

THE QUARRY

With The Deepest Regret, I Wish To Inform You...

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Parker pushed his bike up the red dirt path to the top of the hill, panting. He turned around briefly, seeing his friend, Declan, close behind. Cole was further down the hill. The young boy struggled to push his bike up the path which had been created by the three boys' frequent visits to the hill.

'Come on, Cole,' Parker shouted down to his younger brother, 'We're almost there!'

'The shower should start at approximately 23:34,' Declan panted, kicking the stand out on his bike as he and Parker reached the top.

Parker saw him push up his sleeve to check his watch.

'We're right on schedule! Excellent time, lads,' Declan declared, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose and walking over to their spot.

Finally, Cole reached the top of the hill and Parker ruffled his dark hair.

'Didn't think you were going to make it, buddy!' he said, as Cole aggressively pushed him away.

Cole punched his brother's arm and ran over to Declan, his bike dropping and creating a cloud of dust as it skittered to the ground. Parker meandered slowly over to the others.

'Look! There's one!' Cole shouted, bouncing on the soles of his feet.

The older boys followed Cole's finger to a large shooting star. It burnt up in the sky, casting a long tail, and skimmed across the dark, quiet town below them.

'Another one is coming in,' Declan said, throwing his mouth open and head back, squinting up at the sky.

Parker watched the steady stream of stars for a few minutes before he sat down against a redgum tree. He absently picked at loose threads on his old joggers as he watched Cole and Declan. Cole was still bouncing, excited because this was the first time Parker had let him sneak out with them. He always felt guilty for leaving his little brother at home, but Cole was too much of a liability. Parker watched him squealing with delight, thinking back to how long it had taken them to sneak out that night because he kept making too much noise.

'Look at that one!' Cole shouted, clapping his hands.

'I've never seen one that bright.' Declan squinted up at the star. 'It must be a larger mass than the others we've seen.'

'It could be Martians!' Cole exclaimed, and Parker rolled his eyes. 'A Martian spacecraft!'

'This isn't one of your comic books. There's no such thing,' Parker called out from his seat, crossing his arms behind his head.

'I know that,' Cole shot defensively back at Parker, sticking his tongue out. 'But it could be. We don't know what the shooting stars really are.'

'Well, actually—' Declan started, beginning to spill facts he had read from a textbook.

Parker immediately stopped listening. He knew Declan had spent all summer holidays with the flu, hunched over tattered old textbooks. He had heard that exact spiel many times before on that very hill. It took a few trips out there and a few spiels before Parker had calmly explained he wasn't even slightly interested.

He looked over the small town, the few blocks that encompassed the entire thing. From the hill, he could clearly see the main street. It was deserted. It used to be full of the people in the grades above him; and those freshly graduated, driving their parent's cars, going to the pub

or just sitting in their parked cars, playing music. All the guys were gone now; most of them signed up for the war the first chance they got. The girls were all in the city, working for the war effort too. The remainders, those attached to their family or work, had been the only life left in the town. They had all been conscripted over the last three years.

The only lights were coming from the garage and the pub on the corner. Inside would be the old veterans, celebrating the good news. The Germans were defeated at last. They announced it a few weeks ago. The war was over. That would lead them into reminiscing the Great War. Parker knew they'd be talking about how they had it hardest in Gallipoli, and those missing troops in Asia, and the rumours of the railroad through Burma. That's all they ever talked about.

Parker's thoughts drifted to his father, and then his eyes moved off the main street to his house. It was dark and still, his mother sleeping alone. Waiting. They hadn't heard anything from him in months, so they were left unknowing. His mother took it as a good sign. No news is good news, she said. His grandpa had whispered conspiratorially to him a few weeks ago that maybe his father had been taken as a POW. Parker didn't know who to listen to.

It was a story he knew too well. Sons and fathers sent to Africa, Southern Europe, Asia, and never returning. Declan's older brother and father hadn't come back yet. They hadn't died like many others from their town, but they had moved on. His brother was still helping with the War Office somewhere in Germany, the last they had heard. He would probably come home soon. But his father was another story. Declan had never given Parker much of the story because he didn't like talking about it. But from what he had heard, Declan's father found another woman while he was away. She was an English girl, a nurse or something. And they were living together now.

Parker worried about that more than he worried about his father dying sometimes. When he was conscripted, Parker had just started high school, and Cole was too young to remember. His father told him to look after his mother and brother, to not let anything happen to them, to be the man of the house while he was gone. But how could he protect them from a broken heart, like Declan's family? He just wanted news. Any news.

He looked over at Cole, his brother's brows creased into a v shape.

'Declan,' Parker sighed, 'You have to explain it really dumb. He's only six.'

'Almost seven!' Cole shot back.

‘Lads! Look, another one!’ Declan interrupted.

The boys fell silent and watched the star shoot across the town, lighting up the whole sky. It burnt up just above Old Man Peter’s place below their hill.

There was suddenly a loud bang and a flash of light from the house. Then silence.

‘What was that?’ Cole asked.

Parker’s heart raced, and he exchanged glances with Declan.

‘We should check if he needs help.’ Cole picked up his bike, and took off down the hill.

‘Cole!’ Parker grabbed his own bike and raced after him. Declan wasn’t far behind.

