

## The Loudest Sound

When my sister Charlotte died the first thing that struck me was how quickly the world became silent.

It happened on an August morning. It was early and the sun had just rose, smudging the sky pink and orange with blue edges. I had been sitting cross-legged on the couch, still half asleep. I had just lit a cigarette and was curiously watching the way the cherry blazed red and the paper quickly turned to ash. I was halfway done when I noticed the thickness of the silence. For the past few months, the house had been full of the sounds of my sister dying. There was the ragged breaths that the nurses had prudently referred to as cheyne-stokes respiration. Late at night, with only candles lighting the room, Charlotte and I had googled the term cheyne-stokes and upon reading the first paragraph about them I shut the computer down and told her that I couldn't find anything about it. I had painstakingly listened to her gasping for air for months, praying that she would go to sleep. But then, the sleep was worse. Her breaths would become labored and I would hang outside of her bedroom, checking on her every so often, terrified each time that I would surely find her dead.

Although she would become quiet in those moments, this was different. I stubbed my cigarette out in the ashtray and stood up slowly, feeling heavy. I padded into my sister's bedroom barefoot, feeling cold underneath my nightgown. Her chest was still and her eyes were wide

open, blank. I paused for a moment, sure I would scream, cry, pass out, go into shock, but I felt instead like I was acting out a bad play. I closed both of her eyes gently and kissed the top of her head. All I could think about was how quiet it was.

Charlotte's skin was pale and she was sprawled out on the hospital bed. I pushed her hair out of her face, which was still slightly damp from sweat and pain. I sat down beside of her bed in the rocking chair I had placed there for the last few nights, when the suffering had become unbearable for her. She was always begging for more medicine but, silly as it sounds, I was scared of overdosing her on morphine.

I knew I should call someone. Who to call, though? 911? I knew 911 was for emergencies and this wasn't an emergency, was it? We had all known Charlotte was going to die for months, since Dr. Holmska had said there was nothing else he could do. The cancer was going to spread, or be damned. It had started in her lungs. Charlotte had never smoked a day in her life. I had always been the smoker. I felt guilty for this all the time. I knew it should be me there, in the bed.

Our mother? I knew I had to tell her, but I dreaded it. My mom had a way of making everything about herself, and I knew this would be no different. I would have to listen to her cry. She couldn't cry like normal people. She had to sob -- huge, body-wracking sobs -- that had always made everyone around her nervous, including me. Especially me.

I decided to call Dr. Holmska. I picked up the cordless phone, before I realized that I was undoubtedly a mess. I would like to say that I was stalling, putting off the inevitable situation

where they would have to load my sister's body into a black bag, but the truth was that I had never been comfortable with letting people see me in the morning. I walked into the bathroom and stared into the mirror. My eyes were lined with dark shadows, my skin snow white. I had stayed in the house all summer, taking care of Charlotte, waiting on her to die. I hadn't even thought about what I would do after.

I brushed the knots out of my long, chestnut-colored hair and tied it up in a bun. My clear, shattered-glass green eyes were bloodshot, and I put some eye drops in them, blinking fast. I put on a pair of gray yoga pants and a pink knitted shirt. I knew it was all useless. I would never look half as good as Charlotte had looked, with her blonde sunlit hair, huge smile, and Brooke Shields' eyebrows. I had always been jealous of Charlotte. She was beautiful. She managed to never curse. She could tan easily, this dark, caramel mocha color. I would always blister and burn.

But, I loved her, too. She had never noticed the differences between us, or at least, she never spoke of them. She was always doing things for me. Making homemade pineapple upside down cake for my birthday. Sneaking into my house while I was gone to work, just to clean it up for me. When I had my first junior high crush she taught me how to put make-up on, something my mother would have never thought of.

When I was twenty-one, she decided to take me to her "secret" spot. She picked me up on a four-wheeler that morning. She was wearing shorts and had her hair tied up in a ponytail.

