

# THE QUARRY

Poppy

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Anthony was awake before the alarm. The volume was set to maximum, or so his grandson told him. But he could never quite catch the sound; just a muted buzz like a mosquito above his head. Sometimes it was louder when he forgot to take his hearing-aid out before bed. That had happened more and more lately. Above him the ceiling fan whirred, around and around. His thoughts spun with it, as far off memories appeared like flashes in the darkness; bright, burning flashes that hurt his eyes.

He sat up with an automatic moan, feeling the strain on his lower back as he pulled himself out of bed. The sky was still dark outside and the whole world seemed to be sleeping. He squinted at the red light in the face of his clock, and thought he could make out the time: 0400. The strain made his tired eyes sting and he reached up to rub them. Behind the blotchy darkness of his eyelids, the shadows still fought to be seen, memories refusing to clear.

Beside him, Margaret snored. It was probably louder than what he could hear, because it never woke him. Softly he rose from the mattress, being careful not to wake her. Even though she wasn't joining him, she'd laid out his favourite olive-green suit, freshly ironed

with razor-sharp edges down the sleeves. Quietly he dressed, and opened the wardrobe door to look at himself in the mirror. The jacket was the last piece of his once-a-year uniform. He slid it over his shoulders, shrugging a few times until it sat properly on his back. The medals pinned to his chest clanged together as he straightened up.

Before leaving, Anthony moved to the other side of the bed and tried to lean down to kiss Margaret, but the strain made his back ache. Feeling deflated he turned to leave, but saw her hand was peeking out from beneath the covers. He gave it a gentle squeeze. Her hand felt fragile and soft; delicate despite the lines that wrinkled them. Not like his own hands. They were coarse and covered with the hard streaks of age. Thick skin coated his fingers and the white scars of callouses were like craters in his palms. He couldn't remember a time when he had soft hands.

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'Put your back into it, boys!' The ground is like gum. Hard, over-chewed gum with a seal of slime on top just thick enough to cause your feet to slide apart if you aren't careful. Tony brings his shovel down again into the clay, watching it barely break the earth. The rain is growing heavier, and the sergeant is pissed. Nobody expected the ranks to stretch so far north towards the coast. But the assault is endless. Tony knows it. Bill knows it. Hell, even the Germans across no-man's land know it. The war is going nowhere fast, so all they can do is extend the line.

Tony lifts his leg to step on the shovel, stomping down with all his weight behind it. Again the ground yields next to nothing, spitting out a crumble of dirt as he lifts the spade away. Despite the freezing rain whipping at his face he can feel sweat pooling in his armpits and under his helmet. He looks up and squints through the mist. Some men have abandoned their packs, leaving them to soak in the mud. Tony knows better. Still the weight is heavy and his back is screaming as he digs the shovel in again.

But it's nothing like his hands. He's only a foot or so down into the gunk and clay and already his hands are bleeding. For all the crap they issue as standard, they forgot gloves. Blisters that broke weeks ago have started afresh. His hands burn against the grain of the shovel. The spot at the base of his thumb is grinding along the handle and carving away the flesh. A crevice of callouses works its way along his palms and the skin on his knuckles cracks and bleeds. When he lets go of the shovel he can see his hands shaking in the rain.

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Anthony skipped breakfast. He could never eat this early in the morning. Besides, he was already so full of memory. On his way to the door he stopped by the kitchen to collect

his keys and wallet. He pocketed both, but as he turned to leave he caught a splash of colour beside the phone. He stopped for a moment to look at it; blood red petals spilling out around a heart that left black pollen on the bench, like ash. He swallowed hard.

‘Poppy?’ Anthony turned to find little Lucy shuffling towards him, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. ‘Don’t forget your flower.’

Anthony smiled. ‘What are you doing up kiddo? It’s too early for you. Nan will be cranky.’

‘I wanted to say goodbye.’

