

The Cave

I watch as my sister Carrie runs ahead of me on the wooded trail. Her Nike blazers skip childishly, and the flannel wrapped around her waist flows delicately. The sun shines through the thickly packed leaves and illuminates her sunburned skin in a freckle-like manner. I look down at my own arms, covered in bruises and scrapes and scars. Most of them from our adventures this summer, the first summer we've been together in almost a decade. I check the time on my watch as the heat from the sun incinerates my pale skin.

"Tracy!" my sister calls, her high-pitched voice piercing through the airy noises of nature.

"What?" I yell back without looking, keeping my eyes on my watch. We should be hiking back to the house.

I open my mouth to share the time and my body drops. I scream and close my eyes. A sharp pain snakes its way around my leg and I feel warm blood ooze down my calf.

I hear my sister holding back laughter and leaves shuffling as she walks towards me. The crumbling bridge I'm walking on has a gash in the wood planks that I didn't notice. The sharp and jagged wooden teeth eat at the flesh to the bottom of my shorts, and I try to pull my leg out of the hole.

"You're such a baby!" Carrie mocks, walking back to the bridge and taking my hand. "You closed your eyes like you were going to die! Like you would ever let anything but yourself kill you!"

I begrudgingly take her hand and pout.

"Just help me up." I mutter, grabbing at the bridge's frayed rope handle with my free hand.

Carrie counts down before yanking my arm with all her strength. I resist the urge to scream as she pulls me from the jaw of the bridge, the splinters scraping down my whole leg. I stand upright for only a few seconds before leaning onto the nearest surface.

"Gimme, gimme..." I repeat, pawing at Carrie's backpack. She takes it off and pushes it towards me.

"I'm gonna' need to pack a first aid kit next time, you always find a way to hurt yourself." She goes silent for a moment before she smiles. "Do you remember when we were seven and you broke your ankle at the beach? How do you even break an ankle on sand?"

Doing my best to ignore her, I take a water bottle and an aerosol can of spray-on bandage from her backpack to tend to my wounds. "It's almost seven o'clock, we should probably head back." I mention while washing the blood from my leg. I drain all the water from the bottle and peek back into my sister's bookbag to see if we have more. I frown with my parched mouth as I realize I wasted the last of our water supplies.

"Noooo..." Carrie whines, looking at the sky. "Tracy, I'm so close to finding the cave. I can taste the stalactites!"

“Deborah says we need to be back by then. Or else, ‘the food will get cold, and no one wants that!’” I say, reciting our new foster mom’s favorite phrase. I spray my leg with the bandage and wince at the sting. “Aren’t you thirsty, anyways?”

“I’m fine. And she’s not our *real* mom, she can’t tell us what to do!” Carrie turns from me and continues down the path, her long dark hair flicking behind her. “I’m going to stay out here until I find that cave.” she states, sliding her shoes along the dusty dirt trail. I look up at the sky and back down at my wristwatch. We need to head back home, but out of fear of a Carrie meltdown, I say nothing more.

We follow the path down and down. The trees eventually recede from the sky above us and the air gets crisp as night encroaches. Goosebumps form on my exposed skin and I keep my limbs as close to my body as possible. I hear insects come out from their daytime hiding to play music throughout the forest. I start to check my watch, but Carrie makes a sharp turn ahead of me, into a nearby forest.

“What are you doing?” I yell after her, staying on the path.

“This is where Ricky told me to go right! At the big rock that looks like a chicken.” She responds, fading into the woods.

“But,” I start, before deciding it’s not worth the argument. I look down the path and sure enough, there’s a huge rock, but it’s likeness to a chicken is debatable. I grab a walking stick from the ground and follow Carrie into the brush.

The trees darken our way and I stumble through the woods. The new path is unforgiving, and we traverse through a tangle of fauna, trying not to slip. As we make our way through the foliage, my foot catches on a large, uncovered root. My body snaps to the ground and pain explores my face.

The air is knocked out of my body and frigid hands quickly pull me up from the rocks. “How did you not see the root? It’s a foot off the ground!” I hear my sister complain.

I defend myself, but my words are cut short when I notice a peppering of glass on the ground. My body aches as I pull my arm into my field of vision. My watch clings to my wrist in shambles, sharp pieces of glass poking out from the smooth silver rim. The hour hand is missing, and the others are no longer orbiting the center of the face. I sigh and stare up at the dark sky before continuing the hike. We are not making it home in time.

We reach the cave and Carrie wraps her flannel around her body. A pang of jealousy courses through me. *I should’ve brought a jacket.*

The sky had faded into a purely inky color and the woods around us suddenly quiets. The cicadas and crickets no longer perform their white noise and I look around in the woods for any signs of life. Leaves shuffle in a tree three yards away and my eyes snap to the limbs. An owl rests silently, watching me and my sister as she slings her backpack into a tree. I shiver.

“Carrie, I really think we should head home.”

“This’ll be quick.” she says, resting her hands on either side of the divergence of the rock. “Ricky told me it’s not a big cave system, only a few areas we could even fit in.” she turns her head back to me and smiles, but the false smile doesn’t reach her eyes.

