

THE QUARRY

Something Good

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Stu stood on the edge of the curb, his heart thumping in his chest. Here it comes, any second now. It wouldn't take much, just a single step. A single step he could manage easily. Bam. Game over.

Gathering his courage, he felt the muscles in his legs tense as he prepared to step off the safety of the footpath. He just hoped this wouldn't scare the driver too much. But then, why should he care about frightening those wealthy enough to afford a car?

'There's nothing good about this city, I tell you. Smells of piss and shit. Only the rats like it here,' a grouchy voice declared behind him.

Stu frowned, hesitating where he stood. The car whizzed past him, and Stu couldn't avoid the spray of filthy gutter water that shot up beneath its whirring wheels. Disappointed at having missed his opportunity, he turned towards the sound of the voice instead and came face to face with a pair of elderly gentlemen. The one who had spoken was chewing on his cigar and puffing smoke directly on Stu's face. The man caught him staring, frowned, and growled, 'The hell do you want, pipsqueak? Beat it!'

Stu hadn't been sleeping well, his temper was short already, and he almost had the nerve to confront the pair. Almost. Staying quiet, he merely rolled his eyes and tried to wipe

the muddy brown water off, but in spite of his best efforts, it left dark stains on his threadbare, slightly too short trousers.

Swearing under his breath, Stu straightened up and looked behind him again, but the man was already stomping his way across the street, the shattered glass over the faded green man blinking in time with the man's steps. The man, despite his age, was much too fast for Stu to ever catch him with his uneven gait.

Stu didn't cross. He stood on the side of the road as the light turned red again. The traffic roared past him, filling the air and his lungs with its horrible fumes, staining the surrounding buildings an even darker grey. They'd given everything, as a species, in pursuit of that oil. Everything was grey now, the sky, the streets, the skyscrapers, the rubbish, all of it was grey. Now that he really thought about it, Stu couldn't remember the last time he'd seen something that reminded him of life.

'When I was a kid, there were rolling hills of green, far as the eye could see.' Stu heard his grandfather's doddering old voice in the back of his mind. *'And the sky even turned blue every once in a while.'*

'It's not all bad,' Stu muttered to himself. He'd grown up in this city. No matter how ugly it was, it was still good. 'I'll prove you wrong,' he promised the old man, who was already disappearing in the distance.

'Excuse me, young man, could you help me?'

Stu snapped out of his gloomy daydream and turned towards the voice. He found an elderly man at an ATM, probably the only one left working in the entire city. If one thing had survived all the chaos, it was the banks.

'Sure, what's wrong?' he asked, strolling closer.

'Sorry,' the man laughed, 'I've forgotten my glasses, and I can't read the screen.'

'No problem.'

Large pipes and scaffolding lay in the way, from a skyscraper that had been blown in half some years earlier. Stu clambered through the rubble and creaking metal shrapnel to approach the man and peered at the screen, which listed the options for the card in block grey letters.

'You're withdrawing cash?' he guessed.

The man nodded, so Stu pointed at the top one. The man pressed the screen, typed in \$500, and waited a little. Stu felt his heart beat faster at the number on the screen. He tried not to be jealous, but it was hard not to be after he'd just been laid off. *'We have to make cuts, ya know? Budget and all that,'* his boss had offered, but Stu knew that wasn't true. With the kids growing up and joining the workforce, the factory didn't need the likes of him anymore. He was replaceable, and no one felt the least bit guilty for replacing him.

'And now press enter,' Stu suggested after a moment, and the man obeyed with a cheery smile. The screen then asked for his PIN, and Stu was about to politely turn away to give the man privacy but lingered a little in case he needed help. He felt good. That old grouch at the crossing could go stuff himself.

The smile vanished from the man's face, and he turned to scowl at Stu.

'You ain't getting a reward, buddy!' he snapped.

Stu opened his mouth, and awkwardly closed it again, taken aback by the abrupt change in attitude. As the man continued to glare at him, he rolled his eyes and hobbled away. So much for being nice.

He went past the park he used to go to as a child, back when the grass was still sort of green. Now, it was all ugly yellow, twisted lumps of thistle and weeds, giving the grey and brown climbing frames an almost sepia tone. Stu realised with dismay that, while there had been two climbing frames in his youth, now there was only one. The skeleton of the second stood, blackened and scorched, like a bad memory.

On the swing set, Stu spotted a little boy sitting by himself. The boy had the tell-tale ribs and tattered clothes of one of the countless homeless children. Stu felt a twinge of guilt watching the boy, knowing he was going to ignore him. He was still cringing from the time he'd tried to help a little girl who'd fallen over and grazed her knee.

He hesitated for a moment. Maybe today he could do something good, properly good, and help the little boy. *'Get away from my daughter, you pervert!'* the woman's words echoed in his memory, as she'd hit him with her handbag. People weren't kind anymore. That's why he didn't want to stay among them much longer. Swallowing his guilt, he pressed on, hating himself with every step.

His feet led him to the corner shop, and he peered in. Beyond the tins of spam and beans, he saw a few shelves of sad, withered fruits and vegetables, wrinkling with age and

attracting flies. There wasn't a lot of variety since the farms all started failing. Back in the Resource Wars, the government had promised that with their victory would come more farming land and more food for everyone. They won, and they took the land, but it was all worthless anyway. None of it could support a single grain anymore, not after what the nukes had done. Stu chewed his lower lip and felt his wallet weighing like a stone in his pocket. Against his better judgement, he walked into the store.

