

THE QUARRY

Paper Walls

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I stared absently out the front window, barely concentrating on keeping the car between the two white lines of the lane. Jason prattled beside me.

‘It wasn't like I had planned for her to stay over last night, obviously,’ he continued, ‘but when the Uber stopped at my house she said she had no money to get back home and it was so late. I honestly didn't think anything of it ...’ He paused, giving me a second to process it. ‘And you shouldn't either.’ The road hummed beneath my car as my heart thudded in my chest. He stayed quiet as my insides burned out, spreading heat across my cheeks in a red flush. I gave him a quick look and he met my eyes, expressionless.

I hadn't said anything since he had started telling me about the night before, and how Jessica had supposedly ended up at his house in a strange, unfortunate turn of events. Jessica was his ex-girlfriend of five years, someone I was constantly envious, jealous and suspicious of. I had seen them together a couple of times, hanging out and catching up, but Jason would only shrug it off and call me crazy. I'm frightened of losing him; frightened that he'll get bored of me and go back to her. My mind was running wild with thoughts of them together, and I tried to control my hands so he wouldn't see them shaking on the steering wheel.

We were now about three hours out of Melbourne, heading to a camp ground at Lakes Entrance. Jason had suggested a camping trip this weekend as a romantic getaway. He had said that I deserved to be taken away. I considered now what that had meant, knowing he had been with Jessica only hours before we left.

‘Babe, I love you,’ he said, pulling me out of my thoughts. I felt tears threatening to fall on my burning cheeks.

‘Where’d she sleep?’ I asked.

‘What?’

‘Where did she sleep?’ I asked again, slower.

‘I can’t believe you would ask me that,’ he said, blowing it off.

‘Answer the question, Jason. Please?’ I asked. He was quiet for a minute, and I felt my stomach fall a little more with every heartbeat.

‘Well,’ he took a breath, sighed, opened his mouth and then closed it again. ‘You know how my mum is with girls being in the house and stuff!’ he argued. ‘Zach is only twelve, and I knew she’d blow my bloody head off if she saw Jess on the couch or something.’

Hearing this, I jerked the van into the emergency lane, smacking the hazard lights on as I turned my body to face him.

‘Keep going,’ I urged him, the left hand indicator ticking like a clock in front of me.

‘Well it was so late that I assumed we’d both just crash anyway, and she knew where my room was, so she naturally just headed up there.’ His eyes were in his lap as he avoided my eye contact. I wanted him to face me so that I could read his expression but from the side it looked blank.

‘And?’ I prompted him. The world around us had shrunken away so that nothing else consisted in my mind, outside of this car. There was a long pause and I could tell he was trying to think of the right words to say.

‘She kissed me, okay? And I was drunk, and I wasn’t thinking, but she started it!’ the words fell effortlessly from his mouth and without being able to catch them in time, he froze. ‘But I love you! You know I see my future with you and I know I said I wouldn’t do it again, but people make mistakes!’

‘You told me you were done.’ I knew I had heard it all before, but it hurt more this time after he had promised not to go back to her. Had I really pushed him to this again?

‘I know, baby, I know. But you have to trust me!’ his voice quivered with remorse, but I could only stare at him and wonder if it was fake. ‘You do trust me, don’t you?’ he asked.

‘Get out, Jason. Get out of the car,’ my voice was flat, emotionless. He shook his head.

‘Babe, we just need to talk about this.’

‘Get out, now!’ this time louder. As we stared at each other, our minds screamed noiselessly at each other.

‘No, don’t be stupid I’m not getting out of the car,’ he scoffed. He thought I was joking. Was this all a game?

‘Get out!’ I screamed. His mouth gaped open and hung limply for a little while. Then he shook his head in disbelief and nudged the door open, calling me a crazy bitch under his breath. After unbuckling his seatbelt, he paused and looked at me, before swearing under his breath and sliding off the seat and onto the dusty highway. Cars were flashing past and the wind hurt my eyes, but I kept staring at him, not allowing myself to cry.

