Sight

I take a deep breath. It had been so long. Who knows how it might have changed? I stare up the spiral staircase that curves gracefully into the second floor. I start the climb. One hand gripping the rail and the other clutching my walking stick. A small point in my lower back pangs, longing for a time when I had bounded up these stairs with an ease born of practise. I take another step and a loud moan from the stair greets me. Good, only five more to go. I swing my walking stick around, step onto the landing and release the rail. A hallway stretches out before me, full of doors leading to rooms of sunshine. Suddenly apprehensive, I walk slowly to the end of the hallway. There, guarded by a heavy oak door, lies my sanctuary for so many years. The door creaks open just like it always did, revealing my ancient room. There is striped green and white wallpaper peeling off the walls and everything is coated in dust. My desk is gone, so are the bookshelves. Now the only furniture is a stripped bed sitting quietly in the corner. But the smell remains: cat and old books. I had missed that smell.

Eyes shut, I move around the room as one hand searches for what is no longer there. It traces memories of bookshelves, plucks stories from their shelves. Traces chairs, my desk and even the books on the floor until I reach the door again. Two long steps into the middle and I can throw myself onto my bed. Three to the left and my foot bumps against school books all in braille. Reaching up, there is my school bag. One side step to the left and you were at the corner chair. Shuffle around that and one leg is bumping against the end of the bed and my other leg is against the chair. Three steps along the length of the bed then lean down slightly and I’ve found the bedside table. Two braille books stacked on top, no lamp - no need for one when my entire world was black.

I open my eyes. An older memory playing out before me. The sun bright and shining, with all the clouds hiding behind the mountains. Lunch packed and excitement filling the air. A family outing at last. The countryside flashing past in snapshots of green and gold. Beautiful, blurry but beautiful. If only I had watched for longer. The rhythmic clack of the train split by the desperate screech of brakes. Curiosity turning to panic and pain. Metal folding like paper. Darkness. Yells from far away coming closer. Shouting so hard my lungs screamed. Hands helping. Darkness, only darkness.

I remember so clearly trying to open my eyes. Heart pounding in my ears, asking again and again why I couldn’t see, thinking in my ten-year-old stubbornness that I must be doing something wrong. I slept fitfully in the crinkly hospital sheets, unsure of what else to do with myself. Then I heard a familiar voice, Mum, but the pain of not seeing her showed me the truth. I was blind. She told me what happened. I had heard whispers from doctors and nurses when they thought I was sleeping, but hearing Mum say it made it real. We had been in a train crash. Dad had broken his right leg, badly. The doctors said he would walk with a limp the rest of his life. Greg had his right arm below the elbow amputated, the circulation cut off by the combined weight of seat and human. But Sam, Sam had been on his way back down the aisle when we crashed. Sam was dying. He was 13, two days from 14. That night, Mum sat with me and we cried. She’d managed to escape the brunt of the accident, sandwiched between our lunch and the seat. But she was taking the most pain of losing Sam. Sam with a teasing, cheeky smile and sandy hair reduced to a fading memory. Mum never told me what my elder brother looked like as he died, whether a railing had left a dark bruise on his face or if his skin was bleached white, and I never asked. I hadn’t the courage. If I had, maybe it would have helped, or maybe it would have torn her down to a wreck worse than the train. Some part of me didn’t want to know, didn’t want to break the illusion that he was still alive.

The next time we talked, it was about what to do now I was blind. I didn’t realise until halfway through that I was being moved to a blind children’s home. It wasn’t fair. Greg could get a prosthetic and Dad could hide his limp, but there was no hiding my blindness. To them, to Mum, it was a vicious reminder of Sam and that day. Her words washed over me numbly. I barely registered her promises to visit constantly and that it would only be for a while.

I spent weeks only in my alien room, learning where everything was, learning how to read with my fingers, learning how to escape the darkness. Some mornings I would wake up expecting to hear Sam teasing Greg and Mum trying to hide her laughter while Dad laughs loud enough for the whole neighbourhood to hear. I’d reach out for my lamp, only to greet empty space. Then the whole world would spin and wobble, before settling into cold reality as I remembered. On those mornings I was always late to breakfast, my eyes sore and throat raw.

Mum, Dad and Greg visited regularly until they moved. They sent letters that I asked to be read to me again and again, imagining their voices in place of the reader. All of them happy, content. I could even hear Greg’s slight stutter when wrote to me about Susan, the way he does whenever he’s really excited. I could hear Dad’s voice drop to a conspiratorial whisper when he reported on his new boss’s annoying habits. I could hear Mum’s soft concern when she asked if I had found any friends. I loved writing back, even though it wasn’t me penning the words.

