

THE QUARRY

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Stifle

Alice Grayson cringed when her husband laughed about dying Jews. The jokes came when he and his friend were drunk, when the blood flushed strong in their cheeks and their eyes grew dull. When they laughed like that, it left her with a heavy queasiness in the pit of her stomach. And the thought always seemed to float by in her head. *What the fuck am I doing here?*

The bustle of football fans and families crowded the RSL. The bar served 'til three, and the drinks kept coming. Alice could think of a dozen better things she could be doing about now, but Richie could be persuasive in his own ways. So here she was. Pretending she didn't hate every minute of his Friday ritual. A 'get pissed and wake up shit-faced in the morning' pagan ceremony, complete with booze and sex. It was early in the night and her husband Richie was still sober enough to walk in a straight line.

Alice watched the rising bubbles in a glass of soda water, tracing her finger around the rim. A high-pitched ring slipped beneath her finger, singing, breaking up the choking laugh of Harry Guilford, a heavy, fattened man sitting across from her.

He was a good friend of Richie's, a car salesman. From where Alice sat, he was more of a pig than a man, his stomach rolls wobbling in time with his double chin.

'Why did Hitler commit suicide?' Harry asked.

He left it hanging. Richie shrugged. The pig smiled cheek to cheek.

'The Jews sent him the gas bill.' Harry chortled, slapping the table with a knotted fist.

Alice scoffed. 'That's not funny—'

'It's just a joke,' Richie growled, his smile falling flat.

'Stop being such a tight-arse.'

He watched her sidelong, the mask slipping. An insatiable hunger lived back there, something ugly and untameable. Alice felt it stir and glimmer behind his cold, grey eyes. He gathered her in close. She stiffened, recoiling as the stench of beer wafted heavy on his breath.

Richie was at least a foot taller than her. But even at eye level, he managed to tower over her. He was well built at thirty-two, broader in the chest and shoulders. He'd been bred tougher than leather.

A darkness stole over his eyes, his voice edging sharp and thin.

'Why are you being such a bitch?' he seethed.

She shrugged, a knot catching in her throat. Goosebumps rippled across her skin. An icy hand squeezed her heart tight. And despite the warmth of the club, it felt like she'd plunged neck deep in bone-chilling water.

Richie held his gaze like that for a long moment, working his jaw, considering what to do with her right then and there. He slipped his hand across her thigh, squeezing tight, inching his fingers beneath her skirt. She flinched, the breath catching in her throat. She slapped him away. Richie muttered gruffly beneath his breath, releasing her, sparing his hand to drink deep from a schooner of pale ale. Across the table, Harry recalled the time in school he beat up a Jewish kid for walking on the wrong side of the hallway. Richie laughed, the tell-tale slur dragging down his voice.

Alice slumped in her seat, catching her hands in her lap to stop the tremor. Harry's ugly words drowned out to a discordant rumble in her ears as she turned her

wrist, the ugly puce of an old bruise dark against her skin. She tugged her sleeve down, hiding it from prying eyes.

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Alice stood in the bedroom, looking herself over in the floor length mirror. Stripped down to her underwear, she studied the bruises spotting her stomach. They were fresh from last night. Then on her shoulder, a yellowing bruise, a week old. And most recent, a large discoloration along her ribs. She ran her fingers over the angry, black smudge, wincing.

Deep in her stomach, the queasiness was back. The choking urge to cry hit her hard. It aged her eyes and creased the worry lines on her forehead. She hated that. She hated the slump in her spine, the heaviness in her shoulders. Hated the dip of her hollowed out stomach and the dark shadows under her eyes. She used to be so pretty. But now...now...*shit*.

She thumbed the tears from her eyes with trembling fingers, swallowing down the lump in her throat. *Don't cry. Calm down*. Pursing her lips tight, she snapped open a makeup kit, dabbing foundation on the ugly strangle marks on her throat. Makeup could only cover up so much. She wondered if she had a turtle neck sweater with a high enough collar. No, a scarf might do better. She smeared the foundation, wincing as the marks faded beneath the flush. Makeup hid the ugly Rorschach patterns on her body. Thankfully for her, he only left them in places where they could be hidden. In the end, the makeup and the clothes were all a matter of self-preservation. Yeah. Self-preservation.

Outside in the hallway, boots thumped on the hardwood floor. She stiffened, watching the doorway from the mirror, holding her breath. She'd come to hate the sound. After Richie's raging nights of drinking, she'd expect it. The boots beating the floorboards, kicking in the bedroom door; His calloused fingers snatching, holding her down on the bed, the other hand teasing off her jeans...

