

# THE QUARRY

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## Seeking Sky from Rooftops

Lilly waited to hear Walid snoring through the thin walls before sneaking down the corridor to the back door. The tiles underfoot always felt cool no matter how high temperatures reached. She crossed the asphalt road, mounted the steep stairs that divided Noura's front lawn like a metallic zipper and climbed the ladder leaning against the brick wall of her best friend's house and waited.

The roof gently sloped to a wide channel off the eaves. It was full of debris and leaves. Lilly liked the way the dry mess rustled when she rested her feet in the guttering. She wiggled her toes, listening to the leaves crackle and waited.

Noura's fingers with their badly painted and chipped nails always appeared first against the shingles. Then, the top of her head covered with a black scarf. When she was high enough she hitched up her legs and, sitting next to an expectant Lilly, pressed her hollow cheek next to Lilly's round one.

There was a moment of silence as they gazed out at the scape of obsolete factories, second-hand car yards, and the stretch of highway that led to the city. Freedom was the school holidays, on the rooftop of Noura's home, where Lilly sat unnoticed by her mother's string of boyfriends and Noura was free from her chore-abiding and obsolete law-abiding parents.

Noura crossed her legs. 'Shall I? Again?'

Lilly snuggled in. Noura had started telling the story of the Owl Prince about a month ago. A celestial Hercules saving girls from misery in the suburbs of a forgotten Sydney. Their Sydney was one without a harbour view, where run-down fibro houses lined the streets.

‘Tell me,’ Lilly begged.

And Noura began:

*The Owl Prince*

*The Owl Prince is an aristocrat of the night who visits girls sitting on rooftops and dreaming of gentle love. He knows not of slapping and lewdness, nor of calloused large hands. He is a gentleman. He expends his energy swooping and circling the skies and asking rooftop girls: Would you like to learn to fly above everything and everyone?*

*‘Can you really do that?’ they ask him and, perched on the edge of the gutters, they spread their arms wide and imagine what it is like to feel the weight of air underneath them.’*

‘Imagine if the Owl Prince did come and teach us how to fly!’ Lilly said but Noura shook her head and then broke into a smile.

Lilly hugged her bare, scraped knees up under her chin and rocked. Noura was born to tell stories and *she* was born to listen. This had always been the way of their friendship. Now Lilly wanted to tell a story: to have Noura need her, too. More than anything. She fumbled for the piece of paper she had scrawled the words on in her pocket and began:

*‘Once upon a time before servitude was born,  
And Angel Owls and Creatures of the Night freely roamed and the land was wild, all girls were trained in lessons in flight –’* she stopped mid-sentence.

‘Go on.’ Noura urged, poking her gently on the shoulder.

‘That’s all I have. I can’t think of anything else.’

‘Yes, you can, it’s easy. Just make it up. Like me.’

‘Noura, wouldn’t you love to learn to fly and flee from here?’

‘One day we will.’

A veiled Noura lifted her hands and in place of dirty nails with chipped polish, Lilly saw powerful limbs that gestured the flight of the Owl Prince. She giggled.

‘Do you think he’d protect us?’

‘Of course,’ Noura answered.

*If only the Owl Prince would come and take me away from Walid’s sneaking hands. Or even take Walid away and leave me and my mother alone,* Lilly thought. But then, she knew that another Walid would simply take his place, called Bruce or Barry or Mahmood.

They sat in silence; Noura’s arms were still stretched out like wings, her sleeves billowing in the night breeze. Lily tilted her chin up, letting the wind blow against her face, a short respite from the summer heat.

It was a fairy story, a make-believe myth they had invented just like the ones they told of giants fighting when it thunder stormed and the tale of frustrated artist Monsieur Verdante who threw his paint out the window in a fit of anger and made the artificial grass, artificial green.

But the next night Noura appeared, with henna markings on her hands and arms instead of the usual pen ink. She told Lilly her parents had bought her a ticket to a place that didn’t exist on a map anymore, to be married to a man twenty five years her senior whom she had never met. Lilly knew, then, that her friend was wishing for the Owl Prince to be real, too.

*‘The Owl Prince’s castle lies behind the storm clouds. A sky heavy with winds and rains means he has bought his kingdom to your town. You must ride those clouds, fly into the thick of the storm, or you will get left behind.’*

Noura laid her hands in her lap and they both looked at the patterns in silence. The henna had lost its vibrancy and now started to blur into the tiny crevices of Noura’s skin.

‘You’re fourteen! They can’t send you to marry some guy you don’t know!’

‘They can, Lilly.’ Mascara streaked Noura’s cheeks.

Lilly put an arm around her best friend. She looked up at the night sky, searching for very special storm clouds but the heat had made the sky crisp and starched.

It seldom rained in summer. The season was long and stifling. Young boys tried to fry an egg on the asphalt at the hottest time of the day.

‘Lilly! Lilly! Get your miserable arse back home now!’ The anger in Walid’s voice bounced up to their rooftop.

‘I’ve got to go.’

She kissed Noura’s wet cheek and scrambled down the ladder.

Lilly put salt instead of sugar in Walid’s coffee; her mother got angry.