"C'mon, Alisa. I wanna show you something," she said, her eyes sparkling mischievously. It was a hot day in late June. The oxeye daisies had just started to bloom along

the sides of the cracked, country roads. I jumped up on the four-wheeler behind her and wrapped my arms around her waist. My legs stuck fast to the leather of the seat.

She drove us up into the woods. The sunlight filtered golden through the trees. There was a small breeze in the shade that brushed against our skin faintly. She stopped the roar of the four-wheeler and bounced off. Charlotte always had this way of bouncing on her feet all the time. She grabbed her backpack and slung it over her shoulder.

She wiggled her eyebrows at me. "Follow me," she said, dramatically, waving her arms in the air.

I started after her, breaking branches and twigs under my shoes. I could hear crickets singing. "Where are you taking me?" I asked her after a minute, slapping a mosquito away.

"It's this place dad took me to once, right before he died. You was sick that day or he would have took you, too. I know I should have shown it to you before now, but, it was nice to have this one secret to myself, you know?"

I ducked under some briars and nodded. That's the way it was with Charlotte. A person couldn't be mad at her.

We walked for almost an hour. Charlotte stopped ahead of me and looked back to smile at me, her face flushed. She swept her sunshine-yellow bangs out of her face. "We're almost there. Do you hear it?"

I listened for a moment, cocking my head to the side. All I could hear were the crickets, and the breeze rustling through the tree branches. I shook my head. "I don't even know what I'm supposed to be listening for," I told her.

She started walking again and I followed after her, feeling slightly annoyed. I was wanting a cigarette, and my skin was starting to sting from sweating for so long. It wasn't long before we broke out of the woods into a clearing and I finally saw what she was talking about.

There was a small curtain waterfall cascading down over the rocks, making them look wet and smooth. At the base was a small body of water, deep enough to swim in. I walked along the edges of the water, which was green from moss. I had never heard of a waterfall being back in these woods and I was in awe. Charlotte laughed, spinning around to wink at me. She pulled her shirt off and threw it on the rocks. "Let's go! We're still not there yet," she said, stepping out into the water.

"Isn't the waterfall the surprise?" I asked her. I hesitated, watching her swim laps with just her bra and shorts on. I wished I felt that comfortable with myself. I slipped my shoes off and followed her in, fully clothed. The water was cool to the touch. She dove in, headfirst, and came back up to splash at me.

"Nope," she said, "The surprise is behind the waterfall."

I followed her to the base of the waterfall and stepped under, letting the water spill over me, getting my hair and clothes wet. My shirt clung to my skin. There was a small cave behind the waterfall. Charlotte had Pink Floyd and The Beatles band posters taped to the rock walls. There was a rug and some bean bag chairs. She had a small lantern that she was lighting with a match.

“Wow, this is amazing,” I told her. She sat down on one of the bean bags and started rummaging through her backpack.

“Over there,” she pointed to a corner of the cave where she had a sleeping bag. “Under the sleeping bag, I have some glasses. Get them.”

I found them, two aqua blue plastic cups with mustaches all around them. I took them to her and she opened up a pint of whiskey and poured the two cups full.

I sat down on the other bean bag and took a sip of the amber whiskey, which warmed my throat and stomach. Charlotte started to laugh. “Don’t look so impressed,” she teased, and I realized I had had my jaw dropped the whole time.

“This is just... wickedly cool, Char,” I told her.

Charlotte was quiet for a minute, sipping from her cup. She stretched her tanned legs out and I could see she hadn’t shaved, but her hair was so blonde that you could hardly tell. She pulled her hair-tie out and let her hair spill down her back, brushing through the tangles with her

fingers. "I just need to be alone sometimes," she said, her voice low and raspy. She picked up her bean bag and moved closer to me. She smelled like raspberries and shampoo.

"I get what you mean," I told her. Even though, at the time, I didn't. I didn't understand the depth of her words. She laughed a little, pressing her knees up against mine.