Stu left several minutes later with an apple, the best he could find, though it had eaten into his dwindling savings. It gleamed a soft red and smelt sweet and crisp. Stu's mouth watered at the sight of it. Most of what he ate came out of a tin. He limped back to the park and found the boy still sitting there.

'Hey,' Stu called, forcing a smile onto his lips.

The boy's eyes shot up, and immediately narrowed when he saw Stu, staggering towards him with his twisted legs, 'I was wondering if you wanted this?' he said, holding up the apple in offering.

The boy wiped his snotty nose on a filthy sleeve, before he snatched the apple, and pegged it as hard as he could straight at Stu's chest.

'Fuck you, freak!' the boy shouted and ran off, as Stu clutched his chest, gasping. That was the last child he was ever going to try to help.

When his breath returned, he continued his walk. He'd grown up in this city, lived here all his life, surely he could find one thing, *one* good thing, to redeem it.

The wind picked up, setting the street garbage in a flurry around him, plastic and chip packets clinging to his legs. The fumes from a smoking vent in the street filled his lungs, giving him a hacking cough that made his eyes water. The cough didn't stop for several minutes, and his already bruised chest ached with the strain of it.

'Goddammit!' he swore between heaving breaths, kicking a rubbish bin over in frustration. It clattered to the ground, but nothing spilt out of it since no one ever bothered to fill it in the first place. A couple of old women looked up in surprise, shooting him dirty looks. He often received dirty looks, no one much liked to look at him anymore.

Eventually, when he'd recovered from the cough and the embarrassment of his temper tantrum, Stu gave up on his search and decided to go home. This whole venture had been

pointless, and now his ankles were starting to ache from climbing over the rubble of fallen buildings.

He'd been so proud of his apartment when he'd first got it. Now, its dank, dingy atmosphere, with moulding walls and untreated floorboards filled him with disdain. Stu shoved the front door closed behind him with his foot, kicking it when the swollen wood stuck in the frame. He stood for a moment in the silent room, staring absent-mindedly at all the junk he'd collected over the years, cluttering up the space. So how did it all feel so empty? He caught sight of his own reflection in the mirror on the far side of the room. His twisted, mangled legs that barely worked anymore, his face and arms riddled with shrapnel wounds and burn scars.

Tossing his keys aside, Stu strode across the room to his desk. He pulled it forward, scraping across the floor until he had access to the electrical socket behind it. Stu unplugged his ancient computer from the wall and yanked the cord out of the back of the machine. Tugging it slightly to test the strength, he tied a loop at one end, just big enough for his head. Climbing onto his couch, he swung the cord around one of the cross beams on the ceiling and tied it there. He leaned his full weight against the cord, and it held.

Stu stuck his head through the loop at the end and felt it settle on his neck. He took one last look around the room, and his eyes drifted towards the window. The city he'd grown up in, the one he'd tried so hard to love again, stared back at him: the permanently thunderous sky that blocked out the sun, the dilapidated skyscrapers, half their original height, and never rebuilt after the wars and the bombs.

With a sickness in his stomach, he remembered the *pride* he'd felt when he enlisted. Everyone was cheering, sending the young off to defend their country, as they'd called it. Stu had relished it at first, the order of the army, how his body had felt as he grew stronger from the relentless drills and training. He genuinely thought it was making him a better man, and that he could spread his strength to other lands. Patriotism, and all that. Stu still couldn't sleep most nights after what he'd seen. He'd given the best years of his life to protect this country, fought in wars that had left his body all bent and broken. No one thanked him for it, and even though they'd won, it hadn't been a victory. Stu sighed. He wondered when he'd started seeing the world for what it really was—worthless, dead.

He toed the edge of the couch, and mentally apologised to his landlord, who no doubt would be the one to find him when his rent was late. He was about to take the last step when something caught his eye. There, by the window, partially hidden by the fire escape. A burst of colour in a world of grey.

Stu stood utterly frozen, uncertain what to do. He just stared at it for what felt like forever. Gingerly, his fingers crept up to his neck and removed the noose. He stepped off the couch, his lungs still working when his feet touched the floor. For all he knew, time may have slowed down, each step taking an eternity as he crossed the room.

The window was jammed and took almost all of his strength to open, but eventually, with a grating sound that made his ears bleed, it slid up. Half hanging out of the window, Stu could barely believe his eyes. On the edge of the fire escape, in a pile of broken brick and dust, was a tiny little plant. Its green leaves stretched towards the sky, aching for the sun, and it was so small it was barely visible but for the little pink and yellow flowers that swayed in the breeze.

For a long time, Stu could do nothing but stare at it. His heart ached with the sight of it; he didn't think he'd ever seen anything so beautiful.

The wind picked up, and the little flowers quivered. Snapping out of his reverie, Stu lunged back into his apartment. He ignored the sofa and the cord hanging from the ceiling. He ignored the ache in his legs and the tickle in his lungs of another hacking cough. He ran straight to his kitchen, where he began looking for something that might make a suitable flowerpot.