

THE QUARRY

Melissa Farrell

Cold Current

She still dreams of him. They are always at the beach house, the soundtrack of the ocean thundering in the distance. The light is unusually bright, creating a shimmering incandescence. When he comes to her, his hair is wet from the sea and she can taste the saltiness of him. He will hold her close and she once again feels that sense of place. As she slowly wakes, she will linger in the haze of him, in the feeling that all is right again, until that moment when cold clarity reaches in and sweeps him away and the incredible emptiness returns.

Anna is running late. She had set the alarm, but a silky slumber enfolded her, easing her back into a forgotten dream. Time is nagging as she rummages through the wardrobe for a blouse to wear. She pulls a black stretchy one with lacy sleeves from a hanger, unsuitable for a Saturday morning breakfast with her friends, but needing no ironing, it will do.

Twenty minutes later, Anna is on the monorail streaming towards the tall towers of the inner city. The latest news reports are flashing on the telly-screens, but she watches through the window as the suburbs slide by, at the movements of the people at ease in the world that surrounds them. A man glides a sudsy sponge across the bonnet of a car; a girl rides her bike through the flickering shadows of overhanging trees; an old couple sit close and cryptic on a park bench; children splash in the clear water of a backyard pool; a woman stretches to hang washing on a clothesline. As the images flash by, Anna knows it is more than a window that separates her from that world.

Her phone vibrates. It will be one of her friends checking in on her, making sure she is on her way. She wonders how much longer their patience will last. Surely there is a use-by-date for sympathy, a time where they will congregate together and shout 'enough'. She hates that she has become a worry to her friends who are watching her closely, waiting for some sign that she has returned to a sense of the world. They try to coax her back with inclusions in the various events, the birthdays, the dinners, the get-togethers, but it is the very consistency of their lives that makes her more aware of the changes in hers, the fluidity of their connections that makes her isolation more acute.

Time is supposed to dilute pain, to diffuse its severe shape, to take you in its flow until the pain is just a whispery ghost left drifting in the current. Time is passing, but it is leaving her behind. The flux and surge of life is sweeping everyone along, while she treads water, just managing to stay afloat on the tides that surround her. Sometimes she is surprised that she is still bobbing about on the surface, that what lurks in the depths below has not pulled her down, or that she has not allowed herself to slide under, to simply slip away, just like Daniel. She still euphemises, still avoids some words. He died. Daniel is dead and he has been for a whole year today.

Was it only a little over a year ago that after all treatments had failed, she had pulled him from the tubes and the fluorescent world of doctors and chemicals that had

claimed him? She had salvaged what was left of him, taking him home to the beach house for those last days. She held him at night and sat with him on the deck by day, looking out at the ocean, watching the deep green waves rise up before smashing into a white foam on the heavy rocks below. The movement of the ocean had energised him, connected him once again to the young man he was before illness rushed him prematurely to the end of his life to die at thirty-four years old.

What gets her up in the morning and dresses her and moves her through each day is a gossamer awareness of the potential for her own ending. The quiescence of this idea whispering its promise is what keeps her persevering even though the façade of the everyday, the routines people build around themselves as a barrier against the pure mystery of life, has worn away and she is only aware of the empty chasm left in its place. She maintains this holding pattern while she waits for something to align itself, or for an idea to shape itself into an action.

Once again Anna sees her mother reclined across the unmade bed. She had looked so tranquil, her face holding none of the usual harsh angles. Anna had stood over the bed, watching, not wanting to wake her, not wanting to disturb the peace her mother had found. It was only later that she discovered her mother had taken enough sleeping pills to ensure that she would never wake again. The idea that some sort of inherited flaw could lead her to the same end, could allow her to take the same facile way out, disturbs Anna. She wonders too if she would be able to readily discard the hallowed gist of life that she and Daniel had fought so hard to hold onto over the three long years of his illness.

The word 'time' draws Anna's attention to the telly-screen. It is an advertisement for a cryogenic company. This service was once offered to the dying in the hope of recovery in some distant future, but in an increasingly overpopulated world, it is now only offered to the living, as a form of time travel, a means to begin again in some distant future. 'Travel through time' declares the voice-over as a row of sleeping capsules appears on the screen. 'Sleep for up to one hundred years and awaken to a bright new future.' Anna feels something shift, something tightens or loosens within her, she cannot tell which, but she feels the change as she considers the implications. To be taken into the flow of time again and be swept into the future, to sleep for a century and awaken to a world in which Daniel had never been born, was never a part of. Is this the solution she has been waiting for? Could this sharp-edged

present be softened by the passing of one hundred years? When Anna looks back to the screen, images of the escalating war in Asia have taken over.

Lucy and Kate are sitting at an outdoor table leaning towards each other in conversation as Anna approaches. She knows why her friends have chosen an inner city café. They want to draw her in from her detached existence on the outer coastal fringes, to connect her to the energy that throbs through the inner city, as if feeling its pulsing heart will somehow defibrillate her life. But as she approaches the café, she feels partitioned from the motion around her, like a tourist observing another culture, a culture that operates on a semantic system she can no longer understand.

‘Sorry I’m late,’ Anna says as she takes a seat. The look of relief on each of their faces makes her feel guilty.

‘Where’ve you been?’ asks Lucy. ‘We’ve been trying to phone you.’

