

# THE QUARRY

**Catherine Hughes**

## **The Tree**

The words seemed so casual. Slipped so easily into Mum's stream of consciousness that I almost missed them. She'd been talking for an hour or more, filling me in on the news of the last few months. The family was gathering tomorrow for Dad's eightieth birthday party. Phil and the girls were arriving tonight and I'd come early to help Mum with the food, although she never really let me do much. So far I'd picked some herbs, peeled the potatoes and made the morning coffee.

One of our rituals on my visits home was for Mum to catch me up; about Fred from the post office and his bad knee, Hazel's recent pilgrimage, and Mum's latest community choir concert. Who had left and who had arrived in our tiny town.

I sat at the kitchen table, warm and drowsy, lulled by the sun on my back, the flow of Mum's voice and the thick, muddy coffee that warmed my hands and coated my throat.

I almost missed his name. A slight break in the narrative and a softening in her tone pulled me back to the words.

'You heard about Rick's accident? I thought you must have, although I was surprised you didn't come back for the memorial service. I assumed someone would have told you. We didn't find out until we got home a couple of days after. I did wonder that you didn't seem to have been here.'

An almost imperceptible pause and then the stream flowed on. ‘I saw Aunty Pat up the street the other day and she said they were surprised you hadn’t come, or phoned, or something. So I wondered whether maybe you didn’t hear. But you did, didn’t you? I know he hadn’t been back for a while, but I assumed that word would have got to you somehow. Unless they thought we would tell you. But we weren’t here.’

Another pause...

‘You did know, didn’t you?’

When the flow finally stopped I found I had shut my eyes, resisting the words and the story they inferred. It made no sense. An accident meant one thing. Rick had an accident when he fell out of the tree.

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‘Don’t be idiots,’ they shouted after us. We’d been in the pub all afternoon and decided to celebrate the end of school by climbing the tree, right to the top, higher than ever before.

‘You can’t climb trees in a storm. Rick, mate, if you want to be stupid don’t take Katie with you.’ The barman, I think it was Stan, followed us out to our bikes, leaning on the edge of the verandah.

Rick looked at me and shrugged. ‘You better stay here then,’ he laughed before taking off and shouting over his shoulder. ‘Last one to the top has to buy the first round tonight.’

Of course I went with Rick. Always with Rick. We got to the top. To the fine, small branches, balancing in the fork of the trunk, as far up as it was possible to go.

Too much beer to let us think. Not enough to make us too clumsy to try.

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Don't think about Mum's words. What they might mean. What they can't mean.

Stay in the tree. That's much safer. Well it wasn't really, but it might be, set against what Mum had said. Accident. Memorial. Safer than that. The tree could have killed him. Could have killed us both. But it didn't, not that day, not any day, through all the years we lived alongside it.

That afternoon, the last time we climbed, the noise was immense. We clung to each other, scratched to billyo, whipped by branches cracking against each other and beating against our skin, exhilarated beyond words. Right at the top, looking over the town, pummelled by the wind.

The chair beside me creaked as Mum sat down. Her hands covered mine, still clutching my cooling coffee. 'I'm sorry pet. I was sure you would know. Can I tell you what happened?'

If I didn't open my eyes, if she didn't say the words, maybe there wouldn't be a tale to tell. Except for the one about Rick and me and the tree, on the day of our last exam.

The sun was still warm on my back. I uncurled my fingers and carefully placed my hands palm down on the uneven tabletop.

I shook my head.

Just stay in the tree. I can hear the wind thrashing on that wild afternoon. And now it was thrashing through my belly, just as it did on the day that he fell.

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I thought he'd died, but it was only a broken arm and a concussion. The branch that snapped and took him to the ground was like a gun going off beside my head. Suddenly his grinning face, so close to mine, was gone, disappearing in the midst of twigs and bark and shards of branch. He could so easily have been killed, probably should have been. He looked so fragile, his flannelette shirt a splash of red in the grey and brown debris far below.

My trip to the ground took forever; the tree an enemy for the first time, gripping and clutching, trying to stop me getting down. There was no one to call, no mobile

phones. Just the two of us off on our own. When there was something silly to be done, it would just be us. Enough beer and adrenalin and we thought we could do anything. Until that day anyway.

Rather than killing him the tree actually kept Rick alive. So much stuff fell with him that it cushioned his landing. He was bruised all over and one arm hung at a very strange angle but by the time I reached the ground he was conscious, groaning and laughing.

‘It was first to the top not the bottom who had to buy the next round. There was no need to push.’

