

*Flipping the Stone*

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*To my dear friend Sally, an inspiration.*

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*You need a life plan*, her father had repeated to her when she was a teenager. He had a successful business and much to say. She was more like her jovial mother but had followed his instruction and that of her teachers. He must have been right. Things had gone her way.

She watches the train pull in. The end of a good day.

She smiles at the man who allows her on first. It's not a flirtation. She smiles a lot. And why not? Two years out of university and she has the job she's always dreamed

of. Life on course. Followed the rule book. Crossed her T's. A mortgage today, a marriage tomorrow. She has an ever expanding network of friends. She is independent. She may live on her own, for now, but she's never on her own.

She sits at a window seat. She always manages to find one, no matter how crowded. Life seems to go her way. Perhaps she is lucky.

She's often on the phone or listening to music, looking out at the streets and the people, all those different types and colours and shapes, a strange kind of order. There is beauty in that. Her outlook is positive. As long as she keeps busy. And moving forward.

She wasn't overly attractive but her smile and good nature illuminate her wherever she goes, like a bioluminescent school of fish in the night sea.

Twenty two minutes later she exits the train, humming to the tunes in her earpiece, chilled vibes, light and breezy.

A lot like her.

Her footsteps echo across the chipped concrete in the outdoor car park, barely lit by only several working light poles. Poor maintenance. Funding restrictions. A filtering down of incompetence. A world she is not privy to nor interested in. *Focus on your objectives... and you will be rewarded.*

Her younger brother also lives in the city. Similarly joyous for want of a better summation while the rest of her family live in a major regional centre. She is the first to make the transition, a pioneer in some ways. Though she has a love of the country she has been imbued with the desire for success.

She spies her car, but is on auto-pilot, thoughts elsewhere and nowhere, the day replaying, mixed with notions of tomorrow.

As she opens her car door she realizes music is still in her head. She lifts her hand to remove her earpiece and in that second he strikes, smashing her head against the top of the car.

A second of fire and nothing.

Only blackness.

A fli-ck-er-ing.

Red.

White.

Too. Bright.

Switch Off...

When she awakes she knows that much time has passed. Nothing seems to have happened, no dreams, no memory and yet she knows. Time has moved on without her.

There's no one sitting by her bedside. To welcome. Or console.

She is in a hospital. Oddly enough, in a children's ward.

There is much colour. Yet it is overly bright. And somehow offensive.

Daylight fills a window, intrusive and she can hear the currents of strong wind. It sounds like it belongs to a storm. Yet the sun is shining. Unusual. It's the new nature of things. Nothing will be the way it was.

An Indian boy around six standing in the aisle between the eight beds is the first to notice her. He is tremulous.

‘It’s okay,’ she whispers, endeavouring to smile through her sluggish muscles. ‘I can be your friend,’ but he dashes away in shock. It’s possible she’s been lying here for some time.

In that moment it becomes clear. She is alone. Even though she’s sure her family is nearby, she must be able to manage this. She will be alone again. It’s up to her to re-connect with the world.

She retreats. Sleeps.

She is not mistaken. Her family are close and they stay that way through the several months of rehabilitation. Her right side is slower than her left, the cause of her sluggish speech. It will take time for her body to relearn. Perhaps fortunately, she has been spared the memory of her assault.

It's her face which causes her the most rage. A beauty queen she wasn't but an attractive young woman she is no longer. Somehow the scarring has aged her, hardened her once gentle looks and now outlook.

The scarring runs deep.

The anger is barely beginning.

The offender is caught, security footage. He was known, a serial offender and yet the sentence does not justify the offence. Not for the family. With parole, he'll be out in no time. He gets another chance. Not so for her. The bitterness takes captive of them all.

Though her life is permanently altered, she has time to think. Sitting back she can see what it is doing to each of them, slowly eating away like a puddle baking in

the summer earth. Forgive is too big a hurdle, but forget she must. And so must they.

Nevertheless her father cannot let go. Will not. The control he has exerted over his life has not spared his child from injustice. The indignation eats at him like slow working acid. It permeates his personality, causing marital erosion. Eventually, he separates from her mother.

She reaches out to her parents but the pain has sunk beyond, a cancerous root that cannot be withdrawn.

It's her younger brother she relates to the most and is the conduit through which she re-engages with the world.

A social life she once relished seems frivolous; bars, festivals, restaurants, digital media, gossip and giggling.

Yet it's what she needs most. To externalize. To find the simple joy in others. To find laughter again. Once

discerned, she realizes it's her medicine, her drug. It brings her back to Life.

Things aren't what they were but she has adapted. The *Event* changed all of them, like smooth stones in a mountain creek, flipped over after a flood, forced to view the world differently.

For her though, as a year becomes two, it isn't quite enough. The picture is missing fragments.

She opts to travel, not for the reason that most choose, but to find some place new, somewhere that matches that untried place within.

It doesn't take long. She instinctively knows what she is looking for. At a southerly point, an island, away from the clutter and the noise and the rush of trains and rigid schedules and routines which no longer make sense. Yet

she does not want to hide. People remain close and always will. Her most valuable asset.

With compensation, she purchases a small house, uncomplicated, possibly where she was always going to be, on a hill, amongst trees, overlooking a quiet uncorrupted beach with the watery horizon beyond.

There is air. There is space. Simple. Unbound by convention. No objectives. No life plans. Only to be.

The stone may be unpolished, even a little coarse but there's always hope in an unknown future.