

# THE QUARRY

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## Weathering the Storm

Naomi stared up into the sky, darker and more threatening than the Sunday Nippers were used to.

The girls huddled together, like penguins in their matching swimsuits, trying to stay warm and protected from the sand being hurled at them by gusts of icy wind. The notoriously flat Collaroy surf was large and violent today. The water events had been called off and the sand events, Naomi hoped, would shortly follow.

‘Alright, Under Fourteens.’ the supervisor called, ‘take your marks.’

Reluctantly, the girls separated and took their places - their backs facing the water. Naomi knelt on the sand, inching back until her toes found the groove of the freshly drawn line. She gave a quick glance down the line of competitors before lying flat on her stomach. The sand felt cold against her body as she folded her hands neatly on top of each other, elbows out to the side.

‘Heads up.’

Naomi raised her head up from the sand and stared out at the Collaroy Surf Club in front of her. The normally bright yellow building dulled in the absence of any sun. She turned her gaze right, about a kilometre down the sand, to the two-story houses that lined the beach – hers amongst them. In their back garden that opened onto the sand stood the lean-to shelter her father had built. It displayed the first surfboard he'd ever used and his father's before that, spanning four generations. The limited space of the lean-to was currently occupied by a small group of mothers, including her own, taking refuge from the wild weather. Naomi envied them.

'Heads down.'

Naomi placed her chin back down on her folded arms, her body clenched tight with cold and nervous anticipation. The optimistically applied sunscreen stuck grains of sand to her arms, smelling thickly of creamy chemicals and salt.

*Phwoot!*

The whistle blew and Naomi jumped to her feet, turning to run into the wind for the hosepipes sticking out of the sand a few meters behind her. She plucked a hose from the end of the row as she ran past it, sand hitting her legs as two girls beside her dove for the same flag. Satisfied, she gave the hose to the supervising lifeguard and returned to the start as the course was reset. Walking back to the line, she picked her father out from amongst a group of lifesavers gathered closely together under the big red tent. This wasn't unusual, quite the opposite, but Naomi could tell from the way he and the others were standing, furrowed brows and arms crossed or gesticulating wildly between the waves and the buildings, that something was off. She lay back down on her stomach, ready for the whistle. But her eyes and mind were still on her father. *It's not a shark, or someone in trouble, or they'd be running for the rubber ducky, she thought. A big rip? No, they don't need a group talk about moving the flags. What's going on?*

Lost in thought, she didn't register the starting whistle, springing up a second after the others. *Damn!* She was close enough to her neighbour to be in with a chance if she dived, but Naomi didn't like diving into the sand – that's what the ocean was for. She kicked at the sand where the flag had been and headed over to the tent.

'Out already, Naomi? What happened there?' Paul asked. Naomi shrugged.

'Just wasn't concentrating, I guess.'

'Not to worry.' Paul clapped her on the back, 'you'll get 'em next time.'

‘Is everything okay? You’re all looking worried.’

Paul took a deep breath, recreating his troubled stance from before.

‘There’s a low pressure system moving in from the east, apparently bringing one heck of a storm with it.’

‘A cyclone?’

‘No, sorry love.’ Paul laughed. ‘Just a big, windy storm with some pretty sizable waves.’

‘Will you have to close the beach?’

‘Yeah, we’re starting to send people on their way now.’

Meanwhile, the company of mothers in their yard had dispersed. Trinny, Naomi’s least favourite of the mothers’ group, approached them. Her whiter-than-white smile looking even more unnatural against the ever-darkening skies. *Please don’t talk to us, please don’t talk to us, please don-*

‘Paul! Darling! Young Mark over there was telling me you’ll likely be evacuated with these king tides. Well, you three are always welcome with us up on the plateau there. You could keep an eye on your house from the lounge!’ Paul smiled tightly while Naomi tried to mask her horror.

‘Thanks, Trinny. But we’ll be right. People like to over-warn to avoid lawsuits.’

‘Well, if you’re sure, darling. My door’s always open if you change your mind!’ Trinny gave Naomi’s arm an intrusive squeeze and, after an uncomfortable wink in Paul’s direction, she was gone. Paul let out a frustrated sigh.

