

THE QUARRY

Asmono Truong

You and Me

They say first impressions are indelible. The surpassing of decades has failed to mute my recollection of you, dear Francis. A murmur, a pause, then an outburst. You certainly knew how to make an entrance.

The pause frightened me. Were you okay? How is my baby? I asked. Before they could answer, you screamed your presence. Like an athlete who screams of success in penetrating an opposition's goal, their pioneer and daring, you declared your entry, and overwhelming, into the world.

You cried, boy, could you cry! Such a talent in distress, my attention captured, instinctively and gladly were your needs above mine. Your pain is mine, and your cry

I could identify amongst ten thousand. They carried your wail to the adjoining room as doctors surrounded me as if to redirect the spectacle.

My thoughts were only of you.

‘You are losing a little blood, my dear. The heparin is being troublesome but we have it under control,’ a doctor reassured. I had been on various anti-coagulants since I began to suffer clots in my legs several years ago. One day I awoke to a swollen ankle, and that was that. I was at risk. A life-threatening risk, a doctor would bluntly advise. A little mass of misguided platelets, doing as designed but risking the very life they sought to repair.

Nevertheless my thoughts were only of you. Welcome. How are you? It is very nice to meet you. Welcome. These were my last thoughts before I lost consciousness. The stage was not yet big enough for the both of us. The light was all yours.

I awoke to a darkened room, the bedside aglow with monitors whose font resembled advertising neon. The soft thrum of the air conditioning felt deceptive given the staleness of air and moderate temperature. Its empty sound was all I heard and within the dissatisfaction I was reminded of exactly where I was, and who I was missing. Your name I called as I searched for and pressed the buzzer by my side.

‘How are you?’ a nurse asked as she entered. She swept to the IV on my right, weighing its contents with one hand whilst tracing its tubing with the other. My wrist was soon in her gentle grip feeling for the *glub glub* of my blood measured against the sight of her watch. She smiled. Her question was rhetorical, she would know if anything were wrong.

‘When is it? Where is my baby?’ I asked.

‘It’s 11 pm. You’ve been out just over a day. It’s Tuesday now, you came in on Sunday. You are doing well now. Your baby is healthy across the hall. I think they’ll be letting you go tomorrow.’

‘Can I hold him?’ I asked.

‘Sure.’ The nurse departed to return with my desire. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Francis.’

‘Isn’t that a girl’s name?’

‘It can be for both. I gave him that name because I didn’t know if it was going to be a boy or a girl. My only preference was for a child. It’s Francesca, Fran, and Frances that’s girly.’

I lifted your hand Francis and it fell to rest in the centre of my palm, just where a magician holds their coin. I thought if we played rock-paper-scissors I could choose paper, and would always win. My giant paper envelope would nullify any configuration you chose. Life is not always fair and you would one day break my heart.

‘Francis, you are perfect,’ I declared.

The nurse smiled. ‘I’ll be checking in on you every couple of hours. If there’s anything you need, then please just press that buzzer by your bedside.’

You were asleep through it all Francis. Through my examination and whispers you were probably unaware. But I raise no complaint because it was only joy. You lay there asleep upon the rise and fall of my chest and I thought to join you as I allowed myself to drift and fade into the night.

The next morning I heard footsteps shuffle into my room.

‘Good morning sleepy head,’ a man said.

I was already awake and had heard him, but far more attractive was keeping my eyes closed and focusing on your presence in my arms.

‘Good morning!’ the man called again. Someone gave my big toe a squeeze for good measure.

‘Hi,’ I replied.

I opened my eyes to see Dr Shaun’s arched form standing by the end of the bed. He studied the chart in his hands without expression and then made eye contact over the rim of his glasses.

‘All appears in order and we’re happy with where you are. You are both ready to go home later today,’ he said.

I willingly misunderstood. I too was happy with our location, I liked that we were being cared for and our needs attended to.

‘Can we stay a little longer?’ I suggested.

The nurse detected my disappointment.