‘I’ve had my phone switched off.’

Anna notices the quick look of concern that flashes between them. She knows this breakfast is for her, even though nobody has said it. They know what today marks.

She smiles and tries to sound casual. ‘I’m starving, what’s on the menu?’ Sensing the tension loosen in her friends, she determines to be the Anna that they want her to be, at least for this morning.

The three of them have been friends since childhood. Now in their mid-thirties, they are still close, but as Lucy and Kate talk about their lives and share the latest gossip, Anna finds herself sitting outside the conversation. She laughs when required and nods occasionally, but she feels little inspiration. A shadow of uncanniness creeps in as she observes them. It is like viewing a scene that is both familiar and alien. In the light and focus of a changed perspective she no longer melds with this apparition from the past.

Lucy is looking very pregnant and as they discuss plans for a baby shower, Anna can feel their glances as they check for her reactions. She had been trying to fall pregnant before Daniel was diagnosed. Anna keeps smiling in an effort to reassure them. She could tell them that she feels no regret about not having created a life, only at not having saved one, but she does not want to talk about this today.

‘When are you going back to work?’ asks Kate. Anna expects this question. It is one that they have regularly asked for the last few months since she quit her teaching job. They do not understand her need for solitude, the space that gives her pause, the seclusion in which to wait for her life to take on some sort of shape again.

She tells them what they are waiting to hear. ‘Soon,’ she says. They seem satisfied with her answer.

Aboard the monorail on the way home Anna looks up the number for the cryogenic company and calls. There is an information session for prospective clients the following week. She books her place.

The company is situated in a technological district on the edge of the city. The squat building of four stories in industrial grey does not seem exceptional enough to contain the expanse of a century, but when Anna gets to the elevator she can see that the building reaches down into the depths by another twenty floors. She wonders how many people are down below, sleeping into their futures.

The conference hall is crowded. On the surface they look like a random mix of men and women, of varying ages and appearances. As she takes a seat, Anna searches those around her for some sign, some behaviour or expression that is common amongst them, something to indicate the shared desire to deceive time, to break from the hold and thrust of its linear unfolding. But she detects nothing in their bearing to indicate a yearning for a yield in mortality, a plasticity to bend and stretch at their will, the need to leave the present and sleep into another century.

The session begins with a lecture on the science of the process and a stream of facts tumble forth. They are assured that everything is sound. One hundred years is now a very safe time frame for this type of procedure. In fact, a vastly longer period of time would be possible, but government regulation will not allow for any advance at present. Power to the capsules is secure. In the event of electrical outages, solar-power can keep the capsules operating for years. If there is any breakdown in the system, the capsules are programmed to automatically begin the waking procedures on the occupants.

The process is similar to being anaesthetised. One will be aware of going under and then waking again. There will be no dreaming, no sense of time having passed. Anna realises that her grief will not be dulled by the passing years. The darkness will

follow her to the future, but she hopes that the light of a new world will absorb much of it. She will see the process as a rebirth, a fresh beginning in a transformed world.

They are informed that counselling is available for those left behind. Anna will not be telling her friends what she has planned. She could not bear another major goodbye in her life, or the protests and the attempted interventions that would no doubt follow. She will leave messages for each of them explaining her choice, to be delivered after she is asleep. They will not understand, but the course of the years will convey them along until she is an amorphous memory left in the wake of their lives.

The lecture continues and many questions are asked by others and are answered while Anna simply wonders how soon she can be put to sleep.

After six months of preparations, the day for her sleep arrives. Anna has passed the medical tests and completed all of the legal paperwork. She has sold the house, the car, most of the furniture, and has given what is left to charity. The company provides financial management for sleeping clients, but she has very little left after paying for a century of sleep. An airless square metre of space is also provided to store any personal belongings. She uses this to store a suitcase of clothing, a brown mohair jumper that had been Daniel's favourite, and a small brooch of her mother's. Despite her attempts to disengage from any feelings of sentiment, she found that she could not let go of these items at the end. Nor could she control the surge of regret that surfaced, an oily slick floating across a wave of relief when the time came to move out of the beach house. She has a vague notion that there is more she should have organised or could have taken with her, but her focus has been on dismissing the present. The less she takes with her, the more she leaves behind.

As she enters the grey building where she will spend the next one hundred years, she takes a moment to look back at the city skyline, registering its shape, wondering how much it will have changed by the time she next walks through these doors.

Once inside, Anna is processed with a speed and efficiency that gives her little time to contemplate what is about to happen. She suspects this is intentional, a way to counter anxiety for the client, but she feels no apprehension, only a sense of release now that the time has come.

Soon she is lying in a thin white gown, being given the initial injection that will put her under before she is transported to the capsule for the final preparations. She

closes her eyes and the green-robed medical team are replaced by a drawing from a childhood storybook that appears before her, of a man with a long grey beard. He is lying beneath a tree, yawning and stretching, waking from a long, long sleep. Her mind slants and the image slips away as a stream of ice runs through her veins. She feels herself tumbling through space and then she is in the beach house. Daniel is there looking out towards the ocean. He turns to her and smiles as the house fills with a gleaming white light that seeps through him as he disappears. The walls fall away and the ocean floods in. She is lifted by the swell and finds herself drifting in a deep green wave before a cold current sweeps in and carries her away.