"I know you do, little sis. You know I love you, right? I know we fight sometimes, but I couldn't imagine showing anyone else this place. You're the only person I really trust," she whispered. She grabbed my hand and squeezed it.

I felt warm inside, a different kind of warm than the whiskey heat. I nodded, "I love you, too."

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a helicopter flying over the house. I walked back into the hallway and looked into Charlotte's bedroom. She was still quiet. Still... dead. I half expected her to be crying, asking for more morphine. I took a deep breath and dialed Dr. Holmska's number.

He answered on the third ring. His voice was deep and gravelly, like he had been asleep.

"Alisa?"

I paused. I tried to think of what to say. Even though I had been preparing for it for months, I didn't want to use the D word. Death. Dead. Died. I couldn't imagine that word, and Charlotte's name in the same sentence.

I could hear him moving around, his breath heavy against the phone.

"Alisa? Is it Charlotte?" he asked, sounding concerned. His words were warm, dripping syrup.

"Yeah. She's... gone, Jason."

He was quiet. I looked back in at Charlotte. Her skin was stretched tight across her bones. She had lost so much weight. I watched her chest closely.

"I'll be right over, okay?" he said. "Call your mother."

"Okay." I hung the phone up.

The silence was madness. I paced around the house. The day was getting hotter. My stomach felt empty, but the ideal of food was sickening.

I turned the news on for some noise. They were talking about a car accident that had claimed six lives, two of them young children. They kept showing pictures of this little girl with rosy, red cheeks and blonde curls. I had never liked watching the news. Another difference



between Charlotte and I. She took after our father, who had died when she was nine and I was seven. He had always been obsessed with the news. He would watch it until the late hours of the night and was always plastering newspaper stories all over the wall of his study. He was constantly talking about how sad and fucked up the world was.

I grabbed my crumpled up pack of Marlboros and walked out onto the porch. The air was stale and hard to breathe. I could smell grass from where a neighbor had mowed his lawn, and also honeysuckle that lined the edges of the woods. The sky was clear blue, like glass.

I cupped my shaky hand around my cigarette and lit it. The smoke was sending little tendrils into the air. I inhaled once and thought about Charlotte and choked on it. I could imagine my lungs, black from tar, cancer-free. I stubbed the cigarette out and cursed, dropping it to the ground and digging it into the dirt with the toe of my shoe.

Nobody was outside. The world was so quiet, as if it had stopped moving. Maybe it had. I dry heaved, my stomach clenching, and grabbed onto the hood of my car to keep from falling down.

Back inside, I called my mother.

“Alisa!” she barked, loudly, sounding irritated. “I tried to call you earlier.”

I sighed quietly, feeling a headache coming on.

“Mom? Mom. I need you to come over, okay?”

“Why? What is it?”

“Please, just come over,” I pleaded. *Please, not over the phone, mom. Not over the phone*, I was thinking.

“What? Why won’t you tell me what it is? Is Char okay?”

I closed my eyes, feeling tired all of a sudden. “No, she’s not. I need you to come over,” I said slowly, before hanging up the phone.

The clock read 8:24. I unplugged it. I didn’t want to see it. I didn’t want to know about how much time was passing without Charlotte. I walked through the house again. My kitchen was wrecked and I sucked in my breath, fast. I stopped and filled up the sink with scalding, hot water and lemon-scented Joy. I did the dishes, my hands turning red and raw.

Dr. Jason Holmska got there. He rushed in, came to me first, wrapped his long arms around me and pulled me to his chest.

“Alisa. Are you okay?”

His honey brown eyes were heavy-lidded and I knew I had woke him up, then. He hadn’t shaved and had dark stubble across his jaw.

“I don’t know,” I told him, which was the truth. Was I okay? I wasn’t supposed to be okay, was I? My sister had just died. I hadn’t even cried yet. I tried to feel sad, but I just felt tired.

