

Submerged Senses

Alicia was afraid of many things—planes, lightning, snakes, any creature with more than four legs—but the water wasn't one of them. How could she be afraid of water when she spent almost ten years of her life swimming for sport? That's why Eliza felt the irony to be almost laughable that Alicia died from drowning. She mused on this fact as she hazily blew out her birthday candles.

Although a birthday was a celebration of life, an unspoken sadness swirled around the family's kitchen. At six in the evening, the light had already started to dim outside, yet the old sconces that lined the wall and the overhead chandelier only offered muted yellow lighting to brighten the space. The stuffy heat from the June weather mixed with their Chinese takeout choked the air. Eliza's parents sat on opposite sides of their square table, offering up a few claps and smiles, but it was evident that her mother was only a few blinks away from tears, and her father wasn't any better, using his thumb to rub on the few doodles Alicia had etched onto the edge of the wooden surface years ago. Typically, there would've been two cakes, two sets of candles, and two chairs next to each other. Yet, today, the only "two" came from the number "two" that sat on the cake next to its partner "zero."

We turned twenty today, she thought, *Or, I guess I turned twenty today*. Alicia would remain nineteen forever. After blowing out the candles, her eyes flitted across the table to the empty chair. They had always had four filled chairs around this square table, but one was empty today. Eliza thought of how Alicia would've sat in that chair with her short black hair, big brown eyes, and a stance that always read, "so what?".

"Would you like me to cut you a slice?" her mother asked. She quickly stood up and headed to the sink to wash her hands, clearly intending to distract herself.

"I think I'll eat some later, but you guys should take a piece," Eliza replied.

"You don't want a piece of your cake right now?" her father asked, "You and Licia would always take a piece from both cakes and eat them simultaneously. What happened to that?" he chuckled.

Eliza's mother swiftly picked up a kitchen cloth and turned to face the fridge, leaning her back on the granite counter before drying her hands. Although she attempted to hide it, Eliza and her father knew the tears had finally begun to stream down her face. It had been precisely fifty-two days since Alicia's death, and her mother had reached the depression stage—or at least that's what the grief counselor said. Yet, at least her mother could *feel* something about it. It wasn't as if Eliza didn't care for her sister; she cared for her as much as any sibling would, but she hadn't had the phase where she spent hours crying about Alicia's death like her mother—or even her father—did. The grief counselor had labeled her stage as "denial," characterized by "shock" and "avoidance" or some wordy nonsense like that.

"Well, why don't you open your present then?" her father offered.

Eliza smiled, "I'd love to."

Her father stretched his arm down the island to the large flat box, hastily packaged in leftover brown and red Christmas wrapping paper, and slid it towards her. She ripped open the paper to find two large, brand-new stacked canvases. She flattened her hands on the top one and ran them across it.

Though she loved to draw and paint and had needed fresh canvases, the gift seemed quite anticlimactic, especially for a birthday. Yet she gave an enthusiastic “Thank you” anyway.

“I’m glad you like them, honey.” Her mother had finally turned back to face them. Her eyes were no longer glassy but were visibly redder than before. “I’m going to put this cake in the fridge if no one wants it right now. Then I think I’m going to head off to bed.” Eliza looked over to the digital clock on the microwave, which only read 6:32, but she didn’t say anything.

Instead, she announced, “I’m gonna go out for a bit.”

“Where do you want to go, Liza? It’s getting late, and look out the window,” her father said, referencing the cloudy sky, “My neck’s getting itchy already.” He has always been convinced that it will rain when his neck gets itchy. He was usually right, but Eliza knew that the dark clouds, sudden drop in temperature, and the literal weather app notifications on his phone were the real teller.

“Just down to the craft store. I need new supplies for my new canvases,” she joked, “I’ll be back within the next hour.”

“Okay, dear. Please take your umbrella. I don’t want you getting sick the night of your birthday,” her mother said as she picked off her birthday candles and threw them into the trash, “Take your rain jacket too.”

“Will do,” Eliza answered as she picked up her canvases and walked up the stairs to her room. She tossed them onto her bed, slipped on her rain jacket, and grabbed her umbrella before heading downstairs, picking her keys off the hook next to the front door and heading outside.

It had already started drizzling, and when Eliza reached her destination, the light rain had increased into a steady flow altogether. She hadn’t driven to the craft store. However, saying her real destination to her parents would’ve amounted to a bawl more than a turned-back wipe of the hands. Instead, she had gone to Lake Harbor: the same lake where Alicia and she had spent so many bright summer afternoons, where Alicia and her skipped stones, and where Alicia had died.

Suddenly, Eliza’s thoughts flashed to that hallowed evening. She thought about how they had gone for a spring cool-off like most days. How Alicia challenged her to a diving match. How Alicia had gone down but didn’t come up. And how, after less than two minutes of waiting, Eliza ran in to find Alicia’s hair attached to a heavy log, and although she pulled it off and carried her back to the surface, it was too late.

She parked her car in the lot, opened the door, and held her umbrella outside as she clicked it open before stepping out. Eliza then made the all too familiar walk down to the end of the paved path, and when the pavement turned into grass that had become muddy from the sudden downpour, she grimaced at the fact that she hadn’t switched out of her tennis shoes. After a minute of walking on muck, she reached the scattered stones and began to hop from one to another—a skill she and her sister had mastered at the age of nine. Eliza finally reached the lake’s edge and whipped out her phone to check the time: 7 o’clock on the dot. She was definitely not going to be back in the next hour.

