

THE ROCK CHAIR

Central Park owns the rock that Celia loves the best. It's angled perfectly for climbing in tennis shoes. There are grassy patches and dirty pockets, rough crevices and smooth slime, and shiny and strange and startling things to pick up, though Celia's mother always tells her not to pick them up. The rock chair, the best part, pokes out at the summit. Nice and regal and flat. Angled just perfectly for sitting. Too small for big people and too big for small people, but the perfect size for Celia, who isn't yet big but is no longer small, to sit and write to her heart's content. Today, she must.

Her vibrant red hair, gathered greasy in a bow, dangles in a ponytail near her left ear. A silken breeze tosses the tail to and fro, blocking her view; she brushes it away. Her pen, undeterred, glides across the page like a figure skater. Celia's writing always flows like magic water. It starts with a glow of her face, then a smile at her scribbles, then a bit of her tongue emerging out the left corner of her mouth, and finally a hum of hers, ever so slight, when the words are at the height of their dance. This lovely July day, sitting on her rock chair, Celia puts pen to page and breathes and wills all of the usual to happen—but it doesn't.

Her pen stops, and starts. Ink blotches collect across the page. Her hand is rigid; she stretches her fingers and shakes her wrists and pops her knuckles and takes deep breaths—but her pen still stops, and starts. Celia isn't worried. She moves down off of the rock chair, picks up her notebook, and presses the pen to the page, harder. *Just keep going, word by word, word by word, word by—stop. Start: word by—stop. Start: word—stop.* With a loud exhale, Celia roughly moves over onto her stomach, propped up on one elbow, and burrows

the pen into the paper. Her knuckles are white, *keep going*, her wrist trembles, *keep going*, her hand cramps, *keep going: word by word, word by word, word by*—a sob comes from her throat. She’s written the name, the beautiful name, the name she’s been running from all day. **Aisling** ...

Celia’s hand trembles. *She doesn’t know why I left. She thinks it’s her fault. My god, how could it ever be her fault?* She closes her eyes and remembers the Terrible Texts. *I gotta text her back, I gotta explain, I owe her that. I owe her everything.* Celia suddenly shivers. *In July? No. I’m calling. I gotta tell her—*she shivers again—*I have to tell all of them I’m sorry. I don’t care what Mom screamed.* Remembering it, she’s suddenly warm again. She takes a deep breath, and pushes her pen to the paper. *No. I don’t care. I’ve screamed things just as bad. More things than that. They weren’t listening to me, but I wasn’t listening to them—*Celia’s teeth are chattering. The air feels like ice. *Why is she so cold?—I want home. I have to go home. I want to start new—*Her teeth chatter so violently that her jaw begins to ache. The clamor of the city grows dim, then faint, then quiet. No sound.

Poke.

Celia gasps. Has the rock chair poked her from underneath? Surely not.

Poke.

The force pushes Celia onto her back. She is stunned to silence. She cannot see the sky. She cannot see the park. All she can see is a reflection of herself, from head to toe, above and on both sides of her. She’s surrounded by a bubble, with a mirror on its inside. Her widened eyes gape back at her, a sea of them blinking all around. Pure silence. Just quivering breaths that belong to her. In...out...in...out...

“H-hello?...Anybody?”

A terrible echo. Only her.

“Please...I don’t know—....”

Celia reaches up, straining to find a door, a window, a hole, a surface, anything besides a sea of herself. Nothing. Nothingness to the touch. She can see herself but can't reach herself. She sobs. Rolls to the right, but the reflection follows her. Rolls to the left, but finds the same. Kicks as hard as she possibly can—then gasps. Her reflection ripples, like water, jostling her image on all sides. Celia panics.

“No!...No!...”

She holds her breath, and stiffens her entire body, keeping absolutely still. Her image continues jostling, jostling, *jostling*, then...half-jostling...barely jostling... stops. The sea of herself stares back at her, still, as if was before. Celia exhales, her chest burning. Cold tears reach her earlobes and cascade down her neck. She hears her quivering breaths again, in, out, in, out. Can anyone see her? Is the rest of the park covered in strange bubbles like these? She reaches her fingers along the icy rock beneath her. They land on spiral binding. She gasps with relief. She pulls her notebook up and onto her chest. Presses it into her collarbone.

