

# THE QUARRY

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From Above

Lorne shifted into fourth and below him the gears gnashed angrily. He stamped on the unresponsive clutch again, shoving the gearstick down. With a crunch the cogs found each other in the greasy darkness of the gearbox, and the whine of the engine moved down a key.

‘Piece of shit,’ he muttered, and Sally grinned at him from the passenger seat. She laid her pale hand on his and squeezed. A hot gust from the east danced through her window, tousling greasy hanks of her hair across her face. Swaying gently, her whisky breath floated on the wind. Lorne wondered how many more she’d slammed back while he’d been in the toilet. Mick at the Brass Monkey started pouring her Jack Daniels, no ice, as soon as she walked through the door, greeting them with a nod.

The wrinkles around Lorne's mouth puckered as his lips twitched with affection and he accelerated.

Sally cackled, and her lips spread tight across her stained teeth. As the quivering shell gathered speed she hung her head out the window, and the steady flash of neon streetlights caught her in freeze-frames. The light snagged in the deep grooves around her mouth, and fractured hieroglyphs traced paths across her face. Lorne reached down to spin the radio dial and Pearl Jam filtered through bursts of static.

Sally squealed and turned up the volume, filling the car with the grating guitar intro of 'Smile'. 'I miss you already, I miss you always,' she sang tunelessly and leant back out the window. In the glow of the next streetlight she blew Lorne a kiss. He shook his head and kept his eyes on the road, but his mouth twitched with affection again.

Morning light spilled through the bedroom window and moved across their naked bodies sprawled on the mattress. As he opened his crusty eyes, Lorne's world reeled. The sheet clung to his sweaty legs and he writhed to free himself, his breathing laboured. The air swam with the stench of stale alcohol and urine. Lorne glanced down at Sally asleep next to him and studied the angular shape of her body beneath the sheet. He imagined her as an unearthly arachnid suckling from him. Sweeping a strand of hair off her cheek, he reached across the peaks of her shoulders for a cigarette.

Lorne gazed through the dirty window, past the pitching treetops and into the open sky. His tongue rasped as he licked his cracked lips and he wondered if the air was fresher way up there. From far above they would make the tiniest of scabs on the land. He blinked as the mattress squeaked with Sally moving beside him. The greying fabric of her face split into a smile and the scar tissue on her upper lip stretched tight. With a grunt she rolled to the side of the bed, going through the familiar motions of cooking up. Ash toppled onto the sheets from Lorne's cigarette and the TV opposite squawked with tinned laughter as Seinfeld played.

'Baby,' he murmured when she had finished, drawing her close to him, 'We don't need no one else.' The leather strap creaked as he slipped it from her arm and pried the empty needle from her fingers. Her eyelids flickered as her flat grey pupils

rolled back into her head, revealing bloodshot whites. Outside, the clouds skittered past and Lorne imagined being so light, far above. Her breath crackled through her burnt-out lungs and Lorne pulled her closer, the emptiness of the sky suddenly making him uneasy.

‘You’re my girl,’ he whispered into her hair. ‘You’re my girl,’ and he hummed as she relaxed into his arms. He pictured her floating high above him, and the red gums flailed against the hollow sky as he listened to her breathing.

The darkness of the bedroom swam with noise, and Lorne smacked the snooze button, falling back into the empty ether just above sleep. His mind drifted with dream currents and scenes swam behind his eyelids. As the braying sliced through the air again he switched on the lamp. 3:45am. Beside him Sally lay face down on the bed, her sharp elbows jutting from beneath her like wings. With an index finger he traced the crests of her vertebrae and imagined her as a prehistoric beast while she snuffled in her sleep.

The slow rhythm of pain began to pulse through Lorne’s joints as he dressed. Already he ached to return to the mattress, to Sally and a fix. But there would be no gear without the pay from his shift, and so he forced a cocktail of painkillers down his dry throat. As he kissed her cheek he felt the roughness of a scab against his lips. The bedroom was cold in the silent darkness and he pulled the sheet up to cover her shoulders.

A biting wind stung his face as he rode on the back of the truck and hung his head out the side. The air was sweet with the change of season, yet an iciness still whistled hollow nothings in Lorne’s ears. Above in the dusky morning sky, stars shifted and morphed into each other and a Smashing Pumpkins song played on the radio.

