

A Fine Line

Alicia Rump

Ryan's dad lay up in the ICU, having drunk himself into a coma. Miles from the hospital, down a turn-off from a country road, sat Ryan and his three younger half-siblings overlooking a shadow-drenched lake. Named Big Long Lake, though neither big, nor long, it was a familiar, bittersweet place they used to spend time at when they tried to act like a family. Before his dad and his stepmom, Sarah, got divorced. Back before they kicked him out. Before his siblings grew to hate him. Before all of this.

The hospital and their small hometown were out of sight, but the haze of light surrounding it acted as a compass north, in opposition to the moon and the dull ember of Ryan's cigarette. He watched a wisp of smoke trail up around his arm, over his shoulder, before it vanished behind him over the still water. Goosebumps lined his arms as autumn encroached on summer, and he hadn't thought of stopping for a sweatshirt in his rush here. Now, he wasn't sure why he bothered to rush at all.

A frog croaked in the distance, followed by a diluted splash, but it did nothing to break the tension chewing on them like leeches. Silence had followed them from the hospital, and it was his fault.

When the nurse shared details of his dad's condition, a wreck, broken bones, busted spleen, he'd remained composed. But it was their dad's ridiculously high .45 BAC that triggered his laughter. It was a bad habit, his go-to when tears weren't available, so it caught him off guard when his brother, Alex, punched him in response.

In the time it took to gather his bearings, security arrived and ushered them out until they could "calm down." Ryan had shoved his fists deep in his pockets, licking away blood, and happily obliged. His twin sisters, Max and Natalie, trailed after them, Nat apologizing to the thin security guard, while Max repeatedly tried to get Sarah to answer her phone. Their mom was on a five-hour time difference, living it up with her new husband in Wales.

Ryan saw this as an opportunity to shut his brother up and asked them all if they seriously believed Sarah would fly back for this. For them. It was callous. But so was Alex's comment that Ryan should fuck off back to Bloomington, that once their mom arrived their family didn't need him.

He kicked a stone and took another drag. He shouldn't have laughed.

When he'd received the curt call from Alex to inform him of the situation, he left straight from his job at Tony's automotive shop in only his jeans and a tank top to pick them up because it was Alex's car their dad had wrecked. Ryan was tired and on edge, and his shitty filter was extra shitty. It had been six years since his dad and Sarah had kicked him out. Now 24 years old, he was 115 miles from his bed, his dog, his life, and he felt the years as an anchor dragging him through the past.

His siblings were trying to kick him out again, as if it wasn't his dad up in that bed, as if this wasn't his family too. Always *them*, where he was always *him*, never included in *their* family. Even with Sarah on the other side of the Atlantic, they still wanted him gone, believed Sarah would be back simply because she had said she'd return if they needed her. It was a fucking joke, is what it was.

Now he wished he remembered to stop for more cigarettes. Their suffocating hope felt sick and cloying.

He stood away from them, looking into the night sky while they sat observing everything but each other. Natalie, now 16, watched the fireflies as they lit up around them. By Ryan's standards, she was the sanest of all of them, keeping quiet and trying to remain calm. She was holding up as well as someone could when their dad drank themselves to the brink of death, at risk of family services intervening, with a mom who may not give a shit.

Max's expression refused to communicate. Ryan kept checking, kept subtly glancing her way to interpret *something*, but besides checking her phone, and glaring, Max was tightly controlled. Proudful, in how she refused to look or speak to Ryan. She was stone.

Alex would barely look at Ryan, now only giving his sisters his attention. His anger was palpable, but he was stubborn enough to bite it down now, unwilling to react without another catalyst. Ryan hoped he felt a little guilty for his part in getting them kicked out. Ryan watched his fingers twist the hem of his shirt, again and again, his knees bouncing up and down. Restless.

How much had changed since Ryan saw them last? Was violence something Alex used to cope, or was it a one off? Was it Ryan, specifically, that drew his family to violence?

