

# THE QUARRY

Suvi Derkenne

## Bad Girls

Boys walk over to the public pool because of the giggling and stay because of the girls. A youngster with auburn hair bursts into tears as he watches the tantalizing pink dip under the surface. Unable to move away from the edge of chlorinated blue he grabs his crotch for comfort.

‘It’s our tails,’ Madison tells August and Crystal as they swim, ‘girls don’t have tails.’

August flicks her iridescent scales. Having crashed through the nebula with her sisters, the forty-degree heat at Katherine Low Holiday Park isn't what she imagined sunshine to be.

'How do you know?' She asks Madison.

'I just do, okay.'

So they cut them off with a plastic steak knife Madison finds in the cabin's kitchen drawer. To drown out the shrieking Crystal puts Saturday VMAX on the television turning the volume up loud. After, the girls lock their circumcised flesh in the bathroom and dance on raw toes. Madison and Crystal fight over which song is better, *Talk Dirty* or *Don't Cha*, mimicking the pop and grind of the dancers. August sings from the couch as her sisters leave bloody footprints over the lino, 'Don't cha wish your girlfriend was hot like me? Don't cha wish you girlfriend was a freak like me? Don't cha wish you girlfriend was raw like me? Slow banging shorty...'

'Shut up August, you're ruining the song.'

At night, as Madison and Crystal peel off each other's sunburn, August creeps into the bathroom. She chucks Froot Loops straight from the box into the tub, the tails thrash hungrily in the water, snapping at her for more as she licks coloured sugar off her palm.

On Sunday, Madison buys a red suitcase from the shopping mall in town in which to hide the tails. The boy at the local café, acne erupting underneath stubble, gives her free ice cream. Crystal leans over the counter and licks his ear, 'Greetings loved one. We can melt popsicles'. He gives Crystal and August free ice cream too. The girls grin, vanilla dripping down their chins.

When the money runs out they hitchhike north, lost in fields of bitumen and fireweed. August pulls the suitcase, it leaves a trail of water as its wheels bounce over the gravel.

She swaps arms, struggling with the weight - exposed, her skin burning. She worries that she'll crack in the sun and bubble into foam. The tails whimper inside, scratching at the zipper. Crystal and Madison look over their shoulders, squinting and dizzy in the light. They hiss at the tails, giving them a kick. August lags behind her sisters, her sandals cutting into her toes. Each step a blade slicing against her arches.

'Hurry up August,' Crystal sighs, taking the handle.

Semis and four-by-fours eat up the road. The girls are coated with grit as the traffic shoots past. August watches Madison walk ahead into the bruising light, head high. Before they ran away, Madison and Crystal told her 'You're mum's favorite. Stay if you want to.' But, somehow, being a favorite isn't such fun.

Headlights search over the road, catching Madison's hair. A sedan slows, warm exhaust air slapping against their knees. The passenger window rolls down.

'Hi girls.'

August looks the other way. She keeps her head down and locks arms with Crystal.

'Where you girls going? I'll give you a lift?'

'Leave us alone.'

'Come on girls.'

'Don't talk to him Crystal,' Madison looks sideways at the sedan. The setting sun hits her eyes. She can't see the man behind the wheel.

Crystal keeps pulling the suitcase. Madison tries to catch a better look.

'Come on, where you headed?'

August tugs on Madison's arm but she shrugs her off. Madison smiles, 'Nowhere you're going.'

'I don't bite. Youse girls can all sit in the back.'

Madison stops. The man pulls over. August watches as her sister leans into the car, wriggling in her dress.

The man shouts over the throb of the engine, 'I'm heading to Rabbit's Flat.'

'Yeah?' Madison asks, pouting her lips. None of them know where Rabbit's Flat is.

'Yeah. Where you girls from?'

Silence.

He laughs. 'Alright no questions. Youse getting in or not? It's getting dark out.'

August watches her sisters open the car door and get inside, unsure of where her sisters are going, except that they're going toward it.

Suitcase in the boot, August climbs into the backseat. The man, cleft lipped and blue eyed, tells them his name is Clint. His head brushes the roof of the car, knees up in his chin. 'Dad was watching *Play Misty for Me* at the pics when Mum went into labour,' he says. He doesn't pause for breath, showing pictures from his wallet of his dogs. 'The one with overbite is called Daphne. She don't look it but she's a real sweetheart.' Madison climbs into the front to hold onto the steering wheel while Clint pulls up his sleeves to show off his scars. He turns on the interior lights. 'See? The ones that keloid glow a bit. Got eighteen stitches for this one. Haven't touched a chainsaw since – pain was something else.' He smiles, eyes crinkling into well-worn expression lines. He takes the wheel back, 'Cheers love.' August clutches onto her seatbelt, watching birds, soft scaled and razor-lipped, fly home. Clint peers at her in the rear-view mirror. 'Cat got your tongue huh?' August shakes her head.

'She mute or something?'

'August doesn't talk to strangers.' Crystal wraps her arms around the headrest.

Madison shrugs her off before asking Clint, 'Do you have any music?'

