

# THE QUARRY

**Emma Dorreen**

**Grace's Room**

*The edges of the house are indistinct — no matter how hard I look. It seems American though: solid, large, old. Not what we're used to. It has two storeys, plus an attic. Stone stairs ascend to a deep porch. Large windows front generous rooms. I can see no context to the house — no neighbours, street, or garden even. Inside, a long hallway — hardwood boards — leads to a substantial timber staircase.*

*Other details are vague, colourless. I'm uneasy in the house. I know there is a room here that I dread. Above. It is on the attic floor, under the eaves. This room and*

*the stairs to it are clear and precise. Inevitable. My skin creeps with the knowledge of the room. I gather all my courage, on an intake of breath, and look up the stairs: the long flight to the first floor landing, the shorter one leading only to the small door. There it is. It repels me.*

*I convince myself to climb. I don't want to. But I make it up the first flight. Then pause. Then a few more stairs. Almost all the way, just four steps shy of the top. I don't want to look. But I have to. Look into the room. It is empty, except for one small metal chair. There's no window. The low ceiling slopes to the right. The carpet is stained in gruesome patches and bears the marks of long-gone furniture. I want to be sick. The wallpaper is old, nasty, peeling, a faded figure of a daisy repeats itself; to the left then right, over and over. The print register is slightly off. The whole effect makes the room seem even smaller. Airless. Suffocating. The room is empty, bland, yet I sense crushing hands at my throat and the worst horror I can imagine.*

*All the time I am in the house, I feel the threat of this room above me. I visit in my dreams, often.*

'You never want to hear about the dream.'

'Why do you say that?'

'You say that it's not important.'

'Well... is it?'

She saw a flash of impatience disturb his carefully composed face. Kate was not going to answer. She wanted to win one. She listened to a single car glide past, down on the wet street below. The ticking clock on the wall grew louder to fill the silence. He tapped the rubber end of the pencil on the edge of the desk. Eventually, he began.

'Why don't you tell me about the dog?'

A win then, though Kate did not want to remember the dog.

'I'll tell you about Jodie Metzler.'

The pencil grew still, poised and ready. 'You never liked her.'

'No I did not.'

'You thought she was a bad influence. A threat.'

‘At the beginning, I was pleased that Grace had a friend.’

‘That was Britney.’

‘Yes, *Britney*. Metzler. The daughter. Nice enough kid. But so perfect, you know? Perfect hair, and teeth and skin and perfect little bosoms she liked to show off.’ Kate was on surer ground.

‘Anyway, Jodie. The first time I met her, was through the window of my car when I picked up Grace from school. She — Grace, I mean — had been asking to visit her new friend. I was reluctant. Hadn’t met the family. But then, this woman thrust her head through the car window and introduced herself. Shook my hand actually. Pushy. I thought she looked like a TV evangelist’s wife.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘You know, lacquered hair, too much makeup, glue-on fingernails. Perfect, but everything fake.’

‘You let her go,’ he prompted.

‘Yes, I let Grace go. She was so excited. We’d been in town for six weeks and this was her first friend. It’s my fault; I’ll admit I am a bit of a hermit. Grace is much more outgoing. And I knew she’d been staying home so much on my account, to keep me happy.’ Kate paused. She pushed her thumb up deep into her right eye socket, under the brow, to stem the coming ache. Surely that was enough for now, but he would, as always, keep pushing.

‘Can I get you something for that?’

‘How about a taxi to the airport?’ He didn’t even smile at the joke.

‘It was hard for you,’ he continued. The pencil was on its side, being rolled slowly back and forth with slender fingers.

‘Yes.’

‘To let her go.’

‘Yes.’

He was sitting to the side of the desk, close to the pencils in their perfect white cup. Every pencil sharp and new. Sitting with an ankle crossed over a knee, carefully

casual. She often wondered what he thought of her. Crazy? Paranoid? A hopeless old wreck of a once-attractive woman? Did she care?

‘Hard for you. But it went well?’

‘I suppose. I waited for her by the window. I didn’t know quite what to do with myself — that sounds funny doesn’t it? Silly, overprotective mother. Eventually Jodie dropped her home and Grace spent the rest of the evening talking about Britney and her house and all the cool things they had.’

‘Did James ever meet her?’

‘No. As you know, he is away a lot. And flying long haul is tiring work. When he comes home, he likes everything to be peaceful. So we have lovely dinners at home. Just us. Lovely family time.’

‘So it didn’t matter so much about New York. It had sounded like an adventure when James first suggested it. I’d thought it would be like being 25 again, visiting galleries, restaurants, all that thrilling noise and activity. In reality, though, Montville was much better for us. Good schools, quiet, handy for James for Newark. And I could always do a day trip to Manhattan. If I felt like it.’

‘Did you? Did you go?’

‘I did go. I didn’t stay. Too many people.’

He stopped fiddling with the pencil and wrote a note in his book. He didn’t do that very often any more.

‘You enjoyed the move?’

