

THE QUARRY

Melissa Farrell

The Narrator

As he dresses for work, Harry wonders just how long his parents-in-law will be staying. They have exchanged their life in the suburbs for one on the road, selling their house and buying a large motorhome with plans to travel the country. So far they have only managed to travel the twelve kilometres across town from their previous home to his. Their monstrosity of a vehicle is parked in his driveway and has been for the past three weeks, leaching his electricity and guzzling his water. His in-laws, who sleep and shower in their motorhome, spend the rest of their time lounging about in his home.

Harry cannot abide their company, but there has always been that sweet sense of release at the completion of any engagement with them. Now he is cornered in his own home, snared by these wretched people. His mother-in-law, Thelma, is an impetuous woman, all urge and impulse, a mess of emotion. She cries or laughs at the slightest provocation, in a frantic sort of way that sounds as if she is in some sort of distress, confusing Harry so that he is never quite sure whether she is actually crying or laughing. This unrestrained disposition flows through all facets of her behaviour from the way she speaks, without any censoring, right down to her eating habits, the way she attacks her food in a vulgar bustle of gnawing and gnashing until her plate is

empty. Her husband, Gary, is an arduous bore who is incapable of conversation, preferring to pontificate, or to tell stories which he stretches to tediousness. With winter setting in, Harry suspects that Thelma and Gary may be hunkering down for the season.

Harry's wife, Sherry, is behaving strangely. Since her parent's arrival she has indulged in a childish energy that Harry finds irritating. She is laughing wildly at all of Gary's predictable jokes, calling him 'Daddy,' and is constantly referring to him for answers. 'What do you think about the situation in Afghanistan, Daddy?' Or 'why does the moon seem closer when it rises, Daddy?' When Harry had pointed this out to her, she had behaved like a petulant child, sulking for the rest of that day. She is also encouraging her mother to do most of the cooking. Thelma's bland concoctions of tasteless grey meat and mushy boiled vegetables make Harry squeamish. He misses his wife's cooking. He misses his ordered life and his orderly wife.

Harry looks in the mirror and straightens his tie. It is emblazoned with the 'Harry's Hardware' logo. The only place he feels any sense of composure at present is in the dominion of his hardware store. He lingers for longer hours amongst the neat rows of screws, glues, tools, paints, rattraps, hatchets, and buckets. He inherited the store from his father who had left instructions for Harry to sell it and to continue with his studies in journalism. Harry, determined not to let his domineering father dictate his life from the grave, discontinued his studies and kept the store. Finding it in a careless disarray of random stock and messy financial records, he had systematised the whole affair. From the shelves up and had slowly shaped the store into the methodical and productive business it is today. He has sedulously trained two employees to ensure that everything is performed to his design. He takes great pride in knowing that his store is the most efficient in town. And amongst the tidy aisles of the fluorescent world of the hardware store, he is at peace. A psychoanalyst might tell him that his need for order and control stems from his parent's marital problems and their subsequent lack of attention to him during his period of toilet training.

'Who's there,' says Harry. He pushes open the window and looks out into the garden below. The other thing that has been bothering Harry is that he sometimes hears someone talking, seemingly about him, but he has been unable to find its source.

'Where are you?' says Harry as he begins prancing around like a territorial rooster, looking back and forth, up and down as if searching for someone. 'I don't

know who you are, or where you are, but you'd better bugger off,' he demands. Anyone observing this scene could believe that Harry had gone quite mad as he seemingly addresses some invisible interloper.

The bedroom door opens and his wife, Sherry, comes in. 'What's all the shouting about? Is someone here?' she asks as she glances about the room.

'Someone's here alright,' Harry tells her.

'Who?'

'I can't find him.'

'Who are you talking about?'

Harry stands quite still and listens. He takes Sherry by the shoulders. 'Can't you hear that voice?'

'What voice?'

'The one speaking just now.'

'Are you feeling alright?' Sherry puts her hand to Harry's forehead.

'Didn't you hear that? He just said 'Sherry puts her hand to Harry's forehead'.'

'I can't hear anyone,' says Sherry looking at Harry with concern.

'Shh, listen carefully,' Harry whispers. 'Don't you hear him? He just said 'Harry whispers'.'

'I don't hear anything. I think you should sit down,' she says as she eases him towards the bed.

'I don't need to sit down. I'm late for work.' He takes one last anxious look about the room before pushing past Sherry and slamming the door behind him.

