

# THE QUARRY

Nicki

Vivienne Psaila

I have a black and white photo of Nicki. Not some digital wish wash but the actual thing, one that I can hold in my hands and rip up if I want to. He's hunched over the kitchen table scribbling into his notepad smoking a cigarette. He didn't know I was taking the picture. He was lost in whatever he was doing. He's bare chested so you can see the bits around his collar bone that look hollow because he's so skinny. He never ate anything because he was constantly smoking. Still, he had a boyish masculinity about him that girls seemed to like. But they all babied him in a way, like they were trying to fix him up or be that special girl that could change him. But I don't think anybody can change anybody else. I remember this one girl Elyza, bought him skin stuff with mud masks and everything. She got all clinical on him and told him he had to use it three times a day. Nicki's skin was pretty bad, but whatever. He just used the products as a type of paint and drew portraits of Elyza wearing trannie makeup. We stuck them around our place and called it art. I think I still have one of them somewhere. Whenever Nicki drew self portraits, he drew a little stick figure with a huge head. He could laugh at himself. That's important. I remember after I took the photo I made him bacon and eggs. I always cooked the cheap home brand

bacon because it tasted the saltiest. Once Nicki made me watch a YouTube clip of pigs chewing on their cage bars as these fat farmers ripped piglets off their teats. He told me I had to stop buying it. But I still buy it.

I think the last proper meal I ate with Nicki was at Star City over in Pyrmont. He licked the plate clean. He picked the thing right off the table and held it up to his face so that his nose squashed against the plate. He said, 'that's some good tucker.' We went to see his mum at the pokies after that. That never took long. Especially this last time.

'Hey Ma,' he said. I've never seen him look at someone's face the way he did at hers. She didn't even look at him.

'Hey Ma.'

'I'll give ya twenty bucks to piss off.' That's all she said, so we left.

We met about three years ago at a house party in the western suburbs. He was wearing a gold cowboy hat and his hair was long like Kurt Cobain's. It was cold because people started tearing pages from books to make a fire in the backyard. They were tearing up all kinds of books. They even tore up *1984*. It was the penguin cover with Big Brother's face all patched up in a collage of different coloured paints. I was leaning against the fence getting all hot and not doing anything about it when Nicki turned around to me and said, 'that's the kind of thing that could get me to go to war'.

He moved into Glebe with me soon after that. Amidst the chain stores and the plastic glow of the world's 7/11s. The bloated and gluttonous franchise that is Westfield. The Lansdowne pub with half of its signage broken so it read 'DOWNE' in pink neon. We drank coffee and tallied the number of girls flaunting wrist tats, slobbering over tally hoes, rolling their own cigarettes. We flicked through Brag and Drum Media, looking for the boldest band names we could find. 'Milk Titty' still takes the cake. We laughed at hipsters that carried ripsticks about like handbags and girls that had obviously spent hours perfecting the 'homeless-chic' look. We were there, amidst our instagramming, tweeting, hashtagging i-generation, slopping through all the caffeine and bullshit trying to figure out what it all meant.

Glebe became a real home to Nicki and he worked three jobs to keep it that way. He did his best to cover rent, but I usually paid it. He wasted most of his money on alcohol and cigarettes. I get money off my parents. They own a big house in Edgecliff and go travelling all the time so I never feel guilty about it. I don't see them

much and I guess that probably bothers them. My brother James still lives with them. He doesn't get out much. He'd fuck his computer if he could.

We used to spend heaps of our nights at the Kings Cross Hotel. It's right opposite the big red Coca Cola sign on William Street. Every weekend the street was teeming with girls stomping about in their cheap plastic heels. I was always so curious about those girls because I never felt anything like them. Usually we'd drink at our place before we went out. Then Nicki started drinking alone before I was home to join him. For his nineteenth birthday last year, we were supposed to have friends over for drinks at our place. I came home from work around six and there were beer cans and bottles and scratched records all over the floor. Nicki had written 'Meet you fuckers down on Jubilee Street' on the wall. He'd blue-tacked my *Push the Sky Away* vinyl there too, so that it made up one eye of his self-portrait. The face looked demented, like something Francis Bacon would get off on. I wiped the walls with a wet chux and collected all the empty cans before everyone came over. Lucky he'd drawn the whole lot in chalk.

When I met up with him at Kings Cross Hotel, he was sitting alone on the first floor balcony wearing a stupid red party hat. The ones that look like upside down ice cream cones. I stuck my finger up at him as I was crossing the street. He just stared and sort of flicked his wrist at me. I bought a round and sat with him outside.

'Hey, Happy Birthday fella.'

He raised his party hat to me and took a swig of beer. Three girls with noticeably orange skin came and sat down at the table next to us.

'Oh my gawd Laura, how much was your skirt?'

'Like, twenty dollars from Mink Pink.'

'Actually? Looks literally, so amazing.'

Nicki turned to me blankly. 'I unenrolled from uni today as a birthday present to myself,' he said.

'But you only had one semester to go.'

He shrugged. He was watching a homeless man walking along the street asking people for money. He never wanted to talk about why he dropped out so we never did. I remember the next day there were stacks of old papers by the front door. They were Nicki's poems and essays. He had been doing an arts degree or something at Sydney uni. I read through some of his stuff. Almost everything he wrote had something to do

with a girl. 'She' this and 'she' that. Some of the poems were pretty nasty and I guess those were directed at his mum. The others I'm not so sure about. He mostly got marked distinctions, if not better.

