

# THE QUARRY

## Rain with Distant Thunder

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I reach the end of my story and pull my headphones over my head. I sink into the sounds—I like to listen to static and white noise while cleaning. It brings everything close, I can focus. Sometimes it's rain or cats purring, today it's just static. I close my eyes and squeeze them so tight I see tiny lights. The bleach smells cold and reminds me of home. I open several bottles one after the other and pour them all into the bathtub. The milky white masks the red slightly. I let it sit in the bath while I clean the mirror. I spray the window cleaner three times, squeezing the trigger slowly; they are satisfying squirts. I wipe a cloth over it and the blood smudges. It frames my eyes but covers everything else in a strawberry haze. I look deep into my blue and wonder if I can see my own soul. I wipe faster until my arm starts to hurt.

When I finish with the en-suite I lift the plug out of the bath and rinse everything down. It is back to its flawless porcelain white. I sit the body up. The skin squeaks against the walls of the bath as I struggle; I didn't think it was this heavy. I move into the bedroom. I bend down and drag my hand underneath the mattress to bring the fitted sheet away from it. I strip back the quilt cover and the pillowcases and put them in the wash with lemon, baking soda, and as they are white, some bleach too. I scrub the carpet with cleaner too. The bubbles soak

through my jeans, leaving two dark circles on my knees. I wipe down the surfaces of the bedside-tables and the drawers. The place is small, so the bedroom and the en-suite are the only places that need a deep clean. When I think everything is perfect I have to check it again, twice. Walk through the place slowly and check everything. Look underneath every bookshelf, the sofa; everything. I turn the warm tap on in the bath but leave the plug out, this will keep him warm and soft.

I close the door with a heavy click and put my shoes on again, they feel a lot looser on my feet now. In fact, all my clothes seem less restraining. I pull off the plastic gloves and stuff them into my back pocket, adjust the headphones on my head and change to a different track, this one is rain. ‘Rain with distant thunder falling on a shed’ I laugh at how specific it is. I hop down the stairs of the fire escape, skipping every second one and head into the foyer. I have a quick look around and go out onto the street. Outside it’s actually raining. People are ducking and passing through the streets to avoid the drops. I fiddle with my headphones. My chest feels clearer than it has in months and my nose is no longer blocked, it’s an amazing feeling. I can almost see myself from the outside, raising my face to the sky like I’m in a shitty romance movie—pop music playing over the top.

The train was loud. I could hear it even through my headphones. I looked from one face to the next. A woman was sleeping with a bag between her legs, head tilted to the side and arms loosely crossed on her lap. A boy and girl in school uniforms looking deep into each other’s eyes were blushing and holding hands. They probably thought they’d be together forever, they were more mature than their friends. This one was meant to last, they might get married and have some kids. They’d go to the same university and they’d always be in love. A young mother and her son. He was standing on the chair and looked out the window at the outside moving fast. Did he understand that he was on a train? She was holding him by the legs and pointing at things in the distance: shop, tree, another train. And then there was you.

You were wearing a shirt from some band I’d heard of but never listened to. Your hair was short on the sides but coiffed on the top, your small round glasses were slightly crooked. You were holding a book and talking to your friend. I was awestruck, you were the most handsome thing I’d ever seen. I couldn’t stop looking. Was I hoping to catch your eye? I don’t think so, but I didn’t have to worry about what I’d do if I did, you never looked my way. If you had, looked, I was wearing a blue flannel button up shirt and a striped jumper

over the top, my favourite Levi jeans and a pair of Doc Martens. My hair was neat, but very much in need of a cut. It was getting long. I turned the track down, so I could hear what you were talking about. I think it was about the book you were reading, it was for class and you were laughing with your friend about a particularly risqué passage that took you by surprise when you read it. ‘Should I talk about it in class?’ you laughed again ‘I’d be shy, but I have to know what he was thinking putting this in!’ Your smile made me smile. And then you got up with your friend. I jumped up to follow, I couldn’t lose you.

I gathered you were walking to class. I followed with my headphones on, the street was too loud not to. I missed what you were saying but it was okay. I followed you right up to the university building. It was large and made of sandstone, the edges looked sharp. Chimneys came out of almost every peak on the roof and windows covered every face. You were so mysterious I wanted to be close to you. Your friend said goodbye to you and I caught your name, Max. In Latin it means ‘the greatest’. I thought it suited you well. I felt quite silly standing there now that you were gone, I made the walk of shame back to the station.

When I got home that night I sat alone in my room, face lit by the screen of my laptop. Searching you up on Facebook wasn’t hard, your name and university and there you were. I sent you a request and you accepted. I was surprised, that’s usually the hard part. I waited two and a half days so as to not seem too keen. It took me hours to construct that simple message: ‘Hey! you probably don’t remember me, but I met you at Joe’s party last week. We should meet up for coffee sometime! Or go to the markets?’ I thought this was really smart I scrolled through your feed and saw some photos from the party.

When we came together we were like old friends, you were so upbeat and shone when you smiled. I walked up to you, this time you were wearing a t-shirt, black jeans, and a denim jacket. Your eyelashes were so long they flicked every time you blinked. I don’t think I’d ever seen a man with eyelashes like yours.

