

THE QUARRY

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Peroxide and the Doppelganger

Johnny ‘Peroxide’ Steele placed his sweating palms on the cool ceramic of the basin. He closed his eyes briefly to offset the bile that clawed at his throat. Christ, it had been a big night. Again. He took the weight of his body on protesting arms and leaned forward to inspect himself in the mirror.

A pair of bloodshot eyes looked wearily back at him. Peroxide took stock of the apparition in the mirror. His cheeks, boyishly fleshy less than a year ago, now looked as if they’d been carved into his face by a maniacal sculptor. A congealed streak of yellow – mustard? – ran from his pierced lip to his chin. It matched the overall pallor of his face with unsettling accuracy. Peroxide ran an unsteady hand through his shock-white hair, and he poked his tongue out as far as he could. He instantly wished he hadn’t. The surface was furry with a creamy substance.

He turned on the tap and cupped water to his mouth. It tasted metallic. He swished it around his cheeks a number of times before spitting it back into the sink. He turned the tap back on and watched as the water swirled the noxious glob away.

When he looked back up, his reflection was smiling at him. It was not a cheerful top-of-the-morning smile, rather it was a sly, knowing grin that didn't reach his eyes. Peroxide gaped. His reflection didn't gape back. It just kept up its malevolent leer.

He took a step back in alarm. He careened into the shower cubicle and clutched at the plastic daisy-embossed shower curtain to steady himself. The curtain rings splintered under his weight, and he fell to the floor. The curtain descended on his shoulders like a floral cape, and he wrenched it free.

'Johnny, what the hell's going on in there?' Kaylene's voice was muzzy with shattered sleep.

Peroxide kicked brutally at the curtain and got to his feet. 'Nothin', babe. 'S'all good.' He looked back at the mirror. It was just him again.

Kaylene appeared in the bathroom doorway. Even with her long honey curls dishevelled from sleep, and the oversized Ramones t-shirt she wore to bed slipping from her thin shoulders, she looked unbelievably wholesome. The sight of her freshness made Peroxide feel even more soiled.

'The curtain's broken,' Kaylene said evenly, surveying the crumpled heap.

'Sorry, babe. I'll fix it.' He moved to pick it up, but a wave of dizziness overcame him.

Kaylene steered him back to the bedroom and made him sit on the bed. 'It can wait,' she said. 'Why don't you just sleep it off here today? You've got a gig again tonight, don't you?'

'Yeah, over at The Bluebird. Don't kick off 'til half ten. It's okay, Kaylene, I'll head home, get myself cleaned up.' He looked at her apologetically. 'Sorry, I'm such a mess, babe. I'm trying.'

Kaylene didn't say anything; she just regarded him with her usual sad serenity. It was a look that cut Peroxide deeper than if she had expressed her disappointment.

The midday sun smarted, and Peroxide groped in his jeans pocket for his sunglasses. They weren't there of course. Another casualty of the night. They were probably abandoned; left on a sticky table at some seedy nightspot.

Peroxide berated himself. Kaylene had bought him the glasses as a gift. He recalled with a pang of guilt how excited she had been to find them. Black Buddy Holly frames with a set of faux rubies ostentatiously encrusting the arms.

'Perfect for a rock star.' She had laughed as she pushed them up the bridge of his nose, and stood back to admire him.

How in God's name he had found such a girl, and why she stuck with him, was a mystery to Peroxide. She was nothing like the others. The endless bevy of groupie trash with their predictable tattoos, shrill voices and cut-rate perfume. Kaylene was on another plane entirely. Calm and intelligent, caring and funny. She seemed to dig him in a way no one else ever had, or had ever wanted to. It had only been two months, but he knew that he loved her.

If he could only stop fucking up.

Lost in introspection, and with his head still throbbing like a demon, Peroxide turned left into Chirn Street. He could see his apartment block at the far end through a Jacaranda haze. It was November and the trees that lined the street, hueless for the better part of the year, were ablaze with magnificent blue-purple blooms.

Up ahead, someone with hair as blonde as his was walking towards him. Peroxide squinted. There was something about the walker's gait; a familiarity of stride. He made his way beneath the footpath's mauve canopy. The distance closed between them, and Peroxide felt an ice trickle of fear run down his spine in spite of the heat of the day.

At twenty metres distance, he saw a glint of red beside the other man's head, like a crystal's prisms throwing light in the sun.

At ten metres, he saw the source of the red. It was reflecting from bejewelled sunglasses: The Buddy Holly kind with faux ruby detail.

At five metres, Peroxide stopped dead in his tracks. It was him. The *other* him. The one from the mirror; he was wearing the same unpleasant grin.

He – *it* – didn't slow down. It brushed past Peroxide so closely that he could smell its cologne. *Globe* – the kind he wore. Peroxide spun on his feet and watched as

his other self continued along the footpath. He could see the outline of the crucifix that dangled from its right ear, and he whipped a hand up to his own ear to make sure his earring was still there. It was.

‘Hey,’ Peroxide tried to shout, but his throat felt as if it was stuffed with wool, and nothing more than a feeble croak punctuated the afternoon heat.

