

# THE QUARRY

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## The Riders

Sister Veronica had a well-known knack for knowing if a student was looking at the clock, but Joyce Hocking stole a glance at the hateful face above the blackboard regardless. Still 1:47. Its hands had barely moved. The nun continued to stroll around the classroom, hands clasped behind her back, hovering over the shoulder of each kid and their cursive practice. Joyce had only copied one line from the blackboard, and had also smudged ink down the side of her book. But instead of starting a new page, she pressed her pen nib down hard on the blotting paper and watched the blue ink blossom. Under the desk, her left hand picked at the edges of the large scab on her knee, carefully selecting sections that felt sufficiently healed to yield without starting a new bleed. She let the loosened crumbs fall to the floor and then ran a satisfied fingertip over the soft new skin beneath, imagining it shiny and pink, and as smooth as the satin trim on a woollen blanket. She'd try riding her brother's bike again when she got home. She wanted to show her parents she could do the deliveries for the shop like Arthur had before he'd left for boarding school in Rockhampton. Her mum had told her it was no job for a girl and besides; the bike was too big for a nine year old. And Joyce had clenched her teeth until she gave herself a headache.

Joyce hated Friday afternoons at the best of times, and this one had dragged on like nobody's business. It was rare for anything to happen in Barcaldine, but today the 2pm train from Longreach was delivering The Rossi Bros Circus. This lot had never been to town before, not many had. Joyce had cried for a week after Sterlington's

Circus had a derailment and never turned up. But that was two years ago, and she had been thoroughly satisfied to learn they'd gone bust not long after. This time the principle, Sister Paul, had promised the school they could walk down to Oak Street and watch the procession from the station to the showground. It's not every day you get to see elephants on the main street, she'd said.

A man with a pompadour, sweat stained singlet, and a cigarette balanced on his bottom lip, led the first one down the strip of dust that called itself a road. The brown elephant was adorned with tarnished chains that looped around its ankles and neck and it hauled a green windowless carriage with yellow lettering. Three more carriage-pulling elephants followed, their lethargic tread stirring up orange clouds. Standing in a ragged line by the road's edge, the kindys jumped on the spot and yelped. Sister Paul clutched her bamboo cane in her fat red hands behind her back and leaned forward on her toes.

Joyce slumped against an awning post outside Morrison's Hardware. Seeing the animals up close didn't elicit the feeling she'd anticipated. They could have been goats and billy carts for the surprising disinterest she had in the procession so far. She decided the elephants didn't look right. Their ears were tiny and their heads bumpy. Also, it wasn't even a procession. It was obvious they were just unloading all their stuff from the train and taking it down to the showground. She became irritated by the unwarranted interest the rest of the school, and the other locals who'd wandered out of the shops or pub, were showing in it. Some of her classmates had even joined the babies down the front and were speculating excitedly about whether the green carriages carried lions or tigers.

'They don't even look like proper elephants,' she said to the post.

Brendan Byrne, standing a yard or two in front of her, turned just his head and curled his lip.

'Nothing ever looks right to you, Hocking.' His eyes flickered from her face. 'Yuck. Your leg's bleeding.'

She followed his gaze; a dark red trail had been painted down her shin from her disturbed scab and was now threatening her left sock. Joyce fought a wave of embarrassment before it set into familiar fury. Boys never cared if other boys had bleeding scabs or even spongy warts. She squatted, pulled out a blue checked handkerchief from the pocket of her tunic, spat on it and rubbed her leg clean.

She stood again in time to see two young women with thick eyebrows and bobbed hair each lead a grey pony past the group of school children. The pony girls chatted to each other, cotton dresses billowing around their knees, only acknowledging the onlookers with a constant wave of their free hands that Joyce soon realised was just shooing flies. A flatbed truck tightly packed with wooden poles and covered with oilcloth taupe, overtook the girls. The driver tooted twice as he passed the school children and the infants jumped up and down on the spot again. Another pony, led by a dark haired boy, passed. The boy's eyes were trained on the dirt, but his shoulders were squared. His shoes were scuffed and the light brown limbs poking out from under his creased shorts reminded Joyce of grown-up footy player's legs; lumpy and angular. They seemed at odds with the rest of him, which was like any other kid in her class. She decided he seemed about as thrilled to be participating in this activity, as she was to be watching it. Joyce couldn't say why exactly, but it lifted her mood.