There was a time these kids looked up to him. When he was 12 and Alex was six, Alex followed him everywhere. Ryan hated it, too young to understand what a blessing it was. Then, when he was 18, and Alex was 12, and his sisters, Max and Natalie were 10, he got kicked out. They took sides, and not his. His only contacts were his dad, which was always a gamble between abuse and the spare

clarity of a sober mind, the occasional message from Alex when he needed money for something his dad flaked on, and the random, sweet “miss you” texts from Natalie that gave him hope that they still cared.

“This is fucking ridiculous.” Max mumbled from her perch on the back of the bench. She ignored the glares her siblings sent her way.

“Don’t say that,” Natalie said.

Alex sat up straighter.

“No, it is though. He’s laid up in bed with DTs, our mom is across the fucking sea, and we are here. Why are we here? What has this stupid lake ever done for us? Shouldn’t we be there waiting on news, or, I don’t know, at home showering and sleeping, considering you assholes got us kicked out,” She didn’t glare at Alex. No. Her venom was directed solely at Ryan.

“They’ll let us back in soon,” Alex said, acting like the calm, collected older brother he claimed to be. This was offset by how he looked down at his shoes rather than any of them and in how he switched from twisting his shirt to clenching his fists. Ryan kicked another stone and took another drag. Stubborn, the lot of them.

“Sure, but why are we here? Nothing good comes from this place. Let’s just go home.”

“Then we are even further away,” Ryan said.

“But at least there we have food, a shower, and can sleep in a bed until there are more updates,” Max said, and Ryan tried his best not to wilt under her glare. He was eight years older; how did her disgust have this power over him?

But she was right. Ryan knew this, but the ache in his chest, the memories of this lake when they all became a family, back when they were little and his dad was healthier, drew him here. Despite the last time. He didn’t want them to go home to the house where he didn’t have a bed.

Alex and him locked eyes and looked away quickly.

“The doctor wants us close by. Critical time period and all that,” Alex said.

“Yet they won’t let us in the room,” Max argued.

“Critical time period,” Ryan reiterated.

“Or, you’re an ass.” Max spit and sat back, crossing her arms, done with both of them according to the way she looked away and looked out over the lake.

Nat glanced at Ryan, then down at her boots, clearing her throat and speaking up.

“What if she doesn’t come home?” Nat’s voice trembled, cutting through the uneasy silence. Damn. Leave it to a fifteen-year-old to brave the heart of the problem.

Both Max and Alex’s shoulders pulled tight, while Ryan stopped fidgeting.

“She will,” Max said, though she looked away from the question.

“And if she doesn’t?” Nat pressed, sharper now.

“She’ll call when she wakes up. Don’t waste time speculating.” Alex said.

Ryan watched as Nat’s hands balled into fists. “What if she’s angry and doesn’t listen? What if she thinks he deserves this? What if all she says is ‘good riddance’?”

Alex leaned forward, his jaw tight. “Then that’s what she says. Would she be wrong?”

Ryan had to fight back another chuckle. It was ridiculous, all of it, even this. Their faith...it hung on nothing but hope. Foster care, social services, survival; the consequences if Sarah didn’t return for them. It was something they believed in because they needed her to, but it relied on faith alone. In Ryan’s opinion, none of her actions proved she’d care enough to return. She left them to their dad and that alone confirmed everything Ryan needed it to. She wasn’t shit.

They were fucked and they knew it, and still they protected her, refusing to admit it. But Natalie wasn’t abiding by this script.

“It’s been six months!” Nat’s voice rose, frustration spilling out. “What if she doesn’t come back, and she’s angry, and we’re left to pick up the pieces? What do we even say to her? What do we do?”

Max stood abruptly, pacing. “We tell her she’s right! It’s all messed up. But if he survives, then we’re fine, right? She doesn’t have to come back.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Nat leaned closer, her voice shaking. “It’s fucked up either way-”

“Don’t cuss,” Alex snapped, his tone sharp.

