

**Alive Like Stone**



*Sarah Pachulicz*

Alive

Like

**STONE**

*Sometimes, Standing Still Is the Fastest Way to  
Get to Who You Truly Are*

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## Mysterious Envelope

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The pine cones on her driveway crunched beneath her tires as she pulled the car into the garage. Another thing she should be doing – sweeping the front of the house, at least just enough so that the contrast to the neighboring houses with their immaculately kept front yards and sterile driveways wouldn't be quite as stark. Yet at the moment, she couldn't even fathom adding one more thing to her to-do list. She felt utterly exhausted from another endless day at work. Carefully she peeked out of her car, looked down the street and to the neighboring houses. Nobody in sight. Good. It wasn't exactly that she disliked people or was afraid of them... sometimes she simply did not want to see or talk to anyone, and especially not when she was tired or in a rush. But the coast seemed to be clear, so she walked quickly to the front door, only stopping briefly to check her mailbox. Wait. What was that? Surprised, she took a closer look. A large, thick, brown padded envelope was waiting for her. She furrowed her brows. She wasn't expecting anything, so where would a thick, sort of lumpy envelope come from? She scanned it for a sender's address, but could not find one. Only her name, Kate Parker, and address.

She became aware that she was still standing in front of the mailbox, holding the strange envelope. Quickly she walked into the house, hung her coat and bag, and then took the envelope into the kitchen to take a closer look.

The address label was hand-written in a beautiful, flowing script, which somehow reminded Kate of the kind of writing she had seen in antique books. There

were no other markings on the envelope to indicate its origin. Briefly, she wondered whether it would be safe to open - after all, weren't there reports of attacks on random strangers on the news every day? What if this was a letter bomb? It did have one big lump in the center and felt otherwise empty. But it was also very light, which did not seem to indicate metal of any kind inside. Something told her that his envelope was not meant to be dangerous. Well, at least not in the conventional sense of "dangerous".

She decided to open it. Carefully she undid the clasps and opened the flap. Rather than stick her hand inside, she picked it up by the bottom corners and shook it, to let whatever was inside fall out.

With a soft thud, something small and yellow landed on the kitchen table. Kate could have sworn she had heard an "ouch", but dismissed that thought immediately.

The envelope was now empty. Before her on the table sat a small yellow rubber ducky. What in the world...? she thought. She was puzzled. Why would anyone send her a rubber ducky? She checked the envelope again. No card, no letter, no explanation. Whoever it was must have a very strange sense of humor. Carefully she picked up the rubber ducky and turned it over, trying to see if it had any marks on it that might explain why it was here.

"When you're done examining my bottom, would you kindly set me back down gently?" said a slightly squeaky and rather indignant voice. Startled, Kate set the rubber ducky back down, albeit none too gently. "Ouch", came again. "Seriously, are you always that rude to visitors?"

Kate was too perplexed to answer. She looked around the room as if she was expecting one of her friends to

pop out of hiding, yell “surprise” and reveal a prank. But nothing happened. She was alone, except for a small yellow rubber ducky on the table in front of her. A rubber ducky who had just talked to her.

She took a deep breath. OK now, she thought, I’ve probably been working too much, I’ve had a long day and I have not slept well. Maybe I am so fatigued I’m starting to see things. She pinched herself. No change of scenery. The rubber ducky blinked her eyes. Great, thought Kate, I’m going crazy.

“No, you’re not”, said the voice again, this time a little more gently. “Stop acting all confused. I know you’ve talked to inanimate objects before, it’s just that so far, they’ve not talked back. Guess what, now you have found one that does. It was only a matter of time, I don’t see why you are so out of sorts about it. You should be excited!”

Kate stood still and stared. She was not afraid - after all, it would be ridiculous to be afraid of a pint-sized yellow rubber ducky - but now her sense of curiosity awakened. How could the rubber ducky know about her talking to... things? But it was true. When she was little, she had talked to her dolls and believed them to be real. Well-meaning adults had called her a dreamer and told her that she was blessed with a lively imagination, and had explained to her that she would understand one day that dolls are not “real”. She had pretended to believe them. That had been more than thirty-five years ago, and she had long since left the dolls behind in favor of a job and adult responsibilities. But even now, as she approached forty, she sometimes could not shake the feeling that a particular tree or rock or other random item was not quite as inanimate and soulless as the world would have her believe. And sometimes she talked to

them, as if talking to herself. Just comments here and there, not really ever expecting an answer.