His other self heard though. Its shoulders tensed and it stopped. Slowly, very slowly, it turned on its – *his* – heels and stared back at Peroxide. It was too far away for Peroxide to read the expression on its face, but it cocked its head to one side in a whaddaya-want fashion.

The wool in Peroxide’s throat knitted itself thicker, and he found he couldn’t speak at all. Up ahead, his other self seemed amused. Its shoulders rose and fell in mirth, in the exact fashion that Peroxide’s did when he was trying not to laugh out loud. After what seemed like an eternity, it raised one hand and fashioned a finger gun. It then extended it until it was pointing in Peroxide’s direction. Its index finger pulled the trigger. Bang. And then it turned heel and was striding off back down Chirn Street in the direction Peroxide had just come.

Peroxide’s knees buckled. What the fuck had he taken last night? He remembered drinking first beer, then bourbon, and then they had moved on to shots. But he had stayed off the drugs, he was sure. It was part of his resolution to keep Kaylene. Unless the boys had been messing with him and tripped his drink?

It had been an awesome gig; that was for sure. Since he and The Regrowths had first taken to a wooden box stage at one of the grimy local clubs only a year ago, they hadn’t looked back, and last night’s crowd had to have been somewhere near five thousand strong. They played bigger venues now of course, and the after parties were bigger too. Since Kaylene had come into his life, Peroxide had been struggling to keep a balance between the two. It wasn’t easy, but like he had said to her that morning, he was trying.

Whatever had gone down last night, he must be still under the effects of some powerful hallucinogen. First the unnerving mirror incident, and now this. If he found out one of the crew had spiked his drink, he was going to tear them a new arsehole. With this thought on his mind, he walked on down Chirn Street.

His apartment resembled the state of his life over the past twelve months: hectic, uncontrolled, and messy. He prised open the windows to let the afternoon breeze have its way with the pungent smell of negligence that hit him like a physical force, when he opened the door. He was going to have to get his shit together on the home front if he was going to have Kaylene over on a regular basis. So far he'd been dodging that one by sleeping at her home.

He lit a cigarette and searched about for something to use as an ashtray, settling on an aluminium takeaway container, that judging by the coagulated remains, might once have contained cuisine of the Asian variety.

The green light pulsed urgently on his answer machine, and he depressed the playback button. It gave an agreeable little *blip*, followed by the machine's androgynous voice: "*You.have.one.new.message.*"

It was Troy, The Regrowth's bass player. '*Yo Johnny, you home, bro? Pick up, dude. What a fucking night, aye? D'ya see that chick up front? She flashed her tits at me, man. Dave reckons it was for him, but ...*' An almighty crash interrupted Troy's flow. '*... Ah, fuck-it, that was me guitar, gotta go, Johnny. Catch you tonight at The Bluebird for set up. Bring those Midas vocal chords.*'

Peroxide couldn't help but smile. He was starting to feel a little better. It had been a huge night, and he probably had been spiked, but so what? He was okay now. Wasn't he?

That grin. That awful cunning grin.

He stubbed his cigarette out and peeled off his evil smelling clothes. A long shower and sleep was what he needed. He reckoned he could get a good six hours in before it was show time again.

The shower felt good. He let the hot water drum on his head and shoulders for a long time, cleansing away the craziness of the day, and the detritus of the night. He towelled himself dry, cinched it around his waist, and searched the vanity for toothpaste among the various bottles, disposable razors, and half used tubes of bleach that helped him create his on stage persona.

His fingers paused on the box that contained his *Globe* cologne. It was empty.

Doesn't mean anything, his mind yammered at him. *Probably in the bedroom. Or the kitchen. Hell, you know what you're like, it could be anywhere.* But his heart

was pounding like a backbeat from Davo's snare drum, and he was already racing to the bedroom. Suddenly it seemed very important that he knew where his bottle of *Globe* was.

It wasn't in the bedroom. Nor was it in the kitchen, or the lounge room, or under the bed. He went shakily back to the bathroom. He had just missed it; that was all.

His twin was in the mirror.

It wasn't grinning anymore.

Oh, it was smiling alright, but it was a deadly, elongated smile. Too wide for its – *Peroxide's* – face, so that every tooth, right down to the back molars, were impossibly visible. Peroxide focused on the crown that he'd had fitted four years ago, and distantly felt the warm-wet sensation of urine on his legs as his bladder gave way.

The reflection threw back its head and laughed. It was an obscene sound that prickled at Peroxide's scrotum.

'What do you want?' Peroxide's words were barely more than a whisper through numb lips.

His likeness stopped laughing. It fastened its eyes on his, and leaned forward. Peroxide watched in horror as the face first flattened against the glass, then pushed hard against it. The surface of the mirror rippled and stretched with the shape of its face, until finally it broke free, and swam at Peroxide in three-dimensional horror. A pair of leather clad shoulders followed, and it kept coming until it levelled with Peroxide's ear.

He felt the chafe of stubble against his own as it leaned close.

'You,' it rasped.

Something in Peroxide snapped. He launched himself at the thing with pure adrenalin. His fingers, hooked into claws, found purchase on nothing but the smooth surface of the mirror. The last thing he remembered before his head connected with the glass, and a blessed red curtain of unconsciousness dropped on his mind, was that terrible word.

