

THE QUARRY

Stop Motion, Start Static

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The front door slams shut behind me. The sound is muted by the headphones I've already slipped over my ears. I choose my playlist—Hawthorne Heights—then I let my breath out slowly and let the world outside slip away until there is only the music. If I close my eyes, I can see its colours: the pulsing of the snare, the humming bass and the glorious chaos of the melody. I hardly hear the song lyrics. They are meaningless words, merely a replacement for the useless static of my thoughts. It is the music which is the true sound of being alive.

I take the ten-minute train ride to work. I have to wait fifteen minutes on the platform because my train is late and it feels like an eternity. How does one measure an eternity, I wonder? Is it by the aridness of your existence, or by the strength of your apathy towards it?

Is arid the right word? Perhaps barren or desolate...doesn't matter, they all have the same meaning anyway.

I turn the key in the door of the Willow Street Cinema and step inside. My heart sinks. There's popcorn all over the floor and the possum that lives in the roof has gotten into the garbage bin again, rubbish has been strewn all through the foyer. Amanda started washing the windows, but didn't finish the job. She's left me a note on the counter at the ticket booth:
Sorry Oscar, didn't get time to do all the windows you'll have to do the rest before opening. Thanks!

I consider folding myself into a heap on the floor and sobbing. I consider ripping the whole carpet up with a crowbar and taking a sledgehammer to the windows. I switch my playlist to Jeff Buckley and close my eyes for a few moments, letting the soft chords seep into my brain. I pull on a pair of gloves and start picking up the garbage. It's going to be a long day.

Every Friday is the same. We open with *Casablanca*, then it's *Camille* followed by *It Happened One Night* and *Gone With the Wind*, finishing up the evening with *It's a Wonderful Life*. By about the third hour of *Gone With the Wind* I'm ready to blow my brains out, but the sweet catastrophe of Story of the Year in my ears keeps me from utterly losing my mind. Finally, *It's a Wonderful Life* draws to a close and the audience stands up to exit the cinema. The lights come up and Sam walks in to start cleaning. I see him smile and nod to Mr and Mrs Pendle as he passes them. They've come in every second Friday for as long as I've been working here, *Casablanca* is their favourite, but they come to watch *It's a Wonderful Life* almost as often. Mrs Stenhauser is the last to leave the cinema, as usual. Since her husband died she comes in nearly every day, seeming to take solace in the alternate reality of the silver screen. I shut off the projector and lock up the projection room. Sam's closing up tonight, so I leave him to it and make my escape.

The Pendles are still in the foyer by the time I get there. By unspoken mutual agreement, we studiously avoid each other's gazes. The Pendles are not fond of tattoos and body piercings, and I'm not fond of judgemental old geezers. I push through the fire exit door and I'm out in the alley behind the cinema. Chilly air sweeps the bare skin of my face and the rotten smell of the dumpsters seeps into my nostrils. I zip up my jacket and pull my chin into my scarf. God, I hate winter.

Head bowed, I watch my feet as I walk past the string of homeless guys sleeping against the alley walls. We don't bother each other, lest our personal bubbles of misery should meet. I pull my phone out of my pocket and put on some Paramore. My fingers are half-frozen, I dig them deeply into my pockets.

I don't see her until I run into her. I hear her exclamation of surprise because the impact has knocked my headphones askew. She's dropped the thing she was holding in her hand. When I stoop to pick it up for her, I see that it's a bag full of knitted items.

'Sorry.'

I make to walk past her, but I find myself unable to move my feet. My eyes are arrested. So many colours on one girl - cherry beanie, violet fingerless gloves, jade scarf, peach cardigan and cream skirt flowering with hibiscus. Brightest of all is the blush of her lips, curving into a smile.

‘Don’t be, it was my fault anyway!’

She speaks and the world goes quiet. The cadence of her voice is sweeter music than my ears have ever heard. I try to think of something to say, so that I might hear her speak again, but for once my thoughts are silent.

‘Mum always said I needed to spend less time away with the pixies and remember to keep my feet planted on the ground. Somehow the lesson never seemed to sink in, so I guess I’ll just go around running into mysterious strangers in dodgy alleyways for all eternity.’

Her words don’t quite make sense, they rush and tumble together as drops of water in the river, but the sound soothes me. My headphones hang limp around my neck, forgotten.

‘Mum also said that not every silence has to be filled with words.’ Her smile fades. ‘There’s just so many of them in my head, it’s hard to stop them from spilling out, you know?’

The sound of her voice seems to cut through the air as a bell through fog and it pierces straight to my core. She looks at me, expectant, and I am suddenly aware of the silence that surrounds us.

Yes, like static on the radio. So loud you can hardly hear yourself think.

The words come to me with such clarity, as if they have been there all along, waiting to pour out of my head. But how to speak them, when my tongue is heavy with the gravity of the moment? She drops her gaze and the feeling of momentousness passes.

