

The Girl in the Leather-Bound Notebook

My sister was twenty-one when she fell to her death down the stairs in our parents' house. It wasn't the first time she'd tried it. When she was eleven and I was thirteen, she'd made her first attempt. I was in the living room and was running upstairs to grab a marker for a school project. As I turned the corner to the bottom of the stairs, there was Vanessa, standing at the top. I started up and was at the third step from the bottom when I realized she wasn't coming down as she normally would. Of course, being sisters, we'd passed on those stairs a million times, for a glass of orange juice or a notebook or a field hockey stick from the floor above or below.

That time when she was eleven, Vanessa stood in her spot. She seemed to sway from side to side and she didn't really seem to see me. She stared to the side, to the wall where our mother had hung photos of our family vacations to the Grand Canyon, Yosemite, and Niagara Falls. Then, in a swift second, she put her arms over her head, as if about to perform a gymnastics routine, and leaned forward. I jumped out of the way as she tumbled past me. The noise she made as she fell wasn't terrible like I had expected. It sounded like the sound a cat might make, muffled and small.

I expected her to have glazed eyes or something when she looked at me from the floor. She must've been on drugs to do something so stupid, I figured. She's always been the more reckless one of us. She ran around with my what mother would've called "a tough crowd", except my mother thought Vanessa still hung out with the neighborhood kids we'd grown up with – Cynthia the concert pianist and Gabby, whose favorite hobby until she was eighteen was making friendship bracelets.

When Vanessa looked up at me, she looked like she always did, her brown bangs swooped to the side, her green eyes intense, but in a good way, like she was ready for a good time. She popped up, seemingly unscathed, and took a Diet Coke from the fridge like nothing unusual had taken place.

“What was that?” I asked.

“It’s a stupid rule.”

“What is?” I asked, not following.

“That only Mom can drink the Diet Cokes.”

“No,” I said. “I meant, why did you just fall down the stairs?”

“I wanted to know what it would feel like,” she said, as if this explanation was perfectly reasonable.

“What did it feel like?”

“It was okay.” She took a swig of soda. “I’m okay,” she said, as if I doubted it. It hadn’t occurred to me to doubt it, not yet. Even though I was a geek who liked science fiction movies, I knew girls like Vanessa in my own grade: girls who snuck out of their bedroom windows on school nights to party down by the lake and who made out with boys in the janitor’s closet at school.

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We’re not good at talking about serious things in my family. During the first two years I’d been away at college, I spoke with my parents pretty frequently via phone and email, but it was always about the surface subjects: the weather, my dad’s new car, my mom’s book club.

Once, when I got a C on a test (my worst grade ever), I dialed the first eight digits of their number six times before I hung up and decided to send an email. I expected my dad to call me immediately for further explanation, but instead, I got an email back: “You’ll get ‘em next time.” When I next saw their number on my caller ID, I was worried my mother would bring it up, but we never talked about it.

So, I wasn’t surprised that the first time Vanessa was in the hospital, I didn’t receive a phone call. Instead, I woke up one morning, grabbed a cup of coffee from the pot in my dorm room, and woke up my laptop. There I found an email from my mother. “Dear Lydia” – so formal, like a business transaction. Vanessa has been admitted to McGregor Hospital. It didn’t say why but I knew; McGregor is a psychiatric hospital.

As I’d find out later, she was first admitted to the emergency room at the closest city’s general hospital, then transferred and put on psychiatric hold and suicide watch, after she took forty-two Tylenol. After she took the pills, she went out with friends and said nothing. An hour later, she returned home to find my mother doing a crossword puzzle at the kitchen table. I could see my mother sitting there, as she always did until both of us were home safe in bed. She’d barely look at us and try to act nonchalant about it, but Vanessa and I both knew what she was doing. As soon as we were upstairs in the bathroom brushing our teeth and washing out faces, we’d hear her put her empty mug in the dishwasher and climb the stairs to her own bathroom where she’d do the same.

I was two hours away and immediately felt guilty. My parents had only let me know thirty-six hours after Vanessa had been admitted. I wanted to call them and berate them, but I knew their email was right: there was nothing I could do, and besides, Vanessa’s doctor didn’t

want her to have contact with us for a few days. They didn't need to say that it was in case we were part of the problem.

Even though there was nothing I could do, I boarded a train without telling my parents, then caught a cab at the train station and showed up at my childhood home unannounced. I didn't realize how relieved I'd be that no one was home until I arrived. Maybe my parents had lied to me and they were off visiting Vanessa, or maybe not, it didn't matter. I had only come to get a whiff of the sister from whom I felt intensely far away the moment I heard about her latest troubles.

