

# Set in Stone

Brittany Barrell | Short Story

I used to love photography. Being able to take a single moment and freeze it in eternity. For that moment everything is alright, there is no change, no heartache, nothing but the simple happiness of a single moment. Right now I sit in my room, flipping through my old photo albums, dreaming of the past. I wonder at how innocent I used to be; at how blind.

I suppose most people would say that they changed as they grew older. That, like me, they can hardly recognize their past selves. Perhaps that is a normal thing. But right now it feels unnatural. Who is that girl in the photographs, laughing, as though the world couldn't come tumbling down at any moment? Who is that person, who looks just like me, but with expression of joy I can't imagine conjuring right now? How could that same person be the one sitting here right now, with all the sadness in my heart? How could that person be me?

The past changes as I look at these photos. It is not set in stone. It is impossible to freeze a moment. I gaze down at the photographs balanced on my lap, and a tear trickles down my cheek. Silently I begin to cry. The lines on the photographs begin to blur as I look at them. Their edges becoming less distinct and almost unrecognizable. Seen through a veil of tears, they are just shapes and colors, no longer the scene of a past life. Even with clear eyes though, I cannot conjure the past. The happiness of these moments has long since faded away. Those moments existed in the before, but the memories live in the after.

There is a point in time when the world seems to shift beneath your feet. A moment when everything changes. It can sneak up on you, just a normal inconspicuous moment, starting out in the usual fashion of an ordinary day. You may sit in class thinking of nothing, just waiting for the bell to ring and release you from the boredom, or maybe you sit at a nine to five job, going nowhere and doing nothing. You joke with your friends at lunch, or maybe you sit alone. You do the same thing every day; repeating the simple refrain of an ordinary existence. Even those moments of wild excitement; sneaking into a bar, or out to see a boyfriend late at night, surrounded by fleeting shadows and under a watchful moon. Your heart beating wildly in your chest as you race silently across your yard to meet him. Maybe you decide that just once in your life you'll do something crazy. Go skinny dipping, or attend that party despite your curfew. Even this is just another part of the ordinary weave. Everyone has moments like that, and while the excitement seems so grand at the time, like this old photograph in my hand, it too fades.

Then there is the after, the moment you realize everything has changed. That the homework, and

parties, and stolen nights, don't really matter. They never did. It's a moment when the picture shatters in its gilded frame, and cracks form across that perfect moment. The camera captured it, froze it, but only in action, and changed irrevocably in every other way. I realize now, the past was never set in stone.

The moment that shattered my before and heralded my after, came when my sister died. More accurately; when I killed my sister. It feels so wrong to say those words, we were always so close. We would share everything; clothes, secrets, even a boyfriend once, though the cheater never realized the joke was on him. That was our downfall, because everything included my drugs.

I saw it as grand gesture at the time as I presented them to her. It was a new drug, stronger than anything we had ever tried before. High quality merchandise. I thought we could try it out together, take that next step as sisters. She wasn't as into it as me, I was the screw up of the family. It rather surprised me when she said yes, I hadn't expected her to. I didn't know the whole story though, that her longtime boyfriend had broken up with her, that she had just learned she was failing physics, or that on that day of all days was the worst possible day to have approached her with one of my wild ideas. There was so much I should have known.

I should have known that the drugs were tainted. That she, the innocent one, wouldn't know when to stop. I should have checked on the drug dealer, found out where they had come from. There was so much I should have known. I hadn't known though. I hadn't known that they would kill her.

*My fault. My fault. My fault.*

The words repeat, a steady refrain inside my head. Bouncing across my skull with almost audible thuds. Her death was my fault.

I remove a picture of the two of us and begin to sob. We are laughing in it. Our chins tipped up and our hair flying back as we revel in some long forgotten joke. Okanogan Lake is behind us, the sun glistening on the water. We seem far too young in that picture. Far younger and more innocent than we had been in a long time. "I didn't know" I whisper to our younger selves. My voice cracks as I whisper it again. But no matter what I say, how many apologies I make, I can't escape the idea that all this is my fault.

*My fault. My fault. My fault.*

My body is shaking with the sobs now, my words almost unrecognizable. "I'm sorry" I cry to the empty room. "I'm so sorry." But my sister isn't here to comfort me anymore. I will never hear her tell me that 'it's alright, that no matter what, we are in this together.' If she were here she would tell me that 'she choose to take the drugs, to not blame myself.' But she is gone, and I do blame myself. I was the one who was supposed to die

that night.

*My fault. My fault. My fault.*

Slowly my sobs subside; leaving me curled up on the floor and utterly drained. I look down at the photo clutched to my chest like a teddy bear. I stare at the picture, its wrinkled and tear stained. Fat drops have fallen to our faces and smudged the ink so you can no longer see our smiles.

I find it almost fitting, that this last artifact from the before has now joined the after. It matches the sadness I feel as I try to remember her. I fear that I won't be able to think of what we used to have without feeling this horrible ache in my chest. I fear I have lost you even in my memories.

Your gone. I feel this fact with every fiber of my being. My very molecules ache with the knowledge. My sister is gone and never coming back. I look at the photograph one more time before folding it up and slipping it into the back pocket of my jeans. I will keep the picture, if not the happy memory, it's all I have left now. The past is not set in stone; the future is; because no matter what comes next, I will never see you again.