‘I... It’s very different to home. The seasons are opposite. They drive on the other side of the road. All the sounds are different. Like, in the morning, the birds, the garbage trucks...’

Kate turned and looked out the window, as if to confirm her idea of this difference. Grey, prematurely dark, the occasional passing car made a too-quiet *swish* as it cruised the wet road. Her whole new world a mystery behind fog and drizzle and unknown strangers behind closed front doors.

‘Do you want to talk about Grace?’

‘What’s the time? Do we have time?’ Kate stood straight up from her chair. ‘I need to go collect her.’

‘You forget. Relax. There’s no rush.’

‘Okay then,’ Kate smiled, sat. ‘You know I like to talk about Grace. She is properly beautiful, you know. Naturally. She doesn’t need to paint herself up, though her skin is going through that difficult time just now. She’s incredibly bright, “conscientious” — all her teachers say that. She can be a bit of a dork; I mean what sort of a girl still tells terrible corny jokes at 14? Just... the other day, for example, she said to me “What’s brown and sticky?” Do you know the answer?’

‘You tell me.’

‘A stick! I laughed so hard I choked on my cereal. A stick! Still makes me laugh. I know parents who look forward to their children leaving them but I never would. We do everything together. We even share a bed sometimes when James is away. I really have to go though. Can I see you tomorrow?’

‘Can we talk about the dog then?’

Kate would not reply.

‘Come tomorrow,’ he said. ‘I’ll be waiting for you.’

*I climb the long staircase. Slowly. My feet are leaden and the effort of each difficult step makes me want to retch. Sometimes I stop, breathe slowly. In, out. I distract myself by picking some lint from the stair, or examining my fingernails, as I take one more sickening step. Finally, I make it all the way to the top. I surprise myself. I am standing just a few paces from the open door of the room. The busy wallpaper seems to twitch, in time with the beating of my pulse. There’s a ringing in my ears. The carpet stains are grotesque. Suggestive. Animated — did they reach for me? Something very bad has happened here.*

‘You had a good night?’ He was looking at her, but the computer screen reflected blue in his glasses and she couldn’t see his eyes.

‘Yes, I slept well.’ *Liar.*

‘No bad dreams?’

‘You don’t want to hear about that.’

‘As you say.’ He smiled... reassuringly, Kate supposed. ‘Let’s pick up where we left off then. Grace was spending more time with the Metzlers.’

‘Yes, more time...’ The room was quite dark, apart from the glow of the computer. Outside, the grey sky was thickening to black with impending rain, making an early dusk. Kate felt, foolishly, that she was attracting the gloomy weather. But she must try, must give him something today.

‘Jodie,’ she began. ‘She’d do *anything* for us. Always a bit pushy, she’d break down all my excuses. You know, “Grace can do her homework here”, “we can give her dinner”, that kind of thing. The girls went bowling, to the movies. Jodie would drop Grace home. Very occasionally I was in the Metzler house — one of those big old timber places on Horseneck Road. I’d always be taken to the “parlour”, given a cold drink. I could look at all their happy family photographs and china collectibles, but I never saw much of the rest of the place. Jodie was always “super nice” though. Much too nice. That’s always suspicious, isn’t it? Being too nice? Like people who always say “I’d never lie to you”. Don’t you think?’

‘I wouldn’t know.’

‘You must have some opinion on that, some *educated* view?’

He only smiled. The blue light reflected off his glasses, so the eyes didn’t join in. ‘Please carry on.’

‘I’d like to. I’ll try. So. All Grace could talk about was the Metzlers. You know — how great they were. All the things in their lives that were so different to ours. I was losing. Then, one day, she asked if she could go to “service” with them — they’re into some born-again Christian outfit that sounds like a cult. I really didn’t like the sound of that. I said “no”.’

‘Until?’

‘I never said “yes”. But that’s enough.’ That was as far as she could go, in this miserable weather. Outside, the streetlights reflected off wet black asphalt. Her arms were folded, eyes far away.

‘So short today?’ He may have been annoyed but Kate couldn’t tell, couldn’t see his eyes. ‘Can we talk longer tomorrow? Can we talk about the dog?’

*It is a dreadful effort, climbing all the long stairs to the room. Crossing the threshold is hardest of all. It requires incredible strength. There is a force pushing me back, a force I can't see. Like heading into a wind strong enough to knock you down. The air is solid, pushing at me. I force my body sideways to make progress through the mass. There's a screaming in my ears, terrifying. I cover my ears. I cower. The wallpaper swirls and throbs. Dirty brown daisies won't stay still. There is nothing here, yet something. Something evil. I want to flee. Run. The force of the room finally pushes me back out the door, invisible hands pushing and shoving. Out, headlong, I stumble down stairs, through the hallway, outside into bright day. I don't look back.*

'Do you believe some people can see the future? Psychics, that stuff?' She sat straighter in the chair today.

'That's an interesting question; what makes you ask?' He had returned to his pencils, holding one midway, between index and middle fingers, flipping it left/right/left/right. It was still raining outside. So much moisture: the air itself a solid thing after all the rain.

