

# THE QUARRY

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## Drift

The screen door rattled in its frame as Chris's footsteps ground along the gravel path past the kitchen window.

'Geez he can disappear quick,' Angela muttered to the empty bowl and the newspaper spread like a drop-sheet round her place mat. She finished her coffee dregs and shuffled the paper into some random order, put the dishes in the sink and headed to the bathroom. Leaning into the mirror, she bared her teeth at the reflection, hastily applied a toothbrush, smear of lip-gloss, dash of mascara and just thirteen minutes after Chris, stepped out into a sullen Monday morning. The hydrangea wet her side as she pushed past the lanky branches poised halfway across the side passage. They had been just waiting to off-load their soaking cargo of drizzle. She sighed. Chris swore that he was going to borrow Mick's hedge-clippers and open up the path to the front door. Even *he* said Mr Kurtz would have trouble negotiating the jungle that flourished there.

Having to use the door off the kitchen instead of the one at the front of the house was the problem. The old brick semi was a bit of a basket case in its layout. The room at the front of the house, the one with the front door in it, was going to be The Baby's Room. That was what Angela and Chris called it when they bought the place five years ago. Instead the room was full - with Chris's bicycle with the mangled front

wheel, Angela's kayak that needed patching after a rock oyster rendezvous, Chris's surfboard, unused since his new job at Hamer and Wiley Lawyers devoured his free time, plus numerous boxes of unsorted paperwork and paraphernalia. The door was closed on the junk and the promise of a baby, it seemed.

Angela pulled her coat tighter and tucked her hands under her arms as she ran through the restaurant menus in her head. Dodging a dog turd on the footpath, she hoped the tram was on time. Sue would have a fit if she were late to work again. She pulled out her phone to Google 'Chez'. The tram trundled into view, sparks flashing on the power line in the dingy light. Angela wondered, as she stepped into the commuting scrum, when Chris had become so ungenerous; with his money, his time, his Chris-ness, that package of a man who had looked at her with such hunger. She fumbled in the chaos of her handbag, finding her pass as the tram lurched into a sweeping bend that sent her untethered body careering into a sneering school kid. When had that hunger waned? She shivered as she recalled the press of his hands as they delved her flesh and his mouth's ravenous explorations; those eyes that searched so deep that the rest of the world could evaporate in that moment. All that seemed like a lifetime ago. Now those eyes averted, were cast down or looked straight through her. When had the indifference become so normal that she hadn't even noticed it happening?

*Where's the spark?* she thought, releasing a stifled groan hastily transformed into a cough to divert the stare of the woman next to her. She stepped down and faced the thirty-minute uphill walk to the dog shelter. As the tram disappeared over the rise she realised she'd left yet another umbrella, the third in six weeks, on the tram. And then the sky opened.

As her shoes began to make squelching complaints, Angela reflected on this morning's breakfast. It felt like some blooper outtake from a sitcom, the kind of 'Special Feature' that came in the DVD boxed set edition brought out in time to capture the Christmas retail frenzy. The laugh track was missing however. The clichés just felt unnerving. She re-ran the opening scene in her head:

'What'll we do Wednesday night?' asked Angela as she poured the milk over her cereal. She watched, dismayed as it rebounded off an upturned flake and sent a jet onto the table.

‘Why? What’s Wednesday night?’ Standing at the kitchen bench, Chris looked up from studying headlines on his iPad. He flipped the cover closed with a slap and watched Angela mop at the puddle.

‘Our wedding anniversary; eight years of wedded bliss.’ Her voice pitched up on the final syllable. She flung the cloth at the sink and it gave a squelch as it hit the cupboard door and slid to the floor.

‘Oh yeah. Er, the pub? Wednesday’s two for one deal,’ said Chris. He turned away as he picked up the cloth and rinsed it.

‘Aww’ Angela squawked. Chris flinched at the childish whinge. ‘Couldn’t we do something besides the pub? What about Mario’s or Thai Dyed or that French place up on Newland Street, Chez something-or-other?’

Chris slumped into the dining chair, not made for such a casual pose, with its rigid, high back. He tapped his middle finger on the table like a distracted woodpecker. With his eyes squeezed into slits, he imagined the scene before him filmed from inside a post box. He was a spy, an observer of this life that was surely someone else’s. He suddenly felt the urge to escape. He watched Angela chomp on her cornflakes and released a sigh across the table.

‘Wha?’ she said displaying the mashed cereal and a dribble of milk.