After he dropped out of university, he went to work with his dad as a mechanic. His dad's name was Bruce, so we called him Springsteen. Springsteen punched Nicki in the eye when he found out he quit uni with only six months to finish. He had a black eye for a week. All he said about it was, 'Springsteen's just in a big old wax right now, that's all.' When I asked him what his mum thought he said 'yeah yeah, enough chit chat,' and walked off. He suited the look of a mechanic in an innocent kind of way. He would come home all black and greasy and I used to imagine he jumped in a vat of black milk and swam around like a baby all day. He seemed pretty happy around that time. Maybe it was just being around his dad that made him that way, but I liked to think it was because he floated in that tub of black milk and felt weightless for a bit. It probably would have been good for him if he could feel like that some of the time. Maybe that's why he drank so much. After work with his dad, he taught English as a second language to people in Pitt Street. One time he brought a student called Ashvindar back to our place because we were having a party. We called him Ash. He was quiet. Probably uncomfortable with the wayward air we had about us. Some guy named Stuart was there. He had the Southern Cross tattooed on his forearm. What a knob. No one had ever met him before, he was just someone we knew through a friend. He offered Ash a VB but Ash didn't want one.

'What? Australian beer not good enough?' he said. Ash looked at Nicki because he didn't know what to say.

'It's VB, that's Victoria Bitter,' Stuart continued, 'and I reckon you better love-it or leave-it.' Then Nicki did something pretty weird and smashed his beer bottle against the table and shoved it at Stuart's face and told him to get the fuck out. Stuart scrunched up his face at Nicki like he was crazy, but he got out of there pretty quick. I always thought Nicki had an okay temper, but not after that. I made a joke and said, 'that's how we do it here in 'straya.' Everyone laughed except Nicki. Even Ash laughed. Nicki disappeared into his room and stayed there for the rest of the night. I didn't want to make a scene so I left him alone. Now I think of it, nobody ever went to see if he was okay. I saw Ash out at the end of the night. After that, Nicki didn't bring any more of his students home, or anyone at all really.

The next day I had to put baking soda on the carpet stains Nicki made when he smashed the bottle. The carpet was green and always laced with cat fur. ‘We don’t even have any pussies!’ Nicki used to yell and that always got us in a chorus screaming ‘I got the no pussy blues, I got the no pussy blues!’ We’d bang on the walls and roll around thrusting at each other like depraved sex addicts. He never did treat me like much of a girl. Our neighbour owned some cats. He never let them outdoors so whenever I passed by in the hallway, I heard them scratching at the door. Nicki used to coax them into our place with a little butter on the nib of his finger. He liked animals. He told me when his parents were still together they owned a black cat named Roger Waters. He showed me a photo of the day they found it shoved in a pillow case on the road near their house in the western suburbs. They were all crouched over it and kissing it. The photo was probably ten years old and they all had huge smiles on their faces. Nicki had the biggest.

At our place in Glebe, the bathroom door was broken. Lucky my parents never visited me or they would have lost their shit about it. I had to use a case of Tooheys as a doorstep. It worked well enough. Nicki walked in on me once. I was standing side on to the mirror looking at my boobs. I’d put a pencil underneath each of them because a guy told me that was how you tested if they were a good size. Anyway, he walked in and I jumped and the pencils hit the floor. We looked at each other awkwardly for a couple of seconds then Nicki goes ‘people are funny things.’ He lingered at the door like he wanted to say something else, but I told him to get out.

Yesterday I saw Nicki at Coles in the aisle where they sell birthday cards and soft porn magazines. I almost didn’t recognise him. He’d cut his hair off and it was super short at the sides. He had filled out and his pale arms were all bloated and spotty. I followed him for a while, watching from a distance. I haven’t seen him since we had to move out of Glebe. His dad made him move back in with him because he got done for drink driving. When my parents found out, they got all serious on my arse. Like I had something to do with it. I wasn’t even in the car. I tried to visit him but he lived so far away in the suburbs. He stopped coming into the city so I stopped inviting him to come out with us. People just sort of forgot about him I guess. I said hello to him.

‘What’s that for?’ I asked, pointing to the card in his hand. It was a tacky photograph of a blue rose overlaid with the word *Mother*.

‘Mum.’

‘How is she?’

‘She’s alright.’

But today my friend Carl told me she was in rehab. I told him I was surprised because Nicki didn’t say anything to me when I spoke to him. I wonder if Springsteen is taking care of her. After we spoke for a bit Nicki said he had to go but he didn’t say why. I don’t even know why he was in the city. I said goodbye and watched him wander off ahead of me. He paled against the clean white light of the grocery aisle like a dying flame, only more delicate. Then he turned down another aisle and was gone. I don’t think I’ll see Nicki again. I just have a feeling about it.

Nicki wrote me something once. I found it in my desk today. It’s mostly rubbish but I kept it anyway. He wrote it while we were having breakfast one morning. Right after I took the black and white photo actually. I was throwing cornflakes and bits of dried eggshell at his head trying to lodge them in his hair.

‘You should wash your hair Nicki,’ I said, ‘you’ve got food in it.’

‘One sec.’

‘Nicki Nicki Nicki! I’ve put some cornflakes in your hair to take for lunch.’

‘Hold up, one sec Frankie.’

‘I packed some for old mate Springsteen too.’

‘A-huh, ‘preciate it.’ He was still trying to write.

‘Hey, do we have to see your mum again tonight after dinner?’

‘Yeah, we do.’

‘Gay.’

I think that really annoyed him because he stopped and scrunched up whatever he was writing and threw it at my face.

‘I’ve got uni now, I’ll see ya.’

I read it that morning and I read it again after I saw him yesterday. And again today. It reads:

*beneath this skin*

*rests a nightmare*

*two hundred sleeping hands*

*all lifeless, bloodless*

*but one*

*supine golden*

*warm as the sun*

*she*

Then it just stops because he never finished it. I like it. But I still wonder what Nicki meant by all that stuff.