

THE QUARRY

Broken Lines

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The ward was quiet as shards of light shone between the blinds. They cast rectangles of brightness against the grey linoleum floor. A continuous, methodical beeping sounded from the only occupied bed in the room. It was accompanied by the soft puff and whirr of a respirator. Wires and tubes ran from the patient to all manner of apparatus and cables sprouted from under the crisp white sheets. Both the blanket and sheets were neatly tucked in, covering the bulge of one leg and foot, but hung limply where the other leg should have been. Electrodes pressed against Andy's scalp while another ran up one nostril. His chest rose and fell gently, the only movement in the room.

Josh was slumped on a chair in the corner. His head lulled against the backrest and his eyes were closed. One of his eyes was blue and purple, his nose bent slightly to the left. His bottom lip had been split and a scab covered the cut. A cast held one forearm, the red fibreglass encasing his arm from elbow to wrist. A few signatures were scrawled on the cast in black ink. Soft snores came from his open-hanging mouth and a dribble of spit had dried against his cheek. The morning light came to rest where his ankles were crossed over each other. One snore came louder

than the others, rousing Josh from his sleep and his eyes fluttered open. He yawned and rubbed the sleep from his eyes with his good hand. Blinking a few times as he sat up, Josh looked over to the bed.

‘Damn it, Andy,’ he muttered.

He pulled the cord beside the window, raising the blinds and shielding his eyes with his bad arm. Josh stared into the distance once his eyes had adjusted to the light. The glare of headlights, the screech of rubber on tarmac and the crunch of the impact were still fresh in his mind. He hit his cast against the wall in frustration. Josh could taste the metallic tang of blood and shook his head as he tried to clear it.

‘I’m such a fucking idiot,’ he said. His left forehead bump against the glass, leaving it there as he closed his eyes.

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The light turned green and Josh stabbed at the pedal with his foot. The engine growled as the ute jumped forwards with a screech of rubber on tarmac. His white-knuckled hands gripped the wheel. The sun was dipping below the horizon but the glare was still enough to make Josh squint. One hand lifted from the wheel for a moment to flick the sun visor down as the stereo blared, but it couldn’t overpower the grumbling of the V6. The red circle on a white background of a speed limit sign flashed past on the side of the road but Josh didn’t see the number inside. The number on his speedometer was well above it anyhow, the car whining as it hung at the factory maximum.

‘Why do you have to go so fast every fucking time?’ said Andy, glaring over at him.

Josh laughed. He loved the rush that came with such speed. Things had become strained between them recently. Ever since he had his license suspended for the first time it felt like Andy had changed. Josh knew he was being reckless but he’d never admit that to Andy. The speedometer was nudging one hundred and eighty, almost a hundred over the speed limit but he didn’t slow down. Tyres slid against the bitumen as the car flew around the corner. Josh flicked his visor back up after rounding the bend. The broken white lines on the road came so close together it was almost as if they were a single line. The sky was darkening from the bright blue of the day as a few puffy clouds turned from pink to purple, but neither boy noticed.

‘Josh, slow the fuck down. You’re going to lose your license again,’ Andy said.

‘Shut up, Andy. You’re such a fucking wuss,’ Josh shot back.

‘I wish I had my Ps already. This thing is a death trap.’

‘You’re just jealous you don’t have your own car.’

‘Do you really think I’d waste my money on a ute?’

The last comment stung. It had taken him months to save for the red Holden, and some birthday money from his grandmother left him just able to afford it. It might have been a little rusted, but Josh was proud of it. Josh put Andy’s resentment down to envy. Rounding another corner, the tail lights of a car appeared up ahead, only just visible in the diminishing light. They grew rapidly but Josh kept his foot on the pedal. The broken white lines merged into unbroken double lines, as Josh pulled out onto the other side of the road. Only once he had pulled into the other lane did he see the oncoming car.

‘Fuck!’ Josh shouted, yanking the wheel to the right.