She sat down on the kitchen chair and took a deep breath. “OK, so assuming that I am not going crazy, and that it is perfectly normal to be talking to a rubber ducky and actually get a response... then who sent you? Why are you here?”

Rubber Ducky smiled mysteriously. “That, I am afraid”, she said, “I cannot tell you. You wouldn’t believe me anyway. But what I can say is this: I know that you feel stuck right now. You are exhausted and trapped, and you wonder what the point of it is. But somewhere very deep inside of you there is a tiny spark - a spark that wants to come out and find the life that you are meant to live. Not this crap that you are doing now because that is what you are supposed to be doing. Let’s just say that spark has called me.”

Kate was quiet. Then slowly a hint of a smile began to play on her usually tightened lips. And for the very first time in years, she thought that she could indeed sense that little spark of hope again.

Rubber Ducky’s words had struck a chord. Yes, she was unhappy. Although that word did not fully capture the essence of how she really felt. She was not unhappy all the time, it was just that there was a nagging feeling of emptiness, of “is this really all there is to life?” From the outside, she seemed to have a good life: a well-paying job, a leadership position, her colleagues and superiors respected her. She had a healthy body, a few select good friends. She was independent, could go wherever she wanted, whenever she wanted. And yet... she felt numb somehow; trapped in the job she did not really enjoy, in a life that did not seem hers. Each day

she went through the motions of living, but she did not feel alive.

With that thought, she shook herself a little as if coming out of a dream. Crazy or not, but this rubber ducky seemed to have come into her life for a reason.

## Decisions and Preparations

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In the days following Rubber Ducky's arrival, nothing particularly interesting or noteworthy seemed to happen. Kate continued her routine of going to work in the morning, and coming home in the evening too exhausted for anything but fixing some food and then falling into bed; only to repeat the cycle the next day. Rubber Ducky had found a favorite spot in the kitchen by the sink. From that elevated position, she sometimes voiced opinions or comments on Kate's doings. At first, this had irritated her. Soon, however, she found that she was getting used to and even enjoyed the occasional conversation with Rubber Ducky.

A few weeks after Rubber Ducky's arrival Kate found herself suddenly obsessed with a song she had recently heard: *Loch Lomond*, sung by Peter Hollens. It was originally a Scottish folk song, which he had rearranged and recorded as a multi-track a-capella version. Kate listened to it over and over, sometimes sitting by the light of one candle in the living room, while the wintery gray dusk outside turned into complete darkness. When the candle went out, she often remained in the dark. Something about that haunting melody stirred a longing deep inside her soul. Images of a lake and mountains seemed to form right before her eyes.

"Why don't you go there?" Rubber ducky asked. "I mean, it is a real place, and the song seems to have touched you."

"Don't be absurd", Kate replied. "Just because I happen to like a song does not mean I need to travel to Scotland." But even while she was saying these words,

she had felt her heart flutter a little bit. Take a vacation to Scotland? Actually... why not? It wouldn't be only because of the song, of course - that would be silly - but Scotland was supposed to have some gorgeous scenery and to be rich history. And she had not taken a vacation in many years.

With a shrug, she dismissed the idea again. Her time off was usually spent catching up with her friends or tending to the large house and garden; she simply had no time for travel.

And yet, ever since that moment, Kate felt as if something had woken up inside her that would not go back to sleep. "Go to Scotland, go to Scotland..." it whispered, very quietly.

One cold evening at the end of January she sat in her favorite chair and looked at her calendar. She had wanted to make sure she had everything planned well for upcoming events. Travel had not been on her mind at all, but somehow, she found herself looking for stretches of two or three weeks when she might be able to take time off. Stop being silly, she told herself. But her fingers kept scrolling through the calendar almost on their own. To her surprise, there was a two-and-a-half-week window with no must-attend events or urgent appointments, and it was coming up in only three weeks.