You.

It was dark. For the second time in a day, Peroxide found himself prostrate on a bathroom floor. But this wasn't Kaylene's house. He was in his apartment and ...

The mirror. The mirror. The thing in the mirror.

Peroxide lurched to his feet and jabbed frantically at the light switch. The mirror was broken. Shards of glass clung precariously to each other in the frame; the rest glinted here and there from the linoleum, tiny fragments that threatened his bare feet, and reminded him of his frenzied head-butt. He felt the egg on his forehead, but when he inspected his hand, it was clean. No blood. Small mercy.

Good Christ, the gig! It was nighttime. How long had he been out? He blundered back to the bedroom and snatched his cell phone from the bedside table. The screen threw up 10:17pm in its electronic font. Thirteen minutes until he was due on stage. The Regrowths would be cursing him six ways from Sunday by now. He could imagine how Davo, Troy, and AJ, would have cussed him darkly as they struggled with the last of the amps and lighting. Set up was always a bitch.

Peroxide checked his phone, resigned to the barrage of missed calls. The 'where are you?' The 'you'd better not be stoned again?' and the 'get the fuck here, right now, we're on in halfer'. Peculiar. There were none.

There was a voicemail from Kaylene, however, but no time for that now. No time to worry about the bump on his head either. And definitely no time to worry about his malevolent twin.

It was show time, and he was late. And so, Peroxide came alive.

Without a mirror, he applied his trademark makeup freestyle. He hastily dabbed on rouge and glitter shadow, and applied thick kohl outlines to his upper and lower lashes. A handful of gel set his namesake white hair into edgy spikes, and he pulled on his usual costume of leather and mesh in record time.

He was out the door and sprinting for the train station in less than seven minutes. It was only when he sank into the torn vinyl seat of a carriage that he relaxed enough to pull out his phone again. He tried Davo first. His phone was switched off. So was Troy's. AJ's rang out until it switched to message bank, so he left a garbled message. 'AJ, it's me, man. Listen, it's been a crazy night, I got knocked out, but I'm on my way, okay? Hold the crowd. I'll be there. Ten, fifteen minutes tops.'

The train rattled through the urban night. It was only a blessed few stops to The Bluebird. Peroxide punched at his keypad to play Kaylene's message.

'Oh Johnny, yellow roses. How did you know they were my favourite?' Kaylene's mellifluous voice floated through the phone. *'Thank you, this makes up for ... well, so many things. I'll see you at the show tonight, okay? Love you.'* She laughed. The sound hurt his heart. He had never given Kaylene flowers. But someone had. And it had made her happy in a way he never did.

Peroxide reeled in his seat. No, he hadn't give Kaylene flowers, but all of a sudden, he had a terrible notion of who had. A panic rat gnawed at his stomach as the train pulled into the station. He sprang onto the platform and pounded up the stairs into the street above.

He could hear music pulsing from The Bluebird from where he was. Surely, they hadn't started without him? But there it was – the unmistakable electro backbeat of *'My Society'*, one of their firm crowd pleasers; and the crowd was pleased. He could hear them roaring every word to the chorus, drowning out the vocals.

The vocals?

Peroxide felt as if he was moving through water as he crossed the street and entered The Bluebird. Time took on a dreamlike quality. The crowd heaved and surged around him. There was Davo, thumping away at his drum kit with abandon. AJ and Troy were working the stage, bass, and lead guitars in perfect harmony.

But the real hero of the stage was him. Leather and mesh, makeup and hair. Bent over the microphone in classic rock stance as he belted out the last lines of *'My Society'*. As Davo pedalled his hi-hat to deliver the crisp culmination of the song, the Doppelganger flung his arms wide as if to embrace the audience. The crowd went wild.

A slim figure with honeyed curls pushed her way up and onto the stage. She threw her arms around the singer.

'Kaylene!' Peroxide elbowed his way through the crowd. He was dimly aware that he was screaming, but his terrified chant of *'No, No, No, no, no nononono,'* was drowned out amid the cheering.

Someone to his left said, *'Cool Peroxide, get up, dude. You must be, like, a total fan.'*

He shoved and pushed at bodies blindly, oblivious to everything except his need to get to the stage and Kaylene. He was almost there – he could see the pale-soft down on her cheek, illuminated by the stage lights – when he felt heavy hands fall on his shoulders.

The security guards were unceremonious in their ejection of Peroxide from The Bluebird.

He bucked and kicked and fought, but they were irrefutably strong. As they muscled him back through the crowd, Peroxide strained against the headlock to catch a final glimpse of the stage. He moaned as Kaylene planted a kiss on the Doppelganger's cheek. As the crowd roared their approval, it raised the finger gun in the same fashion it had on Chirn Street. It pointed it squarely at Peroxide and pulled the trigger.

Bang.

Peroxide roamed, his mind askew with shock and anguish. He let himself become one with the city night and the pedestrians that coursed through its streets like a tidal current. At one stage, he passed by a shop window. He stopped and looked into the glass for a very long time.

He had no reflection. None at all.