‘It is hard, there is a day devoted to mothers after all, but you’ll be fine,’ she attempted. ‘We’ll have your possessions ready, and can call you a cab.’

‘Thank you,’ I obliged.

‘My wife just had a baby, it is a wonderful time. Will your husband be home?’ the cab driver said, a few minutes into the journey.

‘Um, no. It will just be us.’

‘When is he coming home?’ he continued.

‘Um, no. It’s just me. Me and the baby, alone.’

‘Oh.’

His shoulders tightened and his gaze upon the road became more intent. It almost felt as if I should apologise for his embarrassment. The rest of the trip remained silent but for the voice of the GPS and the tick of the fare meter.

We pulled up outside my home. The driver, whose discomfort still lingered, could not seem to look me in the eye.

‘How much?’ I diverted.

‘Um, have it on the house, miss. It is the least I can do.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive,’ he said with greater footing.

‘Thank you.’

I carried you, Francis, for nine months without struggle. But now as I carried you to the front door, my, were you heavy! I realise now how weak I was then, such was the focus of my attention. I pushed open the door to a greeting of stillness and quiet. A stain at the centre of the lounge rug marked where my water broke. You began to cry.

I rested the bassinet on the dining table and lifted you out. I was struck again by how utterly unique you were. I imagined that even if I wanted to, you would be

impossible to ignore. There would never be another like you given the infinite possibilities that added and wrestled their way into your creation.

‘Baby, what is it? This is home. Welcome to you. You and me. You and me now,’ I said, ‘You and me.’

Your cry eased, your face lost its creases. The bridge of your nose reminded me of a crinkle cut chip that decided to become one that was smooth. Do you remember the tune I hummed as I held you? We swayed with my knees as springs, our first dance.

‘Let me take you to your bedroom,’ I whispered. Your space I had prepared for so long! Clotted cream were the walls painted to the nine foot ceiling the colour of midnight. Galaxy patterned cornices of moons, planets, and stars surrounded the sky. You could always dream and would always be free. A cot, a rocker, table for changing, dresser, toys, mobile, dust bin, and lamp were at your service. I placed you sleeping Francis inside the cot, the faint expansion and compression of your chest told me I was no longer alone.

For the time we had together your father never came to visit. From the moment he knew that you were coming, a coldness was apparent in his touch. Contact was initiated more from my side, our conversations became increasingly brief, and messages were more typical than meetings. He never really even said goodbye, but just gradually disappeared.

There was common ground despite the thirty five year difference between the two of you. You were both confronted with the unfamiliar, and the expressions when each of you perceived distress or pleasure were undeniably similar. The comparison made him look infantile, and you, Francis, were imparted with a mature quality. You did far better than him. A light you shone where it was dark. An upswing you provided in a frightening descent. Hope and purpose you restored. A gift you were, but one that I could not keep.

It started with a peculiar morning. My alarm did not wake me, you did not wake me. The day instead arrived with a broadly lit room and the roar of a sports crowd from the neighbouring field, their cheers and groans rolled through the air. My

intuition was the first to assert that this was not my life. I wake up earlier and differently, my thoughts gathered and became desperate for you. I immediately leapt from bed and made for your room.

I found you cold and silent. Without cravings, without curiosities. Lifeless you were, and in bottomless agony I realised that your company was gone forever. My Francis. There are not enough tears to wash this pain away. Everything that you were was taken by what they called a Sudden Infant Death. Each of these words speak with an increasing tragedy and grief, that without warning, you, were gone.

Was this your secret plan all along? Did you dislike the circumstances you were in? Could I have done better? Was it simply that I was not good enough? They said that being a mother would be a difficult and heavy burden, but the curse of once being a mother is terrifying. Maybe my mum could sense my crying. She called that day.

‘Laura?’

‘Mum,’ I sobbed.

‘Oh darling, what is it?’

‘Francis is gone mum. He is gone.’

You are gone Francis, but just as my memories and emotions can endure the passing of time, so too will I always remember you and me.