

THE QUARRY

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The Problem with Lilly

Jo took Lilly's hand and pulled her across the dance floor. The bodies of dancers, clasped in jeans and low cut tees, mini-skirts and singlets, grinded and bound together like tangled earphones. The music pumped through the post-factory room, synthesised voices creeping at the tail-ends of the bass-line. Just before her, she could see Jo's butt sway from side to side. Lilly pushed her hands deeper into her pockets and her head further down. When they reached a corner between the photo-booth and bar Jo yelled something familiar along the lines of 'stop looking weird!'

'I'm not sure what you're asking me to do?!' Lilly shouted into her little sister's ear. Jo rolled her eyes, adjusting her bra until her boobs sat like two fleshy melons on the brim of her shirt. Lilly looked down at her chest, hers remained a safe secret under a loose shirt.

She turned to the bar, waving an arm at the bartender. But the steroid addled muscle of a man just laughed nonchalantly with the blondes at the other end. Lilly sighed, the liquor was just a hand-reach away, just beyond the luminescent, purple tip jars.

The Professor had introduced her to the corny husk of whiskey around the start of semester.

‘What is this?’ she had asked, sliding her fingers along the old-school glass bottle sitting on his cabinet, careful not to give away her shaking hands. Sinatra called gently from the record player beside it, and the musk of old books hung in the air. She could feel the Professor’s eyes resting on her butt, clasped tightly by Jo’s excruciatingly tight hipsters (they were about as wild as she dared). She turned back. ‘Will I like it?’

‘Probably not, it’s what you would call a ‘man’s drink.’’ His thin lips arched upwards at the edges. He looked so disarmed in his loose, red dressing gown.

‘Well, that makes me want to try it all the more,’ she said, drawing on the novelty of her youthful enthusiasm. She uncorked the bulbous lid and poured two whiskeys, straight up.

He took a step closer, and his hands crept playfully around her waist. To her surprise, her body didn’t tense up at all.

Jo flicked her arm, her bronze bracelets glistening under the strobe lights. Within moments the bartender appeared, already equipped with vodka and raspberry cordial. Jo smiled at the him cruelly then looked back to her sister with equally cutting eyes. ‘What the fuck are you wearing? Is that Oscar the Grouch on your shirt?!’

‘You’re right, it would suit you better,’ Lilly said, as she watched the lemonade wave dissect and dilute the red syrup.

‘You know what your problem is?’ Jo turned her back to the bar tender, smiling cheekily as she did so. ‘You don’t put yourself out there enough.’

Lilly skulled her cheap house bourbon and drew closer. Girls with plastic breasts appeared on stage and squirted glow-in-the-dark body paint over a begging crowd. Women began to kiss as globs of paint dribbled between their tongues. Men roared. Lilly looked back to her sister, who was smiling and clapping. Say what you will about Jo, Lilly thought, but she actually understands this world.

‘What do you propose?’ Lilly asked.

‘This!’ and with that, Jo grabbed Lilly’s hand and pulled her back into the crowd.

The Professor took Lilly by the waist and spun her through the study, his dressing gown flailing behind him like a red flame. Sinatra’s *Cheek to Cheek* beat out of the player and her heart rang in her ears.

‘Have you started your essay?’ he cracked a mocking smile.

‘No, but I’m enjoying *Desire under the Elms*,’ Lilly said feebly, not quite knowing how else to respond.

‘Yes, I think O’Neil does well to dramatise the chaos of desire.’ The Professor swung her faster as the beat of the song took flight.

‘You liken desire to chaos?’ Lilly asked. Her body began to relax a little in his arms. She focussed on his words. After the first lecture, *Brecht and Marxism*, his passion and his knowledge had made her feel giddy. He understood more about the world than she could even imagine.

‘Yes, it’s irrational, it’s uncontrollable. You know what our problem is? We keep making plans, thinking, thinking, thinking. But, at the end of the day, it’s our animal instinct and our gut feeling that pushes us to action.’ The brass filtered through the speakers. Sinatra sang with a cock-eyed smile. The Professor’s hands dropped to Lilly’s butt. ‘We need to just let go.’