I was so relieved that I threw up in the middle of the mess, which made him laugh, and groan all the more. Somehow, I got him out from under the branches and twigs. There were so many jagged edges that could have gone straight through his body if any one piece had been in a slightly different place. I threw up again. And again when I thought about it later that night and over the next few days when I dreamt about it.

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I still have that dream. Looking down from a great height at a body, tiny and still far below. Sometimes it’s Rick, sometimes my children, occasionally it’s me I’m looking at. And then, the desperate scabble to reach the ground, before it’s too late.

My own personal recurring nightmare.

But the tree didn’t kill him. That was Rick’s accident. It had to be. The only one.

Mum stroked the back of my hands. My eyes stayed resolutely shut. If I didn’t look at anything maybe that would work. The tree - that was the accident. He was alright after that.

We left home and went to uni; Rick to become an engineer, me a physiotherapist. We shared houses and friends and watched each other’s backs for years, inseparable, until Susie came along. Rick fell for Susie like he’d fallen from the tree, suddenly and without warning.

Just after they got together Rick came home one night, subdued and nervous, completely unlike him.

‘Susie doesn’t think it’s a good idea for us to live together or see so much of each other. She thinks you distract me and don’t let me concentrate on things I should be concentrating on.’

‘What, like her?’ I snapped.

For hours I raged, argued and ridiculed, but I lost him that night. Susie was strong and beautiful and completely overwhelmed him and our friendship. In a month he had moved in with her. Six months later they moved to Western Australia and then they were married. I was invited to the wedding but it was too far, too expensive and just too hard to think about. Although we were never a couple, he was still my other half and it was a long time before I really forgave him for letting her shut me out of his life.

We met up over the years when our visits home coincided but it was always awkward with Susie. Occasionally Rick came to Sydney for work. Without Susie, he would always leave a night free so we could catch up. A couple of times he stayed with us and Phil and Rick had a great time bonding over my strange quirks and idiosyncrasies. I went to bed and left them comparing notes and drinking whisky.

‘He’s a male version of you.’ Phil whispered gently through his hangover, the morning after one of these long nights. ‘You obviously spent way too much time together when you were kids. How can you finish each other’s sentences when you’ve only seen each other half a dozen times in the last ten years?’

Usually though, we went out. Phil didn’t mind that every now and then I would get a phone call that made me sing around the house before I disappeared for a very, very late night with another man.

The chair beside me creaked again as Mum pushed herself to her feet with a heavy sigh. A hand on my shoulder, a kiss on the top of my head and she retreated back around the benchtop to continue her work.

No matter how tightly I clamped my eyes and clenched my teeth she kept intruding.

The last time I saw Rick was very different.

It was about five years ago. Phil and I had been steadily drifting apart. We were both tired; tired of mindless work, the endless stress of trying to live well, desperate not to make mistakes with our kids, and always to be on top and in control. We had stopped talking, stopped communicating at all.

I was feeling pretty miserable when Rick called.

‘Hey Kit. I’m going to Canberra for a couple of days next week. Any chance you could come down? I won’t be back for a while and I’d really like to see you.’

‘You’re coming on your own? What’s the matter, babe? You sound awful. Are you sick?’

‘I’ll tell you next week.’ He cut me off abruptly. ‘Please come.’

Phil nodded vaguely, and I was off.

Rick had been offered a job in a diamond mine in South Africa and was in Canberra to organise an urgent visa.

‘Why Africa?’ I asked over dinner the first night. ‘And why so urgent?’

‘It’s more why not Africa than why,’ he replied quietly.

Susie had left him for one of their closest friends. They didn’t have children and after nearly 20 years of marriage his life was suddenly a vast and empty ocean.

We spent the next two days talking; about what was going on in our lives, how sorry we were that we had lost each other, and how bitter and disappointed we were in so many ways.

After dinner on the last night we traded memories of all the stupid things we’d done, including the day Rick fell out of the tree. Many hours and much wine later, our laughter dissolved into tears. I hadn’t seen Rick cry since his dog got run over in front of his house when we were about ten. When I returned to my husband and daughters I left my best friend with much sadness and many tears.

Funnily enough, those few days with Rick were a catalyst for me and Phil to sort ourselves out. I told him Rick’s news and said I was scared we were going to end up in the same place. We began to talk about the disappointment and frustrations we felt towards each other and our life, and gradually began to find each other again.

We'd heard from him occasionally during the intervening years. In the last email, about a month ago, he said he had a girlfriend that he knew we'd like and that they would be home for Christmas.

