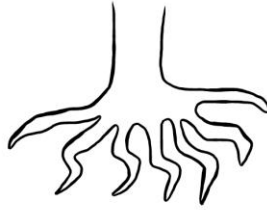


The Greater Picture

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First 5 pages



Alexandria

1. ROOTS IN THE GROUND

My mother named me Alexandria after the city in Egypt, built by the great king Alexander whom she once revered. Alexandria is what they know me by now and after all the memories of me fade, when they finally forget the colour of my eyes or how I say certain words too often, or how I love more than anything to eat passion fruit and read Jack Kerouac, my name is all that will remain. And despite all the things we do in life: all the houses we have lived in, all the places we have seen, beneath all the people we have been, after we have finished every work of art and conquered all the quests that we could, after all the love and loss, at the end of the day we are only a name. A body and a name.

I wake up to these thoughts after dreaming of the city I have never been to: Alexandria. I walk through its busy streets, past shopfronts and Egyptian people, venture through high-ceiling buildings, tread across wooden floorboards in quiet museums. Standing at the intersection of busy crossroads, on the pier at the sea, watching the waves roll in across the Mediterranean blue, thinking I am Alexandria the city as I absorb and become part of all the lives that are happening, lives I cannot see or begin to imagine.

Since a child I have always had these dreams of wandering

through a city that I am somehow a part of, but more often now- in dreams- I have wandered into abandoned buildings, felt the darkness that lingers in the shadows, heard the agonized cries echoing from alleyways, sensed the greater injustices and transgression whelming at every corner. I wake from these visions now in sweats, thinking how there is more evil than there is good: even if you cannot see it on the surface, you know that it's there. But even with this corruption and evil lingering in the city's darkest depths, thousands of years after it was built, Alexandria in Egypt continues to thrive. Yet, only twenty-four years after I was born, Alexandria- me- begins to crumble.

My ending began months ago in Paris when my friend Lily and I had stopped for a few months in the city, looking to find jobs and rent an apartment together. It was a convoluted time, romanticized by the Parisian buildings we walked beneath and the fast language of the French. The night had begun in a quaint brasserie, a dinner with a group of people we had met in our hostel. We quickly began to drink too much and found our way to a party of someone's actor friend. It had been a party like any other: a warm room brimming with bodies, swaying and laughing together under the slow drawl of a live saxophone. A cloudy atmosphere of cigarette-smoke filled all empty spaces between bodies and furniture, the wine was red, the food was plentiful. The people at the party were oddly beautiful: bodies appeared thin and whimsical, like refracted light glimmering under the elegant milieu of the room, clothes hung on sharp angles and each person held only a faint, almost displeased, smile beneath their watchful gazes. At the beginning of the night it had felt like a strange, but fascinating, dream, but when the end had finally closed in everything retained a more nightmarish quality. By that time the looming figures of the French had moved aside, the room became crimson and fell to darkness under a blinding pain. I remember only the flow of hot liquid from my body, the screaming and the hustling of people getting out of the way, and that iron, lingering taste of blood in my mouth. The days that followed

were a heaving rush of fear and disappointment constructed by the wide corridors of French hospitals, words I wanted to say but could not, doctors and nurses who bent curiously over me and said long words in their own language which I could not understand. Lily's hand was always in mine, Paris rushed by around us, there was pain and phone calls, feverish nights, until finally there was an airport and an airplane, my mother, the grey skies of home, concerned silences, vials of blood, more doctors and tests.

Now I am here in my mother's house. The sound of a distant ocean moves in my ear, the Celtic Sea turns, wrenches and crashes against the cliffs by my home. Despite the wind's ceaselessness, the cold beaches and the unforgiving sea, it has always felt like a kind place. The house is full of warmth. I lie in my childhood bedroom, it was here that I was sheltered from the awkward realities of growing up and I hide beneath the duvet as though it could protect me now, too. The house speaks in its creaks and moans, it has not changed in ten years. There is no sound that is unknown to me, everything is familiar and secure. Downstairs there is the sound of my mother cooking in the kitchen, the radio hums beside her. Lily is downstairs too, reading in the conservatory watching out over the cliffs and the ever turning tide, looking out onto the horizon that promises nothing. It is hard to look towards anything to find hope now. There is no future that we could look to which could soothe us or guarantee anything. When we speak we talk about the past, our words delicately skip over anything that involves pain or grief: we avoid all or most horizons. For a short time, we spoke quietly about the future, about options: to try or not to try, to die or to live a painful, uncomfortable and surgical extra few months. But I have made my decision and have closed the door on such discussions. Our main topic of conversation now is to speak of the others that should be on their way to us. It is the only prospect that we can hold to. And still our conversation wanes sometimes, there are only three people who have been asked to come. And we talk about them as though they are adventurers lost in the

wilderness of the world, and we the ones who called them to a makeshift camp to feel safe and at home again in a place they have never visited before. In reality we called the three people who I loved most deeply in the past to come and witness a dying battle and stay for a while in this big house.