‘So, what do you propose we do then?’ Lilly asked.

‘This,’ he said and kissed her.

Jo brought Lilly to the centre of the floor. Bodies writhed around her, artificially glowing under the light and paint. Jo threw her arms up in the air, closed her eyes and surrendered her hips to the bass line. As Lilly stood stiffly at her side, she watched Jo’s surly face open up, her glossed lips smiling so broadly they seemed to grow larger than anything else in the room.

Lilly smiled, sadly. She couldn’t remember the last time she felt nearly as happy as Jo looked, possibly in childhood? Oh, she thought, that brief window of existence before neurosis and self-loathing took its perpetual hold.

Jo noticed Lilly and stopped, ‘come on, Lil!’

Lilly gulped back breath, what was there to lose? She threw her arms out in front of her as Jo was doing, she swung her head from side to side. But no matter how much she tried to submit to the primal rhythm of the music, her body remained awkwardly her own.

‘Do you smoke?’ the Professor smiled as he pulled away and produced a cigarette case from the pocket of his dressing gown. Its silver varnish matched the few grey hairs that embellished the brown tresses around his face.

‘Of course.’ Lilly said, surprised by the lie. He produced a thin cigar, lit it and drew closer to her. Rings of smoke curled between them, and she took the cigar from his hands.

She dragged on it sharply, as he had done, and felt the smoke scratching at her throat, curdling in her lungs. Then, a sudden clenching within her stomach and a surge as its contents

rushed to her mouth. The blue of the Professor's eyes widened as Lilly swallowed back the burning liquid and smiled.

'Not bad.' She nodded, as her head swam.

As the strobe lights flickered down to a deep red and white, a few guys circled Jo and Lilly. Lilly could only catch glimpses of their eyes— wide and alight. One of them stepped between them and wrapped his arms around Jo's waist. Lilly took a couple of steps back, finding a foreign body grinding against her and foreign hands holding her hips, moving them from side to side.

Jo smiled and nodded at her. The stranger's wet lips smacked at Lilly's ears, his groin crushed her butt. She watched Jo's body loosen beneath her guy's hands, her lips widening once more. Lilly dropped her shoulders a little, and willed herself to move. But, as the bass grew louder, the synthesised voices cried for relief and the house bourbon churned inside her gut.

'I want this one!' the stranger called to his friend and his hands rode up her waist, closer to her breasts and neck. His tobacco stink closed in on her.

She had to get out.

The Professor's tongue tangled with hers. His hot hands rode up and down her back, crumpling her tee and burning her skin. With some difficulty, his right hand tunnelled into her pants as *Strangers in the Night* rose from the record player, its slow, sensuous rhythm thumping through the floorboards. The waistband of the jeans tightened around her already upset stomach.

... Something in your smile was so inviting, something in my heart told me I must have you ...

The Professor hummed along as his hand rounded beneath her buttocks, his index finger creeping closer to her most well-kept secret. As his hand twisted, the waist band stabbed into her flesh, and she choked on air and bile.

'Please,' she murmured, pulling his arm out. 'I have to get my bus.'

Lilly ran past the bar and photo-booth to find a beaming EXIT sign. Through there, she found a concrete stairwell in which to collapse. The music of the club drowned out behind her as the door slid itself to closing. 'What is wrong with me, what is wrong with me,' she murmured between sobs, digging her fingers into her hair and rubbing her scalp. All she

wanted was to be a part of this world, so why did she keep running? And, worst of all, disappointing the few people who had made space for her?

She thought of how the Professor's hands curled around the lecture stand, turning his knuckles white, when she returned to class the following Monday. She remembered how his eyes flitted past her, and how the feedback on her essays grew vicious. She thought of how Jo would scream at her in just a few hour's time, probably with something along the lines of 'why are you so fucking weird!?'

Fuck you, Jo. Lilly flinched at the thought, but as she untangled her fingers from her hair and looked ahead, it only grew louder. *Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you.* The beat of it joined the steady rhythm of her breath. And the tears dropped off her chin as though they'd never been there at all.

'So, what do you propose then, Lil?' she said to herself and laughed. *This*, she thought, and left.