Joyce's mum wasn't fussed about missing out on the matinee performance, and didn't want to close the shop even on a Saturday. Someone might need something. She needn't have worried because most of the town were there anyway, along with Joyce and her dad in his Sunday best, already dust coloured and sweat streaked. Joyce had woken that morning, sure that the dull unease and general apathy she now felt about the circus would be replaced by something more agreeable once inside the tent, with a toffee apple in her hand. But there were no toffee apples. Instead, Joyce's dad bought a bag of peanuts from a child in a yellow satin shirt carrying a shallow box down the aisle. His face was covered in streaky white greasepaint, red cheeks and oversized painted mouth, but Joyce could tell it was the pony boy. She smiled at him as he passed her dad the bag, but he was already looking past them for the next sale.

The air was thick with smell of peanut shells, sawdust, stale sweat and ripe dung. Joyce took to sipping breaths between her fingers clamped over her mouth. Clowns as tramps meandered and tumbled around the ring while a leathery faced man with white hair, seated on a box beside the ring, wrestled lurching, discordant accompaniment out of a large black accordion. Joyce's dad chuckled at the clowns and clapped for the elephants, as the cigarette man, now in a sequined jacket, cajoled them to walk in formation, balance on a large crate, and in turn crawl under each other's bellies. When they left the ring the same man returned to introduce *Lady Lana and The Beast*. Then a woman in boots, jodhpurs and unflinching grin, led out a tiger

on a rope. The accordion fell silent, and the audience followed suit; finally, something thrilling and dangerous. The woman led the slow moving animal around the ring twice, then cracked a bullwhip to make the tiger lie down, roll over and stand on its hind legs. She threw it something to eat, took a deep bow and led the animal away. Joyce and her father exchanged glances as they clapped lightly.

‘I’d bet two bob that Lady Lana’s more dangerous than the tiger. What do you reckon Joycie Woyce?’

Joyce shrugged, disappointment settling in her belly like a lump of bread dough. ‘Are all circuses like this?’

‘Like what love?’

She slumped against her father and exhaled loudly.

The cigarette man strode to the centre of the ring. He introduced the next act, *Little Jimmy Rossi, The Bareback Rider!*

A white-faced figure in a yellow satin shirt rode out on a pony, left arm raised in greeting. Joyce sat up. The boy seemed suddenly larger, taller. One of the bobbed hair girls in a full, ruffled skirt, held one end of a long lead attached to the pony’s bridle. She stood in the centre of the ring, pivoting with the rope as the pony trotted the circumference. The boy climbed to his knees, balancing on a thick flat platform of blankets on the animal’s rump. Then he leapt to his feet, standing erect, arms outstretched. Joyce inhaled sharply and applauded in unison with the crowd. The lump of dough had disappeared, driven out by a pounding beneath her ribs. Everyone around them sat up, leant in, whispered astonishment and shushed replies. With face paint blanketing his expression, the boy raised his hands, and in one swift movement planted them on the pony’s back and flung his feet into the air. They hung there less than a second before he bounced back to a standing position. The crowd sucked in oxygen as if collectively winded, and cheered. The applause continued as the boy performed the handstand three more times. On the final attempt, he wobbled on landing. Joyce stopped breathing, exhaling only when the boy dismounted with a graceful jump to the sawdust. The pony continued on course and the boy took a running leap from the centre of the ring and pulled himself up onto the moving animal. He stood again, completing another two laps of the ring in that position. Then, as if satisfied that all eyes were upon him, or that his nerves were sufficiently steadied, he slowly moved to a half crouch, then promptly swung his arms up and forward over his head. His feet left the trotting pony’s back, and with knees tucked

into his chest he turned a tight backflip. The boy's feet reconnected unsteadily with the platform a full second before anyone in the audience had the audacity to clap, to make sure their brains had caught up with their eyes and confirmed they'd seen right. Or, in case he still fell. The boy regained his balance and dismounted from the moving pony, joining the girl in the centre of the ring for an extended, deep bow. The girl smiled, but the boy remained expressionless. Some townspeople stood up and shouted for more.

As he left the ring, Joyce thought how oddly small he looked once again.