'Forget it. Forget I said anything.'

'If you say so.'

'I do.'

'Okay then. Can we talk about the dog?'

'I'll start with Jodie.'

'Whatever makes you comfortable.'

'I'm trying to do a good job, you know.'

'Yes, I can see that.'

'I'm trying to get things straight. I don't sleep right. I dream. Which I know is irrelevant. But I know there was something bad about that room...' Kate took a moment. She looked at her hands in her lap. She had a tissue already, balled up tight in her fist. She exhaled.

'That Saturday, then, Grace was over with the Metzlers. I knew something wasn't right. Grace had been excited about this visit, but trying not to show it. Jodie

picked her up — my car was having some work done on it. She, Jodie, looked like she was hiding something.’

‘Was that important?’

‘Yes, it was *fucking* important.’ The pencil tapping grew stronger. He was unimpressed.

‘I’m sorry. I’m sorry for the bad language. Anyway, late in the afternoon, when I was expecting Grace, I got a call from Jodie. One of those “Face Time” calls, so I could see her shiny, fake face on my phone. She wants to know if Grace can stay overnight. They’ll look after her. They’re at a special retreat with their church. You know, that huge, weird Christian place out near the football club? Jodie said there was going to be barbecue and a movie and that the girls really wanted to stay.’ Kate’s attention drifted out to the wet street past the window. He drew her back in.

‘And then?’

‘And then — I noticed the wallpaper.’

‘What wallpaper?’

‘You know, from my *dream*. From the room. The *daisy* wallpaper I told you all about.’

‘You could see wallpaper pattern on a smart phone?’

‘You don’t believe me.’

‘I didn’t say that.’

Kate had had enough of this. No one ever heard her. So she would be silent. Arms folded again.

‘I apologise,’ he said. Kate was unmoved. ‘Please continue. I’m really very sorry.’

‘You’re so *smart*. Tell me,’ she put *her* hands on *his* desk, ‘if the room with the wallpaper is not important, why do I dream about it every goddamn night?’

‘I guess it must be important then.’ He was rolling his pencil again, with his piano-player fingers.

‘You don’t believe me. No one believes me. No one ever *listens*.’

‘That’s not true. I am listening. Please continue.’



‘Someone needs to find the room. *Please.*’ Kate un-balled her tissue and blew her nose gently.

‘If we could just put the issue of the room to one side,’ he said, ‘could we continue? I know you’re doing your best. We will work it out, you’ll see.’

‘All right. Yes. My best. I’ll try.’ A deep breath. It would be a heroic effort. ‘Well, behind Jodie was that wallpaper I hated and I knew right away that Grace was in danger. I was terrified. I tried to ask very calmly to speak to Grace. Jodie made excuses, but I said she wouldn’t be allowed to stay unless I spoke to her. Eventually, she did put her on. I told Grace to get out — to escape. She was in danger from these people. I’d always known it. I needed her home with me. Just “get out, get out, get out of that place and come home and I’ll explain later.” She told me not to worry.

‘I went to get my keys then remembered my car wasn’t there. I panicked. I tried ringing three taxi companies before finding one that would take me — it was a busy Saturday evening. I couldn’t bear the wait. I just wanted to run the five miles and get my daughter out of that place. But if I ran, the taxi would turn up and I wouldn’t be there and it would take even longer.

‘Finally, the taxi arrived. I practically screamed at the driver to hurry. It was dark by then and the roads were wet, with all the lights reflecting off the black asphalt. We had to go down residential streets to get out to the Metzler’s church and they’re not well lit. I kept urging the driver to hurry.

‘That’s when the dog ran out in front of the taxi. We hit it. We had to stop. I was desperate to carry on to Grace, but the driver insisted that we stop and take care of the damn dog. Even though it was already dead. So I went rushing from house to house, knocking on doors, shouting, screaming, tripping over hedges, trying to raise the alarm and find the dog owner. I had to get to Grace. No one answered their damn door. No one came to help. My daughter was in terrible danger. My knuckles were bleeding from knocking on doors. I didn’t know what to do.’

Kate had the back of her hand to her wet face, sucking the remembered blood.

‘Look at the dog.’

‘No.’

‘Look properly.’

‘It’s just a mutt. A stupid cross-bred mutt that had run out onto the wrong side of the road. You see, the traffic is all on the wrong side. Its bicycle was completely twisted and broken.’

Now the pencil was put away, back in its white cup. He had a reassuring hand on hers.

‘It’s in our house,’ Kate remembered.

‘Yes.’

‘The room.’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s our rented house. Of course. That room is there at the top of the stairs.’

‘You know it well.’ He smiled. She was doing a good job. He was pleased with her. She’d come back to the place she didn’t want to be.

‘Yes. I spent days and days in the attic room with the door locked, just looking at the wallpaper. She was coming home to me, you see. Borrowed a bike. She was a good girl. She knew I needed her home.’

‘But she looked the wrong way — the cars are all on the wrong side of the road. I remember it straight this time.’