“—and if he doesn’t survive, will she come back? Please, Alex. Will she?”

“He’ll survive,” Alex said.

Nat stared at him, glanced at Ryan, then Max, before throwing her hands up and yelling, “there’s no proof of that!”

Ryan flinched. The idea that his dad, the only parent he had left, could die tonight, or tomorrow... despite his father’s fault, the idea was too heavy for him to bear. He sank to the ground to hug his knees, pulling in an empty drag of his cigarette to focus on something else, and tried to center himself here in the present. Not the future without his dad in it, and not the past where memories threatened to drown him.

He was vaguely aware of his siblings glancing at him, knowing that they, like him, were thinking of *his* mother. His loss, something they’d always walked around, unwilling to recognize. Now that death was on them as well, he could feel it like one great beating heart counting its last seconds.

Ryan’s mom died in an instant. A moment, a heart attack, when she was too young for anyone to have seen it coming. One moment, they were cooking together in the kitchen. The next? She dropped her freshly baked tray of those Halloween stamped pumpkin cookies and collapsed, unresponsive, while he sat with her for hours trying to get her to wake, sat with her until his dad came home and called for an ambulance, knowing it was too late. He knew death, intimately, even if he was only 5 at the time. He’d never rid himself of that anxiety, of that loss. They knew this, but this was their first time properly facing the weight of death. He couldn’t validate their fears, couldn’t put words to the pain and dread they’d never bothered to sympathize with.

“He might not,” he said, unsure if he was being vindictive or honest. “He may die. Expect the worst, be fucking grateful if he survives.”

They stared at him.

“Expect the worst. He dies—” He had to swallow. “And Sarah doesn’t come home. Anything more than that is a blessing.”

Alex shot up from his perch. “Shut the fuck up. You don’t get to say shit like that!”

Ryan stood, taking one last drag of his cigarette before flicking it aside and

standing to face Alex.

“Say shit like what? The truth?”

“You’re so...so callous! You act all high and mighty and righteous, but you don’t give two shits if she comes home or not so don’t act like you do!”

“Of course I care, you fuck. You think I don’t want her to, for your sake? You think I want to be here right now? We have no control over her or what happens to Dad. We are all stuck in this, together!”

Alex lunged forward and shoved him in lieu of an answer. So, he shoved him back. Alex stumbled and Max caught him, moving to get in Ryan’s face.

“I know he’s your dad too, but you’ve been gone for years, and you can’t act like you care nearly as much as we do since it isn’t your ass on the line.”

“He’s still my dad!” Ryan shouted, grateful for their isolation. “His BAC was .45. Most people don’t survive that shit, I’m just being realistic! I know I’m older. I know I’ve been gone, but that doesn’t mean shit! It’s simply more ammo for you—” He pushed her back by her shoulder into Alex, who was backing up into Natalie. “To use against me!”

“You’re always satisfied when they prove you right. This is just another example,” Alex said.

Ryan stared at Alex, and he couldn’t help the hysterical laughter that bubbled up and spilled over. He wanted to light another cigarette, but he was out, so he let his laughter run free until tears started leaking from his eyes, and he doubled over.

“You think I’m happy being right? You think, what, that I’m happy that she’s gone? That we are in this situation? Just because it validates that yes, he’s a drunk and yes, I think she’s neglectful? You think I’m happy about that shit?” He laughed again, wiping his eyes.

“Aren’t you? Won’t it make you happy if she can’t come home? You laughed! He’s dying and you laughed! You make fun of us for hoping she’ll come home, yet you’re laughing now! Why wouldn’t it make you happy if we are left to fend for ourselves like you were? Won’t you feel victorious?”

Ryan stared at Alex, stared as Alex’s words seemed to register in his head once spoken out loud. Alex took another step back as Natalie grabbed his elbow, biting her lip. Max shook her head looking guilty.

“Think about what you’ve just said. Do you hear yourself?” Ryan asked.

