

THE QUARRY

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Mud

The mud sucked at our gumboots, making every step an effort. Soon effort became pain, but on we trudged. It had rained for three weeks straight, and the first ray of sunshine made us rush to escape the house.

‘Walk backwards, it’s easier,’ my brother said.

I turned to try it. ‘I bet you it’s not.’

My foot caught in the clay-like mud, and I found myself looking up at the clouds. Clouds shaped like magical mountains, and castles towering over wild cloud kingdoms. Storm clouds. More rain was on its way.

My brother burst with laughter.

‘Shut up, Josh, and give me a hand,’ I growled.

His home-DIY haircut draped down almost to his nose. Haircuts, garbage removal, dog food – everything became DIY in the middle of a six month long flood. His eyes dazzled with joy underneath the sandy blonde hair. He looked at my filthy hand, shook his head, and laughed harder.

‘Thanks so much.’

‘Any time,’ he replied, but I could barely make out what he was saying through his bubbling laughter.

The first sputter of rain made him stop.

Home was out of view. Our exploration down a dirt road that had become a shallow river, had taken us into the neighbour's property. No one actually knew where we were. A rescue was out of the question. If we happened upon wild dogs, we'd be in trouble.

'Hey look, what's that?' My brother pointed into the trees.

We were in the middle of unknown acres. It could have been thousands; it could have been tens of thousands. There were bound to be trees and livestock, but not much else. So I kept scraping mud from my butt, and ignored his excited pointing. What had he seen? A trap door to a secret tunnel system?

The sound of him trying to run in gumboots too big for his twelve-year-old feet, made me look up. Like an emu with turned out knees, he left the dirt-river road and began dodging rabbit holes and saltbushes, making a beeline for something.

The rain began to fall harder. Getting wetter wasn't my worry, but it was icy cold and I was in shorts and a flanny. Muddy shorts.

'Wait for me!' I called.

Hidden by the distant tree line, was something made of wood. A wall? A building? Somewhere warm and dry? The remains of a long forgotten town? I took off running, ignoring the burning in my own legs.

'You can't catch me!' I shouted over my shoulder.

Heavy drops of rain made the world seem smaller. Just us, a few feet of native brown grass and saltbush, then nothing. The world was putty for our imaginations, as we entered the cluster of trees. Ours was grazing and cropland, where trees were left to grow in clusters.

'It's a house,' Josh declared.

'A shack.' I gave the dilapidated building a wide berth, running around it in search of a door.

'I'd live in it,' Josh said.

'That makes it a pigsty.'

The building was nothing special. Its timber walls were covered in flaking white paint. It sat on wooden blocks, and my hair stood on end as I looked down at the gaping holes between the blocks. Not that I was worried about something living underneath the house; I was worried that the rotting house itself might crash to the ground. I didn't want to be near it if it did. Such things only ever happened when someone was around to see them: the tree in the woods, the abandoned house in the

paddock – same thing. And what if someone was inside the building? The door could fly open at any moment, and a great big guy with an axe could come out swinging!

For every house on our forty-five kilometre road, there was a collection of buildings exactly like this: shearer's quarters, cook's quarters, farmhand's quarters. This little building was out in the middle of nowhere.

I scanned our surroundings. At least I assumed we were in the middle of nowhere; truth was, I couldn't see that much, so I couldn't be sure. As far as I knew, our nearest neighbour was somewhere beyond the wheat silo in the next town. What was this place? A secret hideout for bushrangers? Why was it here?

Josh gave the door a good shove, and disappeared inside. I rushed across the waterlogged grass to follow him. As I bounded inside, the rain seemed to triple in intensity. The noise of gentle drops sounded harsh under the corrugated iron roof.

The house was empty. Not a treasure box, mysterious stack of books, or even an old bed to sit on. Our mud-caked gumboots left brown cloud-shaped marks on the dusty floorboards. We walked about the room, running our fingers over the weathered timber. Maybe something was carved into it. Josh tested the floorboards, jumping and bouncing around; maybe underneath a loose floorboard we'd find our treasure?

The noise began as a distant 'whooshing.' By the time I noticed it, it had become more of a rumbling.

My heart pounded. Had we been caught? We were on our neighbour's property, far from where we said we were going, far from where we could easily be found if mum or dad were looking for us. We were exactly where a serial killer would love to find us...

Shaking with adrenalin, I ran out into the drizzling rain. I didn't even notice its icy drops. Josh ran in my shadow.

We stopped, and searched our surroundings. Trees, trees, saltbush, somewhere off behind us was the road-river, right in front of us was a rain-shrouded mound of blue metal for a train track that was out of view.

The train rushed passed us. Horn blaring at two mud-caked kids in the middle of a flood.

In our only escape, our imaginations.