Then she hears a dull growl. Behind her left ear. Celia quickly turns her face to the left. The growl is gone. It moves to her right ear, louder. She turns to the right and cocks her head, curling herself into a ball. She squints her eyes shut. Hears a strange high-pitched bird, then realizes it's her, whimpering. She gulps air like water. Her whimpers grow faint. Then, they stop. No growls. No sound. Dare she open her eyes? Dare she roll over? Her back is so cold ... so cold ... Celia screams! The growl seizes her middle and pulses her into convulsion. Her legs and arms and notebook fly out and she's flat on her back again. The sound seizes her spine, from underneath the rock—louder and louder and LOUDER—it vibrates her every vessel and bone. Celia thrusts her hands over her ears.

The rock jolts forward. Then back. Forward. Then back. Forward, back, forward, back. She fumbles and grasps and clutches her notebook like a shield.

“HELP ME!”

Celia tries to jump up, but snake-like stones wrap around her ankles, then her middle, then her arms. The growl becomes a cackle, and thunderclaps of splitting rock echo all around. Celia is thrust up, suspended in the air—a stone mummy in a bubble—and if she could, she'd see the rock chair buckling, the rock separating from itself, and a mammoth canyon forming an abyss underneath her. Celia tries to think, to struggle, to yell—but she drops, straight down, down, down into blackness, shrieking, as she's swallowed. She's gone.

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The woman in rags has grown accustomed to her chapped lips. She simply runs her tongue over them until the bleeding stops. Collecting hairs around the rock chair if she finds them, she records the times and dates on used labels peeled from old bottles. The police have shooed her away many times, but she always comes back when it's safe. Regular park-sitters call her “the rock lady”.

Today, she's running her tongue over her lips like always. Thinking of Peter. Sitting in her usual spot. Kicking herself for falling asleep. She'd jolted awake on instinct, when her stomach had swirled with dread, climbed up and up and up to the rock chair—but she was too late. No hairs this time. Nothing. Except – a bag.

She'd only scaled it with her eyes, at first. Forest green. Overstuffed. Plastic lining separating from fabric. Ink stains. Finally, trembling, she'd nudged the zipper open with her index finger. Clothing. Twizzlers. Notebooks. Pens. Subway map. Watermelon Bubble gum. And a name. Stitched into the top lining. She'd actually found a name!

Now, she records.

J-

J-

She puts her cigarette lighter to the tip of her pen to make the ink flow. They can usually last an extra three months this way.

July 8. Celia Marks.

Celia. Name origin, Latin. Definition, “blind”. She scoffs at the irony.

Red hair...

A lump comes to her throat. *Not now, Maddy. Gather.* She swallows the lump away and looks upward, resting her eyes on a sleepy-looking tree. She prides herself on being used to it all, on being able to keep a cool head. But whenever the stone takes a child, it rattles her. Whenever the child has red hair, it threatens to break her.

With a deep breath and a clearing of her throat she’s present again, shakily. *Concentrate...* She squints her eyes shut. The girl, Celia, couldn’t have been there five minutes, but the rock lady can remember. She observes and memorizes each and every person that climbs the rock; it’s her job.

She furiously scribbles:

July 8. Celia Marks. Red hair, unwashed. Caucasian. Slim, hungry-looking. Dress middle-class, wrinkled, slightly dirty, sky blue sleeveless shirt, cream-colored shorts, worn white sneakers covered in dirt and scuffs. Height (approximated) 5 ft. 2 in., Age (approximated) 12 years, Nationality (approximated) American, Writing. New to the spot. Alone.

Oh goodness! The rock lady jolts to standing. She scans the surroundings with her eyes, searching for panic on a face, a mother’s face especially. A red-headed mother, perhaps? Partner? Father? Sibling, babysitter, playmate, anyone? The rock lady scans...listens for a cry...waits. No one is looking for Celia. How can that be? Her first instinct is rage—how certain people should never ever be allowed to have children—but she swallows it, and breathes. *A runaway, Maddy. That’s probably what she is. Remember the notes? She hasn’t washed. She looks hungry. Who knows how far she’s come?*

One more detail to notate. The rock lady squints at the sun

and approximates again.

