

THE QUARRY

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The Worst Kind of Pain

I watched them quickly approach us as I held her back, her piercing shrieks and cries ringing in my ears.

‘My son! Michael, my son! Please!’ she yelled through tears, her hands balling into fists as she pushed her weight against mine. I underestimated how much upper body strength she actually possessed. The smoke made it harder to breathe. I can’t even imagine what it would be like for that little shit. Through the greyish haze they reached out to us, helping me hold Emily back.

‘Ma’am, I need you to stay calm for me. There is no way I am letting you back into the house. Now, if you give us two minutes, I’m about to send in my best men to

go and find your son. We'll get him out,' he shouted affirmatively, adjusting his helmet. 'For now, I just need you guys to stand back and try not to inhale the smoke, okay?'

'Two minutes?! This is my son! We don't have two minutes!' Emily cried, while going red in the face and forcing her body forward as hard as she could. She turned to me. 'Anthony, do something!'

'Em, they'll get him. It's gonna be okay,' I lied, attempting to pin her arms down. *There is no way I'm letting her in, that kid will have to figure it out himself.*

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Mum always told me that the fire alarm was important. And that the batteries needed to be changed often. Maybe I should've listened. I mean, when she would come home from work, she'd normally go right into the kitchen and start cooking dinner. Maybe she told me because it was my job to change them. But what about Anthony? He's taller; he could've done it. Mum even said that when he moved in he would help out more.

I smelt the smoke while I was doing my homework. I thought mum had just burned something like she always does, even though I didn't hear her come home. At one point I thought I heard a door slam, but I figured I was just hearing things. Kinda funny that she's a chef and she still manages to burn dinner sometimes. She calls it stress. Then the smell started getting worse and I figured something wasn't right. I went out of my room and ran downstairs. The lounge room was empty except for bright orange fire that was sitting on the couch and climbing across it. I screamed loudly and turned around to run back upstairs.

There was no one home, how could this have happened? My house is on fire, my house!

With each step I took, my stomach climbed higher and higher, tempting itself to fall out of my mouth. When I finally reached my bedroom I knew that I would need my big, grey jacket. I wasn't leaving without my dad's stuff. He died, well, passed away (that's what mum tells me to call it), three years ago in a car accident. I was seven. Mum let me keep some of his stuff and the rest we gave away; by force, you might say. I only kept the things that were important; like his fishing rod and his favourite tie.

The things that made him special. I didn't know how I was going to carry everything out on my own, but my jacket pockets were deep and I had to try.

They taught us about fire safety in school so I knew what to do. They told us to crawl out of the burning house so that you don't inhale too much smoke. I made a list in my head of the things I had to get that belonged to my dad. First thing I needed was all of our pictures together; they were in my desk drawer. Those would definitely fit in my pockets. I ripped my jacket off its hanger and rolled the big sleeves up. Mum said I would grow into it eventually. While fumbling with the knob of my drawer, I knew I had to act quickly or I wouldn't be able to breathe. I scooped my hands underneath my school clothes and threw them onto the floor. The photographs lay at the bottom of my drawer, concealed from the world. I was tempted to quickly flip through some of them but the sudden burning in my throat changed my mind. It started to become harder for me to breathe and an uncontrollable cough took over. Before I took another step, I couldn't help but notice the photograph that was stacked at the top. It was the first time my dad had taken me fishing on the water. I had my short blue rod dangled over the boat with my dad standing behind me, helping me.

'Dad, I can't breathe in this life jacket, can't I take it off now?' I had asked, struggling to lift my arms up. I could feel the sun burning down the length of my back and neck and the choppy waves made standing still look like a job. But I was happy regardless because my dad was about to teach me how to cast a line. He had told me to keep an eye on the string as it flew out and to be aware that if it got tangled, you were screwed.

'Your mother will kill me, so no,' he had answered with a smile, looking over to my mum who was preparing lunch. He moved behind me and placed his hands on my shoulders, preparing to help me cast for the first time.

'That's right, leave it on, sweetheart,' my mum interrupted, reaching for the camera that sat at the top of her bag. My mum had always been one to savour every moment; 'for the future!' she would say.

'Oh please, Mum, no,' I complained, rolling my eyes as she prepared to take the photo. She shifted her body towards us and gestured that my dad and I move closer together. 'One day you'll thank me for all these photos, Michael.'

'Smile!'

Carefully, I placed the photos within my pocket with one hand while the other covered my mouth. I could feel my eyes stinging as the smoke had started to seep from under my door. Tears started to run down my face when I realised that I had been storing away fear. My mind went to my mother still stuck at work having no idea what was going on. That the house we've lived in together for as long as I can remember was currently falling apart. Or Anthony, who should have been home by now. He married my mum last year in Fiji a week before my ninth birthday. I wasn't allowed to go because I was 'too young'; well, that's what he told me. When we first met he would just stare at me, like I was an insect that needed to be terminated. I don't think he wanted to be a father.

'This is Anthony,' my mother said with a glowing smile. 'He's going to be living with us from now on. I know you two will get along.'

We didn't.

One of the things I had managed to smuggle into my bedroom was my dad's favourite tie. He'd wear it when he knew he would have a good day at work. My dad enjoyed his job a lot and it made me realise that I wanted to be as happy as he was when I grow up. Mum said he was a businessman, which is why he was always in a suit. My dad's tie was hung at the back of my cupboard, so no one would think to steal it. He had promised that one day I would have it, so I was just keeping up his end of the deal.

