

THE QUARRY

Ellen A. Williams

Chapter One, from *When the Dust Settles*

When the dust settles, Elsie is running; running into the quiet suburban night, retro kitchen scales clutched to the ridges of her side. The dish was lost a block back, the clang onto the concrete barely registering above the rhythm of pounding feet in her head, pounding blood in her ears. The dial jerks between the grams, an unhealthy clunking in time with her beat. Her feet burn. Tiny footpath rocks imprint into her raw skin, make her faster. Elsie runs, leaving those conclusions behind.

The frosted doors slide open and there they all are— the faces, so many expectant faces. Elsie’s gut steps up a gear. The crowd’s shoulders drop. She pushes the trolley down the ramp and scans across the disappointment for a flash of the familiar. A toddler runs loops around a bollard, foil balloons hover impatiently. A squeal somewhere, then hands waving as if trying to shake them off at the wrist.

Elsie lingers in the collecting pool of fatigued travellers and feels the back of her neck. It feels strange still, three (four?) days after the cut, or ‘hack’, as probably better describes the moment of madness with the Danish girl’s fold-up scissors.

‘Keep movin’ thanks,’ an ocker voice instructs from Elsie’s right. She doesn’t know why it sounds so strange— it’s only been a month, and there was never a lack of Aussie accents broadcast across hostel common rooms. Will Ryan sound funny? It was hard to tell in her last jittery Skype conversation.

The plastic clip of her mum’s old hiking pack scrapes along under the trolley. Disappointment swells to her eyes. She’d had twenty-six hours to contemplate the greeting— the hug, the kiss, the ‘I missed you so much’ whispered urgently into her ear.

Elsie finds a seat at Krispy Kreme, scrapes at the gravy stain on her t-shirt and tries to forget the memory of her reflection in the baggage claim toilets.

Will everything be the same?

She closes her eyes against the surrounding clamour. The patterned darkness behind her eyelids is inviting. She forces them open to keep a look out.

A thatch of hair catches her eye; not quite blonde, nothing close to a strawberry. Her heart knocks in her chest. She can see the line where his hat has been. ‘Ryan.’

He turns, recognition, then confusion settling on his brow. ‘Elsie.’ He doesn’t hurry towards her.

Elsie’s hiking boot catches in the bag strap as she gets up. She grabs for the trolley handle. Ryan’s arms shoot out to steady her. Her face burns. ‘Thanks,’ she manages. It feels like their first date all over again, dorky and clumsy.

Ryan looks at her shoulders, where hair used to rest in a limp nothingness. Elsie waits for him to say something. Do something.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ he recovers, ‘didn’t know there were so many arrival gates.’

‘Do I get a hug?’ Elsie feels stupid.

‘Der!’ Ryan pulls her in under his arms. She breathes in his hoody. The deodorant and faint engine smell makes her want to cry. ‘You’ve had a haircut,’ he says carefully.

Elsie pulls away. ‘You haven’t!’ She reaches up and ruffles his hair.

‘Careful. Haven’t washed that for awhile.’

‘Meh, me neither.’

‘Gross!’ He laughs. His usual, unforced smile, dimples beneath his stubble. Elsie grins. She’s home.

The tiles are cool and the water hot. Elsie props herself up with her forehead and closes her eyes against the blackness growing in the grout. The water surges onto the back of her neck, and she retrospectively misses the shower. She’s glad her parents haven’t fitted a water-saving showerhead, and notices for the first time this contradiction given their eco-warrior stance on everything else. Right now, she doesn’t particularly care about those unnecessary litres.

Elsie thinks about her last shower; the mass of blonde hair in the drain, the pubic hair taunting her from the sticky shower curtain, the lukewarm needles she forced herself under. She doesn’t want to know how long ago that was, or how long she wore those undies for.

She pads along the hallway to her bedroom. Her eyes flick around the wall—band posters, the photo collage; it’s all so familiar, but distant like a memory or *déjà vu*. She stares longingly at her bed.

‘Want a coffee, Hon?’ her mum calls from the kitchen.

‘No thanks. I’d love a tea, though.’

‘Oooh, how very *proper*.’

Elsie laughs and scrounges in her wardrobe for her favourite trackies.

Coffee and baking hang in the warmth of the kitchen. The lightshade splays its woven pattern onto the roof.

‘Better?’ Elsie’s mum shimmies Anzac biscuits from the oven tray.

‘Much.’ She pulls up a stool next to Ryan, already wearing his Man U jersey. He tears an Anzac biscuit in half and drops it onto the plate. He blows on his fingers.

‘Soft ones, my favourite.’ Elsie smiles at her mum, and looks around the kitchen. The pantry door hangs from the one hinge still. Her postcard of The Giant’s Causeway is pinned on the noticeboard over the electricity bill. ‘When did the kitchen shrink?’

Ryan looks at her like she’s gone mad.

‘Now, now, world traveller,’ her dad scolds from across the room. He lowers the form guide. ‘Don’t go outgrowing your own home.’

‘She’s been out in the big, *wide*, world.’ Her mum leans her chin into her hands like a child, and gazes at Elsie. ‘Now let’s have a proper look at that new ‘do.’

‘I just washed it. It’ll be all fluffy...’

‘It’s a boy’s haircut. We’ll have to call you Elsie-Ray instead of Elsie-May.’

‘Oh shut it Greg.’ Elsie’s mum tosses the oven mitt at the paper. His eyes stay on the print, but his smirk stretches into a smile. ‘It looks fabulous,’ her mum gushes. ‘So mature, don’t you think?’ She looks over at Ryan.

‘Yeah, it’s nice I guess. Different.’