‘Look, Naomi... even if we end up being evacuated, it’ll only be as a precaution. Your mum will probably want to pack up a few things just in case. But I promise you, there’s nothing to worry about.’ Naomi felt a slightly terrified thrill working its way up her chest. Her cousins in the Blue Mountains had been evacuated countless times during the fire seasons, and she thought it sounded like quite an adventure. Nothing like that ever happened to Naomi and secretly, she resented it. Maybe this year she’d have a good story to share at the Christmas table.

The heavy clouds unleashed, rainfall rapidly building. The yellow sand turned dark and the beachgoers were sent packing. It was then that Naomi’s mother, Angela, arrived from the house, bringing Paul a travel mug of fresh coffee and a kiss on the cheek.

‘Will you be needed here for long?’

‘Only about an hour after the beach is closed. I think the weather will keep people away.’

‘I gave my mother a call after I saw the storm warnings. She’s happy to have us if needs be.’

‘Thank god.’ Naomi said with relief, ‘I’d rather drown than spend ten minutes with Trinny.’

‘Naomi!’ Angela gasped, giving her a light slap on the shoulder. ‘We’d better get to the house, start packing what we can.’

‘Just in case.’ insisted Paul.

‘Just in case.’ Naomi nodded back.

That evening, Naomi stood at the window of her unlit bedroom, the immense power of the storm shaking the window in its frame. It was exhilarating being so close to the raw elements, only the tremoring glass pane separating her from the thrashing storm. The rain pounded relentlessly on every surface. The streetlight cast the trees’ shadows against her wall, moving violently from side to side. The weakest were branches ripped from the trunks and flung in every direction. She was transfixed. What would that feel like, to be at nature’s mercy? *Could I end up in Oz, like Dorothy?* A deafening crack came from somewhere nearby and the street was plunged into darkness. Before iPhones, a blackout always meant her parents pulling down the candles from the top of the pantry, the three of them sitting in the dim light around the dining room table. They’d draw pictures, and play cards or board games until it was time for bed. That was the part Naomi looked forward to most. Getting ready for bed while her mother followed her around with a candle made her feel like an eighteenth century princess. For nostalgia’s sake, she fumbled through her cupboards for a candle and matches by the light of her phone. She placed the lit candle on the windowsill and sat down in the middle of the room, hugging her crossed legs to her chest and staring at the orange glow against the black.

Not long after the blackout the Emergency Evacuation Alert had come through on their phones. Naomi was breathless; whether from fear or excitement she could not tell. She bombarded her parents with questions as they drove their packed car up to Angela’s mother’s house on higher ground, asking, could their house get flooded? (Possibly.) Would next-door’s fish drown? (No.) Could Grandma get evacuated too?

(Unlikely.) After much fussing from her grandmother, Naomi had settled on a roll-out bed in front of the unseasonably lit living room fire, her parents on the fold-out couch behind her. The fire crackled, its heat warming her face. Rain pelted down in the background, the occasional clap of thunder barely discernible above the wind. Naomi had assumed her parents had fallen asleep until her father spoke softly.

‘Say it.’

‘What?’

‘I know what you’re thinking, just say it.’

Angela sighed reluctantly.

‘I’d feel a lot better right now if the sea wall had been put in. I wouldn’t keep imagining the beach collapsing from under our house.’

‘Ange, if a seawall had been put in, there’d be no beach to collapse. No nippers for Naomi, no life saving for me. Just a kilometre-long concrete slab.’

‘You don’t know that, Paul. Not for sure.’ Angela paused before mumbling, ‘I don’t think Naomi even likes nippers.’

Naomi could remember the seawall causing conflict between her parents a year or two before.

‘Do you know what we’re doing here, Naomi?’

Naomi shook her head, eyes squinting in the glare of the morning sun. Her hand felt tiny, grasped in her father’s.

‘We’re drawing a line in the sand.’ Paul said.

Naomi looked out at the line of people stretched along the beach, from Narrabeen to Collaroy, where they stood.

‘Woah! It looks like hundreds of people!’

‘Thousands!’ Paul grinned widely.

‘Millions?!’

‘No, honey.’ Angela said flatly, adjusting her sunglasses and looking at her watch.

The seawall had been a contentious topic at the dinner table the night before.

