

THE QUARRY

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Rip the Stitches

The crowd was all scraps of unfamiliar skin and dark clothing; black dresses and suits circling her in the church foyer. The chatter faded and swelled like an unrelenting tide and Lorraine, pulled to and fro by murmurs of sympathy, let herself be swept away.

What all these people had in common with Sally, Lorraine had no idea. But, she thought, people just show up at funerals. They were like weddings that way – disguised in the right attire and disposition, anyone could consider themselves welcome. Offering their condolences filled attendees with a calming sense of having done their bit, and what's more, that evening they could turn to their spouse over the dishes and say, 'Well, darling, I went to so-and-so's funeral today. It was a lovely service.' Then their spouse could ask who preached and whether the sermon was any good, and perhaps for a

moment or two they both might feel very sad about the idea of death, but eventually they would wipe down the sink and watch some television and forget about it all.

Standing behind the kitchen servery window, a woman with long hair pinned into a perfect bun was explaining to Lorraine how very much her sister would be missed on the morning tea roster. Apparently no one had been quite as good as her at mixing the cordial the way the kids liked it. Incapable of really listening, Lorraine could only wonder at how early poor Susan was going grey. She herself was nearly seventy-two, and only just now starting to gain silver threads around her ears.

Realising how few nods and ‘hmms’ were required for Sue to continue in her reminiscences, Lorraine allowed herself the freedom of gazing through the grubby glass of the door behind her. Outside, the grey November sky was falling down in rivulets, dripping through the shadesail and flooding the lawn.

Not for the first time since her sister’s death, Lorraine found her thoughts taking her back to Papua New Guinea.

In the Papua New Guinean ‘dry season’ it had rained every second day. In the wet season, the downpours became so frequent that twenty-four rainless hours seemed unnatural. Mostly the deluges would arrive in the afternoon, right in time to drench her young sons’ games of tag at the Ukarumpa International School. These didn’t bother her, so long as she got her washing off the line in time. When the rain came in the morning, though, she would wake up cold to the wind and the melancholy patter on the corrugated iron roof. Her husband James would often be long gone, the ghost of a kiss pressed to her cheek as he left to drive to the villages that kept him away from her for days at a time.

Her favourite storms by far, though, would arrive angry in the evenings, coming in clouds that pulled the dark with them, swallowing up the town in starless black until the sky ruptured, dividing, dividing, and dividing again with eerie streaks of white that lit the world for tiny, staggering moments. In the early years, those were the times she had been most thankful that her older sister had joined them on the mission field. The locals were used to such displays – even the expats who had been there a little longer than them (like that irritable American schoolteacher, Judy) weren’t particularly impressed. Only Sally shared her delight. When it rained at night Lorraine would ask James to puff up some popcorn on the stove, or she would make something else special,

like vegemite on toast, the salty taste a reminder of home. Then she, her boys, and Sally would sit out in the screened verandah watching the ‘lightning show’ being put on just for them.

Sipping at her mug of weak, church-kitchen tea, Lorraine brought herself back to the present with some exertion.

‘Sue,’ she said, keeping her voice as polite as she could. ‘I’m just going to duck to the ladies, if you don’t mind.’

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Natalie had cried. She hadn’t expected to. It wasn’t that Sally wasn’t worth crying for; Natalie just didn’t cry a whole lot.

Standing in the back pew, though, the organ echoing out the melody of ‘When We All Get to Heaven, Heaven’, she had been swept back to her last morning at school in Hong Kong. Ten years old, walking dry-eyed up the stairs to her classroom, praying to Jesus would he please, please, please let her cry? You couldn’t leave your home and your friends, forever maybe, without crying. It wasn’t right.

As it had turned out she needn’t have worried. Her teacher had given her a scrapbook with photos and farewell messages from the whole class, and Natalie was choking on the sobs before she realised they’d begun. Her best friend, Ling, had drawn flowers around her goodbye note.

‘Niu,’ it said – for that had been her name back then – ‘we’ll always be best friends. I’ll see you again when I’m rich enough to fly to Australia or else in heaven maybe.’

