[REALISM]

Ethereal

By Nicole Antonio

It has beenthree weeks.

Three weeks of reliving the same day over and over again.

Three weeks of watching them waste away over grief.

Three weeks of preserving my sanity for as long as I could.

It has been three weeks and nothing has changed.

I stand obscured in the shadows as I watch them for the twenty-second time. The Silence is deafening but I continue to observe.

Breakfast is the usual. There are four plates set on the table, though only three people reside in this house. Their eyes are lifeless and blank, staring out into the distance. Rigidly they sit and mechanically they move. Life has leached out of my parents, though they are not the ones who are dead.

A pinprick of hope still burns within me. Maybe, just maybe, when the clock strikes seven, something will change today because I cannot move on with life. Not if they are broken like this.

I stand in front of them, but they are still oblivious to my presence. Perhaps, they have forgotten their other daughter but somehow it doesn’t matter to me. I am focused on bracing myself for the next moments as time moves on.

Tick. Tick. Tick. Tick and it is seven o’clock.

I face my parents, clench my fists and heave a breath before I speak.

“You may have lost her but I’m still here!”

“It’s her birthday she wouldn’t have wanted this. Please, move on if not for me for her!”

Nothing changes. Their attention is elsewhere; perhaps in the heavens above where their daughter would be.

In anguish I scream, flail and kick the chair my younger sister would have sat in. It wobbles, topples over and collapses to the floor. I glance at my parents and finally, something has changed; shock is etched on their faces from the slap of reality. For a moment, just a moment their eyes meet mine.

“We love you and we always have.” They are weary but they know.

“I love you too,” I murmur back.

I don’t waste time. My limbs start for the door and I slip out. Today I will mend my family.

The breeze must be cool but I barely feel it graze my skin.

On a concrete pathway, I stand, overlooking an isolated road.

This is where it happened.

In one blink, I see it all before me.

I hear a gut-wrenching scream first.

Then, within seconds a car swerves off the opposite side of the road and collides with a lamppost. Smoke coats the air. Shards of glass sprinkle the gravel.

Inside the wreck, two blood-matted girls lay unconscious, one wearing a golden chain glinting around her neck and another whose head had twisted awkwardly.

I am paralyzed as one passenger breathes her last breath.

One survived. The other didn’t.

*No. No. No. No. No. No. No.*

But it is too late; before I reach the collision, the wind has already whisked it away. I don’t wallow in my tears, though. I sprint to the crash site and kneel on the grass of the pathway, frantically searching the area.

“It must be here. It must be!” I whisper bleakly, patting and tugging at the lawn.

Before the vision disappeared, I saw it; the golden chain around the girl’s neck was a locket. It must be here because no one had found it.

“Miss, I think this is what you’re looking for,” A voice startles me and I snap my head up.

The voice belongs to a man. A handsome one, whose smile was pleasantly warm and eyes a twinkling blue. Though most strikingly, a glowing light radiated off his skin. Strange. Beautiful. Ethereal.

This unearthly being, dangled something; the locket, scratch-less and shining.

A labored gasp escapes me and I swipe it away from him like a savage lion cub. Nestling the necklace in my trembling fingers, I pop the latch open and uncover a small, photograph. The sight of it constricts my chest. The image was of two sisters, both laughing, both alive. This necklace was my gift to my sister when she turned sixteen. She had vowed never to take it off because it meant that wherever she went a part of me was always with her. Now it was in my hands, and I knew exactly what to do.

Recovering from my reminiscence, I stand up, intending to thank the stranger. Eerily, he has abruptly disappeared, I am alone and there is not a single trace of his departure. A chill crawls over my skin but joy surges through my veins as I dash off, knowing my mission was soon to be accomplished.

I am here.

The place where everything changes.

Pain engulfs me as I skim the façade of this vast, white building, barricaded with barbed-wire fences around the whole perimeter.

When I reach the hospital sign it reads

**West Wick Mental Institution**

I suppress the urge to turn around and instead walk inside the front doors.

Once in, I don’t stop to inquire the administrator, I fly through the dimly lit halls, scavenging for room 235.

In almost a heartbeat I am right outside of door 235. Undoubtedly, there are people inside; my parents who have come for their daily visit and a psychologist. I press my ear against the wooden slab and listen intently.

“How is she?” questions a strained voice.

“She hasn’t experienced any nightmares, insomnia or paranoia, so I believe it is a positive progression,” a composed voice responds.

“Has she spoken?” another voice asks.

“Unfortunately, she has not. Today also marks the twenty-second day she hasn’t spoken.” another reply.

“Today is also her birthday.” my father says solemnly.

“I am very sorry,” the doctor says.

I breathe deeply, close my eyes and pray that this will be the last time I see my parents in desolation.

Twisting the doorknob, I slip in and like always my presence is not noticed. The room is dark, lonely, a place of despair and sorrow. There is a single bed and one window where a streak of sunlight provides little warmth. How are people supposed to rectify themselves here?

Then I see her.

Sitting stiffly on her bed, she gazes out the window, avidly watching the grey sky. Her body seems limp, her dress baggy. Insanity has broken her. But she is still beautiful despite her ashen face and pale complexion.

She is still the same person.

I want to hug her. I want to tell her that nothing was her fault. I want her to see me. But it doesn’t work that way.

My parents and the psychologist surround her, but I can see her restless fingers, constantly caressing her neck where her necklace should be.

Gently, I carefully place the necklace on the small patch of sunlight where it gleams. I know she sees it because her eyes shift to the necklace and she is instantly on her feet. She scoops it up and starts to weep, while she rocks back and forth on the floor. Astonishment is plastered on everyone’s face, except mine. My parents embrace her and they hold onto each other, sobbing.

“I’m so sorry, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean for it to happen….. I’m so sorry,” my sister cries.

I smile, not because of her words but because my sister has been lost and now found. She was never gone it had always been me.

I wrap my arms around them and kiss their foreheads one by one.

“Goodbye.” I whisper and head off to my final destination.

I stand over a grave in a cemetery.

There are several vases of flowers and lit candles around the plaque.

It’s nice to know that people have visited.

If I had more time, I would just sit on the perfectly, manicured grass, listening to serenity.

But I did not.

“It’s time to go,” a voice proclaims.

I stare up in disbelief; it is the ethereal stranger from the crash site.

There is no questioning him.

I nod and take his outstretched palm. The light around him begins to burn brighter, illuminating the whole cemetery. We dance up to the clouds, and before I am gone forever, I take one last glimpse at my grave.