‘You don't have to do this, Rita. Please, let's just talk about this,’ he begged.

‘Close the door.’ My voice was almost a whisper, but he followed my instructions. As soon as the door hit the latch I pulled off and back onto the highway once more. I looked once in the rear-view mirror as I drove off, and I saw his shadow slowly fading away, arms raised, body jumping. I turned the radio up. Even at full volume, I couldn't drown out my thoughts as my brain repeated the scene over and over. I started to cry.

I remember seeing Jason around campus before I'd ever even talked to him, and it used to make my day. His hair fell dangerously well around his eyes that seemed to pay no attention to my existence whatsoever. I couldn't write down the immense drag I had to him in any other way. He was perfect. He was so mystifying and beautiful and just out of reach, to me. I've always known that I've been a little more infatuated with him than he is with me, but I've tried to never let it bother me. The first four months of our relationship were a rush of cute beachside picnics and unexpected flowers. But after the first time I caught him cheating on me with Jessica, well that's when the flowers stopped. We entered a rut, I would say. I had caught them hooking up at a bar one night when I was meant to be picking him up from a boys' night. He told me that I pushed him to do it, that I'd been too controlling, and he felt upset and stressed. I had cried for days, not eating and ignoring his calls. All I could think was how could I have pushed someone I love, to do something so horrible to me in return. My mum sat there with me, every day that I stayed in bed, and pleaded for me to listen to her.

‘It's not your fault, you haven't done anything wrong!’ She repeated, over and over. But my stomach did somersaults as I thought of ways to make him forgive me.

The day in the van had been the exact same feeling. I had turned around after about fifteen minutes of driving alone. My indecision had driven me crazy. I was so worried about Jason, and how angry he would be with me that I lost the ability to think about anything else. Consumed with worry, I picked him up and patiently waited as we drove, for him to speak, and for me to listen.

When we finally reached the campground, it was absent of people or anything remotely comforting. We started a fire, and the crackling of the embers alongside the soft lapping of the muddled river water finally put me at ease. I was tired. I felt little comfort in the fact that Jason was by my side again, and I was confused as to how I became so panicked in the car by myself. As the night stretched on and we went to bed, there seemed to be a constant noise inside my head. It was my thoughts, teeming with indecision and sadness. I could barely hear the river lapping at the shore as both my sight and hearing were consumed with thoughts of my relationship. As I closed my eyes, I watched beautiful memories flash through the darkness to show their face and remind me of who it is that I love. But my head kept replaying the way Jason had treated me today, and I just kept asking myself the same question. Why?

Pulling me out of my thoughts was a noise a few meters away, sounding like someone was approaching the van. Scared and alert, I sat up, my ears burning to hear more. At my movement, Jason's soft snoring stopped, and it wasn't long before I felt a sleepy hand fumble its way over the bed to find me.

'Relax,' Jason cooed, 'it's probably just a wombat or kangaroo or something.' I stayed rigid trying to peer out into the darkness. A long sigh followed before Jason lifted his head from the pillow. 'Babe,' he said, more firmly. 'Lie down.' His hand moved around my wrist, tightening his grip and pulling me towards him with force.

Feeling him around my wrist, I forgot about the noise and remembered the threat of my own situation. My heart ached a little, when I thought so negatively of our relationship, but as he stared at me in the darkness I couldn't help but feel I was without a choice. I pushed gently on his grip and moved my body back against the mattress, into his awaiting arms. It wasn't too long before I felt completely safe and happy enclosed in his tight grip.

'You can't keep doing this, you know,' I whispered, feeling like it was a safe time to speak my mind.

'What are you talking about?' he replied sleepily.

'Hurting me.'

I could feel him chuckle beneath his breath as his body moved against mine.

'You hurt me, remember? You left me, stranded on the side of the road. You remember that, right?' he asked.

I thought it over for a while as silence consumed us once more. I felt guilty as I laid in his loving arms. He was right. I had left him stranded on the side of the road—something he would never do to me. I nudged his neck with my nose and kissed him apologetically. His body moved with mine as if in acceptance.