Vanessa's bedroom door still held a sign she'd made when she was twelve and I was fourteen, telling everyone (my parents and me) to keep out. I pushed the door open. I expected the room to feel different somehow. Vanessa had had her troubles, but nothing like this. The room looked the same though: the photos of her friends, all with heavy eye shadow; the varsity letters for field hockey and tennis prominently displayed on a bulletin board; the bedspread with its purple gerbera daisies. It looked like any teenager's room, which was more apparent to me now that I was in college.

Vanessa had a number of notebooks stacked on her desk, which looked out of place because they weren't the normal spiral ones we all used in school. There were three with leather covers, one each in blue, green, and red. I picked up the blue one, which was on top. I was curious, then terrified. I thought this might be like the scene in *A Beautiful Mind* where Jennifer Connolly discovers her husband's mad writings and realizes that he's crazy. Maybe Vanessa was that crazy, but she was just very, very good at hiding it, and likely not as smart as John Nash.

The notebook held a story, written in Vanessa's curly handwriting. I began to skim it and then to read more closely. It was about a court case, something about a pharmaceutical trial gone wrong. I couldn't tell if the story was true or not, though the inclusion of dialogue and the occasional crossing out and replacement of words made me think it was fiction or at least a fictionalized version of a true story. I picked up the green notebook, which held writing in a similar style, something about a run-down hospital. The words on the page couldn't have been less connected to my sister, yet I was in her room and it was her handwriting. The stories seemed so at odds with the photographs with red cups taken at house parties, the yearbooks with hundreds of handwritten notes from friends, and the old pairs of running shoes flung on the ground near, but not in, the closet.

I heard the front door open and close. I'd left my monogrammed canvas bag in the front hall, so my parents knew I was home. My mother yelled up the stairs, "Lydia!"

I walked down calmly, trying to act as if I'd just come home for Thanksgiving and they were expecting me. "What's wrong?" my father asked. He was wearing jeans and a Red Sox hoodie – he had clearly not been at work.

"Vanessa's in the hospital," I said, as if it were me giving them the news when it had been the other way around.

My mother let out a loud sigh and walked towards the kitchen. I knew to follow and the three of us sat at the table.

"First of all, it's not your fault," my father said.

I was so taken aback, first that he would suggest this, and then that he'd known that I felt I'd abandoned Vanessa when I went off to school. "I know," I said, even though I didn't.

“And it’s not her fault either,” my mother quickly chimed in. I’d never seen my mother without perfectly manicured nails, but now they were shorter – bitten – and in need of a touchup of her pale pink polish.

My mother needed to be doing something, so she stood up and took a gallon of Oreo ice cream from the freezer and began to scoop it into three bowls.

“Where were you guys?” I asked, wondering of course if they’d seen Vanessa.

My father laughed and looked at my mother who dropped the scoop into the ice cream container.

“What?” I asked.

“We just went out for ice cream.”

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The first time Vanessa visited me at college was for my twenty-second birthday. I was almost over binge drinking myself at that point, so I wanted to do something quiet. There was an independent movie theater not too far away, and I imagined we’d watch a girly movie – something that took place in Paris or Tuscany – while we ate copious amounts of popcorn before walking home in the rain. It would be like a date, except with my sister. We’d once had a relationship where we could do that.

My friends wanted to go out. I told them Vanessa was coming and that she wasn’t twenty-one, but they said we’d go somewhere nice where it wouldn’t matter, out for steaks and wine. I knew we couldn’t afford Ruth’s Chris, so the steak would be tough and the wine would give us extra rough hangovers, but I liked the idea.

We decided to pregame a bit in the apartment. My roommate, Claire, made Jello shots in blue and green because those were my favorite colors, with tequila because that was my favorite alcohol.

Vanessa came in on the train early Saturday afternoon. She should've been away at college herself by then but she wasn't. She was taking creative writing classes at the local community college while living at home and trying to work on a book of essays. My parents found this "courageous", something they never would've said about me. I found it entirely idiotic. What did Vanessa have to write about, particularly if she was focusing on nonfiction? She'd never left town, which I viewed then as necessary to write anything worthwhile. And what are the chances she'd "make it" as a writer? I, on the other hand, was majoring in physics.