Carrie takes a deep breath before turning sideways and sliding into the cave. I make one last glance around us. The owl is still staring at me with its dark beady eyes. Unwavering certainty paints its expression. My eyes drop from the gaze of the bird, and I climb in behind my sister.

My breathing quickens as I make my way through the stone. The surfaces press against me from all angles and leave only a few inches of space for movement. The darkness increases the further I travel, and the full moon's light no longer reaches my eyes. My brain kicks into overdrive and I do my best to take deep breaths.

Carrie hears me and mumbles a small exclamation of encouragement, "It'll get bigger after the entrance, I promise! That's what Ricky told me." Her voice shakes as it reaches me.

The cold walls of the cave press against my back and my chest. I awkwardly shuffle to the side, following Carrie and scratching my already injured appendages on the rough surface. I'm forced to close my eyes in fear of a full-blown panic attack. The walls draw in tighter and tighter as we make our way through the cave, squeezing my body between them like an iron against a wrinkled shirt.

"You've got this, Tracy. Don't worry, Ricky's done this before and he's taller than both of us combined." Carrie encourages. I visualize someone bigger than me sliding through the dark damp rocks. I can only imagine how uncomfortable and horrific this must have been for Ricky.

Carrie speaks up in front of me, panic creeping through her voice. "Don't freak out, but there's a hole in the rocks a few feet in front of you. Don't fall in, please, just look out for it." No humor is present in her voice and my heart starts beating against the walls of my chest. I carefully try to reposition my head, but I can't see past the rock that's under my chin, conforming to the shape of my body.

"How do you know where it is?" I ask Carrie, my voice shaking.

"I felt it with my feet."

Oh god. Oh god. Oh god. I stop moving to take a deep breath, but I can't finish the breath, the cave walls prohibit me from moving my chest out. My body shakes vigorously as I shuffle along the floor. My dirty Vans feel along the uneven surface, unenthusiastically searching for the promised hole.

The cavity comes and my shoe floats freely in the air above it. I poke my shoe into the void and feel nothing against my Vans. "I found it." my flickering voice whispers to Carrie.

"Make sure you step over it." she says, barely audible.

I slide my way over the deformation in our path. To keep myself from panicking, I concoct a vision to keep my mind occupied; Deborah's cooking that's waiting for us two miles south.

The cavern finally expands. The pressure lifts from my chest and I hear Carrie's sigh of relief as she reaches the opening before me. She takes a few deep breaths and moves out of my way. I'm finally released from the crevice and join her, opening my eyes once I'm in the larger space.

The cave is drenched in total darkness.

"Did you bring a flashlight?" I ask Carrie, trying to remember what I sorted through in her brown bookbag; deodorant, lip gloss, gum, lint, dirt. Her hand reaches out and seizes my arm.

"I left my bookbag at the entrance." she responds.

"What? And you didn't think to bring a flashlight? Are you stupid?"

After a few seconds of silence, a small, 'No.' echoes from the cave walls.

I turn and pull free from the hand on my arm. I start my inspection of the darkness engulfing us, being careful as to not scrape myself more against the coarse walls. The earthy cave air tastes awful, but the moisture clinging to my skin makes me realize how dry my mouth is. The ground beneath me is surprisingly stable and after exploring our immediate area I announce my findings.

"So, this place is currently the size of a... small walk-in closet," I reach into the darkness and find a space like the one my foot slipped into. "There's more over here."

Hands grab at my waist, wrapping around my torso. Carrie clings to me, so close to my body I can feel her panicked breaths against my neck. Instinctively, my hands fly up and start prying her fingers back, trying to loosen her grip on my body. Her clutch only strengthens, and I feel her body quiver in the cold.

My hands fall from hers in defeat and pity. I reach up to the stone surrounding me and feel the entrance to the next room. There's just enough space to walk through comfortably. I take a deep breath and we venture into the void.

As we carefully step further and further into the darkness, faint rushing noises get closer and closer. The cave system deepens, and I start to feel moisture under my palms. At first only a few drops sliding down my hands and arms, until it was slowly flowing in a constant stream down the cave walls. The liquid warms my frost nipped fingertips and I wring my hands together, spreading the heat. My steps pick up speed as I imagine the source of the liquid, quenching my thirst and melting my shivers.

We turn a corner and I hear rushing water. I drop to my hands and knees, half out of desperation and half out of fear of slipping on the slick surface. Carrie slinks from my waist and stays behind me, offering emotional support as I crawl across the hostile floor. I scrape my knees and the dirt and grime of the earth coats my hands, knees, and tennis shoes. I reach forward, finally at the bank of the current, and dip my hands into warm water.

"Carrie! I found water. Come here." I hear steps behind me, so many steps. The warm water is thicker than surface water, something I couldn't observe as it came down the walls. I cast my doubts to the side and push my other hand into the stream. My shivers start to subside as I splash and coat myself in the cave water, starting with my arms. The goosebumps fade as the warmth washes over the scratched and scarred skin.

