

THE QUARRY

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Skyfall

It was a way to fill in two hours and a velvet darkness that promised forgetfulness and escape, so Kyle bought a ticket to the latest Bond movie without even considering the name – *Skyfall*. He chose a seat at the side and settled in to the soothing murmur of other cinema goers, the softness of the seat and the gentle sound of cola and ice in a paper cup. He closed his eyes and fought that familiar sense; of a mindfulness of the present that teeters on the edge of the abyss... that threatens to fall and lose itself in the past.

The lights had no sooner dimmed for the previews than Kyle heard the giggle and ‘Shit!’, as popcorn was spilled and a teenage couple found their seats behind him. The chatter began directly as the boy commented on the kiosk worker, ‘That guy really was a prick – he just ignored us for about ten minutes’. Then a read-aloud text from the girl – her friend wanting to know where she was.

‘Don’t tell her,’ said the boy.

Their attention was diverted to the screen, but the boy determinedly maintained the chatter as the new instalment of ‘Madagascar’ was previewed.

‘Mum’s gonna drag me along to see that next week, wants me there to help look after my little brother.’

‘He’s such a freak, you know he pinched my phone and sent a message to Ruby, telling her she has a big ass.’

They had a comment about every preview. ‘She’s fat.’

‘He’s hot.’

‘What a douche.’

Kyle thought about turning around. He should have hissed at them or told them to keep it down. A year ago he would have, if Megan had been with him, she would have, without a doubt. She probably would have told them to shut up or get out. Now though he didn’t have it in him. Besides that – he was thinking that he used to be like that, that there was a time when as a fourteen year old, he crept sweaty-palmed out of home for the movies with Megan, and his heart was thumping and his mouth was dry and he was glad when she took his hand. They’d laughed their way through ‘The Blair Witch Project’ and shared a strawberry milkshake afterwards. She’d worn skinny jeans and a white blouse and had tied her hair up with a red ribbon, which he’d wanted to touch. So perhaps he should let the rituals of teenage romance take its course.

There was a faint scent now in the cinema, a perfume just out of reach and he half turned to the empty seat next to him before stopping himself. He took a sip of cola and swirled the ice, stretched his legs out under the seat in front of him and then tuned in to the couple behind again. They were weighing the merits of an actor in an upcoming sci-fi movie.

‘Ruby thinks he’s so hot but I think his neck is too long, see how his head just sits way up there?’

‘And he’s nearly bald anyway, I don’t really get what his movies are about.’

Their attention waned, but their conversation didn’t.

‘Hey, check this bruise out will ya? It’s kind of glowing here in the dark, all yellow and shit.’

‘That’s so freaky, how did you get it?’

‘Fell over, chasing my kid brother, knocked my knee on some rocks . . . didn’t hurt though.’

That little bit of bravado reached out to Kyle. He and Megan had discovered a mutual love for everything outdoors not long after Megan’s family moved into the

area when Kyle was ten. Exploring the bushland behind Megan's place, they had climbed or scrambled up whatever they could find, from small rock faces to the larger railway cuttings or the old willows with the ribbed bark that crowded down by the creek. One day they both scraped their right knees after running and falling among the mossy stones that lay scattered along the clear flowing water. Kyle had sat there barely holding back the tears while Megan laughed at him and called him a 'sissy'. Later, Megan's mother had stood them against the wall and hosed them off like baby elephants at the zoo before looking at the matching bruises and calling them a 'pigeon pair'.

Kyle thought that once the feature started the pair behind him might shut up.

They didn't, but their comments were drowned by the opening action in which Bond commandeers an excavator on the back of a moving train and uses it as a shield. Kyle was more interested in the backdrop as the train moved from a Turkish cityscape to the more scenic setting of sheer granite mountainsides and pine forests. He found himself automatically assessing the cliffs as potential jump sites and wondering what lay at their feet. By this time Bond had made his way onto the roof of the passenger section and was wrestling the villain for a gun as the train rolled over a high stone arch bridge that spanned an impossibly deep ravine. Eve, Bond's accomplice, had stationed herself above and was looking down her gun sights at the two men fighting atop the train. She hesitated despite being ordered to 'take the shot' and hesitated again before squeezing the trigger. She winged Bond sending him sideways and over the edge of the train. Kyle's breath caught as Bond fell head first, the camera refusing the urge to slow him down, in his grey suit he plummeted like a misshapen lump of granite into the swift flowing river at the base of the ravine. Kyle imagined the train rolling on into the mountains and Eve left there with the heaviness of the gun and its smell, the silence of the pines and the sky, broken only by the distant sound of that rushing river.