“I’m going to go see her,” he said. He pressed his lips to my forehead, then, his breath warm against my skin. I closed my eyes and nodded.

I followed him into the room. Charlotte’s chest was so still. He pressed his index and middle finger against her neck, gently. He let out a big rush of breath.

I came up beside of him, put my hand down on top of Charlotte’s. Her skin was cold to the touch. I pulled away. “She’s so cold,” I told him. *Surreal*, I thought. *This whole thing is so surreal.*

“I know. Listen, I have to call time of death and I’m going to call a coroner to come pick her up. You’ll probably have to sign some papers, I don’t know. But is that okay? Do you need me to do anything else first?” Jason asked. He pulled me away from the bed. “Anything at all. I mean it, Alisa.”

I shook my head. He started to move away from me and I felt a rush of sadness. I grabbed his arm and pulled him towards me. He pressed his lips to mine and I kissed him, pouring myself into him. His breath tasted like peppermints. He caught my wrists, pulled me back and swept a stray curl out of my face. “I’m sorry,” he said.

I put a finger to his swollen lips and hushed him. "Please, you said anything..." I pleaded quietly, tugging at the waistband of his jeans, fumbling with the buttons.

"Alisa... baby, I think you're in shock," he said, his jaw set. I ignored him and pressed my hand roughly against him through his jeans.

"I'm not, okay? I'm not. I just need you right now. Please?" I whispered, kissing him on the cheek. After a moment, he grabbed my hand and looked towards the bed, towards my sister. When he spoke, his voice was gruff, "I don't think this is a good idea, but come on."

I followed him into the bathroom and bent over the porcelain sink, my head spinning. He slipped my yoga pants down to my knees and pressed into me. His bony hips cut into my skin, his fingers kneaded into my back, and I held on, my throat tight, my eyes burning. I tried to think of how I needed this. I tried to get lost in it, but I was too dizzy to focus.

He finished and I could hear him behind me, zipping his jeans. I pulled my pants back up and turned around. His face was flushed and sweaty. He framed my face in his hands, gently. "I know it may not seem like it now, but everything is going to be okay. I promise."

He went into the kitchen and started talking in hushed tones on the phone. I sat back down in the rocking chair beside of Charlotte. I grabbed her hand again, which was limp. Her fingernails were painted a pale pink. She had asked me to paint them for her five days before. She said her hands had gotten too shaky for her to do them herself.

I had read once that when a person dies their brain replays their life in the timespan of seven minutes and I wondered if that was true. If Charlotte had got to relive the happier moments. If Charlotte had been put through the hell of her cancer, all over again, in just a few minutes.

I heard a car pull in fast, tires crunching against gravel. My mom came running in the door, her hair damp and smelling of shampoo.

“What’s wrong, Lyss?” she asked and stopped short at the doorway, her eyes falling on Charlotte.

She walked in slowly, her skin paling. Her eyes, teal blue, the same color of Charlotte’s, filled up with tears. “Oh my God, Lyssa. She’s dead, isn’t she?”

I got up, let my mom wrap her arms around me. We stood there for a long time, next to Charlotte. Her skin was turning this ashen color, pale and gray. My mom’s eyes sparkled wet from tears.

Jason came into the room, his eyes somber. He looked at my mom. All I could think about was how weird it was to have them in the room together. My mother who took care of me as a child, and this man... this man who had been my secret lover for almost the entire duration of Charlotte’s sickness.

Charlotte was the only other person who had known about mine and Jason's relationship. I didn't want to tell her. I didn't want her to know that while she was dying I was out screwing her doctor. We were at the hospital one day. Charlotte was sitting in a worn, leather chair with an IV stuck in her arm.

The chemo was rough on Charlotte. Her hair started to fall out almost immediately. She shaved it all off after a few weeks. She pulled bald off wonderfully, just like anything else Charlotte had ever tried to pull off. She looked beautiful, with her bright blue eyes shining, and the silver hoop earrings in her ears. She wore a silk cerulean scarf tied around her head.