Eliza found the pile of rocks and small stones she and Alicia had always rested on, taking a seat on a rock’s smooth, wet surface. “You’re lucky I’m such a great sister that I’m ruining my pants and shoes for you,” she yelled to the water.” Alicia’s body had been retrieved on the day of her death, and she was now buried in the ground in Acacia Cemetery. However, Eliza never enjoyed talking to

her over there. She had to stare at dirt, grass, and stone in the cemetery. At the lake, she felt closer to Alicia: it was bright and playful and active.

“It’s our twentieth today,” she shares with the lake aloud.

“What’d you say?”

Eliza quickly whips her head to the left to find a girl standing about eight feet further down the lake’s edge. With no umbrella or other protective gear, she was soaked from head to toe from the rain. Eliza quickly stood up, crunching on pebbles under her feet as she hurriedly approached the child. “Oh my gosh. You’re drenched in water. Take my umbrella,” she offered.

But the girl shrugged her shoulders uncaringly, “It’s just water.”

It’s just water. Eliza let out a hoarse laugh. “Just water?” she scoffed. She then realized this child wouldn’t know why she found that hilarious, so she muted her face again and morphed her laughter into the sound of clearing her throat.

At this moment, Eliza truly looked at the girl. She had to be around the age of ten. However, she didn’t know if the 7 o’clock sky caused her not to decipher a single detail about her physical appearance. Eliza thought she was brunette, but if she blinked, she now looked to have jet-black hair. Or, her eyes first appeared dark brown, but after a few more raindrops fell down in front of those eyes, they were now blue.

“What’s your name? Where are your parents? It’s too dark for you to be here. Why are you out here while it’s raining?”

“Why are *you* out here while it’s raining?” the child posed back to her brazenly, firmly planting a hand on her small hip.

Eliza, already irritated, narrowed her eyes at the girl. This child would’ve gotten along with her sister. Eliza and Alicia were not identical twins, nor did they have similar personalities. Alicia was always the ambitious type, the mischievous one, and certainly the one to answer a question with a question sassily.

“We need to get you home,” she answered instead, bringing her umbrella underneath the child’s head and offering her free hand for her to take.

In response, the girl slipped past her, hopping on rocks as she went and keeping her balance by raising her arms straight out. “Can I say something?” the girl asked while she hopped and skipped about. Her long hair had turned stringy from the rain. No, she had short hair. No, hair with tight, kinky curls? Eliza rubbed her eyes with her free hand and took another look, but her hair differed each second. “Soooo?” the girl interjected her thoughts in a sing-song fashion, “Can I say something?”

“Okay. And then you’re telling me how to take you home, or I’m calling the police,” Eliza said reluctantly.

“I think you need to relax.” she sang as she jumped and twirled.

“What?”

“I *said*,” she emphasized, “You need to relax.” Then she started to yelp towards the water.

Alarmed, Eliza quickly jumped and sped to the girl, whispering, “What are you doing? People are going to think I kidnapped you.”

The child tilted her face back to Eliza. “But it felt so good, though,” she smiled, “Try it.”

“I’m not going to start screaming out in the wilderness. People are going to think we’re being murdered.” So, the child began to yell again. “What are you doing?” Eliza cautioned.

“I’ll stop if you do it. Just once.” she challenged.

No matter how annoying she could be, there was something so familiar about this little girl. And from years of having a competitive twin sister, Eliza was always ushered into these dares, and the child made her feel no different. Thus, Eliza tossed her umbrella onto the wet dirt and closed her eyes as she felt the water hit her bodice and seep into her clothes. She raised her hands up and allowed a little holler to escape her mouth. She enjoyed it so much that she hollered some more, and more, and more until she had broken into a whole scream. And then, once her voice had turned sore, she switched to laughter—a laugh that didn’t stem from her sister’s crazy death circumstance. But she laughed for herself. She laughed because she *felt something*.

After a minute, Eliza finally opened her eyes to the girl, smiling back at her. “I’m proud of you, Liza,” she said.

Eliza smiled broader in response—until she realized the girl had called her Liza. Suddenly, even though she had first blamed the rain for restricting her ability to take in the girl’s features properly, without her umbrella, she finally took notice of the girl. Short black hair. Big brown eyes. And a stance that read, “so what?”. Eliza’s breath hitched, but before she could say anything, Alicia dived straight down into the water, and Eliza screamed, running towards the plunge, preparing to dive in. But there were no large ripples in the water besides the small ones made by rain droplets—as if the girl was never truly there. Eliza, now drenched head to toe, dropped to her knees in front of the lake. And she cried for the first time since her sister’s death.

It was half past eight when Eliza finally returned home. Although her clothes were heavy from the water held within them, and she couldn’t stop shivering, it never crossed her mind to change. *It was just water*. She took herself to her room, grabbed one of her new paint canvases, and hung it on her easel. Then, she began to paint. She dolloped marvelous shades of blue and green onto her canvas, along with streaks of black and brown and hues of gray and silver.

When she finally stepped back, it was 12:01, and on her canvas, vivid green grass and small pebbles lined the foreground on a summer afternoon. Behind the grass, a deep blue lake took center stage, its waves moving with uncontrolled liveliness. Alicia was off to the side, yet holding the attention of all who were to gaze upon her. Though she was running towards the water, her face was turned back as she outstretched her arm as if to beckon someone to follow her. For Alicia was afraid of many things, but the water wasn’t one of them.