He sprang from the moving vehicle as they pulled into the curb, grasped the handle of the wheelie bin with gloved hands and swung it into position. The huge mechanical claw groaned and reached down from the sky. The bin discharged its contents onto the heap with a squelch. Bill, in the driver’s seat, caught Lorne’s eye in the wing mirror and gave him a thumbs-up. A sudden discharge of cramps shot

through Lorne's legs and he grimaced. The stench of the rubbish drove into his eyes and mouth, making him gag. Mixed with the rotting bin juice odours hung the scent of artificial frangipani. The sweet scent swam up his nose, and Lorne was drawn into a fog of memory.

Rain beat heavily on the battered roof of the hatchback as it sat overlooking the stormy ocean. Sally grinned at him from the passenger seat and handed him a plastic bag.

'To christen your new ride,' she told him, and he pulled out a tacky air freshener in the shape of a frangipani flower. 'Now you've got no excuse for a stinky car!' She giggled and kissed him quickly with glossy lips.

Lorne gazed at her as she strung the air freshener from the rear-view mirror and started rolling a joint. Her silvery eyes danced as she chattered about a new job and strands of sun-bleached hair fell across her face as she chopped. A shell necklace that clung to her neck moved as she spoke, and the white shells made her tan look darker. Sally glanced up to find Lorne watching her and laughed.

'It's rude to stare, you dickhead! Are you ready to get baked?'

They hot-boxed the car, watching the waves boil against the wet sand and the ocean swallow the torrential downpour. The earthy smell of the weed mixed with the sweetness of the air freshener. Sally opened her window a crack, sticking out her tongue to catch the raindrops. Lorne caught sight of himself in the mirror. His sandy hair curled wildly about eyes the colour of the turgid ocean before them. One side of his mouth sagged a little, and his voice still wavered despite being well past puberty. Sally called these his broken bits, and she told him she loved them the most.

'Lorne! For fuck's sake mate!'

Lorne flinched and found himself hovering uselessly beside an emptied bin. Bill hung out the truck's window waving hairy arms and shouting. As Lorne grasped the bin, a hefty weight once more settled onto his shoulders. He wondered how it would feel to be the sandy-haired boy in the beat up hatchback again. Raising a hand to scratch his head, he felt the close-cropped hair beneath his beanie, and he shivered as a cold layer of sweat swaddled him. The rhythm of his pain beat louder through his thoughts as the truck made its route through the streets, and he wished he had more pills to drown it out.

Tiny flakes of paint drifted like confetti scabs onto the bed as Lorne sank back against the peeling wall. Need pumped a bass line through his body and the spiking pain in his head kept the beat. The leather bit against his skin as Sally's thin fingers pulled the strap tight, and the chink of her cooking up relaxed him a little. The lighter smouldered the bottom of the Pepsi can, and the smell of the hot metal made muscles in his leg quiver in anticipation.

As the cold metal pierced his skin and entered a vein he exhaled. Relief flooded his bloodstream and curled through his mind. Pain dissolved, soluble in this ecstasy and Lorne's breathing slowed. He slumped into the mattress and Sally wrapped cold legs around his body, rocking him. Drifting upwards and outwards from between drooping eyelids, Lorne traced the track marks down her arms.

'Get free, baby,' she whispered with stale breath, 'get higher.'

Dusk was already swaddling the house when the ute pulled up the driveway. The last of the sunset still bled through the gum trees and Lorne squinted in the red light. His hair was slick with a cold sweat and he heaved himself from the driver's seat. In the silence of the evening the slam of the screen door was deafening, and his legs were unsteady beneath him. As he took the small plastic bag from his wallet he sat at the table in the dusky kitchen.

'The fuck are you Sal?' he groaned, and shrank into himself. His hands caught his head and blackened fingernails scratched rhythmically through damp hair. The bag was small, only enough for the two of them until tomorrow and then he would have to find more. But Sally wasn't here, the bed was cold and he wouldn't cook without her.

Wood rasped against his cheek as he slumped forward onto the table and fell into fitful dreams of cramped rooms with no windows. His hand hung from the table, twitching, and a pool of saliva gathered beside his open mouth. His eyes roved restlessly in their sockets: searching, pursuing.

The crunch of tyres on gravel wrenched Lorne awake and for a moment his mind spun madly. Then agony settled over him again as he stood and lurched to the door.

‘Sal?’ he called into the dark, his voice broken. ‘Baby, that you?’ A door slammed and headlights blinded Lorne as the car swung from the drive. Sally came striding from the shadows, her hair loose, coat flying behind her.

‘Babe,’ she murmured, wrapping herself around him. Lorne shoved his face into her hair and inhaled the stench of booze and cigarettes. She pulled back and held out an open palm. In the dim light from the kitchen Lorne saw she held a large bag of yellow powder. Her eyes flashed darkly, and she grinned.

