

THE QUARRY

Caitlin Hickson

Pretty Boy

‘Such a pretty boy,’ people always say when they first see me. I have heard more sentences about my bone structure and the size of my waist than about the bruises on my skin. The audience throws me roses, no matter what I do. I think they would applaud if I just stood and smiled or undid another button of my shirt.

I stand there and smile in the mirror for my instructor and she tells me to push harder. My bones are aching, and my smile is breaking but I do the routine again. I feel the ground reaching up to me, I feel it embrace me and I hear my breath leave.

The first thing I think about when I fall is my face. If I get another bruise on my face, I’ll be done for. No audience will cheer for me if I don’t look perfect. I’m

not stupid, I know that's why they come to see me. They don't really care about my steps, my talent, or the hours I spend in this practice room.

My instructor doesn't say anything as I stand back up.

She sends me home early. I can tell she thinks I fell in practice today because I haven't been sleeping. To be fair, she would be right. It's just not easy to fall asleep with my parents in the room next door, their hatred seeping through the wall like a bad smell. She tells me it's okay to be tired and take a break, but all I can hear is my father's voice.

He says I'll never amount to anything.

And maybe he's right.

The downside to leaving the studio early is that there are people at the bus stop. Boys from my school, to be specific. They're on their way home from soccer practice, balls under their arms and mud on their socks. I shove my ballet shoes in my bag on instinct, but it's too late. One of them sees me and elbows his friend.

'Well, if it isn't the *pretty boy*. How's life as a ballerina?' he asks, lips stretching into a sneer.

I ignore the nickname and push past him to stand below the bus stop sign. He doesn't care about my dancing, he's just bored. I don't even think he knows my real name. I try to tune out their conversation, but their laughter carries.

It's the same every time.

'With that hair he looks like your sister.'

'Hey, don't insult my sister like that.'

'Do you think he wears tights and tutus?'

'Probably, you have to be at least *half* a girl to do ballet for fun.'

I've heard it all by now. But it still stings when they laugh, like all of this – my hair, my face, my dream – is all just a joke.

And the more I hear it, the easier it is to believe.

The other major downside of being let out early is that my parents are awake when I get home.

The first thing I do when I walk in the door is hide my ballet shoes. I slip into the skin of the boy my mother wants to see. The boy with good grades and lots of friends who has come home from soccer practice, or boxing, or any other acceptable extracurricular activity. We both know I'll never really be able to be that person, but we can pretend.

She sits at the dining room table, dinner laid out and waiting. She welcomes me home almost as if she's happy to see me. I smile back at her, forcing my eyes to stay open, my screaming muscles to act as if there is nothing amiss. But my head is spinning, and my lack of sleep is catching up to me. I'm tempted to lay my head on the dining table and never wake up again.

Instead, we talk. We talk about school like we always do. She tells me about the sons of her friends, the ones with stable careers and bright futures. I know she tells me this because that's who she wants me to be. Then I tell her about my day – I don't tell her I fell in the dance studio.

As soon as my father walks through the front door, I shut up. I won't say a word unless he asks me to. His disappointment in me so quickly turns into anger and I'm not in the mood to gain any new bruises tonight.

He isn't drunk right now, but he looks at me like he wishes he was. At least if he was drinking, he might be able to forget that his only son dances with girls and grew out his hair just to spite him.

I slip away as soon as I can to my room. It's as I'm climbing the stairs that I hear him say my name. My foot freezes mid-step and I hold my breath. I wait for him to turn the corner. Drag me back down the stairs. And punish me for my existence.

My skin itches in anticipation. I wonder if he'll bruise me so bad that I can't go to the studio again. I really can't afford to miss another practice.

But he doesn't turn the corner, instead I hear him pull out a chair. His voice is low and not quite angry yet as he speaks to my mother. 'All the effort it took to raise him, and the only thing he turned out to be was pretty.'

I don't get much sleep that night either.

The next day at practice I fail the jump again.

I meet the ground and stay there.

I close my eyes and I hear the disappointment in my mother's voice when I brought home my first pair of ballet shoes. Her longing for me to be someone else. I feel my father's shame like the hard floor against my ribs. I smell the breath of the boys in my face, taunting me. I hear them all calling me a girl like it is a dirty word.

I clench my fists and stand back up.

I tie my hair.

I do the routine again.

This time I don't meet the floor when it calls. This time I land.

The corner of my instructor's mouth turns upward. Not a smile, but almost. And it's better than a hundred roses. It means I am worth something. It means I did something right. It means I am more than my face and my waist and all the things I am not.

It makes me feel as if the marks left over on my skin from my father's shame are worth it. His taunts ricochet in my mind as I land the flip over and over again. And each time I land his words grow fainter. Nothing can touch me here, not even him.

When my instructor leaves for the night, I stay. I practice until my eyes are blurry and my legs are jelly. I'll catch the last bus home and then I'll do it all over again tomorrow. And one day, they won't be laughing anymore. One day, they will look at me and see more than my face, more than my parents' hatred, more than someone to be teased. One day I won't have to hide myself anymore.

At the bus stop that night there's a girl. The first thing I notice is her face. She's pretty in a tired sort of way. She looks like the kind of attractive girl my mother would want me to invite home – exactly the type of girl I want to avoid.

And then I notice the bruises on her legs. I can't help it; she's sprawled across the seat and the marks stand out in the harsh glow of the streetlight. They bloom around her knees like roses and my bruises ache in solidarity. Her hair is tied up, just like mine.

In her hands she holds a hockey stick like it's the only thing holding her to the earth. I wonder if that's how she got her bruises. I study her eye bags and the tight grip on her stick, and I think that maybe there's more. Maybe she learnt to fight the same way I did, by herself against the world.

She looks at me, sizing me up. I know she sees the ballet shoes in my hands and how I carry them like they're the only things that matter. I tighten my grip defensively. When people see the shoes, they always follow up with questioning looks and laughter. But I'm too tired to even pretend to hide them tonight. I prepare myself for the insult, praying she'll just ignore me.

She's looking at me and she doesn't look at my face, or even at my shoes, but rather at the yellowing bruise on my elbow.

Then she moves over and leaves room for me to sit.

'I like your shoes,' she says.