‘Well, have a good night, I suppose.’

With three neat, deliberate steps she passes out of my orbit, but still I feel the force that pulls me towards her with an urgency I can’t ignore. My only thought is that I want to share more words with her. All the words we have in our heads, I want to spill them all between us until there are no more, and then I want to share the silence with her too. The thought grows louder and louder until I feel it pushing its way forward, bursting out of me.

‘Wait!’

I whirl to go after her, but she has stopped only a few paces from where I stand. She is bent over a nest of filthy sleeping bags where one of the homeless guys is sleeping. She is taking something from the bag in her hand and as she holds it out to him, I see it is a beanie. Her head turns at the sound of my voice and I stride toward her with my heart in my throat.

‘I just, um...wanted to ask if you...want to get a coffee or something with me?’

‘What, now?’

Her tone brings me to the sharp realisation of my absurdity. What kind of fool would agree to have coffee in the middle of the night with a stranger they bumped into in some back alley full of bums and dumpsters? The guy with the beanie chuckles and I want to kick him.

‘Okay, sure.’ She smiles at me.

What?

‘Just give me one minute.’ She turns back to beanie guy and hands him something else from her bag. A scarf. ‘There you go Frank, that ought to see you through the night.’

She hurries away down the alley and Frank calls his thanks after her. He looks up at me with a lazy grin plastered on his grizzly face.

Shove it up your arse, Frank. She said yes.

I watch her hand more scarves and beanies to the other miserable sods sleeping further up the alley. Her bag now empty, she returns to where I’m standing. As soon as she is near me again, I feel her pulling me in and my head begins to buzz, but this time instead of the cacophony of my thoughts all I hear is a single frequency: her.

‘Alright, let’s go.’

I let her choose the place and she picks a 24-hour cafe around the corner that I sometimes go to after work if I’m hungry and I know my fridge is empty. It’s not a place I would have chosen, it has neon signs in the windows and weird discoloured patches on the linoleum floor, but the imperfections don’t seem to bother her. We sit in the corner booth and order our coffees—a long black for me and a caramelatte with whipped cream on top for her.

She tells me her name is Maggie and she’s a student at the local college studying art history and political science. In her spare time, she takes French classes online and volunteers at the animal rescue centre. Her job as receptionist/event organiser at a friend’s art gallery pays the bills, but she designs and prints t-shirts on the side to help her save for the trip she’s planning to Europe in two years’ time. My coffee grows cold as I listen to her talk about all the places she’s going to visit, her eyes alight and her hands moving constantly. She takes a sip of her drink and we both laugh at the spot of whipped cream that gets stuck to the end of her nose.

I tell her about my job at the cinema and how I used to play guitar in a band when I was in high school. She asks me about my family and I stutter my way through the story of how my father left when I was fourteen, and how my mother drinks away every dollar my brother and

I ever give her. I thought for sure the words would stop coming after that, but it only brought forth more; a torrent of words about the mother she's never met and the boyfriend who used her credit card to fund his cocaine habit. The tides flow back and forth between us in rhythm, our voices are melody and harmony. Our music drowns out the noise of the world and my headphones lie dormant in my backpack, redundant.

At long last, with dawn approaching and the cafe all but empty, the words run out and silence falls. The quiet hums through my veins and despite the late hour, I am more awake than I can ever remember feeling. We reach for each other in the same moment, our fingers sliding together effortlessly. Maggie smiles.

'Tell me, Oscar, what is it you want?'

Such a pointless question—What do you want on your toast? What do you want for your birthday? What do you want out of life? - but when she says the words, they are infinitely more significant. What do I want? At this exact moment, I want so many things it feels like I can't have. Is it better to want pointlessly, or to live meaninglessly?

'I don't know.'

'I'll tell you a secret.' She leans in until our faces nearly touch. 'Nobody knows what they want, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't chase after the things we *think* we want, does it?'

Her eyes glimmer with the light of a fire I cannot see, but it burns a hole in the silence around us and through it I hear the clamouring buzz of new sounds, in a frequency I've never heard before. I'm terrified the noise will drown me out.

'I think I want to see you again.'

Her smile broadens. 'I think I'd like that.'

The sun is rising as I walk home. My headphones are back on and Dashboard Confessional blears into my ears, but it's nothing more than white noise - a backing track for my thoughts.

Is tonight too soon for me to call her? I wonder if I should invite her to my place for dinner next weekend? I'll definitely have to clean up a bit, my place is a disaster...I hope she likes music, can't believe I didn't ask...

I crash into bed barely five minutes after I'm in the door. It's been a long day. I put my phone on the nightstand, then I take my headphones off and place them beside it. I hit pause on my playlist and roll back over, letting my head sink into the pillows. The world around me

slips away until there is only the music, playing in my head. Her and me, me and her, the colours of us. The sound of being alive.