If he'd been thinking clearly he would have got up then and there and walked out of the cinema into the gathering twilight instead of sitting there while a nightmare underwater-world formed a surreal backdrop to the opening credits and the boy behind him commented stupidly on Bond's remarkable ability to hold his breath.

He really was about to say something a little later when the smug little comment, 'It's a sawn off shotgun', floated forward to the on-screen accompaniment of a man . . . sawing off the end of a shotgun.

In fact he was about to turn around and say, ‘You know about guns do you?’, and toyed with the idea of asking the precise make and model of the gun, or for an explanation of why shotguns are sawn off but realised he had no idea himself. Besides, there was that time, when he had pointed out a ‘Harley’ parked out the front of the corner pub. Only, when he had taken Megan over to admire its leather and chrome he’d noticed the ‘Honda Gold Wing’ insignia and hurried her away on some other pretext.

He and Megan had started some more serious hiking and abseiling together as teenagers, but the desire to feel the weightlessness of flight and air had made Kyle restless and Megan didn’t take much convincing. Their first attempt at hang gliding had been from a sea cliff on a day when the whitecaps on the Pacific looked small below but the instructor had suggested they wait for the wind to die a little. After lumbering to a take-off both had been struck by such a strong updraft that it blew them back up the slope to the tree-line, snapping a wing strut, puncturing a wing and leaving them laughing at their inability to fall. They had been introduced to base jumping by one of Megan’s friends and the jumping seemed to be a natural progression from the adventure sports that had come to dominate their life together. Their first trip out of Australia had been to jump from a span over a gorge in New Zealand generally used for bungy and from there they had ventured further afield. There was the terrifying morning they’d flung themselves from the bridge that joined the Petronas Towers in Kuala Lumpur and then a series of jumps in the south western states of America.

Kyle leaned back into the softness of the cinema chair, unable now to avoid thinking about the world of Bond and the world of certain types of men. Guns and motorbikes and falling from the sky without dying, men were expected to know about these things—he supposed. Although the last two years had shown him that such things often demanded a high price from boys and young men, and offered little in the way of redemption at the end of the process.

The action scenes on the screen had given way to the dark timbers, candlelight and cane furniture of a classic Shanghai hotel room. A perfumed Eve and a showered and towel-waisted Bond were getting dangerously close to each other, separated only by a razor. When she’d finished the shave, Eve’s tilt of the head and ‘That’s better’, were met by ‘Yeah’, from behind. He thought about the drama being played out so close to him and realised that the boy was testing out his desired role, weapons expert,

one shot wonder and smooth talker. Over the next hour Kyle was privy to a mysterious process of becoming, amidst the popcorn smells and darkness of the cinema.

The boy started to respond on Bond's behalf.

'I didn't think you could come up here', queried Money Penny.

'You can't', the boy replied.

He tried his hand at repartee.

Bond: Everyone needs a hobby.

Bad guy: What's yours?

Teen Bond: Kicking your ass.

He strategized like Bond.

'He's heading for the river dude, cut him off.' He even started to give advice to Bond.

'Leave him there under the ice, the bastard.' As if Bond was his sidekick now, Robin to the teenage Batman.

Kyle wondered what the girl thought of the magical transformation of her boyfriend into wise cracking lady's man secret agent. For the most part she sat there in seeming silence or simply murmured some indistinct response.

The silver Aston Martin DB5 represented the young Bond's best chance though. He confidently announced it as a '65 Aston Martin' and kept up the patter as it took its usual place in the action. At one stage Kyle felt a sudden kick and pressure on his back as up on the screen a car chase took place. He realised that the boy had shoved his foot into his chair and was pressing down hard on the accelerator as Bond's car came through the top of a corner.