Tyres screeched for a moment before the car flew off the road, the sound changing pitch as tarmac turned to dirt. Skidding to the sounds of blaring horns and the crunch of gravel, Josh slammed on the brakes. He wrestled with the wheel as the road pulled away from them, bending around to the left.

‘Josh! We’re going to hit a fucking –’

His eyes screwed shut just as the passenger side door smacked into the trunk of the tree, windows shattering as the door was punched inwards. The airbag exploded into Josh’s face. Josh thought he heard a scream before the ringing in his ears drowned it out. Something cracked in his chest as he was flung against his seatbelt and blood began to stream from his broken nose. He shoved the door and stumbled out of the car. The taste of his blood was metallic on his lips as he licked them. His head was spinning.

‘Fuck me,’ he groaned as he looked back at his pride and joy from his hands and knees. Inside Andy wasn’t moving. ‘Andy! Fuck!’

Josh crawled back into the car, fighting against the stubborn seat belt and sliding his hands under Andy’s arms. He dragged him across the centre console and onto the gravel. Blood smeared over the car’s interior and the ground as Josh laid Andy down. His friend’s chest rose and fell as t-shirt turned a deep crimson. Andy’s left arm and leg were crumpled against his side, blood drenching his jeans and dripping from his crushed fingers.

‘Fuck!’ he shouted. He reached for his phone, pulling it from his pocket with trembling fingers, fumbling as he entered his password, the phone vibrating in its refusal once before Josh got it unlocked. For the first time, Josh was truly scared. A moment later he held it to his ear, sniffing loudly to clear the blood from his nose. The phone began to ring.

‘Fuck, hurry up,’ he said before the ringing stopped.

‘You have dialled emergency Triple Zero. Your call is being connected,’ said the recorded voice on the other end of the line.

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Josh wiped his brow with the back of his arm, grease smearing across his forehead. His t-shirt had been discarded hours ago and sat crumpled in the corner, still damp from his sweat. He grabbed a brand new spark plug from the bench and walked back over to the Toyota. Bending back under the bonnet, he shoved the spark plug in before standing back up, smacking the back of his head on the raised bonnet in the process.

‘Fuck,’ he grunted.

The car only needed a simple service, but it was much more difficult than it should have been in the heat. Although it was thirty degrees outside, it felt twice that inside the garage. Josh grabbed his water bottle and guzzled half of it as he looked back over to the bench.

He stared at the crumpled bit of metal hanging from a nail above the workbench. Rust gathered at the edges and some of the yellow and black paint had crumbled away. It was the only remnant of his old ute that remained. Josh glanced up at it occasionally, reminded of his mistakes. It reminded him just how lucky he was to be alive. The car was a write-off, but it wasn’t the damage he caused to his car that hurt. He grabbed the last spark plug, leaning under the car’s hood once again. Josh replaced the part and stood up, this time avoiding hitting his head before slamming the car’s bonnet. He quickly drained what remained in his drink bottle. Josh picked up his shirt, wiping the sweat from his face before hanging it over his shoulder.

‘Hey Josh, you finished with my car yet?’

Josh grabbed the car’s keys off the bench and turned to face the voice. He lobbed the keys over the car and a hand shot out to catch them.

‘Good catch. And yeah, I just finished,’ Josh responded.

‘Awesome,’ Andy said as he pushed towards the car.

It had been a few years since the accident now and Andy acted as if it never happened. He’d lost his left leg and all feeling below his hips, but these days he seemed happier than Josh remembered, even back when they played footy together. To Josh, it was like the wheelchair had become a part of Andy, but Josh couldn’t escape the guilt he felt. He didn’t have to pay the price for his stupidity, Andy did. He was envious of how easily Andy had come to terms with everything.

Andy rolled over to the car and flung the door open. His arms were heavily muscled and he easily lifted his body from the chair and onto the car seat. His leg followed limply and he flicked it in front of the seat.