Time of Disappearance: 2 p.m.

Her watch had stopped four years ago.

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The Greatest Actress of Them All is a stunning beauty, but always tilts her head just so, to hide the crooked end of her nose. Her eyes are a vivid blue. Kind. Sad. Playfully surrounded by crow's feet. A long mane of wispy blonde hair, with faint strands of gray, cascades down her shoulders. The smile is deeply calming. Juliette Poole. *The Juliette Poole*.

The New York Shakespeare Festival happens every summer in Central Park. The daily line for the free tickets can grow to the length of three football fields. Early risers arrive with blankets, picnic baskets, playing cards, and guitars. Once they find their place in line, they have to stay there, or they'll lose it. Those are the rules. After a long day of waiting, hundreds of happy faces go home for dinner clutching tickets; and hundreds of sad faces go home for dinner without tickets. But everyone tries.

This year Juliette Poole will be returning to the Festival's stage. Playing the title role in a famous epic set to music. Reporters have been flocking around Juliette for weeks taking pictures, asking new questions about old roles, asking old questions about new roles. She graciously replies in her usual confident way. But then, they ask a new question about a new role: "is she excited to be sharing the stage with her daughter, Diana?"

It has been said that if Diana Poole were to stand by a photo of her mother at seventeen, it would be impossible to tell them apart. Diana has been posing for all the cameras graciously, also tilting the head just so; she's inherited her mother's nose. It's her first big part, and she's been creating quite a buzz. Equally as gifted as her mother, and—could anyone have the courage to say?—even better. Diana is very humble about all this when asked by reporters. But she knows she's good, very good. And busy. Long, late night dry techs and wet

techs and cue to cues and dress rehearsals have begun; the play in the park opens in one week.

Diana doesn't know about the rock chair, nor has she heard of Celia's disappearance. She doesn't know what the woman in rags could tell her, that thousands of people have disappeared near rocks, near subway platforms and marbled floors, near columned doorways and building cornerstones. If Diana could, she would know to be careful, to be self-aware, to be on the watch. For lately, more and more often, stone has been swirling, invisibly, underneath her feet.

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July 8. Lobby of Avery Fisher. Woman. Grey hair...

The rock lady pauses, flattens the shred of Snapple label against her calloused palm, and presses the pen down again. John could tell her the exact time because his watch had worked. He himself had seen this one disappear: a small, gray-haired woman who'd been mopping a floor.

"Hey. Maddy. Look at this."

"What?"

John presents a matted Playbill magazine. Someone had discarded it in a trashcan on 66th and Broadway, his favorite spot. Reaching page three, he adjusts his black spectacles—taped in six places—and points at a photo.

The rock lady sighs with wonder. "She looks more and more—"

"—like Juliette." He beams. His voice becomes soft. "Good for her..."

The rock lady fidgets. John clenches his jaw and tugs at his scarf. They could fight about Juliette right now, but they've fought about her so many times before. What else could they possibly say? Plus it's been a long day already and they're both very tired. And there are other things to talk about besides. The rock lady's heart

changes the subject.

“A child went at Peter’s rock today.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Mmm.”

“ ... And?”

She turns toward him, slides the bag down her shoulder, and nudges open the zipper once again.

He reads. “Celia Marks.”

“She has to be a runaway, John, no one was there. No one.”

Concern fills his face. “Well, you better turn this in.”

She scoffs. “Oh yes, the NYPD’s always thrilled to see me.”

“Well, then, have one of the others do it. Or do it anonymously.”

She clutches the bag to her chest.

“Maddy. You’re gonna turn it in, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m bloody well gonna turn it in!” Her bottom lip quivers.

John looks at her knowingly. “... Was she his age?”

The rock lady shakes her head. “No. Older.”

John nods. He squeezes her shoulder and waits.

The rock lady drops her head and sniffs. Then whispers.
“She had his hair...”

THE GIRL WHO COULD SEE

Aisling has a stomachache that won't go away. Every morning, she opens her eyes, steps across her bedroom floor, and the pain wakes up, too. It seizes her right around the middle, a pressuring, piercing pain that pushes and pushes 'til she knows she'll just burst into tears about it all – but Aisling won't. She won't dare. If her parents won't, she won't.