‘What the hell did you do that for?’ her mother yelled. She threw the cup into the sink, sending a chipped piece of porcelain into the air.

‘I don’t like the way he touches me.’

‘Don’t be stupid.’

‘He told me to show him my tits.’

‘Stop telling lies, Lilly.’

‘You’re lying to yourself.’

‘Go to your room before I slap you!’ her mother screamed, but she grabbed for her menthol cigarettes instead.

Lilly stormed to her room and slammed the door. In the Banks’ household where the rules changed according to the latest boyfriend, words meant nothing. Actions spoke louder. She rested her forehead against the cold wall, and stared at the floor. What had once been her home, where she felt safe, was decaying around her. She noticed the dust that coated the edges of the skirting boards and the blinds was now visible to her naked eye even in the afternoon light.

She threw herself onto her bed and drifted into a state of half sleep, hearing them argue. Snippets of Walid’s defense – *it’s just a game, she’s a lying little bitch, you know what teenage girls can be like and I saved you so much money by sanding the lounge room floor!* Empty, weightless words that levitated and travelled with a gust of wind.

When the rhythms of her breathing slowed and sleep stood at the edges of her consciousness, she saw the Owl Prince perched at her windowsill. Was she dreaming? She could have sworn she was awake. He wore an owl mask over an angular, chiseled face and lifted his goliath arms, revealing the tawny feathers that sprouted underneath. Then, he took the north wind up, past the tops of the highest roofs and trees and ascended into the night air. A fluttering and fluttering noise reverberated around the bedroom.

Lilly rubbed her eyes and stared at the posters of dragons and winged horses above her bed. Her grandmother had bought them for her twelfth birthday. She hadn't seen Nan since Walid had moved in. Now they peeled from their corners, revealing the dirty white walls underneath. If she didn't blink they looked as if they were moving, flying, too. She drifted back into slumber. Perhaps she should sleep forever.

When she woke, a few hours later, her mother and Walid were both asleep, the television in their room emanating white noise. She sat up and stretched, running her hands through her hair and felt a foreign fluffy texture.

A single tawny feather was entangled in her knotty hair. She gently removed it, brushing its softness against her cheek and trembled with excitement.

*Yes.*

*The Owl Prince was real.*

*He had come for her.*

*Come for them.*

She put the feather into her jean's pocket and went to Noura. She knew her best friend would be waiting.

It was dawn and rows of lights iced the city with a white glow, making dreams seem tangible, real even. The city felt washed clean and hope dressed Lilly in its finest. *The Owl Prince. Real. His feather in her pocket.* She smiled at Noura.

'I was wondering when you would come,' her friend said and pressed her cheek against Lilly's. Noura untied her headscarf, letting her long ebony hair unravel. Lilly thought the tresses hung in wings of raven black, exuding sorceress magic.

‘You look like a witch – a good one.’

Noura smiled and lifted her face towards the few remaining night stars and closed her eyes as if in a trance.

‘He did not touch me tonight.’ Lilly said. It was unemotional, reportative, factual. ‘I put salt in his coffee.’

‘At least when mine touches me he will call me wife.’

‘Does that make it any better?’

Lilly snuck her hand in her pocket and stroked the tawny plume. She decided not to tell Noura just yet about the feather, relishing its secret for a little longer. She wanted to surprise her, tell her at just the right moment.

‘One day, the Owl Prince will come,’ she said.

Noura shuffled closer, put a tight arm around Lilly’s waist and pointed to a large storm cloud approaching from the East. ‘Look, his floating castle is behind those storm clouds. You see, it never rains in summer, yet, he comes for us.’

‘When do you fly out to marry the old fart?’

‘In two weeks.’

‘Right before school starts.’

Noura stretched her hands in front of her; the henna now pale ochre, almost the same colour as her skin. With her story-telling hands she brushed the hair away from Lilly’s ear and whispered, ‘You must believe.’

Lilly tingled at the gentle touch of lips on the curve of her ears. How could her friend stay so calm when she was about to be sold to a man who could mistreat her; someone she didn’t know? She listened:

*The Owl Prince watches Noura and Lilly and thinks they would make great flying companions...*

Lilly dozed on Noura’s shoulder, dreaming of riding the back of her Prince of feathers, zooming past a bird’s eye view of her rooftop, bouncing from one cloud to another, riding into the vast shah blue of the night skies. Away from Walid and her mother.

‘Walid and I are getting married,’ her mother said as she folded the laundry. She didn’t look at Lilly but kept her eyes focused on the worn socks and underpants with frayed elastics.

Lilly waited, to see if her mother would look at her, acknowledge that she deserved conversation, dialogue, not just commands and statements. Half a minute passed.

Lilly marched to her room and slammed the door. She was not going to listen anymore.

‘You’ll have to get used to it!’ her mother yelled out to her. ‘You’re a big girl now.’ She turned the television up loud, competing with Lilly’s music.