Joyce felt restless. She didn't want to work in the shop that afternoon. She wanted to take Arthur's bike out and practice in the schoolyard, but her mum had made her wipe the shelves and sweep. Then she had to fill the fridge.

She'd left the circus with a curious unease that scratched at her insides. She didn't even feel like lunch. Her mum had asked her how the show was, and she had no words. Dad had answered for her.

'...A bit disappointed I think darl.'

It wasn't entirely accurate, but Joyce let it pass. She felt a strong desire to see the show again before they left, so she was keen to keep in her mum's good book for the rest of the day. She knew that night's show was out of the question, but if she aimed for Sunday's matinee she might wrangle it.

Joyce had just finished sweeping the floor of the shop, forming the dirt and dust into a small pile to be swept up with a pan, when the jangle of the bell and thwack of the screen door made her look up. The accordion man hobbled in using a cane, closely followed by the boy. Jimmy Rossi, The Bareback Rider. The man's torso twisted awkwardly and stiffly at each step. The boy followed with the same straight-backed grace that Joyce had first seen on Oak Street. He glanced around the shop quickly and then lowered his gaze. Close up now the boy seemed older, perhaps even in high school. Without thinking, Joyce stepped behind the shelf of biscuit tins so she was out of sight.

Her mother appeared from the back room, slapping on a well-rehearsed smile for the stranger at the counter. 'Afternoon, how can I help you dear?'

'Do you have the Vincent's?' The man had a stern, deep singsong accent and it seemed to catch Joyce's mother by surprise. The corners of her mouth dropped slightly, and with her forehead creased up, tilted her head slightly.

‘Ah...the headache powders?’

‘Yes.’ His reply was abrupt. Joyce watched with interest, knowing her mother didn’t take kindly to pugnacious customers.

‘Righto, then.’ She turned to a shelf behind her where the small blue and yellow boxes were arranged in a small stack.

She placed the box on the counter, ‘That’ll be six and six.’

The man paid and slipped the box into his front shirt pocket. He nodded once in acknowledgement and shuffled awkwardly out of the shop, the boy holding the door open for him. Joyce’s mother pushed the register closed with more force than was needed.

Joyce ran to the door and watched the pair as they headed down the street. The boy held the man’s elbow and helped to steady him as he walked. She lost sight of them so pushed the door and poked her head out. The boy was now alone on the bench outside Shakespeare’s Hotel. Without checking to see if her mother was watching, Joyce stepped out and several seconds later was outside the pub, the boy only looking up when she spoke.

‘Hello.’

‘Hi.’

‘I liked your tricks. My dad said you probably rode before you could walk. Did you really?’

The corners of the boy’s mouth pushed his cheeks up a little; he shrugged, and averted his gaze.

‘I just always done it. Me dad taught me.’

‘Is that your dad, in there?’ She gestured to the pub doors and sat down next to him.

The boy nodded.

‘Why can’t he walk properly?’

‘He had an accident, when he was still in Italy.’

‘Is that where you’re from?’

The boy shook his head.

‘I’m in grade five. What about you?’ Joyce asked.

‘Grade?’

‘In school.’

‘Don’t go.’

‘Don’t go? The nuns at my school say that you have to go to school every day.’

‘Or what?’

‘Or Sister Paul will go over to your house and tell your mum and dad, and then when she finds you, you get the cane.’

‘Do you cry?’

‘A bit... not really. We also get it if we muck up too much.’

‘If you make mistakes?’

‘Yeah. I suppose.’

The boy picked at his nails, ‘What if you try really hard, but you still keep making mistakes?’

‘If you’re too dumb for school they just send you home for good. Do you live in a caravan?’

He nodded. ‘Do you live in that shop?’

Joyce shook her head, ‘In the house behind. How did you know it’s our shop?’

‘I saw you out the front sweeping.’

The door of the pub jerked as the boy’s father struggled to push the door open, using his walking stick while holding a bottle in a paper bag under his arm. Without a word, the boy hurried to his side, taking the bottle in one hand, the man’s elbow again in the other and helped him across the veranda.

Joyce stood, ‘See you later!’

The boy continued on as if he hadn’t heard, but his father shot her a look like a sharp stick. Joyce scowled back on reflex, but he’d already turned.

She watched the pair continue their laborious crossing of Oak Street, and it occurred to her that the old man had just been squinting into the afternoon sun.