Like you were. They knew. They fucking knew that he was thrown aside. Knew he battled his dad’s anger and stood up to it. Knew their fights centered on his mom, both weaponizing her memory, his dad using it as a knife of disappointment, as another excuse to drink, and Ryan as condemnation against his father’s actions. They knew that Sarah disapproved of him, always had, and treated him as the scapegoat for her marriage woes. Blamed him, as a kid, for not telling her about his dad’s drinking problem that hadn’t existed prior to his mom’s death. They fucking knew, and still they blamed him. Still, they looked at him, not as an older brother, but as a vindictive adversary.

He remembered how he used to get in trouble every Mother’s Day because he didn’t want to celebrate Sarah when he couldn’t even get out of bed, memories of hugging cooling flesh and vacant, unstarving eyes swimming before his. How did they remember that? Were they remembering cursing him for picking them up when his dad was drunk, because he wasn’t their parent? He remembers their disappointment and feeling gutted by it. Did they think that made him proud? Were they thinking of the screaming match he had with Sarah when she turned a blind eye to his dad sideswiping a parked car when Max and Natalie were still in car seats? Did they think he was wrong for giving a shit?

Were they remembering the last time they were at this lake, the day he was kicked out, when Ryan defended Alex. It was their father’s birthday, and he wanted to go fishing; wouldn’t take no for an answer. The entire morning was shit, their dad slurring, slipping on mossy stones, blaming them for every fish he didn’t catch. All were unwilling to vocalize what they knew was true and their dad’s anger rose in the perceived judgement his drunk ass rightfully assumed. Ryan had his back turned to his dad, trying to secure the bait to Alex’s line before his dad noticed it was the third time he’d lost it. Alex’s hands were shaking and Ryan tried to calm him, but they could hear their dad’s tone growing impatient. When his dad decided they weren’t moving fast enough, when he moved into their space after throwing his net to the side, his purple face and glossy eyes let them know the situation was out of their hands. The fishing pole slipped through Alex’s trembling fingers and Ryan stood between him and their dad. He braced, thankful for Alex’s retreating footsteps when his dad threw his weight into a punch, a blow to the jaw. He remembers Nat yelling, and someone crying. Did they remember him getting up and fighting for the keys his dad stole as he yelled at the kids to get back in the car? What did they think of Ryan wrestling with his dad to keep him from the wheel, now that his siblings were scared and obedient in the backseat?

Ryan looked at all of them, each of them unable to look away as if they were all caught 6 years in the past with him.

Did they remember how long it took for him to get home? He never knew what occurred in the time it took him to walk, only that he nearly cried in relief when he saw the truck parked safely in the driveway. He hadn't noticed Sarah, not until she stopped him from walking inside to tell him his dad wanted him gone, and he had 20 minutes to collect his shit and get lost. Alex was 13 at the time, Ryan 18 about to be 19, and he hadn't been home since Alex asked him why the fuck he bothered, that he was wrong to agitate their dad. Blamed him.

"I've never felt victorious."

Alex had the nerve to scoff, and Max leaned to pull Alex towards the truck muttering "Let's just go," but Alex shakes her off.

"You left too, and you act like you are better than them. You've never loved mom, and you've always fought with dad. You've never cared enough to act like we are your siblings, always quick to run away and play the 'not my mom, not my family' card. You got to fuck off and leave us behind just like you accuse her of doing. What makes you so much better than either of them? Huh?" Alex yelled the last word.

"I was 18! I was also kicked out, if you don't recall, I wasn't allowed to stay! None of you fought that decision, or called to say they were wrong, or to let me know you wanted me around! No, what you said was that it served me right! Jesus, the fucking standards you all give me vs. the ones you give our parents is ridiculous, I can never be on the right side of anything!" He reached for another cigarette, remembered he was out, and cussed into the night, kicking another stone towards the lake. He couldn't see where it went, but he heard the dull splash as it sank beneath the water. His hands were shaking. "What would you have me do, if not fight with dad? Give him every cent he tries to wring me for, be it your car, Max's lunch, Natalie's band gear? Did y'all ever see that money? Did you want me to ignore everything and act like we were a perfectly happy family? Would you have me act like I think it's fucking mint that Sarah up and left? When my own mom died? You think I wouldn't have an issue with her abandoning you guys? Should I act nice, and take your shit, his shit, her shit, and smile? Would that be enough?" His chest was heaving.