Anthony ruffled her chocolate-brown hair. ‘I’ll be back around lunchtime. You’ll barely notice I’m gone. Get back to bed.’

Lucy stood for a few moments frowning with puffy, tired eyes. She was missing a sock and her hair was tangled like a bird’s nest. ‘Will you be ok by yourself? Won’t you be lonely?’

‘Darlin’ I’ll be fine.’ He squeezed her shoulders. ‘She’ll be right. Besides, I’ll have my flower. Back to bed with ya, then.’ Gently he spun her around and nudged her back towards the hallway.

Once she was gone, Anthony turned back to the blood red poppy by the phone. It waited for him silently on the bench, and he knew he had to take it. Gently he picked it up, twirling it a few times between his fingers before sliding it into place among his medals where it belonged. Anthony angled it so the red face stared out at the world, the petals curled over like eyelashes. He patted his chest before finally walking out the door.

Outside the air was brisk and the streetlights were still glowing overhead. He could barely see the stars past their light. Once in the car Anthony strapped himself in, being careful not to crush the flower. He reached up to adjust the rear-view mirror and found his reflection looking back. His face was criss-crossed with age, etched into his skin like scars. Creases pulled down his cheeks and there were lines like crow’s feet in the corner of his eyes. They scratched away at his youth, making him look angry and frustrated. The man was a stranger to him. ‘She’ll be right,’ he said softly, watching his reflection say it with him before turning over the key.

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Tony watches the officer scribble his loopy signature onto the form. A spring breeze ruffles a pile of other applications towering on the fold-down table. A single paper weight shaped like the globe sits atop the papers from almost every man in town. Tony realises he is

fidgiting and moves his hands to his sides, curling them into fists. The officer raises a brow at the paper in front of him. 'You're writing is a bit shaky there, son,' He points out.

Tony stares ahead and lifts his chin. He can feel the eyes of his mates watching him from near the oval's old fence line to his left. He thinks he can hear Bill laughing.

'Especially around this part where you've put your date of birth...' His voice trails off and Tony knows that the officer has figured it out. The jig is up. He forces himself not to look across at his mates.

Tony swallows hard and tries to sound confident, but his voice still breaks like a child when he speaks. 'I don't know what you mean, Sir?'

The officer puts down his pen and lifts the tiny globe to file Tony's application with the others. 'Welcome to the army, son. Next!'

Tony clenches his fists to keep his composure as he turns away from the table. But his eyes meet Bill and his goofy face perched on the wooden fence and Tony can't help but smile. He tries to walk but ends up running towards the boys with two thumbs up. They welcome him in with congratulations and pats to the back.

'You looked like a bloody guilt-ridden criminal when you handed in your form, though,' Bill chortles, holding his hands up and pretending to tremble in fear. Tom and Clancy laugh.

'I thought he was gonna catch me out.' Tony can feel his cheeks flushing red with embarrassment. 'I was nervous.'

Bill rolls his eyes. 'Yeah but you didn't have to seem so obvious about it. Sam and his brother made it in no worries, and they're even younger than you.'

Tony shrugs, reaching up to scratch the back of his head. He looks down at his feet. 'I know, but I'm pretty sure that officer knew I wasn't eighteen. Asked about my birthday and everything.' Tony frowns. He didn't even know what would happen to someone caught lying about their age to the army.

Bill slides down off the fence, landing steadily on his feet before smacking Tony across the back. 'Get a grip, mate. She'll be right.'

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The road was long and the sky was black and he'd lied. Anthony was lonely. He didn't know why, but he always went alone on this annual pilgrimage. He'd never let Margaret join him, and for some reason she understood even though he didn't. The drive just felt like it should be made in solitude. Even the highway was empty. He flicked on the radio,

but it was droning away with pre-breakfast talkback featuring lonely hearts, truck drivers and bakers.

