

THE QUARRY

Blue Sky City

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A week before Corrine found out that she could turn into a bird, Shaun, from year ten, had stolen her bike. We were leaving school after our after-school dance group on Fridays. The birds were noisy in the trees above, where the blinding gold sunlight filtered through the branches to cast long stark shadows across the ground below. We always left school through the side gates, where we had to pass Shaun and his boy-crew, who always hung around the dirty, adjacent café, even well after school.

We avoided their gaze as we walked past, and I remember seeing Corrine's eyes flicker before I heard footsteps and voices grow louder behind me. Shaun skipped up beside Corrine, his friends giggling behind him as he did.

'Hey Corrine, that's a nice bike. Are you sure a year seven can handle something like that?'

She ignored him, but in the next moment the bike was pulled from her hands in a motion that nearly dragged her to the ground.

'What the hell...?' Corrine managed to breathe before yelling, 'Give that bike back! Oi! Give it back!'

The boys were laughing and screeching and Shaun became emboldened, 'What do you mean? This bike? Give it back to who? Doesn't have your name on it.' He smirked.

'You know it's my bike Shaun, just give it back.' Corrine's jaw was clenched.

'Huh? I found this bike!' Shaun laughed and his friends smacked him chummily on the back. 'Go back to your housos, Corrine.' Shaun laughed, and then he was pedalling out onto the road, through the

crawling queue of traffic. The rest of the boys loyally sprinted after him, their laughing and hooting receding as they did.

In the following week, Corrine called me to go over to her house. ‘Sorry, I can’t give you a hint. But I have something really important to tell you.’

My dad drove me over after his morning exercise routine (which he needed to calm his arthritic elbows). We had his usual music on the stereo. He always played the same playlists he’d burned onto some CDs, maybe ten years ago: Taiwanese 80s political songs, Eurovision hits, a P!nk song, some Japanese ballads, and a Taiwanese singer called A-Mei.

‘She’s actually a Taiwanese Aboriginal, you know, Angela?’ my dad said. I told him Corrine was Indigenous too.

‘What is Indigenous?’ he said.

‘It’s the same thing, Corrine just says Indigenous more, I think.’

My dad nodded, ‘Maybe it is more respectful word.’

Linda answered the door when we arrived.

‘Hello! Thanks for coming. Corrine’s just run upstairs to get changed.’ Linda turned to Dad, and shook his hand. ‘How are you? I’m Linda, Corrine’s mum.’

Dad looked at Linda, at the stray blonde hairs curling out around her forehead.

‘Oh! Hello, thank you for having Angela coming here to play.’ He paused again, wearing a sheepish smile as Linda smiled at us. ‘I’m sorry, I did not know that—Angela just told me you are...’

Linda scratched her elbow, and gestured us inside. ‘Why don’t you come in first?’ She was calm, but I felt like I swear there were bugs in my clothes.

I slipped my shoes off and stared hard at the floor as I stepped onto the floor boards inside. I even noticed a mountain-like pattern in the wood grain.

‘That’s okay, bring your shoes in,’ Linda interrupted my thoughts.

‘Umm. Nah, it’s okay,’ I said, without looking at her. ‘They’re already off anyway.’

She invited my dad in and he began to untie his sneakers. Linda held the door open politely as we waited for Dad to take his shoes off.

Walking down the hallway, the air became cool. Somewhere here, Dad asked, ‘Sorry Linda, if you don’t mind me to asking, I did not know Indigenous can mean white?’

There was a pause before Linda responded as we walked into the warm kitchen, the oven whirring in one corner.

‘Ah. I have a good answer to that, brother. You see, actually, I’m not white.’ She smiled. ‘I’m a Burrumattagal woman of the Darug nation, and I’m fair-skinned.’ She shrugged her shoulders, like she’d been found guilty of a crime she did not feel very guilty for. She pulled out some chairs for us around a circular wooden table, and raised her eyebrows in expectation when we heard Corrine’s boots stomping down the stairs. In the moment of disruption, Dad quickly turned to me, quietly saying, ‘Angela, what is Bu-bruma-gal?’

‘Hey Angela!’ Unfortunately for him, Corrine got to me first. ‘Hey, Mr. Liu.’

Dad smiled and nodded. ‘Hi Corrine, thank you for inviting Angela to play.’

‘Thanks for coming!’ Corrine said, before drifting to the pantry and investigating its insides.

