

# THE QUARRY

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## Bad Faith

I dreamed I was rolling an immense boulder up a hill. I awoke before I saw how the dream would end. The earth makes another rotation, the sun rises, the sun sets, the waves crash again and again. I had to go to work.

I did some push-ups and sit-ups to curb a cubicle body. I showered and dressed. For a moment in the dark I watched my girlfriend, Sarah, sleep. We had met a few times at parties. We had the same three conversations every time we met, one of which was how we had the same two conversations every time we met. Now we didn't speak at all.

I kissed her on the forehead then kissed the baby on his. He was an accident. When Sarah told me she was pregnant I wanted her to have an abortion. I didn't have

the nerve to bring it up. Why pluck this child out of nonexistence only so it will fear the same nonexistence hurtling towards it. I could frighten it with religion like I was. Feed that down its throat *foie gras* style, like my father did. When I was little my father woke us in the middle of the night saying the end is now. He made us get in the car and drove into the middle of nowhere awaiting Christ's glorious return. On the way home Mum hummed "Coming Round the Mountain" and Dad demanded her to shut up. After that Dad broke down and Mum took over. She sent me to a Montessori school so I could work out what I was into. My parents were very different people.

It was still dark when I reversed out the driveway. I remember driving past people waiting at bus stops or in cars in congestion when I was at university. People on their way to work before the day had awoken. I knew I never wanted to be that person. I became that person. I never wanted to be an inmate of this sandstone university then that job with its lack of prospects and rungless ladder. I became that person. I started at the law firm out of uni as a paralegal, thinking it was a good deal, delaying desires, hopes and aspirations because the money was good. I was closer to ten than I was to forty, then. Now I've been of legal drinking age longer than I haven't.

The traffic was frozen. A woman in the car next to me did her make up in her rear-view mirror. Sometimes I wished a plague would thin out the herd like wildfire freeing up these lanes a little.

I had the radio on. The news told me how someone was mugged at filthy syringe point, how the Lolitas of someone of coin or cloth had grown up and come out against them, how a wife beat her husband to death with a frozen leg of lamb, how a man armed with a sandwich and a coke was shot down while a helpless rich man's child was exonerated for influenza. And then, on top of that, my tooth hurt, number two-seven or two-eight (Dad was a dentist).

Work was a lot of the same. I repeated what I had to repeat. I tongued my tooth and sometimes I had to photocopy something. This was never good; there was always someone else there. I waited and the person in front of me sneezed.

He looked at me. 'You didn't say bless you,' he said.

I walked away.

Then came lunch. I spoke two languages while being surrounded by others who struggled with one. A young guy sat next to me. Out of all the spare seats he chose that one.

'Hey, man,' he said, 'when they say jelly wrestling do they mean KY or Aeroplane?'

I didn't work in a law firm. I was immersed and playing the role of someone working in a law firm.

The day ended. It was dark and when I looked up I couldn't see the stars. I sat in traffic and the news was just as bad. I pleaded for that plague.

Later, I looked across the table to my girlfriend, a glass of wine in front of both of us. She pretended not to notice that I would finish the bottle and I pretended not to notice the cigarette smoke clinging to her clothes. Our relationship was built on pretending. I could see the glow of primetime TV where confectionery rotted the teeth of amorous lovers, but they've already done all their smiling. Sarah spoke to her mother on the phone. Her grandfather could predict the weather with his knees and her grandmother was dying of cancer with liver rot and alcoholic dementia to boot. She'd tell stories of her past, that she had danced the Charleston to the troops when in fact with calloused fingers she had sewed pockets in trousers in perpetuity.

The earth makes another rotation, the sun rises, the sun sets, the waves crash again and again. And there will come that dream.

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A few weeks later there was a work cocktail party at an upmarket bar close to the office. We celebrated a case we had won. I had very little to do with it. I didn't look forward to it. Everyone talked shop, if not they talked about money and what they'd bought or were going to buy. That's how they searched for their happiness, like King Solomon, *nouveaux riche*. I'm sure they all had sore elbows from patting themselves on the back.

I drifted away and sat at the bar. I talked to this girl. She would have been mid to late twenties, I think. I asked about her accent. She told me her name was Charlotte

Dumonde and came from Belgium, a little town called Ecaussinnes. I asked her where that was.

*'C'est près de Soignies et La Louvière,'* she said.

I shrugged my shoulders. She told me it was about an hour from the French border. She told me she had worked in a *chapellerie* in Lyon and had travelled down to and through Madagascar. She told me she would do it all again soon.

We laughed and her lipstick stained her drink's skinny straw which, while she made a point, she pretended to smoke real elegant and Holly Golightly-like, tapping away imaginary ash. The moment reminded me of when I first met Sarah. It sparkled like jewellery and champagne. The drinks caused a blossoming glow to radiate in my chest like a sacred heart. We were the kind of drunk where every idea was a good idea, all of which couldn't be done too soon. Later, I backed her up against a wall and kissed her and put my hand down the front of her jeans. She was doing everything I had wanted to do but never did. For years I rationalised my stagnant existence and arrested development, my fundamental dissatisfaction. I looked for right in what I knew was ultimately wrong. I looked for something where I knew there was nothing. That's why we find faces in clouds, a man on the moon and the Mother Mary in toast.

Charlotte went off to the bathroom. I went back to the bar. She didn't return and I couldn't find her.

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The baby cried. I ignored it like it was someone else's. I looked at Sarah across the table. I thought I'd feel something. I thought there'd be a cocktail of guilt and the desire that caused it. What put my head in a whirlwind was the complete lack of guilt I felt.