'Don't worry, baby, I forgive you.'

I felt my body involuntarily wince as he said he forgave me because he'd said it earlier that day. When I had pulled the van over in the original spot that I had taken off from, Jason had got back in the passenger seat and slapped me hard across the cheek with the back of his hand. I tried not to cry, but my eyes betrayed me and I sat there a weak mess as he stared at me. There was a coldness to his slap, like he had had no remorse whatsoever. He had never hit me before, so I knew what I had done was bad, and for the afternoon I felt thankful that he had forgiven me so quickly. But it made me more frightened now, to slip up, to act out, or to do anything that might upset him. I had been overwhelmed in the van, and when he commanded me to start driving again, I did so in silence.

'Next time I might not be so understanding, though,' his voice pulled me from my thoughts once more. I laid, staring up at the empty space in front of my eyes, and desperately waited for the warmth of sunlight to bring on a new day.

When I first met Jason, my mum was so happy. She loved the idea of me finally settling down with a man who would look after me and treat me right. When I was growing up on our property out in Berwick, I never really knew my dad. He was always coming and going, saying he'd be there for things but never showing up. Mum struggled, as much as she tried to hide it, and I knew that me finding someone to treat me right was a big thing for her. About five months into my relationship, Mum started getting less excited about Jason. She stopped inviting him to family dinners, and never asked how he was. One night, unexpectedly, she stopped me before I was leaving to see him. She held my arm softly and asked if she could ask me a serious question. I had nodded, pretty confused.

She asked, 'Are you happy?' She was looking very intently into my eyes, and I gave her a nervous laugh in return.

'What?' I asked. 'Where is this coming from?' She squeezed my arm lightly and smiled reassuringly as if to say, *it's okay, go on.*

'I mean, are you happy with Jason? Does he still make you happy? Does he treat you right?' I couldn't really understand why she was asking this, so a smile spread across my lips, but she stayed completely serious. We looked at each other for a few moments, not talking.

'I love him!' My words had hung limply in the air, for as much meaning as I had put behind them when I said it, all had seemed to disappear. I could tell Mum was dissatisfied with my answer, so I repeated myself. 'I love him,' I said again, with the same level of emotion as the first time. But once again her disbelief seemed to shatter the words as they left my mouth and all I had said seemed make-believe. She shook her head and pulled me over to the kitchen table, myself following like a

little puppy. Sitting down, she took a deep breath and looked at her hands as she placed them on the table.

‘Your dad told me he loved me every time he would come back into our lives for a short while before disappearing again without a note. You saw how much that hurt me and I saw how much it affected you,’ she paused, not taking her eyes off of me. ‘I don't want you to feel like I did. I felt trapped, but also constantly scared that he was going to leave me, and not come back. He made me think it was okay for him to hurt me and make me feel small.’ I could see Mum trying to blink away the tears forming behind her lashes, but all I could feel was anger. Was she jealous of what I had? Why was she saying this?

‘Jason is nothing like my dad!’ I yelled back at her, enraged with what she was trying to suggest. She tried to cut in, saying that wasn't what she had meant but I wasn't listening. ‘I love Jason. I need him, okay?’

I had stormed out of the room without giving mum a chance to respond. The next morning when she got up, she would have been greeted to my empty room. I had packed my clothes and things and thrown them in my car a few hours after she had gone to bed that night. I couldn't have brought myself to see her face; I knew she would have been broken hearted. But when I had gotten to Jason's that night, I was so distraught that I had unloaded everything she had said, to him. He, in turn, was so angry.

‘I can't date you, knowing you live with that old hag.’ He had spat the words at me as I was still crying. The only thing I could do was apologise, and then, move out of home. But I miss her. I always knew, deep down, that she was only trying to look out for me. But I just keep reminding myself, when I miss her or when I'm sad, that I have Jason. I love him, and I think he would do anything for me. This is just one of those hurdles that people go through for love. But you have to get over hurdles because it's the only way you move forward. I would get over anything—for Jason.