“Hon? Get me a pop, would ya?”

Aisling snaps to attention, and feels the car's air conditioning blowing on her knees. The cooler is to her left in the middle of the back seat. Silly to have it in the middle, she knows. There's plenty of room this time; Celia isn't sitting in the back seat. But it just feels better. Normal. Another pain in her stomach. Aisling takes a sharp breath in and ignores it. She slides the cooler's red top off and reaches into the freezing water. The ice is half-melted.

“Tom, it's seven o'clock in the morning!”

“And I've been drivin' for three hours, I need to wake up. A Diet Pepsi, hon.”

“K.”

Aisling fishes through the thrown-together hodge podge of fruit and crackers and Budding meat packages. She finds the red and blue logo, and pulls the dripping can out of the cooler. She holds it in between the two front seats. Her father takes it without a word.

Droplets of water hit her mother's arm. A small gasp.

"Sorry, Mom."

No response. Aisling fishes a dripping Ritz cracker package out of the cooler, and slides the lid back on. Maybe crackers will help her stomach feel better. She munches. They taste cold, and wet, and awful. She keeps munching anyway. She knows her father won't stop driving, not for anything.

The police, after searching every nook and cranny and asking every possible question, had deemed Celia an "Endangered Runaway". Aisling had asked, over and over, what kind of danger "endangered" meant, but no one would tell her. Then, at two o'clock this morning, the phone had rung, and she'd never seen her parents pack so fast. "We're going to stay with Aunt Ruth for a bit!" they'd said, talking in quiet whispers to each other about everything else. Ordinarily, Aisling would have been clueless, but three weeks of being invisible had taught her some tricks – she'd listened in on another extension.

Celia's bag had been found. In New York City. How the heck did she get to New York City? And how did Aunt Ruth not know? Her parents had called her, over and over, and she'd answered them, in her raspy, cold, I-can't-be-bothered voice, "Oh, for heaven's sake, I've told you, she hasn't stopped by!" It was someone anonymous. Someone anonymous had found Celia's green ratty ink-splattered bag, her favorite bag. But they hadn't found her.

Aisling stares at Celia's side of the back seat. Shooting pains in her stomach again. The crackers haven't helped. Nothing helps.

"Honey, you have to merge."

"I am."

"No, *there*."

"We won't fit, Liv, wait."

"You could fit right there and you didn't move—"

"—there wasn't enough room—"

"—well, we're gonna get hit if you don't move—"

"—do you want to drive the car?!"

Aisling snaps to attention again. Left, right, front, and behind, nothing but honking horns, trucks, busses, and screeching breaks. And in front of them, a massive tunnel, going as deep and as far as she can see, like the mouth of a giant whale. They've reached the Holland Tunnel. She's seen it a few times before – when did they last visit Aunt Ruth? Oh yes. Christmas. The Awful Awkward Christmas. Every Christmas with Aunt Ruth is Awful and Awkward, really. How old were they? Oh yes. Celia was eight, and Aisling was six. They were close then.

Celia had discovered – well, *everyone* had, how could you not notice? – that her writing flowed like magic water. Her pen would draft epic plays, and Aisling would read them out loud, proudly, voicing all the characters, to anyone who would listen. Their neighbors would giggle, enthralled at block parties and barbecues, whisper and suggest to her and Celia's parents. Finally, on demand, to the sisters' delight, when summers came they'd make a stage, and a set, and programs, and fill their backyard to the brim with blankets and chairs. The neighbors would arrive, for The Great Big Show, fully costumed and rehearsed since Christmas, and, at the end – thunderous applause! From the adult neighbors, that is. None of the kids ever wanted to come, and when their parents would drag them along, they'd spend the entire evening slumped down in their seats, tweeting or texting. And they'd laugh. 'Til their parents would nudge them. It must have gotten to Celia, because her summer before fifth grade, the productions had abruptly stopped, without announcement. That was the same summer that Celia had stopped playing with Aisling, stopped telling her everything, the same summer that Aisling had noticed for the first time how dull her brown hair was, how knobby her knees were, that she was Completely and Utterly Boring.