The home sported a variety of cats, from a silky longhair to a snuggly youngster named Jinx. It was hard to tell precisely how many cats actually lived at the home. Some said five, others were sure there were eleven. I’m sure Jinx was a shorthair with overlarge ears and the softest fur. But another kid claimed he had long hair and unusually small ears. Despite this, Jinx was always the favourite out of all the cats. Everyone agreed that his purr was the loudest and was the best to snuggle with at night. His movements were easily tracked as he seemed to always be meowing or purring for attention. No one tripped over him, not once.

A blind school was unofficially part of the home, small but a school none the less. I doubt I would have coped going to a large one. My heart was sent racing and pounding every time I boarded the bus with nothing but a stick to guide me. That first day was the best and the worst. I walked so much slower than all the other kids. I had taken three steps off the bus when I froze. Everything I had learned at the home vanished. My mind went completely blank and my blood went to ice. I could feel the other kids brushing past me as they exited the bus. Why couldn’t I be like them? Why couldn’t I just walk forward? The darkness seemed to swirl and wrap itself around me, choking me. I must have jumped several feet when a hand bumped me in the face before resting on my shoulder and a short message was tapped out. “Sorry, are you OK?” It flashed by so fast I barely had time to decode it, then they repeated it aloud. It was just what I needed.

“Let me help you.” I clung onto her arm as she slowly led me up to the school.

“Why did you use Morse code first?”

“I uhm, used to pretend that I was part of a secret rebellion against parents, so we communicated in Morse code so they wouldn’t know what we were planning, and it stuck.”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed until her laughter echoed mine. It sounded so strange, hearing my laughter paired with hers. That day I made a friend who helped me walk steadily, a friend who I could laugh with at terrible jokes. Melissa and I, we were inseparable. She had been born blind and lived her whole life at the home.

The home encouraged high school education, even for girls. Predictably, Melissa did far better than I ever could. In response I buried my fingers in more books, my only escape from the darkness that surrounded me every day. My second year I was given a Perkins brailler. It was the most beautiful machine I had ever laid hands on, to me at least. Finally, I was free of the scribe. The next year it finally happened: I beat Melissa in literature. I wish I could have seen her face as I was escorted to the stage, whether she was smiling, shocked or envious. I remember Mum and Dad’s proud words. I remember Greg’s bone crushing hug. But I remember the clapping the clearest. It was euphoric and so addictive. I wanted more, needed more. So I worked hard. I would pour myself over my clunky brailler for hours, typing, reading and retyping my essays. Some mornings I would wake up to aching or shaking fingers. For exams, a teacher stood up the front asking questions while we would ferociously type down answers. Those tests always dragged on just long enough for my fingers to come away feeling weak and clumsy. Sometimes all that I achieved from my work was utter exhaustion. Other times I succeeded, I got my applause. Then it was over. Who would want to hire a shy blind girl? I had nothing.

A precious year and a half slipped away as I spent my days endlessly reading, escaping from the world around me. It was as I was returning yet another library book that I thought of it. What was the one thing I was good at? It was too perfect, but just maybe I could be a librarian. As I sat down for my job interview, I could feel the darkness around me, pushing, tightening, just like that first day of school. A faint ringing in my ears grew, threatening to block out what they were saying. No. This was too important. With a deep breath I pushed back. I pushed back the blackness. In its place I envisioned a woman to match the voice before me. Her name was Deborah and in two weeks she would be my boss. For seven years I carefully worked and maintained a growing division of braille books in that library.

I was considering getting a guide dog when the phone call came. Mum told me about an operation I could have, experimental. There was so much hope in her voice. I agreed. On a Saturday morning Mum picked me up and drove me hundreds of kilometres to the miracle hospital. A tiny bead of sweat crawling down my spine released my fear. My hands shook while my nausea rose and fell. Every second scraped against my mind while we waited.

When I opened my eyes it was beautiful, blurry but beautiful. It’s amazing how even the white-washed walls of a hospital can be fascinating. I’d been given an impossible gift. I spent hours staring out my hospital window at the fuzzy colours floating and bobbing before me in a mesmerising dance, my sight gradually improving. Then I saw Mum, actually *saw* her sitting beside my bed one morning and I simply cried. I could see the shining, silver strands in her hair. I could see the delicate laugh lines at her eyes and she had never been more beautiful.

Glistening specks of dust float in the afternoon sunlight before me, a few gathering on my glasses, turning the whole world gold. I gaze around the small room with peeling wallpaper where I had spent so much time and remembered. Remembered the girl I was, the small pockets of joy given to me by those precious braille books. Remembered the kindness of the librarians, remembered the noisy laughter I shared with Melissa, and I remembered Sam. I had so wanted to forget, lock away that time and never look back. But that little blind girl would always be a part of me. I’d tried hiding her, now I would face it. She showed me a different world. There was sunshine in the darkness, even then.With one last look over my shoulder I pushed the heavy oak door and left. I left the blind room and train crash, left the fear and loneliness behind me.

I can see.