Vanessa stepped off the train wearing black opaque tights, a cotton dress in pale pink, and a black leather lanyard necklace. She carried a camel leather backpack slung over her shoulder and no other luggage though she planned to stay for two nights. She looks like a writer, I thought. She gave me a quick hug and said, "Happy birthday, sis." It was the first time she'd ever called me sis, like she now truly embodied the part of cute younger sibling, like we were a John Hughes creation.

I felt myself relax. I'd been nervous for her visit, particularly when I knew birthday-level drinking would be involved. I'd been worried that she'd spiral into a deep depression and that the next (inevitable) hospitalization would occur on my watch. Now, to see her, she looked confident and tranquil. It softened my anxiety.

Vanessa made my apartment seem like her apartment. She flung her backpack down by the door where the backpacks of my two roommates were stored. She helped herself to a glass of iced tea in the kitchen. Claire was territorial about her beverages, so much so that Teagan and

I always asked to have a glass of iced tea. Vanessa grabbed her glass and set it down on the coffee table. She slouched on the couch and picked up an old issue of *People*, new to us but old because we stole issues from our neighbors' recycling bin. "What did you think of her wedding dress?" she asked me, holding open a page.

"You look amazing," I told her, not answering her question but unable to keep my observation to myself any longer.

She rested the magazine on her knees. "Thanks," she said, nodding.

We didn't mention her illness, but we both knew what I was talking about.

The pregame drinks ended up lasting all night. We never made it out for steaks. Instead, we ordered Indian takeout, which was a splurge because it was so much more expensive than the greasy pizza from the place on the first floor of our building. Even with the Indian food sitting in front of us, we could still smell that damn pizza every time someone opened the door to the apartment. People streamed in and out, some people I knew and who came because it was my birthday, some I knew but who were surprised to discover the reason for the party, and some I had never met but were friends of my roommates. With each entrance, someone would pose a toast and we'd raise our glasses – to my birthday, to youth (sarcastically), or to the sickeningly sweet Jello shots.

"Are you having fun?" I asked Vanessa.

She nodded that she was. She didn't elaborate, but the music was loud and I wouldn't have heard her answer anyway.

A few hours later, when there'd been a subtle shift in the mood from people funneling out to hit the bars or head home with new crushes or old boyfriends, I couldn't find Vanessa. I checked the fire escape, where several guests had wandered out for cigarettes. I checked the

hallway, where I heard tears that didn't end up being Vanessa's. I checked both bedrooms in our apartment. I found Claire passed out in her bed in her underwear with her eye liner and lipstick already smudged onto her pillowcase. I found our friends Brett and Hazel making out in my own bedroom; normally I would've given them grief, but now I just closed the door as panic began to rise in my throat.

Then I noticed the bathroom door was closed, with a faint line of light coming from underneath. I banged on the door. "Vanessa?"

I heard a muffled voice that I knew belonged to my sister.

"What?" I asked. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she said, sounding aggravated.

I debated my options. I could leave her be, as most people would do for their adult sister. Maybe the Indian food or the tequila shots or both had bothered her stomach. But then again, I hadn't seen her in what seemed like hours. It was hard to tell when the alcohol and the festivities had trumped an acute sense of the passage of time.

That was when I started to cry. My sister wasn't like most people's sisters, and I couldn't treat her like she was. I wasn't like most people, because of who she was, or at least because of what she was like, or had. My parents told me over and over again, "It's not Vanessa, it's her disease." But standing in my very first adult apartment, did it really matter?

I pictured my sister finding the Tylenol in the medicine cabinet, or worse and more immediate, breaking the mirror and using the glass for things I didn't even want to think about. I took off my heels and brought my leg up to kick in the door. It didn't work.

"What are you doing?" Vanessa yelled from the other side of the door.

"I'm coming in," I yelled, as I kicked again, this time successfully.

I didn't see broken glass or pills all over the floor. I saw Vanessa with her dress pulled up and her tights pulled down, and I saw Claire's friend Adam hurrying to zip his fly.

Vanessa glared at me but didn't yell. She knew what I'd suspected and she too began to cry.

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After Vanessa's funeral, I returned to campus a different person, at least to those around me. My roommates didn't seem to leave the apartment for weeks, just in case I might crack at any moment and need to be scooped off our linoleum floors. I was perhaps the most different to the friends of friends and other students in my classes who didn't know me very well to begin with. Now, to them, I was that girl with the dead sister. Some of them had known me as that girl with the crazy sister for years, or at least I thought so in my head. Before her death, nothing strange came up when you Googled Vanessa's name – only field hockey awards and a piece in the local paper about her appearance on the homecoming court. Now, there were obituaries that stated simply, "Vanessa Monroe died unexpectedly at home." Everyone knew that meant one of two things when you were healthy and young: drug overdose or suicide.