"No... I could not." She murmured, as if trying to convince herself.

"Just for the sake of looking, see what you can find", said Rubber Ducky, smiling. Kate nodded absentmindedly.

If she were to go, she would want to explore the country on her own schedule, no guided tours. However, she also wasn't too keen on renting a car with the steering wheel and gear shift on the other side - driving

on the left was going to be difficult enough. That meant she would have to take her own car and go by ferry. A quick internet search revealed that there was indeed ferry transfer available for the dates she would be able to go; and she had also found one Airbnb near Loch Lomond, one near Inverness, and a regular B&B near Edinburgh that sounded like a very interesting place.

“Well... now that I’ve put that much time and effort into finding all these things, it would be a shame to waste it, right?” she said to Rubber Ducky.

“Yep”, the answer was quick, and Kate thought she detected a slightly smug note in Rubber Ducky’s voice.

Still feeling slightly foolish, but also a little excited, Kate confirmed the arrangements.

The next three weeks flew by. There was paperwork to be finished, luggage to be sorted and organized, clothing to be laundered and packed. Kate had purposefully left the itinerary somewhat blank. She had booked five-night stays at the first two places, and three nights at the last one. The first one was on Loch Lomond, because that had been what had called her in the first place. The second was up north in Inverness, because she wanted to see and feel the Highlands. The third place she had booked because the description on the internet had intrigued her: a ‘place to just be and nourish the soul’. Apart from that she had made no other plans or bookings for sightseeing, because she wanted the freedom to decide what to do when she got there.

The last evening before departure finally arrived. Everything was packed and prepared, except for the snacks for the road which she would fix in the morning. Rubber Ducky had seemed to regard it as a given that she

would come with. Since Kate had no real reason to object, they had come to an understanding that yes, Rubber Ducky could come along, provided she would keep quiet when other people were around.

## Setting Out

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The cold February rain streamed across the windshield of her car in snaking rivers. The windy gusts and the spray from the cars in front of her had made the drive extremely unpleasant, and the past five hours had been exhausting.

When she finally arrived at the ferry port in Amsterdam, Kate was relieved. She found a spot in the line of cars waiting to go through check-in and customs.

Several minutes passed. Then a half hour, then an hour. Nothing moved. They were still waiting in the check-in line, and her mood matched the weather outside.

Just a few hours earlier, while stacking her suitcase and gear into the car, she had felt the rush of excitement at the beginning of an adventure. She had hummed the traveling song that Frodo had sung when he had left the Shire, and had even gently stroked the roof of her beloved car. “We are going on an adventure, you and I”, she had said. “And me, too!” Rubber Ducky had added from her spot on the dashboard.

Now all of that seemed years ago; the excitement had been washed into the ground by the unceasing cold rain. Rubber Ducky had been sitting quietly and patiently on the dashboard, but even for her this was beginning to be tedious. Now she sighed. “How much longer do we have to wait? This line is not moving at all! I’m so bored...”

“I don't know”, Kate muttered. Her neck was stiff and her muscles were beginning to cramp from the long hours in the driver's seat. And if she didn't get some decent coffee soon, that slight pucker behind her eyes would turn into a nasty headache.

A sudden movement inside the car in front of her caught her eye. She squinted through the rainy windshield. “Rubber Ducky”, she said, “are they... I mean... are they doing what I think they are doing?”

The windows of the Mini Cooper in front of her were beginning to steam up; only the outline of two heads and bodies moving very close together was barely visible.

Jeez, she thought. Guess that is one way to pass the time... but seriously? Right here? Her mood deteriorated further. Suddenly she felt overwhelmed by the sheer size of the ferry right next to her, by the forbidding windy weather, by the lines of cars full of strangers, by the unknown country ahead of her, and by the almost palpable solitude inside her car. What on earth had she gotten herself into?

“Hey”, came a small voice from the dashboard. “You're not alone, remember?”