He lights up a cigarette. 'You can try, mostly just get static out this way though.'

Madison zips through the radio stations. Bass and shouting fills the car. Clint opens his window, smoke blowing into the backseat as he taps out his cigarette. 'You girls here on holiday?' he asks.

Madison turns up the volume even louder, the car rocking as she starts to dance. *You know the words to my songs, our conversations ain't long. But you know what is...* She grins at Clint, 'You know this song?'

He looks away. 'Yeah.'

Madison looks back at Crystal. 'This is our song isn't it?'

Crystal nods, thrusting against her seatbelt, brushing her fingers against the roof of the car. Madison starts to sing. 'Close to genius, sold out arenas, you can suck my penis, guns on deck, chest to chest, tongue on neck....' She locks eyes with Clint. 'Every picture I take, I pose a threat.' Clint tightens his grip on the steering wheel. 'You girls visiting family?'

Madison ignores him. 'You don't need explaining...All I really need to understand is, when you will talk dirty to me.' She leans out of the passenger window, shouting at passing traffic, 'Talk dirty to me!' She falls back into the car, cheeks flushed and sweat glistening over her top lip. Clint turns down the music.

'Can't handle it?'

'Bit loud for me.'

'It's a great song isn't it Crystal? It's our song.'

'You already said that Madi.'

'Shut up August, nobody asked you.'

Clint lights another cigarette. Wind and ash whips through the car. Madison takes off her shoes and rests her feet up on the dashboard, her dress falling around her thighs.

She opens up the glove box, finds a packet of mints and pops a few in her mouth. The road turns to dirt, the tails jostling up and down in the suitcase over the potholes. August puts her hands over her ears as the tails scream out in anger. Clint turns the music off completely. ‘You girls hear that?’

Madison pulls a mint out of her mouth, wiping lip-gloss across her chin. ‘Did you hear them scream? When I was just a girl, I asked my brother, What will I be? Will I be pretty? Will I be pretty? Will I be pretty?’

‘That poetry or something?’

‘Or something,’ Madison says, turning in her seat. ‘Crystal what are the rest of the words?’

Crystal shrugs. Madison turns the volume back up, her hand hovering over the hand rest – daring Clint to turn it down again. August stretches out, falling asleep and pillowed on the buoyant lap of her sister.

Later, August wakes to find that they’ve made a pit stop at a servo. Wiping drool off her cheek, she finds Crystal and Madison arguing by the open boot.

‘What’s going on?’

‘The tails.’

August looks down at the suitcase and the puddle it has left on the upholstery. She wipes her nose. ‘They’re hungry. For real food.’

‘I know idiot,’ says Madison,

August pulls up a fallen strap on her dress, waiting for her sisters to snap out a plan. Madison watches Clint paying at the counter. She licks her lips. ‘He’s pink.’ August turns to watch Clint buy a packet of Marlboro menthols. ‘You gonna do it?’ Madison frowns, ‘If you’re so keen why don’t you do it?’ The silence is filled by the hum of the

petrol pumps. August slams the boot shut and gets back into the car. Madison and Crystal follow, not looking each other in the eye.

No one asks for the radio when Clint rejoins the highway. They eat the rest of his mints and gnaw on peppered beef jerky, homesick for Titan's seas. August looks past the sand flats at what looks like an old wheat silo. It looms ahead for hours before they pass it, the silo's roof crumbling inward. Clint catches her watching. 'Hasn't rained up here for years now, farms are all dead.'

When he lets them out at the corner of the Rabbit's Flat Motel, Madison lingers high and dry on the footpath. 'Don't cha want to come with us?' she asks. Clint grins. 'Nah love, you're okay,' he says before driving off. Crystal puts on her sunglasses. 'You should have chewed your words more. You frightened him off.' Madison scowls, pushing past in her high-heels.

The motel's windows have been boarded up with timber scraps and cardboard beer cases. Inside, regulars well past the first round watch the rugby. Backs to the door, the men look up from their drinks to watch the girls sit down in the corner. August slides next to Madison, her thighs sticking to the leatherette bar seats, conscious of being watched. A floor fan, its white plastic yellowed, brushes the girls' hair off their shoulders. The barman breathes in deeply as he wipes down the counter. He smiles at August, the cloth leaving its own smear. 'You right love?' She glances at Madison, who speaks for her before looking back at the menu. 'She's fine.' They order bacon and eggs, with potato wedges and sour cream. They lick butter off their fingertips, hungry for more. Crystal gazes at a man high up on a stool across the room. He cracks pistachio nuts with his teeth, sucking the salt off the shells that won't open and spitting them back into the bowl. He winks at the girls, his shirt unbuttoned. He walks over, and gives

Crystal a cider. He watches her as her lips pull at the straw. ‘We haven’t the likes of you for a while,’ he says.

Embarrassed, August looks down at her drink. She tries to sip around a dead fly that bobs between cubes of ice. Her belly heavy, she gets up. The suitcase dribbles along the carpet as she drags it behind her towards the bathroom.

