

THE QUARRY

Madeline Falovic

Enshrouded

Auntie Beth is Chapter Two, in a novel about a young woman who embarks on an emotional journey, to uncover the reasons for the brooding hostility between her mother and grandmother.

Chapter 2 - Auntie Beth

A taxi dropped Lorna at Hills Road on a mild Saturday afternoon in spring. Home to Nan, otherwise known as May Chastain, and Auntie Beth. The orange and pink strawflowers sitting brightly in Nan's front garden reminded Lorna of when Christine and her were children, and they'd pick the papery bracts and stick pieces of wire through them so they could display them inside without them perishing. Nan's house was opposite a park with a river and an otherworldly green lawn. Lorna and Christine used to pretend there were fairies living beside the river bank. They would spend hours as children, frolicking in the sunlight, in their own fantastical world.

Through the wall of citrus trees and sweet-smelling wisteria facing the road, Lorna detected movement; shoes shuffled on the pavement.

'Miffy!' Nan made a sharp whistling sound whenever she spoke so that nearly every word she uttered pierced the ear drum like a phonic drill. Lorna wondered how long it would take to irritate her.

She appeared. Her face was soft and creasy and her grey ponytail was tied up into an old clasp. Wisps of hair sprang out around her face like the fine protrusions of a Venus flytrap. She held out her weathered gloves, motioning for an embrace. Traces of plant clippings and potting mix clung to the droopy lumps beneath her skivvy. Lorna nuzzled into her neck and smelt Nan: old clothes and tea leaves.

They walked down the garden path, avoiding the scatterings of wilted weeds and clumps of soil; the aftermath of Nan's gardening frenzy. Lorna was impressed with her stamina, especially at seventy. Her mother was the same. She could garden for hours and still get up the next day and do it all again.

'How long did it take you to get here from the airport, Miffy?' Nan held open the screen door.

'Only half an hour.'

The lounge room was dark and cool. Lorna set her bags down next to the couch draped with a patchwork quilt. There were boxes piled up against the coffee table and the other couch. She had forgotten about the hoarding. Everyone always did until they stepped through the door.

'Did your mother give you some money?'

'I work Nan, Mum doesn't need to give me money.'

'What are you studying again, darling?'

'Journalism.'

'...Oh yeah, that's right.'

They headed into the kitchen. Lorna looked down the hallway where three rooms jutted off to the side. One used to be Auntie Eliza's. On the wall hung sketched portraits, painted in the early seventies, of all eight of Nan's children. In order of youngest to eldest, there was: Eliza, Jeffrey, Amelia, Jennifer, Paul, Roger, Beth and Brian. Élan's name was Jennifer back then. She changed it when she married because it reminded her of being teased as a child.

'So will you write for a paper, or be on TV, Miffy?'

Lorna sat down at the kitchen table, where out of six chairs only two were available because the other four were blocked by more boxes or piles of clothes.

‘I’m not too sure yet, Nan. I’ll see when I get closer to finishing.’

‘You must have a lot of homework?’ Nan asked, concernedly. ‘It must have been difficult getting time off?’

‘I’m on a break from uni, and the restaurant gave me three weeks off... Where’s Auntie Beth?’

‘We are so happy to have you here. When your mother told me you were coming, I couldn’t believe it. I was just so happy... would you like a cup of tea?’

Before Lorna answered, Nan was filling the kettle with water. She set the kettle on the stove and pushed in the ignition switch until it sparked.

‘Where’s Auntie Beth, Nan?’ Lorna raised her voice a little louder in case she hadn’t heard the first time.

‘Sleeping.’

‘She’ll be up for her pills soon.’

‘How is your mother, Miffy? Good?’

Beth could hear her mother shuffling about the kitchen. The anti-psychotics made her sleep a lot but her body automatically woke up three times a day. Once at 5am, another at 11:30am and lastly, at 6pm. These were her pill times. Every day for the last thirty-five years her routine had been the status quo and it was likely to stay that way until the day she died. Sleep, eat, take pills, and occasionally go to the shop with her mother to get her essentials, like ice-cream and chocolate sauce. Beth loved ice-cream. Her mother used to yell at her for eating it. She even tried to get Beth to walk up and down their street once a day but her mother gave up because Beth always resisted.

‘What’s the point,’ she’d heard her mother say on the telephone to her brother Jeffrey one night.

‘She doesn’t have anything to live for. I may as well let her do what she wants.’

It had hurt Beth, but her mother had been right. When she really thought about it she didn’t feel so bad, partly, probably, because she was permanently drugged up but also because she had come to terms with her lot in life. Of course, some days were harder than others. She would write her poetry when she was alert enough. Each line

carried her sadness of knowing she would never have children, never have someone to love her and never be able to lead a normal life. Lorna had liked her poetry when she had read it on one of Beth's trips to Melbourne. She had packed it hoping that someone would want to read it. And Lorna was the only one who asked to see it. She had called it 'poignant'.

'Tell me,' Lorna had said one day whilst reading one of her Auntie's poems, 'about the man you write about here. You obviously were in love, Auntie Beth. Who was he?' Beth had clammed up instantly. She had never expected to be asked about the subject of her poems, especially not by her niece. She had asked for her poem back immediately and lied that she needed to go and rest. She wasn't really tired at that moment; how could she be when she was asked to explain a poem that embodied everything she felt for the man who had so abruptly removed himself from her life nearly thirty years ago?