"You all are my siblings too, but you've all acted like I'm a spare, like I'm not real or like I don't get to have a fucking say!" It was all coming out now. "I can't help that I'm older, that I'm not your mom's kid, that dad drinks, yet you all blame me for this! You guys all got to have each other but somewhere along the line you guys cut me out. I didn't leave you, I didn't want to, wouldn't, but you pushed me out!"

"Yes, yes you would. You did!" Alex wiped his nose.

“Last time I tried to come home it was you who told me to get lost. Last time I called dad he told me to fuck off. Last time I tried to get Max a birthday present she said not to bother because I didn’t get it in the fucking color she wanted, fuck, Natalie is the only one who has ever been even a little kind to me, but even you don’t bother if Alex and Max are around.” Natalie was crying now too. He focused on Alex.

“We were kids! You were older, and we were just kids!” Alex said.

“I was too!” Ryan yelled. Fuck, he still felt like a kid, and right now, he felt very, very young. “I was your age, Alex.”

Silence broken only by crickets, by their heavy breathing, rang loudly.

“What am I to do, huh? Where and what would you have me do?” His body was trembling now.

“You could come back?” Natalie said. Ryan stared at her as Alex gestured for her to shut up, and Max stepped aside, hugging her body. He thought of his job, of his dog. He thought of them and the phone call they were waiting on.

“If you’ll have me, I will. If you need me, I will be here.” He said, voice breathless. He wouldn’t be his dad. He wouldn’t be Sarah. Not if he had a choice. He thought of his mom and her pumpkin cookies. The last time he felt like he belonged somewhere. He ached for it, for their acceptance, for a chance to be there, and for his mom to relax in her grave knowing someone cared about him. For them to fucking hug him like they wanted him there or something.

“We don’t need you,” Alex said.

Natalie reached for his arm, but he yanked it away, turning his back on them. Max, still hugging her body, refused to look up from the ground.

Natalie looked at Ryan, her big eyes lost and he stared back feeling equally helpless.

Ryan wrapped his arms around his turning stomach, matching Max’s pose. He knew the words sitting on the back of his tongue were true, but they felt toxic, like speaking them out loud would be a sure way to get poisoned. Maybe they didn’t need him. But their dad was...dying. Despite how they knew he’d gotten bad, that he was rarely sober, home, and reliable, despite how much Ryan hated him...he loved him. Loved the person he remembered, before alcohol became him. He was his dad, his last parent, he couldn’t be an orphan at 24. Didn’t know how he’d continue with all of these issues between them unresolved and tan-

gled. His breaths grew tight, a wheeze, and he clenched his fists trying to breathe around the band squeezing his lungs. It wasn't that they needed him. He needed them.

"For fucks sake," Natalie said, ignoring Max telling her not to cuss. "Alex, get over yourself already. Fuck, Ryan. We feel guilty you dumbass."

"Natalie!" Alex hissed.

"Why are you acting like this?" Natalie looked at both Alex and Max who were staring at her. "Why are you acting like we haven't talked about it? As if we all don't feel like shit reciting the same crap over and over again? You remember that night, I know you do. We know he defended us, we know they kicked him out, we know dad's an ass, and we know mom left, and no I don't care if she's happier over there, it's still true. Why are we still acting like he's the bad guy? I'm sick of it. I'm SICK of having no one to rely on and the one person I want to talk to I feel like I'm betraying the two of you if I do, though I know you feel the same!"

"Nat."

"Don't Nat me, Max. Just be fucking honest."