‘Nothing. You book, I don’t mind. I’ll be late tonight. Catching Mick and Andrew for a beer or six after work,’ Chris said. He grabbed his brief case and pulled open the front door. Angela swallowed and opened her mouth to comment.

His footsteps this morning had echoed like the closing bars of some avant-garde symphony; novel sounds met with enthusiastic applause and total incomprehension by a bewildered audience.

‘I need some kind of Inspector Gadget attachment on my shoulder or head,’ Angela whined to Sue when she finally got to the office with soaking coat and a forehead curl dispensing a trickle down her face, taking her mascara with it.

‘Excuse me? Inspector Who?’ Sue was stacking the clinic shelves with worming tablets and hadn’t bothered to turn to look at Angela.

‘You know, Inspector Gadget. He has all these helpful gadgets in his hat and coat and stuff. I can’t seem to own an umbrella for more than a week these days.’ Angela was struggling to extricate herself from the clinging coat. Sue pursed her lips

as she turned and watched the spray settle over everything like one of the dogs out in the kennels had sent a squall across the room.

‘Maybe I need to build one into my...’ Angela’s voice petered into awkward silence as she noted the frown and the mess. She grabbed the roll of paper towel and swished ineffectually over the floor, bench and cupboards and sidled to her desk.

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‘Coming to training Wednesday?’ Andrew asked as he manoeuvred the tray laden with beers and a bowl of chips onto the table. The pub was busy for a Monday night and he pulled his stool in closer to the table to hear Chris’s reply over the din. Chris looked up from his phone screen.

‘Yeah, ah, no. It’s me and Angela’s anniversary. She’s booked that fancy French joint up on Newland Street. Probably cost a fortune.’

‘Man, you’re a tight-arse. She deserves a nice night out for putting up with you for another bloody year.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ Chris thrust out his chin.

‘Well, you’re hardly the most romantic bloke I know.’

‘And what’s *that* supposed to mean?’

‘Nothing. I’ll be back.’ Andrew headed to the toilets and Chris looked at Mick with a what-was-that-about shrug. They both reached for a chip.

‘Mate, I’d rather be at footy training,’ Chris moped as he ran his finger down the condensation on his glass.

‘Geez Chris. Andrew’s right. It’s a night out with your wife, not root canal.’

‘Anniversaries are like that Auntie you only saw once a year at Christmas when you were a kid.’

‘What are you talking about?’ asked Mick

‘You know, it was all like “Ooh, look how much you’ve grown”. The other 364 days is like your parents who see you every day and don’t notice the changes. Then Auntie pops up once a year and sees the two inches you’ve grown painstakingly over the last twelve months and makes out it happened overnight. Ange and me, we’re just drifting away from each other and then come 25th of July each year, I suddenly see the distance.’

‘What distance? You two are great together.’

‘Who two?’ asked Andrew, returning to the table and picking up his beer.

‘Chris is having a whinge about him and Angela. Reckons Ange is like his Auntie.’

‘I didn’t say that Mick, you idiot. I said anniversaries are like my once-a-year Auntie. Look. Forget it. She drives me nuts though.’

‘Who?’ asked Andrew, ‘your Auntie?’

‘Oh for God’s sake! Angela, Angela drives me crazy. She loses her keys *every* day. She forgets what night I train. It’s been the same night for the past three years. She eats with her mouth open, the paper looks like it’s been through the shredder by the time she’s finished with it. She sticks these obscure pop culture references into every second thing she says. She’s got more band tee shirts than you can poke a stick at. That stupid job of hers pays peanuts and she’s always bringing home one or other of the dogs for respite, she calls it. What’s the point of an Accounting Degree if you’re going to waste it working for a dog shelter?’ Chris noted how shrill he sounded and for the second time that day, felt the urge to escape.

‘Whoa mate. Calm down.’ Andrew reached over the table and grasped Chris’s shoulder. ‘Ange loves that job. If it weren’t for people like her, there would be no shelter and all those dogs’d be put down. And she loves her music. So what if she wants to wear that on her tee shirt. Chris, What’s going on with you and Angela?’

‘I’m fucked if I know. Eight years, and two before that when we were going out.’ Chris’s voice faltered as he struggled to find some context for a problem he couldn’t clarify.

Mick shuffled the stool round the table so it was closer to Chris’s. ‘Yes mate, eight years. Are you telling us that you’re gonna throw all that away? Because she eats with her mouth open and owns too many tee shirts?’

‘I don’t know what I’m saying. I just know that I’m unhappy, But the stupid thing is I don’t even know it ‘til my bloody anniversary comes ‘round and I realise I have to force myself to do something special for Angela and it feels like some mammoth effort.’