‘Chuck the chair in the back, would you Josh?’ Andy asked.

Josh nodded and pushed the wheelchair around to the back of the car. He couldn’t understand how Andy was so casual about his situation. Andy would never walk again and yet Josh was the one who couldn’t move on. He picked up the chair and placed it in the car’s boot, closing the boot once it was positioned correctly.

‘There you go, mate. Anyone home to help you out?’ Josh asked.

‘I’m picking Alice up from netball. What do I owe you?’

‘Call it a hundred. Changed the spark plugs and all your fluids and checked the brakes. Everything else was fine.’

Andy handed Josh two fifties and closed the car door. It was a generous discount but he didn’t tell Andy that. He waved as Andy backed out of the garage before turning to look up at the number plate on the wall.

‘Why can’t I fucking move on?’ Josh muttered.

He reached for the scrap of metal, pulling it down from the wall. It was cold. He could taste blood every time he held it, every time he remembered. Josh threw the plate in the skip bin outside, the clang of metal on metal feeling strangely satisfying.

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The pub was crowded that night but Josh sat alone, nursing his beer in the corner. He always drank too much when he was in a bad mood. The glass emptied faster than he expected and he wandered over to the bar to order another one.

‘Hey Josh, my shout,’ called Andy as he rolled towards the bar.

‘Hey mate, thought you were taking care of Alice,’ Josh said.

‘Nah, she’s over at a friend’s place tonight. You drinking alone again?’ Andy laughed. Josh said nothing, took the beers and moved back to his table. Andy

followed. He had known Andy would find him tonight. Every time he felt like this, Andy would show up. It reminded him of those days he's spent by Andy's side at the hospital, wondering if he would ever recover. Josh sipped his third beer quietly before glancing over to his friend. Andy sat in silence, as if waiting for Josh to say something.

'How do you do it?' Josh asked.

'Do what?'

'You know, the wheelchair, not walking, everything.'

'Mate, what choice do I have? Mum and Alice need me. Even you need me.'

Andy took a long drink as Josh watched. How could it be that simple?

'It should have been me. I fucked up, not you. It's not fair mate.'

'Get over yourself, Josh. Do you want my fucking sympathy or something?'

Andy spat, glaring at his friend.

'I, uh ...,' Josh trailed off, his cheeks flushing as he realised the truth behind Andy's comment.

'Life's not fair, mate. Roll with the punches. Stop beating yourself up over it. We're still alive, right?'

Josh smiled weakly and took another sip. How could Andy put everything in perspective so easily? In those weeks after the accident, Josh wasn't sure if Andy would make it. But he recovered much faster than anyone had expected. He was determined not to let anything slow him down, especially doctors. Andy had been in the gym before the doctors allowed him and his arms quickly grew stronger than Josh's would ever be.

'So what should I do, Andy?' Josh asked. Andy paused for a moment.

'Get rid of that number plate and live your life, mate,' Andy said.

'It's already gone. I threw it away this arvo.'

'About fucking time, mate. Anyhow, I found this guy online selling his old racing wheelchair but I need you to help me to pick it up. That cool?'

Josh looked down at his drink again, the glass cool against his palm as he took another sip. 'What kind of racing? Sprints?'

'I want to do a marathon. Why do you think I've been in the gym so much? Gotta use these guns for something,' Andy said, flexing his right arm. Josh stared at him like he was crazy before laughing and nodding.

‘Show off. I’ll help you out but you’re absolutely crazy. Want me to coach you? We’d make a great team.’

‘Fuck you, Josh. What do you know about coaching?’ Andy laughed.

Josh smiled and punched Andy in the arm before draining the last of his beer. They talked long into the night, the drinking forgotten as they talked until closing. Josh knew something had changed. A weight had been lifted from his shoulders as the two friends talked like they did before the accident. Josh would never forget what happened but if Andy could move on, then so could he.