

THE QUARRY

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Dignity Estranged

A Molotov cocktail cut through the summer air. Glass smashed, petrol burned. A swarm of people danced around the flames, desperate to escape the inferno.

'Fucking hell!' screamed Leighton, as he pushed a stocky man named Jason away from the flames. He stumbled as his shoe got tangled in the human wall, his red Converse came off, his ankle twisted as he staggered backwards.

The petrol, no longer contained, swam towards the protestors. It licked at their heels. A circle of about twenty metres opened up as the bodies attempted to evade the searing heat, the fire consumed all of the oxygen in the dense pit, with dozens raising t-shirts to their faces as the vapour dried their throats.

The *Pride Parade* was an annual event held in Sydney's CBD. An extremist group who called themselves *The Reclaimers* had crashed their event. The narrow footpaths were fenced off on both sides, forming a steel funnel. Police were ready to push fence jumpers back into the mix. Fifty metres separated the two groups. The supporters of the Pride Parade were dressed in a variety of colours. In the confined space they looked like a giant hundreds-and-thousands cookie; a sea of pink mixed with flecks of red, white, and blue. Some had brought guitars and the crowd had sung tunes like *The Beatles'* 'All You Need is Love.'

Onlookers flanked each side of the barricade. Anticipating trouble, a boy got out his phone and began filming. His mother pulled at his shirt, dragging him away. A dog barked as a firework was thrown in between the groups. A policeman touched his radio and mopped his brow.

Leighton dodged a rock, the projectile flashed past his right eye. A drummer from the other side started banging, *The Reclaimers* marched, waving banners that cut through the smog. They bore slogans such as 'men are men, women are women!' and 'X does not equal Y!'

Jason, the leader of the Pride Parade, had seen this before. He had been bashed in the 2005 Gay Pride Parade, his nose broken by a hateful fist. He had organised the rally to protest the fascist regime of *The Reclaimers*. Their Twitter hashtag #Sydneypride had taken off, and thousands had bombarded their activist account with messages of support.

Jason turned away from Leighton and shot silly string into the air. He laughed as the synthetic goo covered a few onlookers. He draped a rainbow coloured flag around his shoulders, and mocked the protestors by clapping to their drum-beat. He raised his hands and shook them. Leighton laughed at his eclectic dancing. Plastic bottles bounced around them; *The Reclaimers* used anything they could grab as make-shift projectiles.

Police had underestimated the event and, with an annual bike ride through the city taking place on the day, were outnumbered by the swarm of people. Those at the back of the Pride Parade had decided to flee; banners were ditched and slogan-covered tops were removed. Some went without their shirts to protect themselves.

Sirens blared in the distance as The Reclaimers marched closer. The gap was reduced to twenty-five metres. Jason grabbed his megaphone, ready to plead with both parties. He pushed his fringe back from his forehead, the dried petrol making his skin prickle. His left hand gripped the megaphone, his right stayed clamped by his side, the fingers played with the cotton of his shirt.

Leighton noticed a protestor, a blonde haired girl in her early 20s, hiding behind a group of older, sign-brandishing men. She hid like a child does when they are meeting new people for the first time. Her eyes darted, refusing to make eye contact with the Pride Parade supporters. She wore black Converse shoes, a knee length dress and her face was plain, unmade. A silver chain hung around her neck. A cross no bigger than a postage stamp weighed it down. Her hands played with the chain, the cross turned around her neck as she spun the metal around. She flicked the cross behind her as if to protect it from the proceedings.

Twenty metres apart, they locked eyes. Someone handed her a flag to fly. She dropped it, pretended to swipe for it, and then, when she was sure she had not been noticed, stepped over the fallen symbol. Leighton smiled. He wondered why she had dropped the flag, why she wasn't protesting with fist raised like many of the others. Her face wasn't twisted in unnatural hate and flecks of spit did not stick to the corners of her mouth.

'Watch it, mate,' said Jason as Leighton stood on his shoe. His ill-timed steps made the row behind him stop momentarily. Two arms stretched out to guide him back into position.

The two groups descended into chaos. A guitar bearing man used his instrument as an impromptu bat, the varnished wood cut into the side of a Reclaimer. The guitar splintered, showering the crowd with polished chunks. Only the neck of the instrument remained. Leighton kept his eyes on the girl. A gray-haired man locked eyes with Leighton as placed his hand on the small of her back, pushing her forward. The man shook his head in Leighton's direction and spat at his feet. The sheer volume of the crowd meant she was unable to sidestep his hand, shoulders boxed her in. The Reclaimers were out in force after the showing of a film in schools promoting gay parenthood; they had stormed Sydney's local schools, cafes, and train stations, plastering walls and handing out leaflets. Leighton remembered seeing one at Redfern

station, stuck to a wall of the staircase. He yanked it off the wall, scrunched it up and dropped it to the ground.

A placard struck Leighton in the head, and the corner made a juted incision. Leighton, who did not see his assailant, yelped and fell to the ground. Jason's flying shoulder battered through two Reclaimers. A third grabbed him by the waist, and slammed him down to the ground. A crevice had opened up in the human wall. Leighton touched the back of his head and brought his index and middle fingers back to his face; blood trickled down his fingers and smacked the sweaty pavement. He drew his hands towards his hips and rose up like a surfer catching a morning wave. He teetered as he attempted to regain his composure, pushing both friend and foe in an attempt to make it into the relative safety of the middle of the crowd.

A NSW Public Order and Riot Squad van had arrived. The jet black van was covered in cameras, its sirens blared; Leighton felt the tiny bones inside his ear pulsate. Twelve well-armed men began marching, riot shields out, towards the ruckus. They used their batons to drum on their shields, plastic sounds echoed off the surrounding houses.

