

THE QUARRY

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Pioneers

A russet plume of dust chases my old car along a typical Queensland country road. An old wound cut through the dense scrub and scattered stand of blanched gums. I slow at a wider stretch of dirt and gravel opposite the aged, colonial-style metal gate that serves as a carpark. I doubt if little more is ever needed. Here to greet you are the no-nonsense, resolute letters, ‘Pioneer Memorial’ welded along the top section of the gate. Above this, a white wooden arch—the type you see posted over the cattle grids of outback stations—serves as the support for weathered, bold-black letters, ‘Howard Remembrance Park’ further reassures you of your location. Tan-brown supporting brickwork, fades out to white fence posts, strung together with cheap paddock wire. The ‘Kill Rust’ industrial mud-brown paint on the gate has cracked, peeled and, in many sections, parted ways from the spiralled metal. What remains are years of layers slapped on by thick, heavy brushes, wielded by hands and hearts that never cared. A small brass plaque is screwed into the brickwork: ‘These Gates Dedicated to the Glory of God and to the Sacred Memory of the Pioneers of the Burrum District’. Well someone cared... once.

I lift the latch, releasing a small groan, then a squeal, as if to signal that the battle is over. The sound dominates the flat rectangle cut out of the desiccated Queensland bush. For the first time I notice how quiet and still the air is. Half-a-dozen thin, dust-choked Norfolk Pines line each side of the entrance; a driveway of tyre tracks pushed down into the short, desiccated grass.

The number of plots is reputed to be almost 1700, but after a quick scan, I settle on a number closer to 200. How many unmarked graves must lie before me? About a dozen sculpted monuments tower over the mostly brown and grey speckled granite headstones. Standing guard in the Primitive Methodist section—the first to establish a church in Howard in 1887—a few obligatory angels carry baskets of flowers, while others stand posed praying for those beneath their cold alabaster feet. Almost everything that was once white, is now encrusted with a patina of yellowish-grey lichen and black mould. All the angels have at least one arm missing—a sadder version of the Venus de Milo. Are these monuments victims of time and faulty workmanship, or the defenceless prey of amoral creatures?

Impressive ornate crosses, some with Celtic patterns woven into the cold white marble, dominate the Roman Catholic section. Running from the west to east fence, the grounds are divided into Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, Primitive Methodist and Baptist sections. I notice that a lone Mason was welcomed into the Presbyterian domain. The cemetery was laid out in 1882, and follows the Christian tradition of placing the headstones facing the eastern horizon. According to Matthew 24:27, ‘For as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.’ The faithful of Howard’s century past await the second coming of Christ. I’ve had too many years of Catholic schooling to be swayed by the Bible; but to each, his own. I’m not buoyed, constrained or channelled by any particular faith, but I am comfortable with my lack of it. Do I believe in an all-powerful being that created the ground on which we stand; the stars in the heavens above us and all that lies beneath it?

Five years ago my mother was diagnosed with cancer. She never wanted to make a fuss and ignored symptoms for so long that she managed the terminal trifecta—bowel as the primary, with liver and lung as secondaries. They say that this is the test. When struck with such disastrous news, do you plea-bargain with an imaginary entity for the safety of a loved one? Did I seek refuge in the belief that it was ‘God’s will’, find any consolation

that after being tortured by an eight-month battle of operations, pain and disease, mum—always the rock in our family—would somehow be rewarded in Heaven? I am one who accepts that horrible things happen to good people, and that the morally bankrupt are often extremely fortunate. I accept that there are no reasons or a great plan; life simply is what it is, and I've discovered that this philosophy is liberating. I watched my father torment himself, frozen in time grasping for some ever-elusive 'reason'. I believe in the most basic principle of kindness, because as social creatures this is how we accommodate each other. This is how we evolve and, dare I say it, become enlightened, both as individuals and as a species.