Over the coming days and weeks I thought of Charlotte. She'd left a lesion on my brain. No, that sounds contaminating where what she left was enriching and mesmerising, like a murmuring of starlings creating geometries. I kept going back to that bar in hope of finding her. I didn't. I packed a bag and left it in my car. I stared at it in traffic every morning and evening. The news was always bad. That plague never

came. I didn't want any of this. I wanted out of Maggie's Farm. I'd rather ask forgiveness than permission. I'd rather regret action than non-action. I was ready to be happy.

One morning, I left. I wrote a note of no more than ten words. Love was not one of them.

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I flew to Lyon via air conditioned Dubai. I looked out the window at the incomprehensible desert receding into city.

It was raining in Lyon. *Pluie Prudence* road signs advised. Straight away I looked for her. I found the hat store she had told me she had worked at. The English lady who owned the store told me Charlotte had visited a week or so ago. She told me Charlotte frequented a café not too far away.

I went to Le Lion, on the corner of Quai Saint-Antoine and Rue de la Monnaie, and asked monsieur, who stood behind the counter next to hanging salamis, if he'd seen her. He said he had. He said she came in every day. I did the same. I'd sit by the window sipping a coffee in the morning and a beer in the afternoon, looking up at the basilica on the hill which overlooked the entire city. Every morning and afternoon I asked monsieur about Charlotte. He always said I missed her until one day he said he hadn't seen her at all. I went back to the hat shop. I was told Charlotte had left for Madagascar. I was told the name of a place Charlotte had mentioned. I took the first flight I could.

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If the Garden of Eden was the beginning of the earth, Madagascar was the end. I took a train destined for Charlotte. The carriage I rode was painted and by the door was written: *1ère Classe*. The second class carriages weren't painted at all. I shared

that carriage with a couple. They were white, bovine tourists, fat fucks in jeans and joggers. I turned and ignored them.

At one of the stops were merchants and markets and hungry children. There was a bouquet of black begging hands, bare chested girls with glockenspiel ribcages or bulbous bellied boys. I felt like a cunt because earlier I got annoyed by the heat and that my clean, bottled water wasn't cold enough.

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I ended up at a colonial mansion. One of those buildings the French left behind with the language. This was the place I'd been told about. There were only two others staying there and they spoke English. Christian was a teacher from Cameroon with African accented French and Ganesh was a paediatric surgeon from Malaysia of Sri Lankan blood.

I was told they'd seen Charlotte a week or so ago. She had said she was going away for a bit but was coming back. They told me I should stay there until she returned. She had left some possessions so they knew she would. I liked this idea.

We all sat out on the white veranda overlooking green hills. A soft rain fell. Ganesh told me he had left his two daughters and wife at home to work with *Médecins Sans Frontières*. He asked if I had a wife or kids. I said I didn't.

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I did nothing all day while Christian and Ganesh worked. I drank gin and tonics to ward off malaria and listened to the BBC World Service on a crackling radio. Something had gone down in Liberia, or maybe Libya. I don't remember.

Sometimes I took walks down to the markets where in wicker baskets lay cathedrals of cumin, cayenne and turmeric. Chilli peppers towered taller than the squatting children peeling pistachios beside them. All I could smell was fish and sweat. Car horns honked and vendors hawked, there was a pounding of a goat-skinned

drum and a street preacher with tattered black bible in hand warned of hell and sweated like a soul singer.

Most of the time I stayed at the mansion, sitting out on the balcony drinking those gin and tonics or local beers surrounded by the stray cats and dogs who seemed to reside there. Cats roamed with their tails held high showing off their assholes. Next to me a dog whimpered in its sleep. One million stars burned like a furnace and I imagined somewhere someone was awaking unwillingly for work.

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I knew Charlotte wouldn't return. I left post-it notes on my vanity mirror. I wrote: *you piece of shit, you worthless fuck*, et cetera. I changed them every week. They quickly held no effect over me, they became as normal as brushing my teeth. Ha-ha, self-loathing, the black truffle of brain diseases.

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One afternoon Ganesh returned with wilted posture. He slumped in a chair on the veranda and demanded a beer. Clouds gathered and the sky turned a gun-metal grey. A storm would soon strike. He lost a six year old in surgery. He blamed himself and cursed the static air around him. I thought of my son.

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I don't know how, but Christian and Ganesh found out I had a girlfriend and son and had left them. They felt they had scalped open my chest, my true self spilling out.

'Shame on you. You've seen the children here beg and plead,' Christian said. 'You know the motherless and fatherless ones and the *restavecs*.' *Restavecs* were

children staying with relatives who took advantage of them. *Restavecs* were common day Cosettes.

Christian and Ganesh didn't want me around. I told them I wasn't leaving. They ignored me. I'm sure a few more bad surgeries or a mother dying in childbirth would make them forget all about my sins.

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A few weeks later Christian broke his silence and said he'd heard word about Charlotte. He wouldn't look me in the eye. He said she was only an hour away by train and that he'd take me. The train left in the evening and he said he'd go straight there after work and we'd meet at the station. I packed all my things. Ganesh wouldn't shake my hand. He asked me what my girlfriend and son's names were. I lied about both. I knew he saw right through me.

At the station I couldn't find Christian. I boarded and walked down the crowded carriages. He wasn't there. I knew he had no intention of getting the train.

I was in unpainted *2ième Classe*. The train rocked and swayed and everyone stared. Maybe because I was the only white person, maybe because they too could see my chest bared open revealing everything like an old lady dropping her prescriptions showing the world all that infects her. I understood the pounded gavel, the disdain and hatred held by Christian and Ganesh and everyone cramped inside that train for its fourteen hour crawl.

Some part of me still believed the train would lead me to Charlotte. It didn't. There came that dream.