"Merge! Merge *there*."

Aisling hears a hint in her mother's voice, an old hint of that terrible thing she screamed, three weeks and one day ago, the night before Everything Fell Apart –

Shooting pains in her stomach again. The crackers are gone. Why can't she just say her feelings? That's why her stomach hurts. She should just say everything, yell everything, starting with "Talk to me (bad word)! Include me in this!" to her parents. Celia would have. Celia would have blurted out every possible feeling, she would have yelled them – for hours – at her parents, as she had, for the past two years. She started fifth grade and suddenly became an alien. A spouting emotional alien. And it just got worse, in sixth grade and in seventh. She still had their father's red hair and their mother's brown eyes; she and Aisling still had the same dimples and – lately – the same spots on their chin, but beyond that, Celia was a stranger. Why did she have to become a stranger?

That night ... three weeks and one day ago, the night before Everything Fell Apart ... Aisling had lay in her bed, shivering with fright, listening to Celia and her parents go at it, again. Tom, their father, was trying to be heard, Celia's shrieks overpowered him, Liv, their mother, was sobbing, and finally blasted, "WE JUST CAN'T TAKE YOU ANYMORE!" The house was eerily silent then. Aisling heard Liv gasp. But she didn't hear an apology. Celia then stomped into their bedroom, buried herself under the covers, and Aisling knew that something was broken. It could never be fixed. The next morning, Celia was gone. And Aisling's stomach started to hurt.

"Okay, now, you have to watch; this exit—"

"—*I know*, Liv!"

Their voices fade away as the light begins, at the end of the tunnel, to grow brighter and brighter and brighter. Suddenly – swoosh! – light illuminates the car, and the city jolts up and around her on all sides, like a great noisy moving mountain. Aisling cranes her neck; she never knows where to look first. Giant buildings covered in jungle gyms. Trees growing out of sidewalks. Men delivering pizza on bicycles. Horse-drawn carriages. Flashing lights and animated billboards. Busses with accordions in the middle of them!

For a blissful moment, Aisling's stomach lets up. She rolls down her window. The old sounds are new again. Yelling, and music, and sirens, and traffic, and brakes screeching from underneath the

ground. *Blam, blam. Blam, blam.* She chuckles. *That* sound. It had terrified her when she was three, 'til Celia had shown her with a “no, silly, look” what it was: huge metal rectangles lying on the street, ricocheting as cars passed over them. It then turned into their favorite game. They'd beg, “Dad, run over a rectangle!” The car would bounce and they'd leap in their seats, screeching “Blam! blam! Blam! blam!” to their parents' utter irritation.

Aisling pulls her knees to her chest. She leans her head back, and takes a deep breath. The smells. Hot asphalt, a hint of greenery, steam, cooking food, wind-blown hair, incense, garbage, dog poop, spices – her nose loses track. All the same magic she remembers. Just missing one thing.

“Aisling? Aisling.”

Liv has opened the back door. She has the cooler in her arms.

“We're here, come on. Come on!”

The door closes. The car is parked, yards down the block, from Auth Ruth's Awfully Awkward Apartment. Already? The street looks the same. Slightly smaller, because she's bigger. A few different stores. A few different signs. Liv and Tom bustle about the car, opening and closing the trunk, gathering bags. Not looking at her. Aisling can't stop hugging her knees. The pain in her stomach starts to swirl. They're *here*, in the place where Celia ran, in the place where her bag was found, in the place she disappeared. Everything feels so much worse, so much scarier, so much ... clearer. As her stomach churns, Aisling realizes that she hates her parents – for yelling at Celia, for not listening to Celia. She never would have left if they'd ... Aisling realizes that she hates Celia – for ignoring her, for ignoring the fact that, all that time, *she was* listening, even when their parents weren't. Why did she have to leave?

Aisling can't cry. She rubs her belly, and instead, makes a sudden decision. Her parents will meet with police today. They'll identify Celia's bag. They'll tell her nothing. But she won't care. She'll tell her parents nothing. They don't know it, but she has her own secret about Celia. She is going to look for Celia – and find her –

all by herself.