I cup my hands into the water and bring my cupped hands to my mouth. The liquid washes over my dry tongue and into my throat, coating my esophagus.

Coughing and gagging fills the small area of the cave as my body rejects the water that I had just held as godly. My body heaves and I turn from the liquid, vomiting. Questions race through my mind, but one stands out from the rest. *What is this?* I dip my finger back into the stream and bring it to my nose, a familiar scent filling my nostrils. A memory from earlier that day comes to the forefront of my mind; washing the blood from my leg with the last of our water.

Blood.

How does this happen? Where did all this blood come from? Did someone do this? My body instantly pushes away from the stream and falls against the wall. Tears stream from my eyes and my body roars with heaving.

“Stay away, it’s- it’s blood! Carrie, get away. We need to leave.” The words vomit from my mouth and my stomach soon follows. I find the nearest cave wall and start searching for where we came from. Carrie screams behind me and falls into me, crushing my ribcage against the unforgiving rocks.

The air is pulled from my lungs and caught by a deep and scratchy voice beside my right ear, “Don’t leave.”

The voice disappears as soon as it arrives, and I feel hands grab at my body.

“Get away! Get off me! Please!” I scream, flailing like a fish on dry land. The force squishing me to the cave walls stumbles away from me and I pry myself from the stone. Pain radiates through my legs as they direct me around the cave. My hands rapidly grope every rock around me, looking for any exit.

I feel a rush of air pass me and hear my sister’s voice where the air just was. Carrie found an exit. My feet mindlessly chase her as my body catches up. I run faster than my mind can tell me to be cautious, tell me to feel where I’m going, or knock any sort of sense into my body. I can’t stop running.

A hand grabs my blood-stained ankle.

My body twists in the air and a gargled scream comes out of my mouth as I snap to the hard surface below. The pain travels from my body to my face and I feel blood leak from my nose and into my mouth.

I cough and choke as I’m pulled across the grit and grime by my foot. I kick with my free leg towards the foul entity that pulls me, and my mind does anything it can do to get away. My hands grasp at the walls beside me and the stone beneath me. My hair and skin is pulled from my body and left on the rocks as I hear the rushing stream draw near.

My nails find an edge and dig into the rock. They bend and contort backwards as I hold on, almost ripping my nails from my nailbeds. My feet hurt the entity. I hear a low scream emit from the darkness, an unhuman scream that makes my stomach churn. The grip around my ankle loosens.

My tennis shoes continue their frenzy. Trying to remember the path we took, I bolt through the cave system. I can no longer hear the unholy stream or unsettling noises and I know I’m close to the entrance. I turn a final corner and hear my sister’s restrained sobs.

“Carrie? Carrie, please. Where are you?” I call out, tears streaming down my face.

An unwilling whisper alerts me to her location and I follow the noise. The whispers soon reveal the small tunnel that Carrie has already started to escape through. I dive back into the hellish corridor.

My chest is flattened, and my breathing constricted as I shuffle my way back through the crevice. I can almost taste Deborah’s cooking, I can almost see her; clad in a patchwork dress with pockets the size of a basketball, sandals clicking across the cracked tile in her kitchen, and anger painted honestly across her pointed face...

The tunnel widens ever so slightly as I continue through the rocks. The trip is faster on the way out, but I must sacrifice my comfortability, continuing to bruise and cut my legs against the harsh walls. The pain is almost unbearable. My consciousness starts to fade. *I have to keep pushing. I have to.*

My half-breaths don't suffice. My breathing shallows. Colors start to intrude on my field of vision. Purples, blue, and greens, dance around the edges of the caves. A piece of abstract art. My eyes finally close. The colors are gone. My foot finds the void from earlier. I slip.

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"Tracy?" I yell into the darkness. *I can't leave her here! What kind of sister am I?*

Rain soaks my clothes and blood is lifted from my hands as I yell into the void I just escaped from. The sky is dark and cloudy and the forest greener than before. The rocks surrounding the entrance have darkened in the storm, worsening my grip.

I continue to yell Tracy's name, but I hear no answer. My shoulders shake and my face contorts in excruciating pain as I sob my sister's name quieter and quieter. I fall to my knees and bury my face in my hands. My body convulses and I look back up and into the darkness, clinging to a shred of hope.

My hope is futile.

I bring myself to my feet and tremble towards my belongings. The small brown bag is hanging on a tree branch, enveloped in rain.

I open the flap of the main pocket and reach my hand in, grabbing the flashlight I hadn't brought into the cave.

My feet trudge along as I walk through the mud and back to the cave with my light. I wipe my eyes with my sleeve and my body shivers as I click the flashlight onto its brightest mode. I shine the beam of light between the rocks and search for any signs of my sister.

The rocks have streaks of blood along the walls, but I can't see any other signs of life.

I reposition myself multiple times, looking through every crack and crevice with the ray of light. A small opening is visible from where I'm standing, near the back of the tunnel before it's turn. I stare intently through my tears, hoping to see anything appear.

I shine my light on the opening and something moves into my vision. A closed eye. I scream my sister's name. I flash my light in the opening. The eye opens.

Darkness.