Despite the initial discomfort, Kyle simply settled deeper into his chair and allowed himself to drift, back to that day, his car, Megan riding passenger. He was taking the corner on a rain slicked road just before dawn, jamming the old silver Skyline into fourth. The first glimmers of light could be seen to the east and the windows were down. It had rained last night and might rain again, the air a mixture of wet soil and eucalypt, but he figured they had at least three or four clear hours to get up there for the jump. Megan was looking west to catch the first glimpse of their next challenge. Her hair was hidden under a black cap but as she turned he caught a flash of red. This was to be their tenth jump together, but the first from an antenna mast. Their previous jump had been on their trip to the US, from the top of the sheer El

Capitan in Yosemite National Park. There had been a light cover of snow over on the top of the Half Dome across the valley and the westering sun had changed the usual grey tones of the rock to a burnished bronze. The valley floor had moved into early shadow by the time Megan launched herself into space. He watched her grow small and the red of her opening chute below was like the flare of a distant match struck over the darkening valley. He had followed, and felt like some comet falling through the sky, for a moment giving no thought to whether his chute would open or not. The air numbed his cheeks and the tops of the pines rushed up to meet him. He glimpsed the river, ice blue from snowmelt before being jolted back up into the air by his harness. He'd landed next to Megan on the washed gravel of the riverbank and they'd built a driftwood fire there that evening as a way of holding on to such a moment and such a place. They'd talked for a while under the stars but their voices disappeared into the vastness of it all and so they sat, back to back, and fell into a sleepless quietude.

They were planning on another trip, Europe this time, and had been scraping some money together by doing some training work for a small sky diving company and working odd hours in the sports store owned by Megan's brother. So this jump was an indulgence, and a recognition that they were linked by the intangible nature of air. They were to be the first to jump from this particular antenna mast situated on the lower slopes of Mt Picken, overlooking the coastal plain on the north coast of NSW. The base of the antenna mast was a little way back from the road and they cut their way through the chain link fence surrounding it. A last check of equipment, harnesses, canopies, footwear, first aid and they started their climb. The first sixty metres was a steel ladder but after that they climbed using the spikes welded to the inside of the antenna. They stopped twice on the way up, the first time to watch the sun lift above the horizon and the second at a small platform two thirds of the way up for the warmth of thermos coffee and a pastry. The highest antenna array was three hundred and fifty metres above the plain and they arrived there, short of breath, forty five minutes after starting their climb. The sun, now well above the horizon, had turned the serpentine river course silver. This was the rich farmland of the river delta and the fields were a patchwork of gaffer green and stubble brown, the ocean, mirage-like, glimmered on the horizon. The adrenalin and the breeze which whistled through the guy-wires made normal conversation difficult, but they didn't need to say much anyway.

As had become customary, Megan opted to jump first and eased herself to the exterior of the mast. She looked back at Kyle and smiled before turning her attention to what lay in front of her, the distant ocean and the patchwork below.

‘Three, two, one’ . . . the familiar jump, the abandoning of the self to the air, a gust . . . the shiver of a guy-wire, its tug and release, the sight of her hands spread wide to catch the sky and a glimpse of her face, pale under the black cap and then a flash of red as she twisted unnaturally, not like her at all, plummeting, misshapen, the wind now screaming.

He angrily pulled himself back to the cinema, shaking his head and focusing on the screen. Bond had found his moment of redemption. Kyle thought about how ridiculous that was, an impossibly smug bastard Bond, surviving falls and gunfire and wrecked cars, wisecracking and womanising all the while.

He gathered his rubbish and was about to stand up when he felt the movement behind him as the teen couple, quiet at last, stood to leave. He watched as they came into this field of vision and moved down the steps towards the exit.

In the half light, Kyle caught a glimpse of hair tied back with red.

He was alone again, back at the top of the antenna mast, the serpentine river, the wind through the guy-wires and the moment of his un-becoming – when the sky – just – fell.