I hadn't got around to replying.

'I'm going for a walk Mum. No...on my own. I won't be long. Please...just don't fuss me.'

Head down, eyes open but my mind still doggedly closed, I strode towards the centre of town. A goods train stopped me at the level crossing. Unconsciously I began to count the carriages, beating my fist against the barrier. With every beat, another memory.

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'What are you doing?'

Rick was looking up, staring intently into the traffic safety mirror that guarded the crossing.

I was about four. Kristie in her stroller, and me and Mum had just collected the mail. Mum and Rick's mum were talking. I stood alongside Rick and looked up. It was so funny; we were completely squished out of shape. Rick was like a giant ginger head with no body, freckles swimming across his face.

'What are you doing?' I repeated, giggling. 'You look like a munchkin.'

Without moving Rick replied solemnly, 'How do you reckon the cars get their shape back before they get here?'

Our first proper conversation.

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‘Please Tam, come look, you’ll see what I mean.’

The time he tried to convince Tam Rowland, the Rural Fire Service chief, that the fire that burnt the post office down was started by a spark between the mirror, some rubbish and the afternoon coal train. The reflection of the setting sun in the gaps between the carriages was so blinding.

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‘Rick, Rick, don’t be a dick

If you keep me waiting

I’ll give you the flick.’

As I swung around the pole, aged fourteen, waiting, always waiting for him to arrive.

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Rick and Phil’s first meeting, unexpectedly one weekend when we were home. While I jumped about excitedly, sure they’d get on, Susie stood, looking away, impatient to leave.

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The train passed. I crossed the track, ducked under the mirror and headed up the hill.

When we were kids the tree rose above the town, an ancient gum, vast in the middle of a paddock. A pine wind break ran along the boundary line, protecting the farm house further round the hill from hot westerlies and storms from the south, but the gum stood aloof.

As I got older and the population grew, chunks of properties were carved off and subdivisions appeared. Smart houses behind pristine hedges replaced the cows on the hill behind the town. But for many years the tree had remained, just beyond the edge of development.

I saw the shiny new gate as soon as I turned the corner, shut against the field where the tree stood. That shouldn't be there. This day was just full of things that shouldn't be.

The tree was still there. I could see it in the clearing, powerful in its isolation. The core of my life, as essential as my family, the home I grew up in, and Rick.

'God help you if it ever came down,' I muttered, slightly disgusted at my dependence.

But there shouldn't be a gate. The tree belonged to us all; we always assumed it did anyway.

The sun was dappled, still warm but diffused by shadows from the wind break that remained on the boundary fence. The huge pines looked incongruous now, rough and ugly along one side of the avenue that was lined with elaborate topiaried hedges and architect designed mansions on the other. The wind high in the pines sounded like the sea pounding the shore and a heavy scent followed me as I headed towards the gate.

There shouldn't be a gate. The tree was meant to help me, save me from the truth of the news I walked out on. Save Rick, save us all. How could it do that from behind a gate?

I didn't lean on the gate. That would give it legitimacy. Instead I stood slightly back and pretended it wasn't there. I was so weary of all the things I was pretending that day. It wasn't in a paddock any more, just another block of land to be built on, with fences all around.

The thick knotted rope we had badgered Rick's dad into hanging so we could get into the tree was still tied to the lowest branch. We were probably six or seven.

I couldn't imagine letting my daughters out at that age on their own, knowing they were going to spend the day trying to climb a tree. Maybe we were older; I think our parents were just braver.

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‘Dad, we need the rope. We really need it. Really, really need it. You wouldn’t want us to get hurt, would you? It’s so much safer with a rope.’

‘Come see Dad. Reckon we can jump down. Course we won’t be silly. Safe as...come tie it up for us and we’ll show you.’

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I remembered the feel of the rough rope in my hands as I swung from knot to knot until I reached the smooth fork at the base of the climb.

Raging angrily at the barrier before me and at Mum’s news about Rick, I noticed a small clump of new leaves snared in the gate. Without actually touching the wire, I unhooked them and held them to my face.

And waited.

Waited until I could absorb the truth that Rick was dead.

Until I was brave enough to unclench my body and let that truth flood me.

Until I was ready to walk back home and let my mother hold me and to let myself mourn.

I crushed the leaves against my cheeks, the scent of the eucalypt gradually earthing me, while I desperately tried to ignore the truth that I wouldn’t see him, not at all, not ever again.

My other half, my tree dwelling friend.