When they got to the old weatherboard house, the veranda was caving in on the left, and the gum tree out the front littered the ground with dried leaves. They lay spread across the scorched red dirt, so that the boy’s feet crunched as they jumped off their bikes. Parker caught Declan’s eye. His throat tightened as he looked over at Cole, who was already walking towards the front door.

‘Cole, wait!’ he called out, running after him. His bike clunked to the ground.

He grabbed Cole’s arm just as he was stepping onto the veranda.

‘We have to see if Old Man Peter is okay!’ His brother’s voice was small and worried.

Parker looked back at Declan, who was still holding onto his bike, his knuckles white. They both knew what that sound had been and what it probably meant. Old Man Peter lived out here alone since his sons went off to war. He hardly left the house anymore. Lianne from the corner store even drove supplies out here for him once a week.

He remembered overhearing his mother talking to Diane, their neighbour, over tea last week.

‘Di, don’t say that!’ his mother gasped. ‘Of course the boys will come home.’

‘I don’t have a good feeling about it. They were so young. David was how old?’

‘Nineteen?’

'God. Nineteen. And Reggie was underage! I can't believe he left his father to run off after David and his mates. He always idolised him.'

'It's devastating. It would utterly destroy Peter if they didn't come home. Those boys are everything to him.' His mother fanned herself with a book.

'You're lucky your own boys are too young.'

'I am grateful to God every day for that,' his mother said quietly.

'I do worry about your husband, though. Often.'

'Di!' His mother slammed her hand to the table, making Parker jump behind the door.

'What?' Dianne shrugged. *'You have to prepare for these things. My Stan never came back.'*

'I know. But you ought not to talk about it.'

Parker let go of Cole's arm and stepped onto the wooden veranda. He could hear the wireless playing softly inside, the sound of piano floating out on the breeze. He looked at Cole's wide, bright eyes and called out to Declan.

'Cole, you stay here for a minute,' he said, and before Cole could protest, he continued, 'Declan and I have to make sure it's safe.'

'Safe? From what?'

Parker wracked his brain.

'From Martians, of course, like you were saying before! They fly their ships down here during meteor showers as cover.'

Cole's eyes widened, and he nodded vigorously. He walked back to the bikes and stood beside them, keeping a look-out.

Parker bit his lip and locked eyes with Declan, then reached across to open the front door. It wasn't locked, so the boys walked right into the living area.

The lights were on, casting a soft, yellow light on everything in the room, chasing the shadows in the corners. The fire was crackling quietly, and the wireless was still playing soft piano music; it sounded like Debussy, his father's favourite. Comfortable looking armchairs sat in front of the fire, fraying from age and use.

Parker walked across to the kitchen table. Breakfast was still placed at the table, even though it was past midnight now. The cold, half-eaten eggs and a single strip of bacon had hardened fat upon them. Two flies were buzzing atop the food, dancing around each other; a synchronised dance only they knew.

The kitchen bench was a mess. There was a half loaf of bread that had gone hard from being out all day. Dirty plates and cups lay in the sink. A pan sat on the stove with a thick layer of hardened grease from the bacon. He turned around and saw Declan looking at something on the table. He picked up an open letter that was lying next to the cold breakfast.

‘Parker,’ he whispered, shakily pushing his glasses up his nose. ‘It’s a commiseration letter.’

Parker walked back over to the table and saw the War Department header on the letter. His heart dropped.

‘Both boys,’ Declan sighed. ‘Reggie was only a few years older than us. And David...’

Parker quickly turned around and walked across the lounge to a hallway. A door at the end was ajar, more soft, yellow light spilling into the hallway. He knew what he would find down there. He walked up the hall slowly, his feet padding on the threadbare hall runner.

The walls were lined with photographs. David and Reggie grew up as he kept walking, turning from bald infants into bold, dark-haired boys on the backs of horses. There were photos of them with Parker and Declan when Parker was years younger. Reggie was in his footy club. He was always good at sport; the coaches’ pick every time. They said he would get a sports scholarship and get into university in the city. The whole town was behind him.

David was just as loved by the town. He worked on the farms, helping out wherever he could. He was a hard worker, attractive, and was sweet with the Mayor’s granddaughter in the town over. The people physically felt his loss when he was sent off. Parker heard his father say it was unjust, unnatural, to send the boys away. This community would die without them. And he was right.

Parker pushed the door at the end of the hall open, slamming his eyes shut as he did. He jumped when he heard Declan swear behind him, completely forgetting that he wasn’t alone. He very slowly opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was the red splatter on the wall behind Old Man Peter’s lifeless body. The yellow light couldn’t soften the dark shade on the white wallpaper. Then he saw the gun in the old man’s limp hand.

‘We need to get Officer Winston.’ Declan’s voice was urgent.

‘He’s not here during the week.’ Parker couldn’t drag his eyes away from where Old Man Peter’s head used to be.

‘Well... we need to get someone. Doc’s here, I saw him today. We need to report this. I need to get—’

Declan raced out of the room, coming back to grab Parker’s arm and drag him out too.

Out the front of the house, they were met by Cole’s watchful eyes.

‘What’s happening?’ he asked.

Declan grabbed his bike and sped off before Parker could do as much as protest. Cole watched him peddle away and then looked back at his older brother.

‘Where’s Old Man Peter?’

Parker gratefully knelt on the ground in front of Cole; he hadn’t realised how heavy his body was. He took Cole’s small hands in his own and stared into his eyes.

‘You were right, Cole.’

‘What?’

‘It’s Martians. They’ve taken him.’