Richie lingered in the doorway, listless, emotionless. He studied her with a lazy roll of his eyes, looking over every inch of her skin. She stiffened, cringing under the

heat of his gaze. He was unshaven, his dark hair tousled, his knuckles raw from pounding down the bedroom door last night. Even the soap couldn't wash the dark stain of blood from under his fingernails.

After a long minute, he pulled away, thumping down the hallway, wincing as he limped. She shuddered, her skin crawling. *Nothing. Not even a grunt.* What did she expect anyway? Another empty apology?

It used to be so different. They'd married two years ago. He worked building sites and she worked behind a desk, billing patients for fillings and dental check-ups. They'd bought a place in Penrith, even planned on having kids. He used to enjoy a beer or two, but never more than he could handle. Then he shattered his leg in four places under a pile of cinder blocks. Physiotherapy was a bitch. He lost his job. He didn't feel like a man anymore. Not with Alice working and with him at home, confined to a wheel chair. The worker's compensation didn't ease the sting of the bite or the blow. He numbed the pain with the deepest bottles he could find. The pain killers, hospital bills and the sleepless nights crowded in, and something died deep inside. Months later, he was back on his feet. Couldn't walk without a limp though. The bad habits held firm, and it was like he was a stranger all over again. Drinking made him forget that he felt more like a cripple than a man. And nothing eased the powerless rage than landing a fist to soft, squirming flesh.

She was still waiting for the man she married to come home again. The man with the warm smile and the gentle hands; The one who laughed like he meant it, without the venomous spark glinting back in his eyes; The man who loved her, even when she nagged like her mother. It all seemed like a naive fantasy now. But it kept her kicking. Kept her alive. But the doubts were always there. She couldn't help feeling trapped. How could she leave him? How could she say it directly to his face? If she left, he'd find her. And he'd urge her back. Or beat her raw. No. She could wait. One day he'd put down the bottle and they'd leave this shitty life behind. One day.

Alice looked herself over, her vision washing over as the tears swelled. She slapped her hand over her mouth, stifling the ragged sound. *No!* He couldn't hear her cry. Not this time. She sunk to the floor, hugging herself tight, breathing deep. She filled her lungs. It was a shaky, half-drawn breath, a strangled noise hitching in the back of her throat. *Be strong. Oh God, let me be strong.*

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The rain poured in soaking sheets, spitting on the bus shelter roof. Under the glow of the streetlamp, the bitumen road glistened, giving off the odour of melting crayons. Alice huddled under the shelter, shivering, checking her watch again. He was late. Half an hour late. *Again*. If he didn't come, she'd chance the rain.

Down the road, headlights sliced through the darkness. A battered ute pulled up at the bus stop. Richie rolled down the window, squinting through the pouring rain. He waved her in, rolling a toothpick between his teeth. She crossed through the rain to the car, slamming the door behind her. The air con brought feeling back to her frozen fingers. Richie pulled out into the lane, heavy on the accelerator.

Alice held her silence, listening to the thumping of the windscreen wipers. The radio crackled, fuzzing in and out of static. He spun the tooth pick between his teeth. It kept his fingers busy when he needed a fag. He was trying to quit. Said it was bad for him. *'Its bad shit, you know,'* he'd say, *"breathing in fag smoke. When you fuck up your lungs, that's it. You can't breathe. And when you can't breathe, that's when you know you're fucked."*

Back on the main road, he stopped at the traffic lights. He looked sidelong, watching her steadily, rapping his fingers on the steering wheel. He opened his mouth, but paused, reconsidering something. She endured the silence, counting the seconds as the light turned green. He eased the car forward, finding the words he was looking for.

'I'm sorry about last night.'

She felt the twinge in her ribs redouble. He continued, determined.

'I'll stop drinking. I'll skip the pub visits.'

Alice held her tongue. How many times had she heard that before? She often wondered if he practiced in front of the mirror, measuring every word and every line on his face, reciting his lines with the precision of an actor. If he hadn't said all this a hundred times before, she would've believed him.

'That's what you said last time.'

He tightened his fingers on the steering wheel.

‘Yeah, well I mean it this time.’

He mashed the toothpick between his teeth. She shrugged.

‘Good. You can join the alcohol group I told you about. The one on Fridays—’

‘Jesus Christ!’ he snarled. ‘I’m not a fucking retard!’

He took a corner sharply. Alice flinched, holding on to the edge of her seat. Her heart jumped into her throat. Steadying her voice, she continued, unsettled.

