

The Pebble Factory

By Lindsay Fischer

Lydia walks on the train tracks while I walk along the river.

I remember, I remember, I remember. I remember because the memories are so hard to press back, because that life meant so much more to me than I ever let anyone know. The sun on my face, the silver Spanish moss ghostly and skeletal on days when it was dark, the soft breezes and the harsher gusts. It all comes back, crashing into me in waves of smells and summer days. We were best friends, weren't we, Lyd?

The phone is ringing. Shrill and sharp, at first it's like something out of a hazy dream and I just want to knock it off the bedside table. My fingers scramble along the wood, searching, eyes pressed shut, until I am forced to concede and peer out from between my lashes. Hand guided by what I can see, now, I pick up the phone and press it to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Oh, God, you're awake!"

"No, not really." But my sister sounds so worried, her voice strained and cracked like broken glass, that I sit up. I haven't talked to her for so long, I don't know why she would call now. She's supposed to be all bright splashes of color, all *inspiration* and *illumination* bursting forth from that dilapidated artist's studio she bought in New York. She said it would solve all her troubles and I laughed at her, because she always has dreams as high as the sky. I know better than anyone that the higher you dream, the farther you to come crashing down to earth.

"It's mom. It's mom—oh, Quinn."

And you know, sometimes that's all you really have to hear before you drop the phone to shut out the words.

A month later, my sister and I are driving to the home where we grew up, which has been bequeathed to following of our mother's death, which is a word that seems so cold and final and empty. She twists a straw wrapper around her finger, eyes flickering

between the trees as they pass by, and I drive, eyes narrowing. She fiddles with the radio dial until there's nothing but static, static in between stations, and the fake, happy, plastic voices I am so used to hearing on the morning news are gone. She leans her head back and closes her eyes.

“What's this?” My voice is rough, but I can't help it.

“I just . . . it seems right,” she says as the static buzzes softly, grating in my ears and seeming wrong, all wrong. I reach over and turn off the radio as darkness claims the highway.

She looks at me, her necklace with tiny copper bells jingling and her freckles standing out against her pale skin, her big red-rimmed eyes so empty. She seems so fragile, her neck long and her brown hair a short halo of frizz. She twists the wrapper around her finger again and I don't say sorry even though I know that I should.

The trees whip past, dark, sharply distorted in the night, and I can't help thinking about how dark it looked in that rectangular hole. There's no light under the surface.

“Quinn! You can hear the trees, can't you? The breeze carries their voices.”

Lydia is perched atop a moss-covered rock, a skinny girl of eight, and I am twelve, which seems like a decade of difference. Her pointed chin is angled towards the tree, a light smile of understanding gracing her thin features. I don't hear anything, I can hardly hear the breeze, it's so light in the leaves. I trace my name in the dirt with the toe of my beat-up tennis shoes.

“Maybe,” is all I say, and sometimes I wish that I could be like Lydia, could see the magic in everything. I see the ants scurry over the hard, worn ground and I see the sky, flecks of blue between emerald green leaves that cast shadows over the forest. The bronze hairclip in Lydia's hair is sliding out, wisps escaping and flying wildly around her face in a tempest of summer light. She builds fairy villages out of smooth gray stones she plucks out of the creek like a kingfisher, fingers darting in the clear flow. They sit in the shade of the trees, tiny houses with toothpick fences and dirt mounds for hills, old rusted cans, brown crumbling leaves, brittle dried grass, corks, and bright bottlecaps.

She calls the creek her pebble factory, and I don't understand how she can be so patient. She waits months and months until the stones are smooth and soft. I wanted to

buy a rock-tumbler with our money from weeding the garden, but she just shook her head at me in that way she does, like she's the wiser one, and says "Don't you understand, Quinn?"

I don't, not really. She tells me about the fairies, too, and her face glows like she's tasted magic on her lips, like she brought it forth from the sun and the sky and the moon, lassoed it and pulled it down to earth.

"Oohh, they're tiny. They have little blue faces and limbs like bent paperclips, and they bite! They don't ever talk, but you can tell how clever they are, because their eyes glint like tiny raindrops, and it's just obvious they *know*."

"Know what? What do they know?"

"Things," she says mysteriously, and smiles, and perches on the rock with her face tilted towards the sky.

I turn onto the old rutted driveway in the dark, car wheels grating against the dirt and weeds sprouting up in the middle of the dirt path, highlighted like thin fingers twisting in the yellow headlights. It's been five years, five long years that trail in the shadows and try to tug me back as I move forward. The house appears, and it is covered with vines, moss, and chipped paint. It used to be the color of a peach. The wooden gate around the garden is hanging off by one end, and the sight makes me both guilty and even slightly ashamed. Lydia leans forward and sighs wistfully.

"It's been a long time," she says softly, and I get out of the car, sneakers crunching over the gravel, my duffel bag slung over my shoulder. The darkness stifles me, the sister who slept with a green nightlight, while Lydia was climbing out the window to camp underneath the stars. She would dance on the lawn, catching hazy fireflies in glass jars. She gave me the jars to ward off the dark, but I was always afraid that they would escape out the tiny holes she punched in the lids. Always afraid.

In the morning, the sky outside looks like water in a giant fishbowl, the gray clouds murky bubbles. I can hear slushy rain slapping on the window pane and the roof shingles. I rub my eyes and swing my legs over the side of the bed, narrowly missing

kicking the orange cardboard Lite Brite box on the floor. Lydia's bed is empty, the covers trailing over the wooden floor of the bedroom we used to share.