“You're right.” She took a deep breath and put the car in gear. The line of cars in front of her had started to move. They were finally being loaded onto the ferry.

Here we go..., she thought.

## Across the Sea

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When the car had been secured deep inside the belly of the ferry, Kate made her way to the cabin. She had booked the cheapest kind possible, which was a bed in a two-person cabin. Back at home, sitting comfortably at her desk, the upgrade to a more spacious single cabin simply had not seemed worth the steep price increase. Now she deeply regretted her choice. Surveying the tiny cabin, she noted that the two beds barely had enough space between them to let one person walk through.

Great, she muttered. I'll be sleeping practically right next to a total stranger. Let's have some medium-sized waves that make the ship take a bit of a roll, and there'll be two of us to one bed. Oh well, can't be helped now.

She began to settle in, which really only meant setting her backpack on the bed and the toiletries onto the shelf in the minuscule bathroom. Then she sat down on the bed and listened to the sounds in the hallway outside her cabin. With each set of footsteps, she prayed for it to please go find a different door.

Time passed and no other person showed up. It was close to departure time, and Kate began to hope that she might have finally caught a bit of luck. She had noted on her way through the ship that it was not fully booked, so maybe there was no one else booked into the cabin with her.

From her small, round window she could see the crew begin preparations for sailing. "Come on, Rubber Ducky", she said. "I desperately need some coffee, and then let's watch from the observation deck when we take off."

Coffee in hand and collar turned up against the blasts of wind, she stood on the outside deck directly above the prow of the ferry. A deafening horn blast sounded and almost startled her into dropping her coffee. Powerful engines began to rumble from somewhere deep below. Crew members were busy pulling in the ropes that held the ferry to the dock. Hardly perceptible at first, the buildings on the shore began to move. The ship was pulling away from the dock and into the canal that led to the open sea.

Kate looked around, expecting almost everyone aboard to be on deck and watch. To her surprise, out of the hundreds of people on the ship, she was the only one out there. Every once in a while, a family or a couple came out, took the obligatory picture, and quickly disappeared again through the heavy steel doors. Probably to sit in the lounge and sip their beer or go to the movies, Kate thought.

The ferry began to roll gently as the waters turned rougher the closer they got to the open sea. The wind was pulling at her hair and howling past with a strength that brought tears to her eyes. And yet, as she stood there with blurred vision and no other sound in her ears but the roar of the wind, it felt as if a heavy cloak that she did not know she had been wearing was slipping off her shoulders. A heavy weight was being lifted from her, slid down and melted into the sea. For the first time in she did not remember how long, she began to feel something akin to freedom.

Before her, the horizon lay hidden in gray mist. Only water, sky, and clouds. Behind her, the land was receding further and further into the distance. She remembered stories of the pilgrims she had read long ago.

Those brave souls who had left their homes hundreds of years ago. Who had headed into the great unknown, likely never to return, to go to the new world. What must it have been like, back then, she mused, to board a ship to take you far behind the horizon? To take a journey without knowing where it will take you, or whether you will even survive it. And the only thing you have is the hope of a new and better beginning.

She felt a kinship to those pilgrims. For her, too, this felt like a new beginning.

The sense of adventure returned. She smiled and breathed deeply the salty, tangy air.

Suddenly she sensed that the feeling of adventure had shifted and had been replaced by a different feeling. It was familiar, yet she had difficulty identifying it at first. With a start, she realized that 'going out on an adventure' had disappeared to make way for 'coming home'. Wait, what? But there was no mistaking it. She felt as if she was going home.

"Well, that's just a tad crazy, don't you think?" she said quietly to Rubber Ducky, who was peeking out of her pocket. "Who knows?" Rubber Ducky replied. "Just go with it. After all, you came here to feel, didn't you? Not to be logical. So stop overthinking already, I thought you wanted to leave that behind as well."

"Good point", Kate conceded. "I don't need to analyze and question everything... such an exhausting habit. And look, the waves are getting a lot bigger. Maybe I am just getting seasick."

Rubber Ducky just looked at her. They both knew that seasickness had nothing to do with it. Silently they went back inside to have dinner and settle in for the night.