‘This place is so busy today, hey?’ your voice was even lovelier than I remembered, I had psyched myself up for days training myself not to need my headphones at the market. I knew it would be loud, but I wanted to hear you. It was deep and felt like you had poured golden syrup into my ears and over my face. I wanted to sit in your soundwaves forever. There was a stall that sold jumpers not too far from where we were, I suggested we looked over there.

‘Yeah sure,’ you did a little smile that made my heart skip a beat. I didn’t want to assume anything yet, but I thought, maybe, you liked me. We talked about what you studied, I already knew, it was on your Facebook, but I wanted to hear you say it. Give it to me.

We discovered throughout our market traipsing that we were the same size in clothing. And even though I was shy to suggest that stall, you did in fact like jumpers. The more we talked the more I felt as though you felt the same as me. We liked movies, the same movies. We liked books, the same books. Our hands brushed over each other and lingered. You put your hand on the small of my back as we weaved through the multitudes of people. I thought you were so brave to touch me like that in public. Our hands bumped together less by accident and more with purpose, our fingers intertwined.

We got coffee afterwards. You pulled out your phone to check your messages. Your hands were strong and heavily lined. Your fingernails were cut to the same length on every finger, no stray pointy shards that needed to be bitten off. Each nail was blessed with the same sized half-moon by the cuticle. The hair on your arms was straight, and all went in the same direction. When you looked up at me, was the first time I wasn't afraid if someone had seen my soul behind my eyes. We arranged to meet again, two days later, I'd catch the train back to your apartment with you after uni.

We shared earphones. The first song you put on, do you remember what it was? it was soft like you. Your fingertips stroked the back of my hand the whole trip. Your place was cosy and warm. Brown carpet stretched from wall to wall, the walls were off-white as they generally are in apartments. You had books and films crammed, double stacked, into your bookshelves. You walked in ahead of me and turned around. 'Well. This is it!' Your lips pinched into a smile that looked like you were stifling a laugh. 'I love it.' I whispered. You made us tea and we sat on your bed. Your hair was soft passing through my fingers. 'Max.' I took a deep breath. 'Do you like me?' your little smile again; it killed me every time, you leaned in and kissed me. I could feel the lines on your lips and your stubble on my cheeks. Inside your mouth was warm and wet. We lay down on the bed and you held my face. Our breaths were slow and heavy but got faster. Your hands clutched at my back and mine made fists in your hair.

When we fell apart the place was quiet. I wondered if you could hear my heartbeat, was it fast? Or slowly trudging on? I moved my hand to your head and ran my fingers over the cartilage in your ear: Daith, Rook, Helix. I could feel you shift and then vibrations travelled up my chest and throat. You invited me to a party you were thinking of having in a couple weeks, you said you'd introduce me to people. I kissed you again and pulled you in close.

I had done the trip to yours a countless amount of times by the time the party came around. When I arrived at your building I could hear the music from the street. The door was already open and there were far too many people crammed into the space. The music

reverberated in my chest and my ears. I put my headphones on quickly and shut my eyes. Breathed in and out. The air was already being used by everyone else. You were leaning against a wall, a red wine balancing between two fingers, talking to someone. My entire body filled with warmth when I heard your golden syrup voice. You saw me and beckoned me over.

‘What are you wearing these for?’ You pulled my headphones off, ‘guys this is Ben, the one I’ve been telling you about,’ your arm circled my waist. You called out to Sam, to bring me a wine. I didn’t drink but I wanted you to see me drink. Wine after wine after Vodka lemonade, the drinks kept coming. I watched you dance. Your body swayed, and your eyes closed. Your mouth was loose, and your smile was different, a drunk smile. You were called away by Sam for something, you looked back to me and smiled. I wasn’t sure what to do with myself while you were gone so I assumed my wallflower position. I ran my hands over each of the books’ spines, they seemed cramped and their spines were jutting out everywhere. The amount of liquid I had consumed had started to hit me and I went to the bathroom but when I opened the door – you have to remember this bit. This is the bit that absolutely crushed me, so you must remember. You were there, weren’t you. With Sam. My heart fell through the fucking floor, Max. You didn’t see me straight away, so you kept on. Your hands were on his waist and clenching his shirt like they often did to mine. Your eyes were closed with your long eyelashes gently kissing his cheeks. Your eyes snapped open and I felt my knees wanting to give way. ‘Ben! What are you doing in here?’ Your voice was slurred. You followed me out of your apartment saying you were sorry, but I pushed passed you and ran into the alley next to your building. I fumbled with my phone like a drug addict trying to push in the needle. I had to press play. Rain with distant thunder. You didn’t come out after me.

The next three days were the hardest; I sat like a kettle boiling. I took the train to your house. You kept trying to apologise and kiss me, but I connected my elbow with your face and carried you to the bath. I stripped you down and put tape over your mouth. You woke up. I told you I loved you, and I didn’t want it to be like this, all the cliché stuff you’d expect. I flipped the knife over and over in my hand and moved my eyes from the floor. The first thing I noticed were your eyes. They were almost closed but not quite, eyelashes still flicking softly when you blinked but they were holding tiny pearls made from tears. Your skin was red and wet from the tiny pinpricks of sweat. I placed my hand on your cheek and kissed your quivering eyelid. And I did it.

‘I wanted you to know my side of the story, Max.’ I’ve got to clean now. I pull my headphones over my ears.