Anthony caught the poppy looking at him in the rear-view mirror. Its face was wide open now, like it was watching the world pass by as he drove. It sat so comfortably across his heart that for a fleeting moment he lost his loneliness and let himself remember.

He pulled into the carpark at 0520. After turning a few laps he found a spot, but it was at the far end. He checked himself one last time in the mirror, straightening the red companion on his chest before swinging open the car door and stepping out into the brisk air.

As he shifted his weight onto his left leg he felt that familiar twang of pain in his calf, and sank back into the car to rub the cramp out. He could feel the old injury that drew its way down the back of his leg, from his knee to his heel. The white scar was barely visible anymore, but to touch it was different. Anthony could always feel that line of tissue, just a subtle bump on the skin that would never fade.

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The metal is hot but the pain is searing. Tony had promised himself he would never shed a tear on the battlefield, but he has broken his promise. His lungs explode with screaming as the jagged piece of shell begins to cool deep in the flesh of his leg. He can feel tears running down his face, mixing with the rain and the dirt and the sweat. Somewhere behind him, another mortar makes its mark on the ranks.

‘Tony!’ A familiar voice is calling out to him. Dust still falls from the air. He can’t see anybody. Another shell flies overhead, whistling through the sky. Blood is drizzling from the hole in his calf, where the metal sticks out like a shark’s fin. He can’t stand, he can’t breathe. Tony lifts his arms, trying desperately to reach down to his leg. Suddenly Bill catches him by the elbow and grips him tightly. Tony clutches him back, digging his nails in as the pain begins to poison his body.

‘Tony?’ He tries to keep his eyes on his friend as Bill pulls him away from the rubble. His toes are beginning to grow numb and he starts to feel his mind wash away with the blood and rain. Someone passes Bill a cloth and he tries to stifle the bleeding, but it just pushes the metal deeper.

‘We’ve got you, Tony. Don’t worry mate, you’re gonna be fine – get a stretcher, get him out of here!’ Tony can sense movement all around him now, as men climb over each other in the narrow crack of the trench. Some offer dirty bandages and ripped uniforms, but Tony is losing consciousness. The last thing he can remember is being propped up in the elbow of his best mate. ‘She’ll be right, Tony. Just hang on.’

Somewhere in the distance, foreign rifles begin their fire.

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‘Would you like a poppy sir?’

Anthony stopped abruptly. He was almost through the gate when a young woman with a basket of freshly cut flowers spoke to him with a smile. He blinked at her, his thoughts still far away.

Her eyes travelled to his chest where the string of badges crossed his heart. ‘Oh, you’ve already got one I see.’ The girl pulled back her hand awkwardly, the blood-red flower dancing between her fingers. Her face softened as she looked back up at his face. ‘Thank you.’

Anthony felt uncomfortable, but smiled in reply.

At last he passed into the courtyard. Here it was silent, like the darkness. Even the birds stopped their usual morning calls. A few light-poles lit the area, revealing the many tired faces that had risen before the sun to be here. Babies slept in the arms of mothers and fathers, old men stood in groups wearing suits and polished shoes, grandchildren clutched their parent’s hand and stared about with wide eyes that fought sleep. Hundreds of faces standing with him, and still he felt left behind.

A flash upon the stone wall caught his eye, and Anthony turned to see a large photo of familiar faces standing in a trench, covered in dirt and sweat and fighting grins. The image melted away to form another; men training in Egypt and laughing at a camel. Somewhere behind the crowd the projector changed again, and this time the image of men lying in beds covered in bandages illuminated the wall. Picture after picture of people, all in black and white, and all more familiar to him than anything else.

Anthony touched the poppy at his chest, angling it towards the photos.

At 0530 the lamps slowly dimmed and the black dawn swept across the courtyard. The slideshow of memories upon the wall ended with the words ‘Lest We Forget’ and even the children grew sombre. Anthony looked to the head of the memorial, standing alone within the crowd.

Somewhere, a bugle sounded.