Arriving at work, a flustered Harry heads straight to the restroom. Locking the door behind him, he stares into the mirror. 'Who are you?' he asks. 'Are you in my mind? Am I going crazy?' Leaning closer to the mirror, he stares deeply into his blue eyes as if some answer lay buried there. 'Ah ha,' says Harry. 'My eyes are grey, not blue. I would never call them blue. You're not me... then who are you?' Harry waits for an answer. There is a knock on the door. 'Won't be a minute,' calls Harry. He splashes his face with cold water, adjusts his tie, and takes one last look at his reflection before opening the door to his working day.

There are a few customers waiting at the counter as Harry approaches. He notices one of his employees check his watch. Harry is never late. Just ignore him,

Harry tells himself as he makes his way to the counter. With effort, he stretches his mouth into a smile and addresses an elderly woman waiting to be served.

‘What can I help you with today?’

‘I’m after paint for an outdoor wooden table.’

Harry knows just the one for the job. It is a waterproof paint compatible with wood.

‘You think so?’ says Harry.

‘Ah... yes.’

‘Sorry... what I mean is, I think you should go with a hard wearing paint. It’s not waterproof,’ Harry says smiling smugly towards the ceiling, ‘but it will last longer.’

‘Oh... if you say so. I was thinking of a muted colour, perhaps a beige.’ Perfect thinks Harry, who likes the colour beige very much.

‘Aubergine would be a good choice,’ suggests Harry. ‘I think aubergine goes nicely on any surface. It’s one of those versatile colours.’

‘Oh... well okay then... if you think so.’

Harry does not think so. He hates aubergine, but he strolls over to the paint counter and proceeds to mix a vile combination of black, grey and purple.

After sending the uncertain customer on her way, Harry looks towards the ceiling. ‘You think that I’m some sort of puppet, that you can read my thoughts and predict my actions? Think again,’ he says to nobody in particular, before spending the rest of his day second guessing himself and leaving many dissatisfied customers in his wake.

The following morning when Harry wakes, he lies quite still, listening for a few moments. ‘You’re still here,’ he sighs.

‘Where else would I be?’ asks Sherry.

‘I’m not talking to you.’

‘Harry, what’s going on? You’re scaring me.’

‘Can’t you hear that voice?’

‘What voice?’

‘The one speaking right now.’

‘Harry, maybe you should see a doctor.’

‘I don’t need a doctor,’ insists Harry. ‘Leave me alone,’ he shouts to the room.

‘Harry please...’

‘Shut up. Shut up the both of you!’

Sherry pulls the covers over her head and sobs.

At dinner that evening, Harry sits silently while Gary tells a protracted story about a holiday that they took to the coast when Sherry was a child. Although Harry is preoccupied with listening for a voice that only he can hear, he feels a trickle of jealousy at the story. His own childhood had held none of the adventure of his wife’s. After Harry’s father had left, just getting through each day’s routine was an overwhelming affair for his mother. Their house had reflected the disarray of their lives, everything out of place and out of order. His mother was oblivious to this, living largely within the narrow world of her own mind. Harry would fantasise that he was adopted and that his birth parents, who were organised and tidy people, were searching for him and would rush through the door at any moment to rescue him into a happy family life.

‘How would you bloody know?’ Harry snaps. ‘For your information, I was a very content child!’ Harry is in self-denial about the way he felt as a boy. At his outburst, Gary had stopped in mid-sentence and they all sit staring at Harry now, waiting for some sort of explanation.

‘Harry, what’s wrong?’ asks Sherry

‘Nothing’s wrong. Everything’s bloody terrific.’ Tears begin to well in Sherry’s eyes.

‘Tears begin to well’. ‘Is that the best you can do? Talk about hackneyed! Maybe it’s time you found something else to do with your time,’ laughs Harry.

‘Maybe it’s time we all went to bed,’ Gary says signalling for Thelma and Sherry to rise. The three of them hurry out leaving Harry alone.

Feeling as flat as a nail head, Harry leans back in his chair. ‘Oh, that’s clever, ‘Harry says sarcastically’. The similes are from my world perspective,’ he says to the empty room. ‘I’m not talking to the empty room and you know it. Come on, it’s just the two of us here. Admit that you exist and tell me what this is all about.’ Harry sits in silence as if he is waiting for some concealed presence to answer. Finally he shakes his head and says, ‘okay, if that’s the way you want to play it.’ He stands and opens the refrigerator, reaching for a bottle of beer. ‘You’d be mistaken,’ he says with conceit, pulling a bottle of chardonnay from the shelf. Harry does not like wine but he pours

himself a large glass anyway. 'Cheers,' he says and takes a deep gulp. He fights the urge to balk at the flavour and continues to drink.