Jason came in and checked her vitals. He was always doing little things like that, even though it was the nurses' job. He was always saying he wanted to do it for me, so I would feel better about Charlotte's treatment. I think he just liked being around her, though. Charlotte was the type of person everyone wanted to be around.

He was adjusting the blood pressure cuff around her arm. He looked up at me and smiled a little, shyly. I felt all warm inside and had to turn my head away to keep from smiling back. When he left the room, Charlotte laughed.

"You know, I can close my eyes if you and Dr. Holmska would like," she said, grinning. She poked my arm.

“What do you mean?” I asked, feigning innocence. I tried to keep a straight face, but I could feel the blood pooling to my cheeks in a flush. Charlotte shifted in her seat, pulling her long legs up underneath her and turning towards me.

“I know you and him have something going on. And it’s okay. I just really wish you wouldn’t try to hide all the juicy details, though,” she said.

I was quiet for a minute, my heartbeat pounding in my head. Finally, I looked over at her. “How can you tell? Did he say something? Did he mention me?”

Charlotte laughed again. “I can just tell by the way he looks at you. That’s love. He’s full of it. When he walks in here, all he sees is you.” She looked sad for a minute, her eyes thoughtful. I was just thinking about how I was right for not wanting to tell Charlotte when she spoke again. “Don’t worry about me, little sis. Seeing you happy makes me happy. Besides, when I kick this cancer’s ass I can get out there and find my Prince Charming, too.”

Only the cancer got worse and a few months later my boyfriend had to tell my big sister that she was going to die. She was going to die before she ever got a chance to find her “Prince Charming”. I swallowed hard, looking at her body. Jason looked at my mother. “They’ll be here soon,” he said. He pushed his hand through his wavy, black hair and hung his head, his eyes on Charlotte. The room felt too cold all of a sudden.

I wanted out of there. Suddenly, my lungs felt tight, and I knew this is how Charlotte must have felt all the time. I pulled away from my mom, looked at Jason. "I need to get some air," I told them.

My mom tried to reach for me again and I rushed from the room and out of the house, stepping into the suffocating, thick heat that seemed to catch me, like an insect flying into a spider web. I shook my head and started to run, feet hitting the pavement, blood pounding behind my ears. I ran to the edge of the woods and stopped for just a second, looking back at the house. I was unsure if I would ever be able to go back in there, knowing that my sister had died there.

I ran through the woods, crashing through the trees, briars scratching my arms and tearing at my clothes. A brier caught my cheek and I reached up to feel the wet, cool blood smearing across my skin. I tripped over a branch and landed hard on my left knee, skinning it. I got back up and started running again. My heart felt like a hummingbird in my chest, beating against my ribs. I felt a hitch in my side, but I ignored it, pushing myself to run faster.

It was approaching noon when I got to the waterfall. The sun was directly overhead, burning hot, white heat. The branches fractured the sun rays, dappling it across the water. I jumped in, so fast that it momentarily took my breath away.

I swam to the cave. It was the first trip I had made there since I had found out about Charlotte's cancer. I could hear her laugh, like wind chimes, echoing against the cave wall. I could smell her raspberry perfume. I climbed into the sleeping bag and finally, I cried. Hot, salty



tears that bit the corners of my eyes and spilled down my face. My throat felt hot and tight. I pulled the sleeping bag to me and took in a deep breath. My shoulders shook.

I cried for what felt like forever, until I felt drained. I could feel something hard under my leg and pulled out a half-full bottle of Jack Daniels. I untwisted the cap and put it to my lips, drinking it straight. I drunk it until the bottle was empty and my head was dizzy. I laid back on the sleeping bag and closed my eyes, feeling the world spin and tilt around me. I listened for Charlotte's voice, for her stories about dad and her boyfriends and the pranks she had pulled at work. I listened, but there was nothing. The loudest sound, that wrapped around me hot and thick, and pressed against my ears, was the silence.