

THE QUARRY

Brooklyn Andrews

D's Repairs

I could see my underwear floating past the window. My left sock was treading water in the middle, and the sleeves on my cardigan were wriggling like a clump of seaweed. I pressed every button, twice. I waved my hands in its face and I kicked it in the shins. Nothing. Not a sound, a light or a breath of life. The machine had died midway through the rinse cycle, belly full of water, my clothes trapped like babies in a womb.

I searched the Internet for appliance repairs and called the company with the catchiest slogan: D's Repairs 'If it's kicked it, we'll fix it'. The man who answered had an accent, rich, curly r's, possibly Italian. He sounded like a Domenic or a Dino, with a thick, heavy brow. I could hear facial hair scratch against the mouthpiece of the

phone—some upper lip whiskers, or a patch of new growth on his chin. He said he'd be here between eleven and three, but I vouched on five.

*

The door buzzed fifteen minutes ahead of schedule, or an hour and forty-five behind. I heard the elevator open, and the swish of wide legged pants make their way towards the door. I lit a candle as if that would mask the smell of how I spent my day: chain smoking and leftover pizza. Pathetic. I tucked my hair behind my ears, the strands were clumped and mucky and I had forgotten when I last washed it. I opened the door to a short, cushiony woman. I thought she might be lost—I was expecting a Domenic, or at least a man—but 'DETTA'S REPAIRS' was stitched across the breast pocket of her overalls. She was approaching sixty with dark features, large eyes, cradled by plump pillows of skin, and thin lips sliced into soft, fleshy rolls of chin and neck. She had the low, heavy brow I predicted, but beneath her brows her face was hairless.

'Where's eh machine?'

Her accent sounded thicker in person, like she covered her words in mud before she spoke them. Her eyes skimmed over the apartment as she made her way into the laundry. She turned to look at me, slumped her brows, bowed her head and sort of smiled. It was a slight curl on the surface, but there was something deep about it, behind it, I could see it in her eyes. I retreated into the kitchen and cringed. I reached for a wet towel as if wiping down the benches would clean up my act as well. I hadn't returned my mother's calls, I hadn't got a real job, and the woman across the hall was trying to sell me meth.

'Finish,' Detta's voice dispersed my thoughts and I threw the towel onto the bench.

'Here, the problem,' she handed me a fist full of wet coins, 'Put these in bank, not pockets. It fifty for repair.'

I thanked her and she smiled again, her eyes diving into mine one last time.

When she left I put the wet coins into a jar. They splashed against the glass and the sound of it kept bouncing around the walls, like I didn't own enough furniture to absorb it. When the echoes stopped I opened a copy of Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. I had marked my spot in the book with the handle of a teaspoon. I tried to enter the story but I couldn't get that smile out of my head. That Mona Lisa smile, subtle but deep. Just a twinge on the lips, but with brows folded over eyes that were locked onto mine. It was probably out of pity, because she thought I was a dropkick. Crusts on the counter, overflowing ashtrays, and a smell of staleness so thick you could part it with your hands. But I know there was hope somewhere in there too.

*

I slept restlessly and woke with Detta's image still circling my mind. I tore the last page from my sketchbook, clipping it to the easel in the middle of my living room. I filled the paper with closed-lipped smiles and then paused to microwave a bowl of oats. I stared at the lips, spooning the gloop into my mouth. They were rough and smudged, and some pressed against each other. I could feel sweat beading around my scalp, slicking the wispy hairs against my forehead. I laughed out loud in my empty apartment and the sound of my own voice scared me back in to silence. Just as the quiet began to prickle my skin the door buzzed,

'Hello?' The oats slid down the back of my throat like a slug.

'Let me in it's Kay.'

Kay was erratic, she carried pills in a tic tac container and was barely ever sober. I first met her at the supermarket. She was buying Doritos—at least, she was trying to. Nothing but fluff in her pockets. She didn't see the problem. I was on the register, she was holding up the line. Trolleys were touching front to back, and kids hung from their handles like the place was a playground. I gave up and let her have them. She waited outside until I finished, thanked me, and we got talking. She lives in another bottom feeder apartment block three streets away.

*

‘That’s some creepy shit, dude,’ Kay surveyed my sketches. She tried to pull her hair into a bun but it all just fell apart at the bottom.

‘I mean it’s good, real good, but,’ she took a seat on the couch and shamelessly ate a plate of pizza crusts.

‘I saw a flyer the other day,’ she paused to swallow, ‘It’s some competition for portraits. You can win a bunch of stuff. You should enter.’

I looked at Kay and let the idea grow inside my head.

‘You can win a scholarship, and money, and one of those vertical desks you have here,’ she pointed the crust toward the easel.

I looked around the apartment, the mattress on the floor, sketch-filled pages tacked to the walls, my obnoxious ‘super sale low prices last chance’ red cashier’s shirt.

I grabbed my keys, ‘Come, show me the flyer.’

*

Across the hall, the meth lady cracked open her door as we were leaving.

‘Hey, I got something for ya,’ she said, leaning her bones against the doorway. Scabs, no teeth, hair stringing down her cheeks. She was ripped straight from a pamphlet warning kids to stay in school. Kay paused.

‘You got potential,’ the woman said, wriggling her finger at Kay and sucking her gums.

Kay cringed at the thought, burying her chin in the neck hole of her jumper. She stared at her scuffed-up shoes until I tugged on her shoulder.

‘Come on,’ I said, ‘I want to get another sketchbook and some felt tips.’

Kay followed me into the lift. As she walked the pills in her pocket rattled and she cupped the container to silence them.

