

THE QUARRY

Leigh Coyle

Absolution

Mack didn't say a word either. We just watched as she swept the meat ants away from the dead man's body, working a perimeter of clear space around him in the red dust. A pig dog, frenzied by the smell of blood, wrenched at its chain and she raised her broom at it and shouted.

Her task was pointless and she knew it.

I didn't know the dead man with his booted feet sticking out into the afternoon, but then, I didn't know anyone else on that property. Even Mack I'd only met a few weeks before when we were both walking in the same direction. Mack was one of those bull-headed men who can't think around corners. He wore black clothes in the heat and any spare bit of skin was covered in smudged tattoos, like he'd done them himself. His front teeth were cracked off right across the middles, a long time ago, if you cared to see the worn down edges of them, and he had a face that was all collapsed in on itself. Mean bugger though.

By the way Mack held himself, his body tense, the way he muttered and moaned in his sleep, how he couldn't look me in the eye for longer than a second, I knew he'd been inside. But the good thing I'd discovered about Mack was he didn't ask questions. I liked that much about him and, by sticking together we seemed to

find more work. That's why we were there on that property and why we'd heard the single shot which had cracked open the dawn and for a few moments stilled the day.

Mack'd said, 'That was no 22.'

I'd said, 'Yeah, think you're right.'

Then we'd gone about getting ready for the day's work, pulling on trousers, sweat-stained singlets, hats bent to the shapes of our heads. It wasn't our business, so when we went past the house on our way to the horses, we didn't ask questions, even though we could already see the body motionless with the woman sweeping in circles. We just wanted to get where we were going.

And when we came back in the afternoon, salt-smearred and thirsty after driving posts into the ground all day, we still didn't want to find out anything about it, except she yelled out to us and we stopped near the gate, me leaning on the fence and Mack shuffling his boots in the red dust. She was blotchy-faced and sweaty, reddened by the dirt so it was hard to tell what colour her hair was, or whether she'd ever once been a looker.

'Know what this bastard did?' she said, letting the broom drop against her thigh.

'Nuh,' said Mack, with all the effort of someone who didn't want to know.

'Shot himself,' she said. 'Right here.' She glanced back to the house as if allowing it the chance to break out of its ongoing silence. 'And I've spent this whole stinking day trying to keep him nice, waiting for some bloke in a suit to come and tell me he's dead.'

'Jeez,' said Mack.

Mack looked at me as if I had the words he needed, but didn't want to share them out, so on his behalf I asked, 'Why'd he do it?'

'Why does anyone do it?' she said.

I looked at Mack and thought I saw something disturbing in his eyes, but he was that sort of bloke.

'Beats me,' I said.

The woman resumed her sweeping. 'You're right there.'

We started to walk off towards the sleeping shed, but her sharp voice continued.

‘We hid all the guns, you know. Every last one of ‘em. My husband put the strychnine up in the roof so he couldn’t get to it, I put all the knives in my undies drawer. Last place he’d look, we reckoned.’

We waited while she snatched a dirty hanky from her apron pocket and wiped at her eyes.

The afternoon was stretched red-tight and all I wanted to do was get to the shed, lie down on my bunk with my toes free from boots and think of nothing much. Mack looked uncomfortable with the woman’s tears and fidgeted with his belt buckle. I saw something familiar in the way her face toughened as she spoke again, a sour tinge to her voice.

‘Made no difference in the end,’ she said. ‘This morning, he just grabbed a rifle from the back of Ron Strodeor’s ute before we had time to stop him.’

She paused as she gazed at the mad-eyed dog. ‘Wish we’d get rid of this bloody useless mongrel,’ she said.

I coughed inside my throat to break the mood and gave her a little nod. ‘Well, we’ll leave you to it,’ I said, stepping closer to Mack so we could both turn and escape in one slick manoeuvre. But the stupid bugger had stopped there, unmoving, so I was forced to stay put too, with the snuffling grunts of the dog and the fading heat of the afternoon sucking up the very last drops of moisture left on earth.

‘He just grabbed the rifle,’ she said. She dropped the broom onto the ground. ‘He just cocked it, put it in his mouth and pulled the trigger.’

Her face was lined by the sun and any womanly softness had been worn away by the weather and too much hard work. She looked like someone I’d known once, but I couldn’t quite remember who. She wept and her tears seemed obscene with their wetness, then she folded at the knees and hunched herself over beside where the dead man’s head was covered by a hessian sack.

‘We did everything we could,’ she sobbed into the dirt. ‘But in the end, it was impossible.’ She began to wail, a great heaving bawling which made her body quiver and I didn’t know where to look or what to do. I wanted someone to come out of the house and take the woman away, relieve her of her futile vigil, let the night press its darkness down upon her. But the place seemed deserted.

I glanced over to Mack for help and he gave me one long desperate look like he was seeking my permission to do something. Then that big tough bloke climbed over the fence into the yard where the woman knelt next to the dead man and he crouched down beside her, his huge tattooed arm covering her back, so their three bodies were butted up alongside each other in the dirt like rusty sardines.

Even then the woman continued to talk, as if her words had been caught up somewhere deep inside and were being flushed out with her tears. 'We were the ones who told him to come. We're the ones who promised to look after him. He just about blew his head off.'

She paused and then took in a long exhausted breath.

'He was my brother.'

Mack's black-haired hand was stroking down the woman's back as he muttered to her. I couldn't hear what he was saying, just the sound of his soft voice curling out into the last flare of sunlight; he was saying more to her now than I'd heard him say in all the weeks we'd been together. The woman remained curved over, but was silent now, listening.

I was useless, worse than that ugly crazy mutt, which still thought it could bust out of its lockup. As I stood there watching Mack with the woman I realised that the expression I'd briefly seen before on the woman's face belonged to my wife, when I'd finally told her I was leaving for good.

For one blinding moment, I let myself understand I was a million times less worthy than that thug Mack, before I grunted loudly in disgust and left them to it.