‘Wrong room sweetheart.’

August turns to hurry out, but the man keeps talking. ‘Unless you’re hiding something up in that dress,’ he says. Zipping his fly, his lips wet, he leans over to close the door. The suitcase whimpers. August watches as he picks up his beer off the sink. ‘Shh. Our little secret.’ Up close his hands smell like salt-and-vinegar chips.

Madison and Crystal giggle with the mining boys, their skin blackened underneath Chesty Bonds and high-vis vests. They tell the girls about Nambeya Lake. ‘Most beautiful place on earth.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

Madison and Crystal want to see beauty. The boys lean in, wrinkling freckled noses as they laugh. They describe an avenue of paperbarks and dagger wattle, Crystal imagines green seaweed growing upside down and swaying in invisible tides. Madison makes the boys draw a mud map on a paper napkin, stealing a kiss and biting down on a sunburnt lip.

‘Whoa love.’

Madison giggles. Crystal whispers, ‘She eats meat for breakfast.’

Leaving the boys to stare into their beers, Madison and Crystal stumble into the Ladies, mascara-smudged and cranberry-vodka-stained.



August walks in, the suitcase rumbling on the tiles. She pushes past her sisters and washes her feet furiously in the sink with hand soap. The tails stretch against the fabric of the case as she squishes suds between her toes. ‘They’re starving.’

‘So?’ says Madison.

August watches as her sisters apply eyeliner and pout at their reflections. The girls appear to float in the mirror, sundresses hugging their hips.

‘Can we go home?’ asks August.

Madison lights up one of the cigarettes she stole off Clint. ‘You’re such a pussy.’ August sits down on the suitcase. She pulls dead skin off her thumb. ‘Mum will be worried.’

‘Mum doesn’t give a fuck. You didn’t have to come you know.’

‘I know.’

‘You’re not gonna be a baby are you?’

‘I’m not a baby.’

August picks at the frayed edge of the zipper of the case. Madison slaps her hand away. ‘Don’t, we don’t want them to escape.’

Crystal scratches flakes of dried snot off her nose, inspecting every inch of her face in the mirror. She pulls at her dress, grasping her breasts. ‘Why are they so small?’ She rolls up toilet paper and pads out her bra, looking enviously at Madison. ‘How come you got the better skin?’

August reads graffiti on the toilet walls as Madison and Crystal argue. Women have written poems in pen and pencil, or drawn crude images of castrated ex-boyfriends next to Exodus 21:7-11.

*Snapped wrist, and pierced,*

*If you ever feel powerless*

*Remember love is the greatest gift*

*God has given.*

Underneath, scrawled in pink, are the words *Can I return it?* Followed by others, in black, *Keep fucking and preaching sista.* August leans her head against the cool porcelain of the sink. She brings her hand up to touch a patch of missing hair, her scalp stinging. ‘I don’t feel well.’

Madison sighs. ‘You gonna moan this whole time?’

‘No.’

‘Cos you’re being such a bitch.’

‘Fuck off.’

‘Fine.’

Madison smirks and leans against the sink. August walks out into the car park, the wheels of the suitcase catch her ankles. There is nothing outside but an odd tourist S.U.V speeding through, bullbars splattered with the blood of road kill. August tugs the suitcase over the gravel and walks off.

Inside, the barman clears the table. He stares down at the teenage girls all pink limbed and soft. Crystal pushes at escaping toilet paper peeking over the neckline of her dress.

‘Last orders?’

‘You buying?’ asks Crystal.

‘Nah love. No cash no drinks.’

Crystal sucks her lip, fingering the boys’ map. ‘What’s the quickest way to get to Nambeya Lake?’

‘You girls not from around here then?’ He asks. ‘Just follow the road girls. If you head off now, you can catch a look before it gets dark. You by yourselves?’

They shrug.

‘Well, unless you girls are thinking of paying for a room, I’m closin’ up.’

Night presses in as they hurry to catch up with August. She hasn’t gone far, the wheels of the suitcase have caught in the salt scrub. Out of breath, the girls are startled as the mining boys roar past in their utes, wolf whistling and catcalling ‘Real nice baby!’ Madison winks back but no one pulls over. As the tail-lights disappear over the crest Madison lights another cigarette. She lets it burn to the stub without ever bringing it to her lips. By the time they find the turnoff into the National Park the sun bleeds into the sky, mopped up by trails of cotton clouds that can’t staunch the flow of red. As the girls stand by a fading signpost for the lake, they gaze out at beauty. Madison juts out a hip, and asks no one in particular, ‘Is this it?’ Taking off her shoes her blisters ooze into the sand. Crystal pulls out the congealed clumps of toilet paper from her bra. She shakes the paper flesh from her fingers. August sets down the suitcase and slumps by its side; the tails haven’t stirred for hours. She looks up. Home looks so far away, an orange infinitesimal speck.

Nambeya Lake stretches out alien and empty. Nothing but pink salt and bass bones that fade into the horizon. Burning light sets the clay banks ablaze and the girls cannot tell if it is dusk or dawn.