

# THE QUARRY

Alec Mallia

Pass Over

I was paying to watch her die, every week.

I flew to the city when she was admitted and managed to get a room half an hour away in a share house. At four or five in the morning my eyes would open to the cracks in the roof, shying from the window light as if sleep was ever going to come back into the picture. Pulling the dusty cover off my razor, I'd make sure every single hair was cut to the skin. Little red welts would begin to wrap across my chin, and I'd remember why I kept the beard back home. Before walking out the door there would be three perfect circles, five scratched attempts and two games of noughts and crosses on the morning's paper. On the way there the red needle of the speedometer nestled exactly to each road's speed limit. When an orange light came on in front of me, I'd slam the breaks – safety first.

Eventually I got lucky and someone rammed straight up my backside. It was one of those utes that sat three tires above all the other cars on the road. Couldn't see a scratch on its actual body but apparently I messed up his precious bull bar. He was waving his arms about and screeching this-that and the other. I did my best impersonation of a copper, talking all slow like 'HAVE. YOU. BEEN. INJURED?'

He was having none of it, and by the time that got sorted I was at least an hour late.

Coming down the hill to the car park I'd circle round the first floor, finding the nicest little spot with a twenty-point reverse park job. On the colder mornings I smoked in the fire escape, eventually shuffling in the building to one of the reception desks. There was a lady there most Sundays; her name was Michelle Zhao. Grandma would always tell me that getting someone's name, 'and all of it,' was the polite thing to do. Of course I was terrible with names, worse with faces, and although this never bothered me, I had begun to try with Michelle.

'Michelle Zhao!' I called, with a sort of coughing, shuddery-ness from the lingering accident's adrenaline. She waved, almost crouching under her desk from her startling, but a smile nonetheless.

'It's good to see you Mister Davies, I'm sorry about your grandmother.'

I did the 'gloom' smile and nodded, 'Didn't think I'd be back again so soon, but here we are.'

She grabbed a nurse and eventually we found the ward, stopping outside her room. The nurse briefed me that things might not seem right with her mind, that her lungs weren't looking 'optimal' either. She was staying for monitoring.

'We'll see how she goes'.

The nurse opened the door, and I sat down on the plastic chair across from her. Gran tilted her head a little towards me. The bed was your standard, stiffish, folding piece of work that could be found in most hospitals.

'Close the curtains will you?'

They smelled of that musky, second-hand perfume – week old daisies shoved into a bottle of brandy. A slightly rotund man danced about on the television with his hair slicked back,

'I'm Jonathan Brian and this is MONEYGRAB!'

I cleared my throat and she raised an eyebrow towards me, 'How're you feeling Gran?'

She looked up and down, squinting.

'I know you.' Her brow scrunched up behind her glasses. I leaned forward and showed my teeth.

'I'm JONATHAN BRIAN and this is MONEYGRAB!'

She smiled a little, shifting in the bed and propping herself upright. A couple of nurses went by past the window. My foot started tapping on the floor, 'It's Ian, Gran...'

'Oh of course, sit! Please!' She smiled, nodding as I gestured to my already seated bottom.

'What have you been up to hey?' I reached forward before her hands squeezed the bed so hard their veins popped out.

I leaned back.

She raised an eyebrow and looked past me, leaning slightly out of the bed towards the figures moving past the door.

'You've done it Ros! You've won a thousand dollars!' The TV rang out, bells dinging. Bright green cartoon stacks of money flashing on the little box.

Gran coughed and smacked her lips together, 'Did she come with you?'

'Who?'

'You know who.'

I shoved my hands in my jacket, 'She's not here. She's not coming'

She, my mother, was dead. I know that for a fact. Saw the photos of the crash. Car was wrapped around a power pole, 'Speed suspected in cause of incident.'

As the years go by it's getting harder to recall what she had to do with me, let alone who she was. I remember a couple of beaches, being in the back of the car, a foggy birthday or two. Gran would slip details now and then before snatching at her cross and shaking her head. Her name was Kate. Gran said she

did 'bad things' and that they had to 'save' me from her. The photos I had of her were from her last couple of high school years. I remember the sound of the fights they used to have. You could feel my grandfather's voice in the walls. We used to have a wooden spoon in the house that was chipped where Gran smacked her with it a couple of times. After they'd sent me to bed I'd hear the intro to 'The Bill,' and sooner or later they'd start talking if she wasn't home – which was often in her last years. I used to sneak down the stairs and stick my ear through the paling to try and hear things. I'd never get more than a grunt out of Grandad, but Gran had a sort of hiss when she spoke about Kate. It was never good.

She died around my eleventh birthday. By then I hadn't seen her for two years.