Twelve years later, they hadn’t seen each other since. As the music had faded to a final, hollow note, Natalie thought she might have been crying for Ling as much as Sally. Both of them were gone, were no longer her friends but memories instead, to be enclosed in photo albums and pocketed away until she needed to cry again.

It was after the service, when Natalie was reaching to dab at her eyes with a scrap of paper towel in the bathroom, that the seam under the sleeve of her dress split neatly down to the strap of her bra. It was the only black dress she owned that fit the occasion, and apparently she’d bought it a little too long ago, as it no longer fit her. Hearing the noise as it tore, like the slow undoing of a zipper, she swore under her breath.

Remembering immediately that she was in church, she flinched, lamenting the dirty habit that high school had taught her. Closing her eyes, she silently apologised to God and held her breath, hoping that whoever was in the occupied stall behind her hadn't heard.

She heard a flush, and the lock clicked open.

Natalie watched in the mirror as the occupant of the stall exited behind her, and cringed at God's sick sense of humour. She recognised the woman, of course, The black gored skirt, the neat court shoes, the fragile skin worn down from its years of devoted service to the Lord – it was the same woman who'd given the eulogy not half an hour ago. This was Sally's sister, and here she was, caught with a foul mouth and her underarm on display.

'You wouldn't happen to have a safety pin, would you?'

It wasn't the most refined way to introduce herself, Natalie knew, but 'I'm sorry for your loss' when your not-so-recently-shaved underarm was making a bid for freedom from your dress didn't seem appropriate either.

The woman mumbled something about a sewing kit somewhere, reached into her bag and began to rummage. Natalie felt for a moment like she was watching Sally again, digging through her ridiculous knitted bag before scripture class on a Friday morning for her lipstick, her pen, or the bag of lollies she brought along to reward the gremlins for correct answers. She smiled at the memory as the woman pulled a small purple case out from the depths of her handbag. 'Sally had a Mary Poppins bag too.'

Sally's sister – Lorraine was it? – studied Natalie. 'You knew her.'

It was an accusation, Natalie just couldn't figure out what of.

'I did, yeah. We taught scripture together. She was a great lady. All the kids loved her.'

Lorraine pulled a needle from the case and began to unravel a small bobbin of black thread. 'What's your name?' She asked, snipping the thread with a pair of nail scissors.

'Natalie.'

'I can sew this up for you, Natalie.'

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Lorraine's new acquaintance stood patiently, one arm in her dress, the other slid out as the older woman worked.

Sew it shut, sew it shut. The mantra hummed in Lorraine's mind as she stitched the cheap cotton together under the fluorescent bathroom light, her hands not quite as steady as she had expected.

Sew it shut – and the slice of the needle seemed to be her only defense against the memories that threatened to gush free and swallow her.

Sew it shut – but it was too late, already she was back in Papua New Guinea, careening past mudslides and over rickety bridges in the backseat of the jeep, tears clogging her throat, clutching a cloth around her son's finger as the pain dragged him into unconsciousness.

The whole damn thing was pulling open now, coming back no matter how hard she fought it.

They had been on a village trip some six hours drive from Ukarumpa. James was to work with a local translator while Lorraine visited families in the village with Dean and her younger son, Harry. Harry in her arms, she was in the middle of a halting Pidgin conversation with the matriarch of a household, when she heard Dean scream.

A teenager carried him from the courtyard where he had been playing into the thatched room. A crowd of bodies, of men with pierced noses, of women with their bare breasts dangling to their stomachs, gathered outside the door, yelling words so fast that she struggled to comprehend. 'Pen bilong em han!' Dutifully, she looked to her son's hand and saw the blood that dripped from his index finger to the dusty floor. It was mangled, crushed to the bone, torn and bleeding profusely.

'Maritaman – bilong mi maritaman!'

'My husband, my husband.' It was all she could piece together at the time, but before she had even tried to get any further, two men came running from the other side of the village, hauling James along with them. Lorraine pulled off her cardigan and bundled it around Dean's hand before James could see the injury. He tended to pass out at the sight of blood, and she needed him alert to navigate the hairpin turns down the mountains as they drove.