'Michael, one day you're gonna have to know how to tie one of these,' he told me one morning while standing in front of a mirror. 'All men have to learn how to do it. My dad taught me and now it's your turn.'

'But I'm not a man yet, dad,' I answered while watching his hands wove around the tie. The way his hands moved looked like magic.

'Who says you're not?'

I shrugged my shoulders in response.

'You do your homework every day, don't you?'

I nodded.

'You help your mum with the dishes when I'm not there, don't you?'

I nodded again.

‘Well, it sounds like to me that you already are a man. They get things done even when they don’t want to. Now come closer and watch how I do it.’

With a deep breath, I started to walk towards my bedroom door. I didn’t know what to expect on the other side but I knew it couldn’t be good. For a moment I thought it was stupid to have gone back for the photos and tie, but I couldn’t help myself. It was Anthony who forced us to give the stuff away, probably from fear that my mum would miss my dad too much. My heart wanted to grab the fishing rod too before I left, but there was no time. I started to cry knowing that I probably would never see it again. I hoped my dad wouldn’t be mad at me for losing it.

I finally built up the courage and forced my hand around my doorknob. I almost wanted to close my eyes as I turned it but I knew I would have to face the outside of my bedroom eventually. I felt it was best to ‘take the plunge’ as they say and fling the door open. I gasped as I saw that the fire had almost reached the staircase. Carelessly, I threw the tie around my neck and hesitantly walked to the top of the stairs, my hands glued to the railings. As I walked I could reassuringly feel the photos, which moved as I did in the depths of my pocket. I was determined to keep them safe. When I looked over my heart began to race; the living room was gone. The coffee table and the couches had been reduced to nothing. My head had started to spin and my coughing intensified but for some reason I couldn’t bring myself to leave. I couldn’t bring myself to be scared. I was just sad. Every memory that had been created and lived through within this house had vanished. Crumbled. The stitching of my house had come undone.

The wooden tables that circled around the dining table had been forcibly chiselled down to sharp points. The smell of burning wood was normally a favourite of mine, but right now, all it did was fill me with hate. With a heavy heart I watched as the fire seeped into the heart of the dining table and begin to swallow it whole. Every night at dinner my dad would tell a terrible joke to make my mum and I smile. Sometimes we’d laugh, but we’d mostly just smile at how terrible they were. It was our version of saying grace. Now that memory had been replaced with ash. I didn’t know if I was going to make it to the front door.

It felt like it had been hours since I moved and my head felt as if it was about to fall off. They told us at school what would happen to you if you inhaled too much smoke. My stomach had started to feel queasy and churn violently. My lungs felt as

heavy as cement and each breath I took became increasingly difficult. One of the neighbours must have seen the smoke by now. Did they call for help? Do they know I'm inside? Does mum know? I couldn't wait any longer; I needed to get out of here. As I walked down the stairs, my vision began to blur and my body started to droop uncontrollably; I was tired and weak. It was bad enough that the fire and smoke had torn my house apart; now it was trying to take me down.

I wasn't gonna make it to the bottom of the stairs.

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When they had told me I had gone into labour I panicked; I wasn't ready. James had thrown in me into the wheelchair, screaming for the nurses to help. My contractions had started to appear every couple of minutes and I knew it was time to be taken to the hospital. James and I had been married for only less than a year but we were itching for a family. I could only see white fly past me as James raced me down the hallway with two nurses following speedily behind. He was running so quickly, I thought I was going to fall out of the wheelchair.

'James, slow down, it's okay,' I cried out, my hands cupping the gigantic bump that was searing with pain. I didn't really know if I was coaxing James or myself. It was then I realised that you could read as many books as your mind could handle, take as many breathing and nursing classes as you could afford, but you'd always end up unprepared. The nurses helped me onto the bed as I held my breath. They propped me up and leaned me against a stack of soft pillows that catered to my aching back.

'You alright, Em?' James asked while squatting beside me and reaching for my hand. He had looked more nervous than me.

'Shhh,' I replied immediately while squeezing his hand cruelly, feeling my nails dig into his skin. 'Just please...don't talk.'

'Here if you need me,' he smiled, knowing I didn't mean to be so rude.

Minutes had turned into hours and I still had not seen or held my baby. I had reached my limit. Somehow through my constant screaming and crying I had managed to tell James to get the nurse nearby.

'Everything all right?' she asked cheerfully coming around the corner. I almost hated how happy and carefree she was.

‘How...much...longer,’ I groaned, squinting my eyes shut. She pouted her lips pitifully and walk to crouch near my legs, assessing my dilation.

‘You’re at 8 centimetres, you shouldn’t have long to go, dear,’ she told me softly. ‘Just hang in there for a little more.’

James tended to the building sweat that was now dribbling down my forehead and onto my lips. I could feel my heart race; it felt like it was bouncing off the inside of my chest. My body was in agony and I was ready to give up.

‘I can’t do it anymore, James,’ I whimpered, shaking my head as I spoke. ‘It hurts so much, I can’t.’

‘You can, Emily,’ he replied, stroking my hair softly. ‘I know you can.’

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‘Sweetheart, look!’ I said to Emily, pointing to the dark shadows that were slowly emerging from the house. I squinted my eyes and tried to find Michael; either being carried in their arms or slowly walking behind them. As they got closer I could see the boy draped over one of their shoulders. He wasn’t moving.

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Everyone says that labour is the worst pain imaginable.

They’re wrong.

Losing a child hurts more.