‘There’s no evidence that sea walls will prevent coastal erosion.’ Paul had insisted. ‘In fact, it may well do the opposite. The water will just hit the walls and drag the sand back in. Eventually there’ll be no beach left.’

‘Trinny was saying-’ Angela started.

‘Oh god, not Trinny.’

‘She was saying that the council could use all the sand they dredge from Narrabeen lake and some of the other lagoons to replenish the beach.’

‘That’s not just sand, that’s sediment and sea grass and all sorts of crap. Do you want to turn our beach grey? That Trinny is an idiot.’

‘Let’s hear your great idea then, Paul.’ Paul leant back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head.

‘Not my job. That’s what the local government and its fancy think tanks are for.’

Angela had simply shaken her head in an angry silence as she cleared up the plates to the kitchen.

‘We’ll show ‘em what’s what at the protest tomorrow, eh?’ Paul had said to Naomi with a wink. Naomi scrunched up the left side of her face and blinked hard in an attempt to wink back.

The storm raged on for another twenty-four hours. Naomi was glued to her iPhone, transfixed by the images and videos on social media capturing the increasing severity of the damage. Narrabeen Lake had spilled over, flooding sections of the main road. People were filmed kayaking in the side streets.

‘Idiots.’ Angela said, shaking her head.

‘Still not as stupid as the people driving through the flood waters.’ Paul replied.

‘You wouldn’t run into a bushfire, so don’t drive into a flood.’ Naomi read aloud from her Facebook feed. Then she saw it.

An eleven second clip taken the night before by one of the Collaroy residents, showing a backyard pool being dragged into the sea along with barbeques, garbage bins and outdoor furniture. Police lights flashed in the background. What was on the other side of the pool punctured a hole in Naomi’s stomach. *Is that...*

Her back garden. At least, it was where her back garden used to be. Now it was a straight drop into the tide, barely a metre from their back door.

‘Dad? *Dad!*’

The lean-to was gone. The family’s boards were nowhere to be seen. The table, chairs, her mother’s roses, those were replaceable. But ....

‘Shit.’

‘Paul! Language!’ Paul took the phone from Naomi and showed it to Angela.

‘Oh my god. Oh, Paul. Wha-what do we – how will...’ Angela trailed off in despair. Paul handed Naomi her phone. He left the room without a word. Naomi felt paralysed. She had wanted something exciting to happen. But nothing like this. She felt her mother’s arms wrap around her shoulders.

‘It’s okay, Nomi,’ Angela whispered, ‘We’ll be okay.’

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Naomi waded into shore, looking out at the reserve that now separated Collaroy beach from Pittwater road. Small children with ice cream-smearred faces played on the grass as their parents watched from a picnic table. *That used to be my living room.* Water dripped from her hair onto the sand as she bent to collect her belongings. She straightened, car keys firmly in hand, and noticed her father’s dusky orange van beside her dented Mazda in the car park. She spotted him stepping off the short wall that separated grass from sand. He held a close-to-melting ice cream in each hand.

‘A graduation present.’ Paul held out an ice cream, ‘congratulations.’

Naomi exchanged it for a kiss on the cheek and sat down on the wall, toes digging into the dry sand. It’d been six months since she saw him last. She’d stayed with him in Byron Bay shortly after her mother’s wedding, Naomi and her grandmother vacating the house in lieu of a proper honeymoon.

‘How long are you here for this time?’ Naomi asked, catching drips of ice cream with her tongue.

‘Just for the week, then I’ll spend a few days in Coff’s on my way back. Do you want to join me?’

Naomi counted out the days in her head, realising with disappointment that she had to work.

‘Another time.’ Paul promised. Naomi watched as Paul looked around behind her, biting into the cone as he contemplated the recreational area standing in place of the houses. Once it had become clear the large-scale storms would be a more than annual occurrence, beachfront homes at Collaroy, like Naomi’s, were no longer viable. Bit by bit, the land was sold back to the state and transformed into a reserve.

Though Paul had held out for as long as possible, Angela and Naomi having already moved in permanently with Naomi's grandmother, the fight was eventually one he could no longer afford. Naomi gave him a friendly nudge.

'At least the beach is still here, right?'

'Yeah.' Paul conceded. 'They could've done worse.'

'Speaking of, Dad...'

'Mm?'

'Trinny sends her love.'

'Naomi, that's not even funny.'