

# THE QUARRY

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## How to Get Away with Unfinished Homework

‘Motherfucker,’ I whisper, too preoccupied with my frustration, forgetting myself in the night’s silence.

It’s what I get for buying the shitty fifty cent pencil pack from the IGA, I know, but my anger flickers and boils regardless. It’s two A.M, the lead on this god awful pencil keeps breaking, and I can barely even think what to write.

I've already sharpened it too many times, the shavings forming a monument to my stupidity on my desk. I clump them together. It's a record of how whittled down the pencil has become, taking my energy with it, and I hesitate to brush it into the bin. Where the lead — sorry, graphite — is supposed to stay secure in the pencil is now replaced by a gaping hole, a wound in the wood. I have half a mind to discard the thing entirely, to discharge it of its services and start anew, but then, the temptation to give up altogether would be too great.

I could, of course, venture outside of my room and acquire a pen; a much more reliable tool, but my work is far too important to be permanent on the first try. Besides, even though they lack the fragile graphite, they can just as easily run out of ink; the ballpoint rolling uselessly around, only scraping out ghosts of letters. There's nothing that wants to help me with this.

My page is maybe a quarter, maybe one third full. Pathetic. I've been at this for hours. I haven't even allowed my attention to wander — this page, nearly blank, has been my whole world. The least it could do is act inviting.

It doesn't like me, though, I've realised. It resents the markings I've laid down, rubbed out, tried again and discarded once more. It mocks my indecision, knowing the more it stays blank the more I'll pay for it. I can hear my teacher now — *'This is unacceptable, Cameron.'* The page thinks I'm stupid. *'You never put any effort in.'* It's right, though, I'll give it that.

It's my pencil, I remind myself — it refuses to cooperate with me. Constantly breaking. All my utensils are against me; none of them want to be in my corner.

Forgetting again the silence of the early hours, I throw the pencil down and it rattles against the hardwood floor. The sound snaps me out of my bedroom and to my classroom — my teacher, Mrs Alex, was always quite fond of taking my pencils and hitting them against my desk when I wasn't working hard enough. Sometimes they would snap, little pieces of wood flickering back at me. I look down to where my pencil now lays on my floor. It deserves to be there. Besides, it's probably a far more exciting fate than all the nothing I've been using it for on the paper.

I have to keep writing, though. I need to hand this work in.

It's five past six now, and the morning light is just starting to creep over the horizon. I walk to my destination, my pile of A4 pages securely in my hands. I look over them again to check they're in the right order — intro, body, conclusion.

I reach the graveyard a little bit later than usual — I hope Mrs Alex isn't too impatient — and I can see some other people milling about among the dead; maybe some workers, a few other visitors. They're all silhouettes against the rolling hills, stalking between the aisles of tombstones.

When I reach Mrs Alex, I step lightly. I present my finished work to her, resting the sheets of paper down on the patch of grass that covers her grave.

'I finished it in time,' I tell her. I had to stay up all night to do so, but it was worth it. 'It's handwritten. With two centimetre margins, just how you like.'

I struggle with what next to say. She's giving me the silent treatment, like she hasn't had her coffee yet, like she wants to be left alone. Maybe I didn't write enough. Maybe my handwriting is too hard to read.

'It's an essay on the creation myths of Mesopotamia.' I hesitate. 'I know we didn't go over that a lot when you had me, but...' There's something stopping me from forming full sentences around her, a firm grip around my throat that's leaving me flustered.

She was my year six teacher. In the cramped classrooms of a public primary school, five days a week, I knew her for a year. Or, more accurately, for most of a year. It was a month or two before my primary school career was over that the principal sat our year down, talking his mouth off about grief and loss and support structures. They were concepts that most twelve year olds would rather die than be forced to hear about, and before I knew it, a substitute I can't remember the face of replaced Mrs Alex for my final days. I didn't see what all the fuss was about. My parents took me out for ice cream that day.

Throughout high school, she didn't cross my mind much — she hardly ever did, until I found her by accident, my vision drowned in tears.

It was a year and a half ago, and I'd just barely graduated high school. I was one of many in a crowd of black, crawling after a coffin carried on the shoulders of men, my grandfather's body safely wrapped up inside. Walking along the winding path of

the cemetery, I saw it, as if possessed by an eagle, my eye somehow catching her in a sea of her brethren.

*Evelyn Alexander. Beloved wife, mother and grandmother.*

I stopped in my tracks. She reached out of her grave and clawed at my mind, yanking me out of the slow stride of the crowd. It was a sort of stumble, a sort of yielding.

My memories of that last year of primary school didn't come flooding back; there wasn't a tidal wave of past emotions suddenly overtaking me at seeing her name. Only confusion grabbed me; the grip of the past was not as strong.

In fact, I could hardly remember anything from that time. The last year or so of primary school, everything wrapping up and starting anew in high school — there were only bits and pieces, most of it was a blur. There was an obscure glass wall in my mind, and I didn't dare break it.

There was one thing, though. One thought, one memory, that scratched at my brain as I stood, rooted in the middle of the cemetery, lagging behind my grandfather's corpse.

Mrs Alex was a heinous bitch.

There were some faint screams in my head, maybe hers, maybe my parents, maybe mine, I didn't know. Too late, too late, always too late — and if I wasn't too late, I wasn't enough anyway. For such a hazy memory, it was loud, *so loud*, and boiling to the touch; the glass my mind kept it safely behind smoked and steamed, like I would burn myself if I got too close.

And for the rest of the funeral, the wrong ghost was haunting me. I didn't cry when they lowered my grandfather's body into the ground; I had other worries on my mind.

In all the days since, I've been trying my hardest to make up for lost time.

The cold morning air bites at my skin as I stand in front of Mrs Alex. The conversation sputters and dies out, flopping uselessly as a fish out of water — she's had

enough of me by now. The sun is rising slowly, beams of light now flickering the morning awake. My essay pages are dotted with white-gold flecks.

‘I hope you like it.’ My eyes are on my feet, I don’t dare look at the tombstone — into her eyes. The letters on the stone serve as her only presence left in this world. Her name, etched into the granite slab, is dug deep, like lasting scars — she has no burden of impermanence, no possibility of the indecision I face when I erase pencil mark after pencil mark. I leave the cemetery before the morning hits seven.

She’ll be impressed with me one day. One day, my efforts will finally be enough.