My advisor thought I'd struggle in my classes and told me it was okay if I did. We'd figure something out so I could still graduate six months later, he said. He looked at me from across his desk, which was piled with papers filled with equations I couldn't understand. Everyone knew that Dr. Luck was one of those professors who only cared about his PhD students, not the lowly undergrads the university required him to teach and in my case, to meet with quarterly about my progress towards a B.S. in physics. For nearly four years, we'd both

attended our quarterly meetings out of a sense of obligation; I didn't really need him since I was an excellent student, and he certainly didn't need me.

When he emailed me to meet him after he heard about Vanessa's death, I wasn't sure what to expect. I certainly didn't expect him to artfully play the therapist, which is what he ended up doing.

"This is hard," he said as I sat down. At first I thought he meant facing me and figuring out what to say to the only surviving daughter of my parents.

"It is," I acknowledged. I was holding a notebook and a pen, though this clearly wasn't a meeting where notes would be taken.

"Whatever you need..." He didn't finish his sentence.

"Okay."

"Believe it or not, I've been in your shoes."

I didn't reply.

"My brother jumped off the balcony of his apartment building when we were forty."

"You were twins?" I asked, as if that was what Dr. Luck wanted me to take away from his story.

"Yes." He waved his hands, as if that didn't matter. Of course he didn't want me to feel like Vanessa's death wasn't as important, since she wasn't my twin.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It was a long time ago."

Dr. Luck barely looked forty so I doubted it was too long ago, but I nodded. He looked as though he thought his news might create some sort of bond between us and cause me to stay in his office longer. But the opposite was true. The only thing more annoying than the people

who couldn't possibly understand the guilt I felt was someone who actually knew how I felt and wanted to rehash his own story.

I decided to switch gears rather drastically, but it was the reason I had agreed to meet in the first place. "I'm changing my major. To English."

Dr. Luck crossed his hands on his desk. He opened and closed his mouth several times, stifling the advice he wanted to give me but already knew would be unwelcome. "You're very good at physics," he said.

"I know. But I want to do something important."

He couldn't even nod at that one, and I regretted my words immediately. He thought physics *was* important, and I had too until only weeks before.

I was more afraid to tell my parents than I had been to tell Dr. Luck. As soon as I left his office, I became a girl he might occasionally think of, and only because both of our siblings had decided they liked the lack of a world better than the one we lived in. My parents had more riding on my decision, and worse, they'd know my reasons.

Fortunately, the first time my father came to visit me after Vanessa's death, he didn't bring my mother. He didn't seem to want to talk about Vanessa at all, which wouldn't have been possible if my mother had come. I hadn't been back home since the funeral, but I could guess that Vanessa's room was the same as it always had been, including the untouched colorful leather-bound notebooks piled on the desk.

Dad took me to a new restaurant. He'd asked me over the phone to pick a place we'd never been. He said, "What's the new hot spot?" like he'd ever cared about that before. We both knew he didn't want to go somewhere he'd been with Vanessa, and that was fine, because I didn't want to either.

I picked somewhere so fancy I'd barely have gone there for a special occasion. I regretted the choice. It was a tiny restaurant and we appeared to be the only pair not on a date. My father ordered the salmon and I had a steak with mashed potatoes.

"How's school?" he asked.

"It's good. I'm switching my major."

He put down his fork and then picked it up again and took another bite. I knew he kept eating so that he didn't interject with words he'd want to take back.

"I think I can make more of a difference. And English majors are more employable. There are so many more things I can do." I had no idea if this was true, but it seemed reasonable.

"What about grad school?"

"I don't want to go to grad school anymore. I'm sick of school."

"Will you still be finished in May?"

"Probably not. I'll probably need an additional semester."

"So it's actually more school if you switch?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Not in the long run. It's three more semesters, but no grad school. So, less school altogether."

"We should talk about this," he said.

"We are talking about this."

What I wanted to say and didn't was, "I want to be like the girl in the leather-bound notebooks. I want to figure her out." I had this vision of trying to *be* Vanessa, so I could figure out how it all went so horribly wrong.

I also wanted my father to understand this unspoken idea and to oppose it. He didn't. He backed off. It was the moment I knew that neither of my parents would ever fight me on anything again in my life. Maybe no one would, once they knew about Vanessa. They didn't understand that I wasn't like her. They thought I had it too, somewhere deep inside, something their words could set off.