*Is that what married couples do?* he thought as he pressed his fingers into his forehead. *We work, eat, sleep get up, do it all again, going through the motions. Once I couldn’t keep my hands off her, now I don’t even see her. We were gonna travel, have kids, fix up the house, I was gonna make partner.* Images from a misplaced future bombarded his thoughts.

‘Where’s my bloody Machu Picchu?’ he said out loud. *Oh God!* he thought, *now I sound like a raving loony.* His fringe flopped over one eye. He stared at his friends like a sleepwalker waking mid nightmare.

‘Mick, get us another round mate,’ said Andrew. He downed the dregs in his glass and stacked it onto the five others perched on the tray. ‘I remember that day, Chris.’

‘What day?’

‘Your wedding day, you moron. You were both so bloody happy. All those things you are whinging about are all the things you loved about her; her scattiness, her sense of humour, her passion for her work. You’ve changed a bit, just quietly.’ Chris looked up with a chip poised halfway to his mouth. ‘This new job for a start, you’re making a packet but you still complain like you’re a student living off two-minute noodles. You work every minute God sends you and you don’t *do* anything.’ Andrew brought his hand down on the table and the stack of glasses clinked and shook.

‘Whadya mean? I play footy, I ride my bike.’

‘Mate, you haven’t ridden your bike since you pranged it two years ago and I don’t mean you, I mean you and Angela. She rang Michelle the other week to go to a gig with her. You’re thirty-two years old, you’ve got a great job, plenty of moolah. Can’t you loosen up and live a little?’ Andrew moved the tray onto the empty table next to them to make room for the new glasses.

‘I thought I was having a few beers after work with my mates. I didn’t know I was going to be nominated for Arsehole of the Year.’ Chris finished tearing the coaster into a spiral and chucked it onto the table.

‘I am not calling you an arsehole, you dickhead,’ said Andrew with a grin. Mick returned with the beers and they drank in silence.

Andrew broke the awkward pause, ‘See you at training Mick. Chris, Ange is a great girl. Get your head out of your bum and make it work hey. Enjoy Wednesday night.’ He gave Chris and Mick a gentle thump then strolled towards the door.

‘I better head off too, Chris, big presentation tomorrow. Take it easy mate. You and Angela will be fine. You two are solid.’ Mick followed Andrew onto the street.

Chris tilted his head, closed one eye and watched the bubbles rising through his lager. He didn’t like examining his own life. He knew he was pretty good at dissecting other people’s but his was just fine if he didn’t look too close. He and

Angela didn't fight. They didn't even argue much. When had he stopped loving her? A continental drift moved them apart. He could hardly see her standing on the far shore, waving, grinning and spilling her breakfast. The realisation felt like a punch. 'Now what?' he muttered.

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Angela ran her fingers down the wine glass and grasped the stem. *I wonder if I get that habit from Chris, or if he got it off me?* she thought as she watched the trail appear through the condensation. The candle flame wavered as she tapped her foot against the table leg and reached for the menu again.

'No, I'm fine thanks,' she answered the hovering waiter checking her watch for the millionth time. Her phone sat in silence on the napkin she had taken from her lap and placed in front of her. She hit the button and the image of Chris and her grinned out of the screen. Just how she could have missed a call or text when the phone was under her nose was unknown and she felt the welling desperation in the action even as she did it. When half an hour turned to 40 minutes, then 45 she snatched up the phone. 'Yeah, it's me. Give us a call so I know you're ok and how long you're gonna be. Want me to order you a drink? Anyway, wondering if I should start calling hospitals. Yeah, er, call me.'

'Shit.' It came out like a slow leak from a tyre. What if he had forgotten or worse, decided that football training was more important. Angela glanced at the door through the mood lit couples and the gentle chinking of cutlery on plates. There was only a twenty-dollar note in her wallet, a bit extravagant for one glass of Sav Blanc. She couldn't bring herself to face the waiter so slipped it under the base of the glass and stepped in silence out into the neon strip. The air was cold but she walked anyway. It would give her time to think but her mind numbed to blankness after she had reconsidered the possibilities one more time.

The house was hunkered in darkness as she fumbled in her bag for the key. A shudder passed through her and she opened the door. She swung her handbag onto the bench, her keys jangled to the floor and she turned and flicked on the kitchen lights. She froze and felt her skin burn as fear hit her body.

Then she registered that the figure sitting at the table was Chris. Wearing his new shirt, smelling of aftershave and hair gel, he raised his face from where it rested in his hands and turned to look at her.