We turned back to Linda, who was leaning with her forearms on the back of a chair beside us.

‘I’m sorry,’ my dad had his head tilted. ‘Can you say again? I am not sure I quite catch it.’

‘Sure. Coffee or tea first?’ Linda moved towards the kitchen counter.

‘Yes, thank you, coffee,’ my dad said, his head bobbing. ‘Thanks.’

She continued as the kettle began to boil. ‘I think this might make more sense; no matter how much white you drop in a black pool, the water still flows from our ancestors. I say I am proud to be a Burrumattagal woman because it’s important for me to remember who I am, for us to remember. It means our identity hasn’t been stolen from us.’ She offered dad his coffee, sat down, and added milk to her own. The cup tinkled as she stirred. ‘Something we like to say: coffee’s still coffee.’

She continued, ‘Sorry to create this big conversation, but it’s important to me, because it’s about who we were, and fighting for that.’ My dad was nodding slowly and blinking quickly.

‘Okay,’ Corrine said. ‘We’ll be off then, Angela, before my mum gets started.’

‘Hey, I’m a passionate lady!’ Linda was laughing.

‘I think it is good to have a passion,’ my dad chimed in. ‘It is something that driving people throughout their whole lives... Those with passion are the lucky ones.’

‘Okay, let’s go,’ I said. It was time for me to get out of there before my dad started too.

We walked to a bushy reservoir down the road where we often hung out. There, a concrete footpath wound through sparsely grown bush, woven with gently spiralling trails of bare hardened dirt, where people had wandered further into the trees. At the end of one of these trails was our rock; a large angular rock that sat in a bed of leaf litter beside the bend of the skinny, polluted creek that trickled through the reserve. We picked our way through fallen branches and web-covered trees before shuffling onto our rock.

I sat and waited for Corrine to speak. I listened to the trickle of the water, and looked down at its marbled surface, glittering with shards of sunlight. In the water below, I saw something move.

‘Whoa, is that an eel?’ I leaned slightly towards the movement.

‘Oh what? No way!’ Corrine planted her hands on the rock and pushed her head down towards the water. ‘Wow,’ she whispered. ‘You wouldn’t think they’d survive in *that*.’

I laughed, before the trickling sound of the creek settled back into our silence.

Corrine took a deep breath and picked up a pebble before flicking it into the water with a gentle splash. ‘So, do you remember that time we were talking about ghosts? When you said your friend and a group of his friends saw ghosts in a forest, and now they all believe in ghosts?’

‘Yeah,’ I nodded.

‘And we were talking about how you want to believe, but even though your friend is so sure, and all his friends are so sure, and you trust him, you still just kinda doubt the story and can’t believe in ghosts?’

‘Yes,’ I nodded again.

‘And same with aliens and mega monsters?’ Corrine’s fingers toyed with another pebble, before she threw it into the water.

‘Yeah...’ I was unsure then. Corrine’s shoulders tensed and untensed as she spoke. Her fingers picked at the pebbles that lay too close, before they were sent to join the others in the creek. Her eyes had not met mine yet, but her lips were pulling back against a smile. Corrine never flirted with mystery, but I could not figure this one out. ‘What was it you wanted to tell me?’ I said.

‘Okay. Sis, I’ll just give it to you straight.’ Her eyes slowly moved to match mine. ‘I can turn into a bird.’ The creek trickled. ‘And I’m just going to do it, okay? Okay, don’t freak out.’

Before I could even open my mouth to speak, Corrine leapt backwards off the rock and leaned into the leaf litter on all fours. She flexed and strained, looking like she was trying to burst from her own skin. And then she did.

A smoky cloud of feathers ruptured her figure, the force of it lifting her body into the air in the same moment, her body was like a volcanic eruption, sending leaves and dirt blowing into the air around her. She stood before me. Corrine's human body had disappeared beneath a vibrating shifting layer of glossy plumage.

'Oh my god,' I chanted it like a mantra. 'Oh my god.'

Her feathers settled, and her shoulders became smooth, curving wings, resting on an arched back, sloping towards an elegantly fluffy tail.

Protruding from the mass of feathers were two leathery grey legs, standing on gnarled, clawed feet. Proportionally, they did make sense, but when you see something like that so big and close... all I could think was, *dinosaur feet*.

Corrine's face peered out from beneath a crown of feathers that followed her hairline, and loosely down around her jaw. 'So yeah, uh, don't tell anyone, please.' Her feathers moved when she grinned.