The band around Ryan's lungs loosened, his eyes wide as he watched Alex's lips quirk into a little smile as he stared at their sister.

"Can you stop cussing? Please? It's weird when you do it." Alex said. The air around them lost 20 lbs.

"Oh, fuck off." Nat said, though her lips quirked with a matching smile.

Alex glanced at Max before letting out a huff and collapsing back on the bench, his body language defeated. He spoke. "That night, dad's birthday. I didn't mean to blame you for it. I meant to, like, apologize. Beg for you to forgive me for fucking up. But then I saw your face when you came upstairs. Saw the bruise. Your panic. It scared the fuck out of me. I heard dad's decision to kick you out. I was so angry, but I, like how could I go up against the both of them when it turned out that way for you? Before I knew it, I was angry with you for getting in the way, for calling out the problem, for not letting shit go and taking that stupid hit that wasn't meant for you. Still am, I guess." He grew quiet. "Know it ain't your fault though." Alex leaned over his knees, his hands gripping his hair. "This is all so fucked."

"After you left, it got worse." Max said. "Then mom left. It felt like we could

hear you mocking us from afar, laughing at us for turning our backs on you and choosing them. And if you were the good guy, that meant we were stuck with the bad guys.” Max looked up from the ground to stare at Alex. “We weren’t stupid, I’m not saying that. Just...every time you tried to be there, it proved how much we weren’t getting from dad. Every time you tried to help meant that you thought we needed help, and I couldn’t stand that either. Look at what it got you! It reminded us of that night, and how we let you down. Not to mention, at least for me...you’ve got to hate us at this point.” She looked away as her voice quivered.

Ryan gaped at them. That’s... “No. No, I’ve never hated you guys. Our parents, sure...but never you guys.”

Max sniffed, then ducked into her shirt to wipe away the tears that were falling at an increasingly quick pace. He wanted to reach out to her, felt it in his bones, but their past, muscle memory, kept him back.

“I told you guys he wouldn’t hate us.” Nat quipped. She flashed Ryan with an insecure smile. Alex just put his head in his hands.

“I don’t get how you don’t.” Alex said.

Ryan understood, suddenly, and felt his world shift to the left. It wasn’t *him*, and it wasn’t *them*; he was part of their family. Even if Ryan chose not to include Sarah. They were siblings, grew up in the same household, were equally affected. It was pride, and fear. This kid sitting with his shoulders hunched, as if their parents’ decisions were his to bear, blamed himself for the shit Ryan went through. Just as Ryan blamed himself for never being enough.

“It wasn’t your fault. That day. I’d do it again in a heartbeat. You were just trying to fish.”

Alex let out a self-deprecating laugh. “If I had just done it like you showed me-“

“It wasn’t your fault dude. Dad blew his top. Nothing you could’ve done deserved that reaction from him. You never needed to apologize.”

“I should’ve called.”

“It would’ve been appreciated.”

A ring cut through their eye contact, through the silence. They all looked at Max’s phone. The word mom flashed from the screen. In the panicked looks they all shot each other, Ryan felt his decision cement itself.

He nodded at her, braving their past to step closer. “Hope for the best, right? Regardless,” he looked at them all, “No one’s kicking me out. Got that? I’m not going anywhere.”

Natalie let out a wet chuckle and slid under Max’s arm. Her hand shook as she held up the phone. Alex and Ryan looked at each other as Max swiped to answer the phone.

“Hello?” Sarah’s tired voice cracked through the speaker.

“Mom,” Max went to speak but it was as if her throat collapsed in on itself, a sob swallowing the rest of her words.

Natalie ducked into Max’s shoulder and Alex stared at the sky, blinking away tears.

Max waved her phone for someone else to take over.

Ryan grit his teeth, but took a step forward. No one stopped him.

“Hey, Sarah. It’s Ryan.”

I’ll always be there for you if you need it, Sarah had promised them when she left. *Well,* he thought. *Time to prove it.*