The day after the funeral Gran found Grandpa in the garage with a hose from the Alfa's tailpipe to back window, driver side. We didn't speak of her at all after that, or at least I didn't ask.

'When bad things happen, we don't stare.'

Not that I ever had the chance to bring it up — boarding schools were Gran's tool of choice, military high schools with brief holidays. I'd spend those days away from her and that house. By the time I got to university I was already living a few hours away.

Gran's fear of 'her' and 'she' was the first time she was on our lips since those days.

But she forgot her the moment the words left her lips. We talked about Melbourne for a while and my 'big job' coming up before I left. I made sure to use vague enough terms to make sure she was both proud and uninterested.

Things complicated, and I moved back to the old house. My room had been stripped to a bed and empty drawers. Down the hall Gran had turned Kate's old room into a kind of study. There was just a leather chair and half-filled bookcase left. On the second Sunday night I sat in the chair and stared at the shelves. Any kind of book was stacked right next to its opposite.

*Encyclopedia Britannica – 45 Volumes, The Complete Works of William*

*Shakespeare*, a strong display of Tolstoy and a few other Russians. Beneath that an array of war books ranging from Gallipoli to the Battle of Long Tan. Just above the olive-drab spine of Gallipoli was a corner of a page or piece of paper. It stuck out between the back and the jacket. An envelope, shoved into the 'about the author' page. The front of it simply read 'Sorry'. It was unsealed, and the letter slipped out of it.

'I am sorry for what I did just now, Ian, Janet.' Handwritten in jittery blue pen. After that line a few words had been struck through a handful of times until they were scratchy blobs.

'...but I'm more sorry for what we did to you, Kate.'

Another bird's nest of tangled rewrites.

'I don't expect anyone's forgiveness or sympathy.'

There was nothing else. I left the letter on the chair and closed the door.

Before the fourth Sunday I was sitting on the edge of my bed. It had poured all day. The night was missing the rolling moans of buses, the splintering leaves and animal noises. It was all black after the window, and there was no sound to tell me otherwise. White shone up from the desk, and my phone crunched in vibration on to the floor. I scrambled to pick it up, answering the call but saying nothing as I pulled it to my ear.

'Hello? Mr Davies?'

I scratched my nose and brushed my hair to one side, 'Hello, who is this?'

'Mr Davies there has been an incident with your grandmother,' the earpiece crackled.

'What sort of incident?'

She had suffered some sort of stroke going to toilet, banged herself up pretty badly. The accelerator stayed pressed on the orange lights.

Michelle was working that night and she grabbed the doctor for me. 'Mental trauma' and 'risk of comatose' filtered through amongst muffled words. There was the slightest smell of orange on his breath. 'Not much time.'

We arrived at her room in the ward and the doctor pointed, 'She can hold conversation, but I would be careful not to give her stress or upset her'.

The letter was dangling on the edges of my sight.

I watched her little glazed eyes staring straight through to the wall, juddering sometimes towards the odd nurse that'd pass her by. When they brought her food they'd follow the trays to her lap. It took a few tries for the nurse to feed her but eventually she managed to pull through it. Her eyes rolled back into position — staring into nothing. I waited another minute before walking in. She was glued to a spot that was a few inches right of the television. Her face stayed the same regardless of what flickered across the screen. I sat next to her, and she didn't move a bit. There was an aerobics class on the television.

'Gran?'

Nothing.

'Gran?'

Nothing.

'I found the letter.'

Her eyelids twitched and she looked away. I pulled the chair closer.

'The,' she spoke, 'letter?'

She blew air, trying to heave into a full-body eye roll.

'Gramps said that you both did something to Mu- Kate.'

She stayed silent, and I watched the reflections in the window before she spoke again, 'I don't want to hear this now Ian.'

I pulled the chair beside her and shook my head, 'Did you ever ask her to stay? Did you ever ask what she needed?' I bit my lip, and for some reason chuckled.

'She left you.' Her hands gripped the bed, 'Left us.'

She looked at me for a second before snapping back to the other side of the bed.

'You never tried to be better for her?'

Her lips were shut.

'I need you to be honest with me Gran,' I said to the back of her head.

Nothing. Could barely see her breathing, but I could hear the whistle and hack of her inhale/exhale routine. She might have said something under the coughing and spluttering but I didn't hear it. I pulled at her shoulder and turned her around towards me. Her eyes would never meet mine.

That last Sunday night I drove through a red light on the way home. I parked in the garage and locked the old roller. In the house I made sure that every switch was off, every cord pulled, every curtain shut and every door closed. My effects were splayed out on the guest bed, and they fit decently back into my bag. The alarm was off, the door unlocked.

I started walking east.