'Oh my god,' I said again. And then I began to laugh. Something about her fleshy face grinning from a mess of feathers just hit the spot, and I laughed so hard tears sprung to my eyes and Corrine was quick to join. I didn't know what to say, and Corrine didn't either, so we just laughed.

I could hardly believe it; Corrine was marvellous. And she was my friend; my real-life friend who was a real-life bird who existed in *real life!*

When we had calmed down, Corrine shrunk back into her human form, and thanked me. 'I mean it. Thank you for understanding,' she said.

I didn't actually know what she meant, but I gave her a hug and thanked her back. Later in the night, in the darkness of my room, I was woken by a string of text messages from Corrine. I read them like a dream. I only managed to skim them, before slipping into a sleep filled with the sound of wind pressing against my windows.

'Corrine

Sat, 23 Sep, 3:25 AM

I was flying above the house for maybe twenty minutes before I finally landed. The dog had already seen me by then, and he seemed to be waiting. It was lucky how windy it was, I wasn't quiet when I landed. It was amazing though; he made way for me to land, and when I did, he looked afraid.

He walked over to me slowly and sniffed at the air between us until he was sniffing at my wings. His name was Rex, I managed to see on his collar...

Corrine

Sat, 23 Sep, 3:27 AM

At that point, the wind made the clotheslines turn and make a terrible high-pitched squeak, and Rex jumped back. I went over to my bike, and luckily, Shaun didn't manage to mess it up—the stickers were still there and everything. I had a rope with me and I quickly changed back so I could tie the body of the bike to my ankles...

Corrine

Sat, 23 Sep, 3:31 AM

When I turned again, Rex must have been sniffing behind me and I heard him jump and run behind the shed and a motion light switched on. God, it was terrifying, Angela. I just turned around and I see the door leading to the house and Shaun is right there. He was crouching on the concrete, clutching an Ipod...

Corrine

Sat, 23 Sep, 3:38 AM

I couldn't move. We just stared! He looked like he was going to vomit. I didn't know what to do, I had this bike tied to my legs and I panicked, so I just jumped and flew. Shaun fell backwards then, and I saw the shadow of my wings black him out as I rose, can you believe it!

After dance group that day, Corrine asked me if I'd mind taking another route home. She fidgeted as she started, 'I dunno, it's probably fine, I'm just freaking out...'

'No, of course,' I said.

'I mean I don't think he'd do anything...'. She was rubbing her forehead.

'Don't worry,' I reassured her, let's just go to the back gate.'

Her shoulders unwound at my words.

We walked through the empty school grounds, past dark classrooms, accompanied only by the afternoon song of birds. I walked alongside Corrine, pushing her bike between us. We reached the main oval, sitting atop a hill that rose above the rest of the school. It was surrounded by tall swaying trees

that bordered the bright blue sky above. We walked across the oval, the yellowy grass crunching under our footfalls and the rolling bike wheels, the burning sun touching all that the shadows could not.

As we approached the back gate, Corrine jolted to a stop, and I followed her gaze to find Shaun's back, many steps ahead of us. He walked slowly. And he was alone. Corrine's eyes were trained on the back of his head as we approached the gate. Our pace soon exceeded his, and I kept my eyes on the sharp dry blades of grass under my feet as we passed him; I could hear the grass crunching beneath his feet. Corrine was quiet, and her footsteps were just as measured as mine. We walked through the metal gate and down the dirt path that led to the road. Shaun never once seemed to notice us.

When we reached the top of the road, where my bus stop stood, and where we would be parting ways, a sound void seemed to be filled with the sound of traffic. I looked up at Corrine and saw that tears sparkled in her eyes. She was smiling.

'Thanks, Angela,' she said. 'Jesus.' She laughed.

We hugged and Corrine climbed onto her bike and pedalled across the road, where the line of houses foregrounded a hill dotted with other houses, and a big blue sky. I closed my eyes and felt the warmth of the sun against my skin. It felt like I was on the edge of remembering something, a happy memory I know I'd never remember, and maybe never even had. When I opened my eyes again. I saw that Corrine had stopped too, and in that moment, she turned around and waved at me. Corrine turned her head and squinted up at the gauze of thin wind-blown clouds, before waving again and getting back on her bike. I looked up to see the sky behind the houses and thought about how cool the mist would feel against her face later, when she would be flying in the sky above me.