We had to make many calls to find two of our friends, the years have scattered us like dandelion seeds around the world. Margo, after ringing many of our other friends and many strangers we did not know, was located near Bratislava in a commune and began to speak Austrian to Lily on the breaking landline. We contacted David more easily as he is the only one of us who has invested his time and money in a worthwhile university degree. Through his mother we found him working in the human resource department for a big company in Amsterdam and our call was put through. There is one more person, a boy named Elijah, the most important to me, who was- and still is- not contactable. For many days I had left messages into the looming silence of voicemails, speaking into the darkness. Each time I spoke I felt my quivering voice crack to imagine that his ear might find the other end of my plea. And it was only after I wrote the letters and sent them to the vague addresses he had left behind him and rang the numbers that would ring out or be answered by someone who did not speak English, that I began to slowly understand my own situation. The words I spoke into telephones or wrote down on letters frightened me deeply. I tried to be as vague as possible, yet also wanted to portray a certain urgency, so that he knew that this was no flu. And there was always the lingering doubt that he did not want to come, that he had met another girl or had found too promising a belief in the east to leave and return to England. There were no words for me to express either the extent of my illness or my blind craving to have him beside me in this dark time. And always as I wrote or spoke I thought of the potential emptiness that lay on the other side, the sensation of speaking secrets into silence, saying things aloud in the darkness of the night. And after you speak you wait vulnerable and frightened in the dark for a response

or acknowledgement, but only emptiness moves in your ears.

We have potato soup for dinner. Sitting at the kitchen table I look to my best friend and my mother. We are speaking about Margo and ponder over what it is like in the ecovillages in which she lives and works. My mother hopes she's not one of those 'vegan types' making Lily and I laugh at her misplaced worry. We rarely speak about Elijah, there is only a trembling hope that he will come at all. And still we have not spoken about the real issue yet. It has been ten days since we set off to the hospital when they rang to tell us that the test results had come back. That same day, in the afternoon, we returned silently to this big shell house where my mother grew up. Lily's dark hair falls into her face as she bends to her bowl. My mother's hands are aged and tremble slightly as she holds her spoon, a faint white mark on her wedding finger from where she once wore a ring. We eat slowly or not at all, it is as though none of us have the stomach for life anymore. It is an empty time. The radio is on, it hums in the background, the refrigerator whines, jaws move thoughtfully and slowly over bread, metal spoons clink ceramic bowls, steam rises up and warms my cheeks, the bread is soft and pulls apart easily. It is the small things that we must focus on now.

Later on in the evening we sit in the living room, in front of a crackling fire, the only light illuminating the room comes from flickering flames and the static of the television. We watch it emptily, curled up together on the sofa with a blanket draped over our legs. I sit in the middle walled in by their two warm bodies that serve like a protective shield from whatever hurt may be lingering out in the shadow of the dying evening, a bowl of popcorn between us as though our appetites may suddenly return to us as the day ends. When the program goes to its ad break and Lily leaves to go to the toilet, my mother turns to me.

"How are you doing? You know, when you are ready to talk about this, I am too." My mother's face has aged so much in these recent years. It is though her thoughts have grown

older and wiser and subsequently dyed the roots that grow forth from her head a light grey, her wrinkles gather like mountains usurped by the movement of tectonic plates beneath her skin. Her eyes remain the same: grey and caring. She is close beside me and the smells of our dinner hang to her clothes. There is also a motherly smell about her and about the house that I had almost forgotten on my travels. In response to her question, I don't even know how to think about it, I mean, it's all happened so fast.

"I know, honey," she wraps her arms around me and I lay my head against her soft chest. There has never been a moment that my mother's arms have not been open to me, and they remain just as soft as they always have, even in the long years of my absence. In her soft, motherly embrace I feel like a child, like nothing can hurt me here.