairs after Lola, Lola squealing in delight as Alicia picked her up and spun her around. “Let’s dance!” Alicia said.

“Won’t we get in trouble?” Lola giggled. “We’re in a public library!”

“I don’t see anyone else around.” A glint of mischief. Lola smiled.

“Okay, but we gotta go down. I’m never forgiving you if you fling me over the railing.”

Singing, dancing, and being a general nuisance, Alicia spun Lola around the library. They managed a clumsy rendition of some ballroom dance before finally receiving the slap on the wrist from the library staff. Figuring it was time to go, Alicia led Lola to the entrance. Lola solemnly waved goodbye to the books on the shelves, a little upset that she didn’t take the time to go up and read their spines. She supposed they could always come back, as long as they hadn’t accidentally blacklisted themselves.

Rumbling shook the library. Looking again through the majestic murals on the ceiling, the light came through much bleaker than it had moments before. Alicia shouldered open the grand, brown doors, and stalled.

”Hm,” she mumbled, “That’s... unexpected.”

It wasn’t just raining, Lola noted, but pouring. Water sprinkled her cheeks as the wind blew the water through the doors. Alicia quickly shut them before the staff had any more reason to make this visit their last. Immediately, Lola’s mind kicked into gear.

“Well, how long until the next bus gets here?”

Alicia’s eyes traced the intricate designs lining the huge doorway. “Uhm, a half-hour maybe? And that’s if buses are still running with this rain.” Lola sucked in a deep breath, feeling all of the energy drain from her bones.

“We didn’t bring our umbrellas,” she whined. “We should’ve checked the weather for today. Or maybe we could ask one of the people here? How good is your German?”

“It’s fine.” Alicia made a face. “Not my German, I mean—Here, just follow me.”

Alicia slipped out of the doorway, holding it open from the other side and allowing enough room for Lola’s small body to slip through. Now, faced with the brunt of the rain, Lola quickly asked, “So, what’s the plan?”

“Run!”

“*What!?*”

Alicia sped down the sidewalk, and Lola could do nothing but chase after her. Alicia whooped and hollered as they sped down a decline, and laughed at every gathering puddle she stepped in. Lola’s shoes were wet, socks completely unsalvageable at this point, and yet—through the exasperation, the shock, the worry—she still found herself laughing alongside her sister.

By the time they found their rental car, the thick, angry clouds had passed.

—

They were really in the thick of it now.

The car sputtered and hacked at every attempt to turn it on. Something had gone wrong after their last trip it seemed, something that left their only mode of transportation completely inoperable. Lola sat on the road in front of the car as Alicia fiddled with the hood, looking for some catch to get it open. The panic Lola had been trying so hard to manage sizzled beneath her ribcage, seemingly taunting her for attempting to ignore it for so long. She stared pointedly at the road, seeing if she could decipher every microscopic mineral that made up the asphalt. She wondered if she could stare so hard that holes would sear into the ground. The road was silent, the air sparkling with frozen droplets fluttering to the ground.

“What’re we gonna do?” she finally asked. She waited for one of Alicia’s half-answers, some kind of vague reassurance backed by nothing but some whim, but hated more what she got instead.

“I don’t know, Lala.” Uncertainty, sharp as a knife. It was too much to bear. Finally, everything Lola had been trying to force down bubbled up, bursting out of her lips, spikey and sad and angry and afraid.

“Alicia!” she shouted, hopping to her feet, “We’re in the middle of nowhere! When you said that this would be good for us, I believed you! Because *you’re* supposed to be the big sister and *you’re* supposed to know better. Instead, all you’ve been doing is driving around—*without a plan!*—and hoping that things turn out for the best. We have no security, no ‘Plan

B', and nowhere to go after all this ends." Lola's heart beat loudly in her ears, throat tightening as tears welled in her eyes. "We sold our house because *you* said it would be a good idea. And I believed you."

She wiped at her eyes with her sleeve, which did nothing but slather the tears across her face due to the shiny, cold material of her jacket. Alicia stood silently in front of her, and Lola couldn't bring herself to meet her eyes. Instead, she said what had been hiding in the recesses of her mind during the entire trip. It came out broken, drowned with tears.

"I miss mom."

With that admission, Lola was suddenly swept up into the arms of her sister—warm, comfortable, familiar, and so, so safe. Lola wept more, legs dangling as Alicia held her aloft and pressed her face into the side of Lola's neck.

"I miss her, too." A crushing admission. It was easier for Lola to believe that Alicia wasn't bothered by anything, that nothing shook the strong foundations that made up her sister. It was hard to believe that Alicia was human and made mistakes and missed their mom just as much as Lola did. "I'm sorry, Lola," she continued, "I messed everything up, and I'm sorry. I guess I was trying to forget what happened by trying to live in the moment. Selling everything, this whole trip. I was in a bad place after mom died, and I figured that it would be better to die after seeing the world than in some homeless shelter—"

"Don't even joke like that!" Lola cried, wriggling out of Alicia's arms and stumbling backward onto the ground. "So you were planning on just leaving me too? After all this, you were gonna — and leave me on my own?"

"I was being selfish—"

"Yes, you are!" Shouting now, Lola balled Alicia's jacket into her fists. "You're not allowed to leave me alone! You have to stay alive like everybody else and watch me and make sure I'm fed and *be my big sister*." A long beat, followed by a soft. "Okay?"

Alicia's face broke, eyes muddled with sorrow and something that looked a lot like an apology. "I'm sorry," came a soft cry. "I'm so, so sorry."

"I love you, Alicia," Lola murmured, sniffing. "Please don't go away. Please."

"Okay," Arms again, surrounding her with a promise of home. "Okay."

They sat in the car until night fell. Lola found herself grateful for the thick jacket she had picked up in London, the biting cold only reaching her face, the only part of her exposed to the air. At some point, she had gravitated into Alicia's arms, which promptly solved the

cold-face issue. She thought about her mother, and thought about her sister, and found herself content.

“Want to go outside?” A cautious, quiet voice. Lola frowned.

“It’s way too cold. I’ll freeze my nose off.”

“Only for a little bit,” Alicia promised, “We can see the stars really nicely from here.”

Clambering out of the car, Lola hugged her jacket tighter around her shoulders. She could see the breaths that left her lungs, the cold air wasting no time whipping her nose with frigid wind. Even so, Lola looked up, and balked.

Alicia was right. The stars looked gorgeous. Spatterings of them decorated the sky, clearer than Lola had ever seen them before. She took them all in, wondering if she could take a picture of the moment and save it in her mind forever.

“Someday,” she thought out loud, “all of this is gonna end. And then we’ll have to figure out for ourselves what we’re going to do.” Alicia shifted beside her, an arm wrapping around her side and encasing Lola in warmth.

“Yes,” she agreed, “but, c'mon. Don’t talk about this moment like it’s already over.”

Together, they sat. Together, they stayed. For the time being, Lola was comfortable existing there with her sister. Contemplating the stars. Talking about the past.

Living in the moment.