They made it back to Ukarumpa in the darkest hours of the morning. James carried Dean, floppy and feverish in his arms, from the car to Sally's door, kicking at it with his boot, bellowing, 'Sally, wake up! Dean's done his finger!'

Her sister, the quintessential nurse, was the kind of person that the missionary kids ran to when they grazed their knees and wanted sympathy that their parents wouldn't give them. Opening her door to Lorraine's family that night, her purple dressing gown cinched at her waist, she had hustled them quietly inside the moment she realised Dean was hurt.

'Sally, can you fix it? Can you sew it up?' Lorraine knew she sounded hysterical, but she needed to know, she needed to be sure that her sister could make this okay.

'What happened?' Sally's voice was measured and kind, and Lorraine felt herself begin to breathe again.

Here, it was James who spoke. 'Kid stuck his finger in a coffee grinder.'

Lorraine thought she saw a rare flicker of disquiet cross her sister's face, but it was gone as quick as it came, and soon they had Dean across the road in Sally's little two-room clinic (the best hospital they had, at that point) and they were ready to operate. Even though she shuddered with every one of her son's anguished cries, Lorraine watched her sister close his wound from a chair by his bedside, and felt safe. James had taken Harry back to their house; it was just the three of them in the room. With no diesel on hand to turn the generator on, Sally worked in total silence under the flicker of two gas lanterns, squinting at the little hand splayed out in front of her, sewing it up stitch by painful stitch. For that long hour, the sisters could have been in a world entirely their own, wrapped up in the pale blue walls of the clinic, and Lorraine allowed herself to be enveloped in the comfortable familiarity of the moment.

The next morning, though, it was raining.

Sally came over to their house early to check on Dean, and Lorraine realised quickly that something had changed.

'Now the stitches will have to come out in about three weeks, alright?' Sally told her. 'And you'll have to do it, I'm afraid. I'm booking to fly back home about then.'

'What – already?'

‘Well, you knew it was going to be soon. Ukarumpa’s just – well, I’m not sure this is where God wants me right now. But don’t worry, you’ll be fine, won’t you Lor?’

And she had been, Lorraine thought as she stitched. She and her family had called that place home for fifteen years without Sally. But when they returned she had folded up the memories and stored them away from her sister, cramming them into boxes in the garage. She’d sewn her past up neatly and got on with her life, but now, in the ladies bathroom of St Mark’s Anglican Church, Sally had torn everything open again.

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Natalie gingerly lifted her arm to inspect Lorraine’s handiwork in the mirror. It wasn’t as good as new, but it would get her through the rest of the afternoon tea without embarrassment. ‘Thanks,’ she said.

Lorraine nodded, but was quiet, her hands trembling slightly as she put away her needle. A pregnant pause had Natalie wondering if she should just go ahead and leave the bathroom when the older woman turned to her and asked in an odd voice, ‘Did my sister – that is – did Sally ever talk to you about her missionary work?’

Surprised, she replied that yes, she had often heard Sally talk about Papua New Guinea. ‘We used to debate the differences between Papua New Guinean churches, Chinese churches, and Australian churches. Actually – I think she was the one who convinced me leave the Cantonese service for the evening one I’m at now! I remember her saying something about how the church was a delicious soup with all different flavours and ingredients blended together, and that I couldn’t always hide myself away in a safe little clump of noodles, I should get out there and make the soup as tasty as I could.’

Natalie smiled at the memory of the conversation. ‘She could be a real nurse sometimes. Great with the kids, a little pushy with adults.’

Lorraine softened, and looked ready to agree, but then before she could a careful but firm knock sounded on the bathroom door. ‘Excuse me – is Lorraine in there? It’s James.’

Lorraine’s voice was steady. ‘I’m sorry love, I’m coming.’

Leaving the safety of the bathroom behind them, Natalie and Lorraine ventured back into the fray of mourners. After a cordial farewell, both women pocketed away the memory of each other, but perhaps, they decided, not quite as deep as usual.