‘This isn’t a forever thing,’ she said, looking down at her shoes, shaking the tic tac box in her pocket, ‘I’m not going to end up toothless. I’m going to be a nurse one day.’

*

The flyer for the contest was pinned to a notice board outside the TAFE. The bottom was fringed with tear-off tabs, so I ripped a piece and folded it into my pocket. It was a scholarship for a Fine Arts course, \$5000 prize money, and a ‘vertical desk’. I stood a minute, watching the people enter and exit the building as Kay flicked through a nursing pamphlet. A girl with a collar full of pins forced a couple of thick books into her bag. It collapsed her shoulders as she swung it onto her back, and she walked out the TAFE gates with her head bent over her knees.

‘Let’s get to the shop before it closes,’ I said. Kay was still consumed by the content of the pamphlet. She was staring at the girl on the cover, dressed in scrubs. Then she looked up at me, smiling.

*

I pulled out a dollar to put on the lottery and Kay volunteered to collect the supplies. Two months ago it was my job. Everything was smooth until I reached the exit and three chocolate bars slipped through a hole in my pocket. If it wasn’t for the generosity of Kay’s V-neck, the cops would have been called. Now I just stick to distracting.

Kay wandered in first. I stood waiting around a corner opposite the shop, watching her browse the women’s magazines. I entered as soon as she reached the soft porn in the men’s isle. I strode straight to the cashier. He was a spindly Indian man smelling strongly of sweet tobacco. I told him my numbers. I changed them three times, on the third time Kay strolled towards the door. The sketchbook and pens were hidden inside the folds of her jumper.

The man raised his eyebrows, his gaze still consumed by the computer screen,
'Ma'am.'

My stomach dropped but I kept my face together.

He looked up at Kay, his beady, close-set eyes giving her a once over.

'Watch your step.'

He turned back to the computer and continued putting in my numbers. Kay left, stepping over the power cord that snaked across the doorway.

'Okay, here's your ticket ma'am.'

*

I walked outside and went to toss the ticket into the bin. Kay grabbed my wrist. I only put the lottery on to distract the cashier, the tickets have never even won a cent, but she won't let me throw them away. She can't bear to watch the possibility die. It's the possibilities that get you out of bed; they keep your heart wanting to beat again.

'Don't sabotage your chances by binning the ticket,' she said, as she tucked another cigarette between her lips. She laughed at her own contradiction as she dipped the end of it into the flame.

I grabbed the sketchbook and pens and went back to my apartment. It was that time in the afternoon when the last bit of sunlight violently pushed its way through my only window. I dragged my easel into the yellow puddle and ripped a fresh sheet from my sketchbook. I held my bottom lip between my teeth and chewed on the flesh. I felt the skin start to tear, peeling away, beginning to bleed. My page was filled with lips and eyes. Detta's lips and eyes. I drew her hands in the left corner too, and drew them again and again in a row, each pair of hands a shadow of the last, losing detail, depth, dimension.

I needed to see her again. To see the way her mouth balanced on the edge of her jaw like a sad man on a cliff. To see her deep eyes, robust hands, and skin, rough and ridged from reaching into the pit of appliances and bringing them back to life. I wanted to know how she made it as a repairwoman, in a repairman's world. I wanted

her to tell me where she'd been, where she slept and what lay behind that flicker on her lips. Her face could win me the scholarship, but I needed to soak longer in the detail if I was going to replicate it right.

*

I tipped the coins out of the jar and into my hand. One was still wet; I held it up and watched a little droplet slide down the queen's nose like a tear. I put them deep into the pockets of my pants, stripped down to my underwear and threw the pants into the washing machine. I started the rinse cycle and slid my back down the wall, my bare skin pressing against the cold tiles. I had to wait until the coins rolled out and wedged themselves in the aorta of the machine.

It took three rinse cycles, seven cigarettes, and a plate of toast, slightly charred and buttered, before the machine slipped into sleep with a bloated belly. The clock glowed eight, the bags beneath my eyes glowed eleven, so I let my pants marinate in the dead machine overnight.

*

I called first thing in the morning and spoke to the same muddy voice. 'Between eleven and three,' they said, but I still vouched on five. I went to work, cleaned the apartment and smoked my cigarettes out the window. Four forty-five came and went, five went by too, and six, and then it was quarter to seven. I filled another page with lips and ate another slice of burnt toast. I pressed the breadcrumbs into my palm and brushed them into the sink, watching them soak up the splashes of water and roll around plump and happy.

*

It was quarter to twelve and I sat in darkness on the living room floor, my pants still marinating in the washing machine. The lips that filled the paper were smudged, faded, distant echoes of the original. No matter how much I tried to draw a pair that held the same subtle depth they did in reality, I couldn't. I folded the paper down the middle and pushed it under my mattress. I stayed sitting on the living room floor until the sun began to spit morning light through the window. All night I listened to the meth lady open and close her door, but I never heard any footsteps coming or going. I heard the man next door chanting and screaming and chanting and screaming, and I practiced meditation to the sound of sirens.

I slipped into sleep for the morning, waking every twenty minutes and getting up that afternoon at three. I reached under my mattress and opened the page of lips. I flipped it over, using the folds as a scaffold for her face. I persisted through the quivering lines and wispy scratches and the outcome was horrible. The face was too cavernous, there wasn't any depth, the lips were thin enough but they weren't smiling. And then the door buzzed.

'Hello?'

'I'm here to fix machine,' the muddy voice dripped through the speaker and onto my face.