I pick my way over the labyrinth of ancient junk, kicking aside things with my bare feet. A worn softball signed by members of my parent's wedding; a rolled up, peeling laminated animal alphabet poster; a plastic lizard slide puzzle; an empty Windex squirt bottle; fuzzy plastic McDonald's Furby toys; a candy-striped jumprope that snakes its way around my ankle; and pink Hollywood sunglasses.

The floors are covered with dust, the corners hung with cobwebs, and I stop in the doorway. All that has happened strikes me very suddenly—my mother isn't here any longer, and this house is draped with the ghosts of my memories. My sister doesn't understand, because we don't correlate, and our lives have never followed the same path. She was walking in the clouds and dreaming about rainbows while I was taking on a burden large enough for the two of us. Because I had to, because I cared and she didn't.

"I'll do anything to make you happy again," that's what he said.

I pressed the receiver closer, closer to my ear. He sounded so earnest and so sincere and so tired and I almost believed again. But I knew the words he didn't say, and that is "Anything I can buy. Anything except come home."

"That's okay," I said. I pushed 'end call,' but my fingers did not want to give up the phone, and there was a red mark on my face where my father's voice used to be.

The night that my father left, I stood at the window pane and watched his car disappear, fingers pressed against the cold glass, staring. Lydia read the "Princess Bride" under the covers, flashlight in hand, silent as the worn and yellowed pages rustled. I stood in the dark and missed him and he never did come back. And then my mother painted the house pink and I helped.

Lydia built villages for creatures that didn't exist, alone in the forest with her magic that did nobody any good. She sat under the leaves while I was alone, and we were both alone, and I think that we were always alone.

I don't know where she is, but it's raining hard and I hope she didn't leave the house. I step into the kitchen and watch the raindrops slide down the window pane like

glistening tears. Lydia is gone, and no matter how much I call for her, she doesn't appear in the doorway. I've always felt like I need to protect her—after all, I'm the one who can see life for what it is, and my sister needs someone to remind her that life isn't all magic, that life isn't perfect, that things happen that none of us can explain away. She needs someone to protect her from herself. The dim bulb over the stove flickers, and for some reason I suddenly panic, poking a hole through the cranberry juice box I was about to drink. The red liquid, sticky and sweet, runs in rivers over my fingers. I throw it into the trash and dart outside, forgetting a coat.

I don't even have any shoes on, which dawns on me slowly as my toes touch the wet, slippery grass. I run to the garden, fall as I reach the broken gate, reach for it as my back collides with the ground. I sit up again quickly.

“Lydia! Lyd?!” My voice is loud and strained, and I'm sitting in the weeds of our garden, rotting tomatoes near my feet, wet hair clinging to my face.

“Quinn,” my sister's voice says behind me, her face surprised. “Are you okay? I was cleaning out the attic . . .” She sits on the ground next to me, her expression startled and confused. I stare at her. I think, *that's funny, because I was sure she'd be out here in the rain.*

I was sure I'd need to rescue her, you see, that she would be searching aimlessly in the woods for the fairy villages or tripping in the creek, but I am the one sitting on the wet grass in the cold rain.

It strikes me suddenly—my face is wet. I'm crying, and I didn't even know it, the tears mingling with the rain. I don't understand anything as my sister puts her arms around me and pulls me close, our toes twisting in the vines.

“Shh, it's okay, it's okay,” she says, her voice soothing and comforting. “Know something funny? I was just thinking about Dad.”

My heart clenches like a cold fist, but I don't pull away.

“Do you remember the way he'd sit in the kitchen and cut old Orangina cartons into sailor hats for me? And the way he watched the Weather Channel every night and made those silly, complicated crayon weather charts with you.”

I hadn't remembered until now, because I remembered other things. I remembered the dark and the confusion, and I remembered standing at the window. But

the funny thing is, I did love it—all of it, because even if there were some difficult times mixed in, the majority of my childhood was self-discovery and sun.

“And mom would always try to knit,” I add with a shaky, uncertain laugh. My laugh is dusty, and I wonder when the last time I laughed or cried was. The months behind me stretch on, paperwork and gray cubicles, and blaring alarm clocks, but there is no magic. “She knitted those horrible orange scarves for us, remember, but they were so long we tripped over them.”

Soon we are laughing so hard that Lydia is crying too. The salty tears slide down my face, messy and uncontrollable. After a while, I'm not sure whether I'm laughing or crying anymore. I just know that I can feel the rain against my skin.

With Lydia there was always magic. Always.

We spend the next month at our old home, with me tackling the cobwebs while Lydia digs up old photos, warped by the sun, and pins them on the peeling wallpaper around the house. We found the old pebble villages still standing. The grass grew tall around them, weaving in and out of the cracks so that they look like they've been there forever.

I laugh a lot these days, and I cry a lot too. I listen to the wind in the trees at night, and sometimes I think I can hear it whispering. Sometimes in the forest I think I hear tiny peals of laughter like bells, and the creek glints in the sunlight like it's covered in a layer of diamonds. I saw a rainbow once. I realized something funny—Lydia and I were best friends, we always were. We knew each other better than we knew ourselves. She is a dreamer, and she taught me how to dream a very long time ago. I got lost, but I knew all along that she would be the one to bring me home. She always did, and I think that she probably always will.