I can understand the desperate search for the helping hand of a benevolent, supernatural being. Had I existed in a time and place where the only consolation of half your children never reaching adulthood, was the hand of a friend on your shoulder as they supported you above an open wound in the earth and whispered, 'It's God's Plan. Your baby is with him now'. I am willing to admit, that my faith's pedigree may have been very different.

A wooden plank bench, neglected for decades, stands as the only invitation for the living to linger a while. Its journey through time has not been kind. Decades of Queensland summers have stripped it back to bare wood; a scattering of mustard-tinted paint flakes desperately cling to the splintered wood and the simple lines of its supporting steel frame. When the moon is full and silver light dances across the smooth, cold headstones, I can easily imagine the spirits gathering here, and reminiscing on times, long since past.

One memorial statue in particular calls to me. Life-sized figures of a young man and woman, draped in classical Greek-style robes stand facing each other; behind them, a broken column—symbolic of a life cut-short. Their downcast eyes focus on their joined hands. I surmise that it's the final resting place of a young couple, but when I read the inscription on the pedestal, it reads:

In Sorrowful and Everlasting Memory

of our only Darling Child Noel Olgar Power Starr,

who died of Diphtheria Oct. 30th 1908 aged 6 years and 2 months.

The Pride of our Hearts & Home.

Six years & 2 months of Earth's Best Love Lies Buried Here.

Good-Bye Darling! Our own true love.

Love shall always live with us.

Diphtheria—a disease we attribute to third world counties, where life is all too often short, cruel and difficult. These were was also the conditions of that time and place.

Coal was the reason for this region's Genesis. This was not a land of massive man-made craters, where Jurassic-sized machines tear away at the earth, but of ninety-four barely human-sized rabbit warrens, which branched out a hundred metres below the roots of gnarled ghost gums. Here, thirteen year-old boys followed their fathers down into the long, dark tunnels, and for twelve hours a day, the tiny open flames on their helmets were their guiding lights. With bare backs, slippery and wet with coal dust and sweat, the miners contended with collapsing tunnels, poorly managed detonations, methane gas explosions, inadequate wages and, for the sake of a livelihood, picked away one fist-sized lump of coal at a time. How many of the region's 400 coal miners were slowly strangled by black lung and ushered into an early grave, is anybody's guess.

I wander among the resting places encircled by rings of brittle, poisoned grass. There are the lucky few who managed to reach into their seventies, eighties and even nineties, but so many more failed to come close to this:

Charles Neilsen Schmidt... aged 1 year 3 months

Donald McLeod... aged 2 years

H. Smith Hamilton... aged 7 weeks

Samuel Gongram Warren... aged 3 years 6 months

and the roll call continues...

Seeing so many graves of children is difficult—even for me. I've never been a parent, so cannot know... only imagine the devastation such a loss would have on the parents. There are many plots that bear witness to such a tragedy occurring multiple times in the same family. All that promise, held in life so young, never to reach its potential.

I hear the telltale sound of stones lashing metal, and a car soon comes into view. It's a Sunday morning and I'm curious to see if any of the scattering of recent internees actually receive a visitor. The entire ground is devoid of fresh flowers, though a few colour-stripped, tattered plastic imposters lie scattered amongst the headstones. A small silver hatchback slows at the 'car park', and momentarily hesitates before making a quick u-turn and escapes back into the dusty curtain of eucalypt. Either I've been mistaken for a spectre, or walking amongst the dead wasn't what they had in mind. I've reached the stage in life where there are now more days behind than hoped for ahead. My mother was cremated—she disliked the thought of worms feeding on her, though I'm confident embalming fluid would keep the most persistent of grubs away. Some of her ashes were scattered on the calm, clear waters of the river which meanders behind her house. She would take a small amount of time from work each day, to walk and swim her dogs there. The only 'personal time' that she really had. She didn't wish to be forgotten in a cemetery, and I agree that I can't see the attraction. For the religious who feel that they need to be buried in sacred ground, fair enough; for myself, raise a glass, be kind to each other and scatter my dust to the winds.