Things were closing in. Noura would be gone in less than a week and she would be left here alone. She crawled under bed and lay there in the darkness and dust bunnies. She wondered how long she would have to stay there until her mother came in and saw her in silent protest. She never came. Soon, her muscles cramped and her neck hurt. Still her mother didn’t come. Lilly stayed in her room until they went to bed. When she went to the kitchen, she found a dinner plate with two lamb chops and mash inside the microwave.

That night Lilly was alone on the rooftop. Noura had been sent to her Aunt’s place for the evening. She stroked the single feather in her pocket and marveled at how she had woken with it in her hair. She spread her arms out wide and pretended they were wings. Her shoulders felt strong. The wind accelerated and blew her hair back off her shoulders and it flew. But when she looked down, her head started to spin as she rocked dangerously too close to the edge.

Should she jump? She thought about her mother. Her wiry mother who shook too much, smoked too many cigarettes and watched too much television. She would marry Walid. Walid, who chained his motorbike to the post in the car space and always tied the dog up, no matter how many times Lilly let him run free in the yard. Her mother would vow to love and obey him and he would tie her up, too. The rope of manipulation is a strong, coarse one, already Lilly feels its noose around her neck, tightening, each time he stood near her.

She would never obey any man.

*Would you like to learn to fly above everything and everyone?* She heard Noura's voice in her mind. How would she cope when her best friend had gone?

'I do believe,' she whispered to the night sky.

Walid slapped Lilly.

It was the evening before Noura was to fly to her new home. Lilly and Walid were sitting at opposite ends of the sofa in the lounge room, her mother ironing in front of the television. He was watching the wrestling and Lilly changed the channel without asking. It was without warning, a cold, dry slap across the face. Lilly pushed him back. He undid his belt, brandishing it like a sword to threaten her. Lilly recoiled, back towards the corridor but the feather had made her cocky.

'Mum and I always watch Family Feud.'

'Walid!' her mother pleaded. 'Leave her. She's just a kid.'

Lilly froze. An eerie silence fell between them as white and tawny feathers floated past the lounge room window. Walid slumped back on the lounge and Lilly's mother continued ironing.

'You can leave home when you turn fifteen,' he said.

Lilly didn't answer, mesmerized by the cottony tufts that fluttered past.

'Did you hear what I said?'

*The Owl Prince had come.*

Lilly bolted. She dashed down the corridor and onto the footpath. Vapor rose from the asphalt and she could smell the humidity mixed with the promise of rain. A storm was coming! She ran across the road, the hot ground burning her bare feet and didn't stop until she was up the zipper staircase and climbing the wobbly ladder to the rooftop. White and tawny feathers pirouetted in the air. She hoisted herself up.

On the other side of the roof, Noura stood dangerously close to the edge where the last row of shingles met the guttering.

She held a hessian sack, full of white and tawny feathers and was releasing them to the angry wind. They plummeted, swooped and circled like fragile birds taking their first flight.



Lilly's mouth watered involuntarily and nausea churned at her stomach, wringing it tight.

'Noura, where's the Owl Prince?'

Noura's were vacant; she stared toward the emptiness of the horizon and laughed. It was a tinkling kind of laugh, and echoed against the excitable winds.

'*I am* the Owl Prince. Stories are all we have left. Can you see his turret in the storm clouds?'

The bile rose in Lilly's mouth, coating her tongue. She saw nothing but clouds and weightless feathers. She shook her head.

Desperation swallowed Noura's already hollow cheeks. She reached out her hand, her fingers outstretched towards Lilly.

'Jump with me! Jump! You must believe!'

Before Lilly could decide, Noura leapt out into the empty air, grabbing Lilly's hand as she passed. Lilly felt her toenails scratch against the roof tiles and was suspended into the night air of debris and dust particles that stung her face.

'I do believe. I do believe. I do believe,' Lilly prayed and the words curled up and whisked away.

A pressure beat inside Lilly's skull. Her ears blocked. They were being taken up, further towards the fast moving charcoal clouds, towards the opening of the storm.

Thunder birthed a chasm in the sky and separated them. Lilly's hand scabbled for Noura's.

'Noura!' she screamed but her friend was out of her reach. She watched Noura's drop turn to a bounce as if scooped up in a net. Caught in this invisible web she bounced from left to right, up and down as feathers sprouted from her shoulder blades. Then it let Noura go.

Lilly gasped as her friend fell free, faltered, fluttered ...and then flew.

Lilly itched as if she had hives. She was caught in an unseen thread of silk wind and cold rain; Lilly spun inwards, her skin crawled as feathers poked through and her eyes watered as her eyelids furred. She jerked and flapped, and then flew towards Noura, their wings entwined to share their first joyous flight.

‘Tell me a story,’ Noura demanded. Her voice was calm as if she was born to do this.

And Lilly began,

*‘Once upon a time before servitude was born,*

*When Angel Owls and Creatures of the Night roamed freely  
and the land was wild,*

*All girls were trained in lessons in flight*

*So when they ran up the rooftops to jump their lives away*

*They did believe in fairies*

*And did grow wings of fey.*

Lilly flew upward. Noura followed. It was an impulse, a quick decision. An exhilarative rush surged through Lilly as she brushed Noura’s wings. Weightless, they picked up a wind current that blew west.