‘They’re not retards. They have problems. Just like you—’

He tightened his jaw. The tooth pick snapped in half. Dread sunk deep and she flinched back against the seat, expecting a heavy handed slap. If he didn’t have one hand on the gear stick and the other on the wheel, he’d throttle her right then and there.

‘You little bitch!’

He floored the accelerator. The car wavered, fishtailing on the road. It picked up speed, forcing her back against the seat.

‘Slow down!’ she urged. ‘Richie. Slow down!’

The rain pelted on the windscreen, a hazy mess of sheeting water. The headlights flashed back, lighting up the guard rails of a bridge. Richie swore, slamming on the brake. Too late.

The car swerved on the slick road, careening sidelong on the curve of the bridge. It hit the guard rails with a screech of steel. It crashed through. Below, deep water rippled in the pouring rain.

The car plummeted over the edge. Alice screamed, lurching forward in her seat. The hood of the car smacked the water. The impact hit them hard. The airbags exploded. The world snapped out of focus. Dark numbness knocked her out. The ute lurched, sinking, going under.

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It was the chill that stirred her from unconsciousness. The chill and the sound of churning water. Alice groaned, pushing the deflated air bags from her face. She peered around the car, fighting the heaviness of her head, tasting blood fresh on her lips. She wiped her bleeding nose, a cut on her lower lip twinging.

Richie lay slumped on the steering wheel, unconscious, bleeding from a cut on his forehead. Beyond the windows, they were surrounded by water. The glass ticked, straining under the pressure. Water streamed in from a gaping crack in Richie's window, filling the car to her knees. She reached over, shaking him, the panic rising hot and strong.

'Richie! Wake up!'

No response. She snatched at her seatbelt, clicking it loose. She bent over, working at Richie's. It held firm. She gasped, doubling her efforts. The water flooded in, rising fast.

'Richie!'

She tugged at the seat belt, yanking it. The water rose. The air thinned. *Shit! Oh God!* Her thoughts raced. Her heart thundered. She had to wake him up. She had to get out!

The seat belt disappeared under the rising water. She released a strangled moan.

The crack in the window strained, splintering, spider-webbing. The icy water bubbled higher, rising to her waist. She fumbled on the belt buckle, fingers trembling. It wouldn't budge.

'RICHIE!'

It rose up to her chest. The crack kinked, glass clipping loose. A splurge of water surged through, filling to her shoulders. She let go of the buckle, gasping, her voice rising to a sob. Richie bobbed in the current. The water slipped over his mouth. Over his nose. Bubbles blustered on the surface of the rising water. Water crept to her throat. She bumped the car roof. No time left. She had to leave him.

One last breath. She filled her lungs.

The window popped. Torrents of water flooded in. The force knocked her hard against the passenger window. A bout of air bubbled from her mouth. She pressed her lips tight. *Get out! Get out!*

She blinked, her eyes adjusting. Richie drifted. Pockets of air glimmered on the car ceiling. Fighting the panic, she urged her arms to move, her eyes stinging. She slipped through the window, swimming out into open water.

For a moment, there was no up or down. It was too dark. She urged her body up. Or was it down? The stretch of water went on endlessly. It clouded over with sediments, thick and impenetrable in the darkness. Black dots swam across her vision. Bubbles of air slipped from her nostrils. She swam furiously, her lungs burning.

Above her, the surface shimmered. The swim was agonising. *Nearly there. Nearly there.*

She breached the surface.

She gasped, gulping in a wet breath. She blinked the water from her eyes, her head spinning. Air. *Sweet Jesus. She could breathe again!*

She treaded water, walloping air bubbles rising from the wreck below. With every ounce of strength left, she paddled to the river bank. She staggered on shallow ground, crawling up the bank, slipping on slick pebbles, mud oozing between her fingers. She collapsed, lying flat on her back. Hard pellets of rain spattered her face. She lay there for a long minute, her eyes closed, her heart thundering. The exhaustion sunk in deep. Out in the pouring rain, in the darkness, she opened her eyes, curling her fingers in the mud.

Minutes passed. It was too late.

He was gone.

Every moment with Richie had been in that car, drowning. It had all been a vicious cycle of stifling control—a nasty, twisted sensation of drowning in icy water, holding her breath, breathing thin air. Those precious moments of loving a sober man had pulled her through. Those pockets of air had kept her alive. But just barely. And now she could breathe again.

The rain pockmarked the surface of the river, air bubbles rising and popping on the surface. The chilling air stung her throat, leaving searing trails. But with every

breath, every wet gasp, the heaviness lifted from her shoulders. She shivered, breathing deep, the air thick with the stench of mud.