The following morning, dealing with an intense hangover, Harry watches Thelma's tacky lipstick coated mouth move to the discordant tones of her voice. It cuts through his consciousness in an unintelligible babble. Sherry and Gary have gone to the supermarket and as it is his day off, Harry has nowhere else he needs to be. Thelma has just devoured a plate of bacon and eggs and Harry can see bits of bacon dangling from between her yellowed teeth. She is a truly repugnant woman, thinks Harry. 'You think you know me and you can read my thoughts?' he demands.

'Well, Harry, I suppose I don't really know you terribly well...'

'I'm not talking to you,' he says in an aggressive way that alarms Thelma making her jump. Harry laughs at her reaction and stands to leave.

'I'm not going anywhere,' he says. 'Now what?'

'Why don't you sit down,' suggests a confused Thelma.

Harry continues to stand, glaring obstinately into the room. After a few moments, he begins to feel foolish.

'I am not foolish,' Harry shouts.

'Oh Harry, I've never thought you were foolish. A little droll at times, but never —'

'Take this,' he says grabbing the back of Thelma's head and plunging his mouth to hers in a kiss that tastes of eggs. 'How's that for repugnance?' he shouts.

'Oh Harry,' exclaims Thelma, 'I've always felt that there was something between us.'

She moans as her greedy mouth finds his again. He pulls away to make his escape from the loathsome woman. 'Is that right?' he challenges before pulling her up and sweeping her along the hallway to the bedroom. Tossing her onto the bed, he pulls his trousers down and leaps onto her, raking her nightgown aside.

'Oh Harry,' she swoons as he pushes into her.

'How's this for aversion?' he calls to the ceiling.

Harry is momentarily surprised at his level of sexual performance before he finds himself flying backwards through the air and landing on the floor with his trousers around his ankles.

'What's going on?' bellows Gary, standing over him, fists held high.

‘He pulled me in here and forced himself on me,’ Thelma shrieks.

Harry stumbles to his feet, pulling his trousers up as he rushes for the door, pushing past Sherry who is wailing uncontrollably. He feels a momentary surge of compassion for her. ‘Shut up!’ he shouts as he pushes Sherry against the door with his hands around her neck. ‘How’s this for compassion?’ he cries. Sherry is struggling to take a breath. Gary grabs him from behind and throws him to the floor.

‘Hold him down,’ Gary shouts to Thelma, who throws her naked body on top of Harry, pinning his arms down with her thick thighs.

‘You think you’re in charge, that you can read my life with such confidence? You have no idea and your narration is so clichéd,’ Harry laughs. ‘Come on, ‘surge of compassion’, I’ve heard it all before. You’re so banal. And why the formal language? Throw in a few contractions, mate.’

‘Shut up, Harry,’ yells Gary as he tries to console a bawling Sherry who is slumped against the door. ‘Make him shut up, Thelma.’ She presses her bacon-scented hands over Harry’s laughing mouth, which makes Harry laugh even harder.

Harry is still laughing when the police arrive. As he is handcuffed and pushed out to the patrol car, their words wash over him: rape, attempted murder, hears voices, yells at people who’re not there.

Harry tries to explain to the police about the voice he hears. Nobody seems to understand, until they send in a psychiatrist who asks him all sorts of questions and believes that he can indeed hear a voice. Harry is relieved until the psychiatrist testifies in the court, calling Harry a paranoid schizophrenic. Harry shouts out that it is not true and he calls to Sherry and her parents to help him, but they will not look in his direction. He is dragged from the courtroom, yelling profanities at the ceiling.

Harry is committed to an institution for the criminally insane. The doctors will try many medications, but none will prove successful. He will spend the next seven years trying to convince them of his sanity until the fine thread that holds him together snaps. His mind will close down and he will simply stare into space for the rest of his days, never to utter another word.

Sherry does not visit Harry after he is institutionalised. She just wants to put her life with him, which was unsatisfying even before his mental health issues, behind her.

She files for divorce and once it is finalised, she sells the hardware store and

begins an affair with the real estate agent, Barry. Sherry experiences lust for the first time and a year later they wed and continue to live in the home that she once shared with Harry. Sherry's parents continue their stay in the driveway.

Sitting in their mobile home that is yet to travel very far, Thelma and Gary discuss how they much prefer their daughter's new husband to her previous one. As Gary watches Thelma, he wonders if he will ever be able to nullify the vision of her in bed with Harry, of her calves wrapped around his skinny white buttocks.

'Did you hear someone?' Gary asks as he looks about.

'Oh Gary, that's so funny. No Gary... or should I say Harry, I didn't hear anyone.' Thelma laughs in that frantic way of hers. Gary hesitantly joins in and Thelma does not notice his furtive glance towards the ceiling.

And so you see, life goes on and nobody misses Harry... not even me.