She could hear the birds welcoming twilight outside her window. A red breasted rosella perched on the paperbark caught her eye. Its rigid movements mesmerised Beth. How busy it was going about its day. Beth remembered that her niece was coming to stay today. Maybe that's why there was so much noise coming from the kitchen. She still felt groggy but decided to get up and see if Lorna had arrived. The sun blushed through the curtains, creating a dusky glow. Her mother had put new floral wallpaper up in her room last year. Nearly everything in her room was pink. It had been that way since she was a girl. Even when she and her mother and Eliza had moved from Marpon when she was twenty-three, she had kept all of her childhood toys and ornaments. She sat on the bed, using her feet to tap her slippers on the floor into position. She closed up the buttons on the flannelette shirt her mother had bought from Target during the men's clothing sale and heaved herself up from the bed. The head spins were common, especially after lying down for so long. Beth shuffled her feet towards the door and headed out to the kitchen.

'Auntie Beth!' yelled Lorna gleefully. She leapt up and dived towards her Aunt, nearly knocking her back against the fridge. She liked to make a fuss of her Aunt whenever she greeted her. She knew her mother's siblings saw Auntie Beth as a burden, especially on Nan. Their eyes conveyed their disdain and her worsening condition was a hot topic of conversation at family gatherings.

‘And I’ll be the one left with her,’ Uncle Jeffrey had muttered at a Christmas Party when Lorna was a child.

‘Lorna, how are you?’ Auntie Beth’s voice was soft and delicate. She had a malleable, flawless complexion like ivory coloured play-dough and her eyes were the colour of walnut shells.

‘I’m good, how have you been?’ Lorna gulped and worried that she seemed insincere. Everyone knows how Auntie Beth is, BAD! Clearly, she hadn’t been good.

‘Okay,’ said Auntie Beth again. This time her voice was softer and she looked down when she spoke. She walked over to the freezer and pulled out a tub of Caramello Swirl ice cream.

‘Be- eth,’ Nan said reproachfully.

‘Mum!’ Auntie Beth turned towards her mother and stared at her with furrowed eyebrows. She placed the tub petulantly on the bench, gaze fixed to the floor.

‘I’m only having a little bit now,’ she said quietly.

‘Don’t you remember what the doctor said?’

Auntie Beth ignored her mother. Great, three weeks of them fighting Lorna thought. She was taken aback by how much Auntie Beth seemed to regress each time she saw her. She felt her heart ache again and realised that there was probably more of a chance of Auntie Beth passing sooner than her grandmother.

‘Look what I found at that new Salvos store,’ Nan cried blissfully.

Good, a change of tone, thought Lorna. Nan was holding up a knitted electric blue jumper with black beads sewn in the shape of flowers on the shoulders.

‘I love it!’ cried Lorna. ‘It’s so eighties. You know that’s all in now, Nan.’

Lorna felt a strong urge to embrace her Nan. But then she couldn’t. She could see her mother’s tormented face and the memory of her crying on the phone. She tried to push it back and ignore it, and for a moment it worked, but then the thick burden of her mother’s gloom seeped in through every pore, until Lorna felt weighed down in sickly guilt.

‘Aww, Miffy, I have tonnes of this stuff out the back.’

‘In bags?’ asked Lorna, thinking that she should at least try and feign eagerness. But she didn’t have to, because she loved retro clothing. Spending weekends rummaging through op-shops with Alanna was her favourite past time. There was nothing wrong with sorting through Nan’s old clothes. Surely her mother wouldn’t be put out by this. Anyway, Alanna would be so jealous when she’d see all the cool clothes. It would be worth it.

‘It’s all in the shed, Miffy.’

‘How do we get in there? Hasn’t that been locked for donkey’s years?’

Lorna played up the old expressions when she was around elderly people. She didn’t know where they came from. It was like they were locked up in a file inside her head and whenever she was around particular people these idiomatic words would filter down and spurt out of her mouth. She would never use that expression with Alanna. For her it would be more like, ‘Hasn’t that been locked for ages,’ or ‘For eva’- that’s how she’d send it in a text. But Nan and Auntie Beth wouldn’t even know what a text was, in the phone context, anyway.

‘Yes, but I do need to clean it out, and it would be nice while you’re here. An extra pair of hands would be great. You know Auntie Beth can’t help.’

Auntie Beth had planted herself on a chair next to Lorna and was now looking at her mother accusingly.

‘Now Beth, you know you can’t help. You’ll get out there and turn straight back inside. It’ll wear you out... and anyways, there’s all those huntsman’s in there. They all fell off the door when I tried to open it last month. They’ll scare the beeswax out of you.’

‘How bad are these spiders Nan?’ Lorna’s face tensed.

‘No, you’ll be right Miffy; we’ll cover you from head to toe.’

Auntie Beth picked up the box of bottled pills sitting in a container on the oak cabinet by the table, and with listless resignation, tipped out her evening dose. She didn’t want to help. She hated her mother’s hoarding but she wished she wouldn’t always point out how hopeless she was. Sometimes she’d daydream that robbers would come and take all of her mother’s rubbish, but then she knew that no one in

their right mind would want to steal the junk hogging up all the space and making it impossible to move around the house.