‘Where’d you get that?’

‘It’s for us! There’s at least 400 here. Call in sick to work tomorrow and we’ll go on a trip.’ She chewed the dry skin on her lip.

‘No.’ Lorne took a step back into the light from the kitchen. ‘Where’d you get the money for it? You didn’t have five bucks for cigarettes yesterday.’

Sally rolled her eyes and elbowed past Lorne into the kitchen.

‘Chill out. I called in a favour. Can we cook? I’m aching.’ She spotted Lorne’s small bag on the table and grinned at him. ‘You don’t wanna cook that, do you? C’mon babe, let’s do this.’

‘I’m not cooking that fucking gear until you tell me why you were out there so late,’ Lorne said quietly.

Sally’s eyes hardened, and she pulled her coat tight around her, crossing her arms.

‘Don’t you get on your fucking high horse with me when I have to sit here all day just waiting for you to bring me back some gear.’ Her words were clipped and her breathing shallow. ‘That’s bullshit, Lorne.’

Lorne wrapped his arms around his shoulders and pulled at his hair. His body throbbed, and he squeezed himself tighter. He shut his eyes and wished the squirming doubt in his stomach would dissolve. When he opened them she was walking towards him, her eyes soft again.

‘We’re both hurting,’ she told him quietly. ‘Let’s just cook, please. I need it baby.’

Lorne looked into her and saw the same pounding rhythm as he felt in himself and his mind surged with a yearning tenderness. Bending to kiss her pocked cheek, he froze mid-air. With a finger he stroked a fresh bruise on her neck, picking out the four dark points where teeth had marked skin. Wrenching the coat off her shoulders, he exposed her back and found the familiar fingernail scrapes covering her pale skin.

‘Are you serious?’ He croaked, his voice thick with anger. ‘Did you think I’d forgotten what this looks like? Did you think I’d forgotten about Jonny and what he makes you fucking do?’

‘Wait, wait,’ she pleaded, her voice shrill. ‘You don’t understand babe, I need it! Jonny gives me good gear for cheap, not that scummy shit Davo’s pushing. I can’t deal with that smacky gear anymore! It doesn’t mean anything. It’s gross, but then we’re all alone and we’ve got enough for days. It’s for us baby, it’s all for us!’

‘That’s not the fucking way I want it!’ Lorne spat and swept his bag of brown powder from the table into his pocket. Blood screamed in his ears and tears sprang hot in his eyes. She grasped at him as he tore past her, but he threw her back against the fridge. He tripped as he reached the ute, and found himself on hands and knees, the sharp ground biting at his flesh.

‘You’re a fucking failure,’ he hissed to himself, and pulled himself into the car. In his anger, Lorne forgot his pain and gunned the ute up the drive in a whirl of flying gravel and crunching gears. Darkness swallowed the silent house behind him, and the screen door wailed on rusty hinges.

In a shriek of ancient brakes the ute juddered to a standstill and Lorne threw the door open, falling onto his knees on the asphalt. He retched and neon bile came driving from his gut. Wave after burning wave spilled from him until his body felt it would cave in. The smell of the acid made his eyes water and as he pulled himself back into the ute a fit of shivering gripped him, sweat trickling into his eyes mixing with tears. He caught sight of himself in the mirror, eyes sunken in purple sockets, shoulders hunched, weighed down with shadows. Lorne punched the steering wheel, cracking a knuckle. Should have taken on more shifts, he told himself, should have

never let it get back to this shit. He watched the blood from his knuckle slowly trickle down to pool in his palm and his shoulders shuddered with silent sobs. It's your fault, he thought, you're a bloody failure.

Reaching into the glove box Lorne took out the sharp and a lighter. As he stepped from the car again he splashed through the puddle of his vomit to rifle through the bin and find a can. A tear fell to mix with the smack as he cooked. As it purred through his blood, his jaw fell slack and the belt loosened around his arm.

Resting his head on the wheel, Lorne's pain dissolved and he gazed vacantly through the bug-spattered windshield. His tears had made tracks down his face, and they dried into sticky trails as the smack covered his guilt in a blurry forgetfulness. City lights blazed to the west, the sky hung with their orange glow. A dry wind blew in from the east and he turned his gaze up. The glittering mass of stars swam against the sky like manic fireflies, and it swelled above him as he gazed upward and outward.

'Get free,' he murmured to himself, drifting on a warm breeze into the obliterated cosmos of his mind, 'get higher.'