Elsie knew he didn’t like it. She had a feeling at the time he wouldn’t like it. But she adored Marta’s pixie cut, admitting how much she wished she had a face that suited short hair. Marta reckoned *everyone’s* face suited short hair. ‘It is only hair. I will buy you a hat if it looks terrible. Or you could follow Islam...’

‘I was feeling adventurous,’ Elsie says into her tea. She doesn’t feel adventurous anymore; she is beyond tired.

At the edge of her subconscious, Elsie is aware of another presence. At the other end, black fatigue paralyses each muscle and fibre of her body. In the fleeting semi-awakeness, Elsie panics that she is dead, that her soul is disengaging from her body.

A mug is set down next to her head. She recognises the big old speaker that Ryan uses for a bedside table. Her vision sharpens and settles on the grey scuffmarks on the white ceramic. Elsie hates drinking tea from mugs.

‘Hey, sleepy monster.’ Ryan drops down, too sudden, too heavy.

Elsie practises movement in her mouth, and wipes at the sourness on her chin.

‘It’s six.’ He curls around her banana body, pressing himself into her tailbone. The doona is a safety blanket against his gentle poking.

‘I can’t wake up.’ Her eyelids lock back into place.

‘Did you come to see me or to sleep?’ An acerbic edge betrays his joke.

‘You.’ She wills her brain to kick into gear. ‘Jet lag.’

‘Jet lag? You got back four days ago!’ Ryan sits up against the salmon wall. ‘I did twelve hour days while you were gone.’

‘I know.’

‘And you’ve been at uni for what, three hours today?’

Elsie levers herself up. She presses her fingers into her scrunched eyes. She wants to tell him that jet lag is like being on the train home from the Big Day Out, times a hundred. She wants to explain how hard it is to concentrate in a three hour tutorial, how the fluorescents hum louder each passing hour. She can’t be bothered. It’s easier not to fight. ‘Thanks for my cuppa.’

‘Did I get the milk right?’

‘Yep.’ She decides to wait until next time to ask him to take the teabag out.

Ryan half rolls off the bed and finds a printout on the floor. He puts it on Elsie’s swaddled lap. She looks at the black and white thumbnail of a weatherboard house and next to it, *Thur 5:15pm* in Ryan’s left-handed scrawl. ‘Ryan... you know—’

‘Know what? That you want to wait ‘til you travel? Hello, got your passport stamps, don’t you?’

‘I can’t afford this.’ She stares at the price in bold. It clicks in her vision like cash registers in cartoon eyes. ‘I’m broke. I don’t even know if I can get my job back.’

‘I can afford it.’

‘It has three bedrooms!’

‘It’s perfect!’

‘It’s Mayfield.’

‘It’s affordable.’

‘But it’s Mayfield!’

‘When did you become such a snob?’ Ryan snatches the paper from her.

Elsie feels the tell-tale heat behind her eyes. His shoulders relax back down. He folds the paper in half carefully.

‘I’m going to go look at it still. You don’t understand how tight the market is. It’ll take us ages to get one.’

She hears the apartment door open, Dan's work boot holding it ajar, then grocery bags being passed in from the lobby. At the bottom of her mug, the teabag is a soggy clump of brown.

'Is it really her? Globetrotter extraordinaire!'

'That's a bit of an overstatement.' Elsie blinks her eyes into focus under the kitchen light. Everything looks green.

Dan straightens up from packing his food into the veggie crisper. 'Holy shitballs! Check out the hair.' A broad smile splits his browned face. Only Dan would have a tan in winter. 'Seriously, you were made for that haircut.'

'Oh stop it,' Elsie swishes at an imaginary fly. She glances at Ryan, propped against the wall on a backless chair. His head tips to the side slightly, like he's considering a painting. Maybe he's getting used to her hair. Or her lack of it.

Ryan jumps up and jiggles some pizzas free from the freezer. The vodka bottle scrapes against the frost. Elsie squeezes her shoulders to her ears at the sound. Dan settles into Ryan's chair with a mandarin. 'What a welcome home feast!' he winks at Elsie. 'Ah McCain, you've done it a-gain!'

Ryan and Elsie look from each other to Dan.

'Right, right. I keep forgetting I'm an old man! It used to be an ad for microwave pizzas.'

'Gee Dan, how old are you?' Elsie clears the seat at the other end of the tiny wooden table. Since Ryan moved in with Dan a year ago, she's only known him to be vaguely older than them.

'Twenty-nine.' He sighs.

'Wow, you're totally old! You should be married and all that,' Elsie jokes. She pulls her arms back through the sleeves of Ryan's jumper, and hugs herself against the cool air.

'Yeah, well, tried that.' Dan peels off a mandarin segment. 'Wasn't for me,' he laughs.

'Shit, sorry, I didn't know.' She looks at Ryan with his head in the oven to check it's on. He glances back and shrugs.

‘Water under a bridge,’ Dan waves away her pity. ‘Boring story. Tell me all about your trip. I want details, I want drunkenness, I want debauchery!’ He pounds the table with his fist.

Elsie snorts. ‘Wait, I’ve got something for you.’ She comes back and tosses a chocolate bar at him.

Dan studies the label and hoots. ‘Yorkie. It’s not for girls.’ He holds it up to Ryan. ‘Check it out, even has a cross through the picture of a chick.’

‘Actually I forgot to declare it...’

‘Contraband, my favourite.’

‘How come I didn’t get a Yorkie?’

Dan holds it out to Ryan. ‘Swap you for your jersey.’

‘Get stuffed.’

‘See? This is what I’ve had to put up with since you’ve been gone!’

Elsie laughs.

‘A whole month of Mr Mope Face.’

Ryan turns his back on them. ‘Piss off.’

Dan shoots Elsie an uh-oh, we’re-in-trouble look.