Unabated, the front two rows of the Pride Parade and The Reclaimers pushed, shoved, and spat on each other. A man in a suit and tie attempted to swat at one of the girls in the Pride Parade from outside the metal confines of the barriers. His arm reached over a bunch of protestors, he clawed at air like he was trying to swat a dog on the nose with a rolled up newspaper.

A tear gas canister hit the ground in the middle of the riot; it belched white smoke. Leighton pushed to the left, forcing his way through, pushing some of his own people with reckless abandon. Gagging on the chemicals, he doubled-over onto the fence. After retching, he grabbed the barrier and hauled himself up. A body bumped into his feet, sending him sprawling on the concrete, head first. Leighton felt a searing pain in his right shoulder.

A hand reached out, urging him to take it. It was the girl. Sweat rained down her face, a trickle of sick stuck to her chin, trailed down to the top of her dress. She put her hand over her face in vain, hoping to dispel some of the toxic fumes that permeated through the chaos.

‘C’mon, let’s go. They’re going to fuck you up.’ The girl barked into his ear and she yanked him, by his right shoulder.

‘Fuck, my shoulder; I think it's dislocated,’ Leighton yelled out, and cradled his arm; the limb dangled like that of a ragdoll.

‘Leighton!’ Leighton turned at the sound of Jason’s voice, but he could not see him. The police continued in a line. Their shields made an impregnable wall as the make-shift drums got louder. Anyone caught in the line, injured or not, was bundled over, hauled to the ground and arrested. Leighton saw a flailing pair of legs, a torso pinned under black boots, knees in backs and discarded placards.

He staggered to his feet. The pair dashed away, ducking down a side-street. They found a crevice between two old semis that were marked for demolition, they ignored the construction sign and entered the passage. They leaned against a peeling wall, unable to sit in the slit-like passage.

‘What’s your name?’ Leighton squared up to the wall and rammed his shoulder against it. He let out a wail. His left arm spun outwards and he shook his hand. It looked like he was trying to start a lawn mower.

‘Bessie,’ she mumbled as she wiped the back of her hand across her face, yellow sick smeared across her cheek, touching her left ear. Bessie tucked the silver chain underneath her dress; she grimaced as a few stray strands of hair were yanked out.

‘What were you doing with those bigoted assholes?’ Leighton pushed the rage out; he spat on the pavement, looked her up and down, and shook his head.

‘Calm down. Those idiots are my family; I’m forced to be here.’

Leighton raised his left hand and clicked his fingers upwards like he was tossing a coin, dismissing her excuse. He noted the early stages of bruising and swelling as he explored the pink prickled flesh with his left hand. The bruises had small spots of blue that were beginning to join the larger areas of pink. Those bastards, he thought. He felt the anger rise up inside him. He imagined his father, at home watching the cricket or having a beer. He imagined families enjoying the spoils of brunch; full bellies and smiles. He wondered why, out of the thousands who pledged to be there, only a few hundred had shown up.

‘Look at what they have done to me!’ Leighton pointed to the back of his head. He felt crusted blood as he rotated his shoulder upwards.

A shout echoed down the crevice, shaking off the grogginess of the afternoon. The sound preceded the owner; it travelled down the passage way, eating up the air in the stuffy alleyway. Leighton could only guess that it belonged to one of the extremists. He imagined they had seen the pair leaving the riot, desperate to retrieve her, and injure him.

‘Shit! We have to go, Leighton.’ Bessie tried to grab Leighton by the arm, but he brushed her off. The adrenaline from the riot started to leave him, a wave of sickness crashed through him, the nausea coursed up from his stomach. Thick yellow sick dribbled out of his mouth, the taste of tear gas and petrol collided against his tongue.

Bessie side-stepped the puddle and forced Leighton upright, she yanked his hand and they began to run. As they left the shelter of the crevice, a bottle hit the entrance way, dregs of beer dripped down the wall.

The city streets were narrow and event parking meant there were next to no cars to hide behind. Leighton realised that they had to make it into the heart of the city, or on to a train, anywhere. He wondered if Jason had gotten out. The riot squad were not known to be gentle; many of their supporters had been roughed up when being taken in for questioning, sometimes their stories even made the papers.

He began to tire as they hurtled down the city street, ducking as the occasional projectile flew passed them. He thought back to the countless hours he had put into campaigning, fund-raising. He had helped many people be themselves, feel less vulnerable. He remembered helping a transgender girl, who called herself Kate. He had stayed up all night, talking to her on Facebook. She was a studious young woman, bright, bubbly, friendly, confused.

Leighton felt angry as he realised how easily his own supporters gave in to violence. His shoulder ached with every step, as the pounding of his feet forced the vibrations into his arms, reminding him of the earlier fall.

The NSW Police had shut down the streets, issuing a lockdown in Sydney’s CBD. Bessie and Leighton made their way to Darling Harbour. Leighton sat down against a pole on one of the wharfs. Dirty water lapped up against the side of the pier,

seagulls swarmed on rubbish and people ignored each other in dignity estranged. The teenagers looked like party-goers. Leighton smelled the stale air, cigarette-butts lined the wharf; rubbish hid in between wooden slats.

'What's going to happen to you?' Leighton turned to Bessie, his lips pulled tight and his eyes squinted.

'They'll kill me.' Bessie turned away from Leighton. She remembered Catholic school; the firm stance, the iron-clad scripture and Sunday school with Sister Callaghan. The way the sisters spouted the same passages and ignored her questions frustrated her to no end.

'God has an answer for everything,' chirped Sister Callaghan in lyric baritone; the sugar syrup seeped from her mouth, Bessie felt sick.

Leighton and Bessie talked late into the afternoon. The faint sounds of sirens drifted through them as the sun started to dip. Leighton's heart raced, his mind flashed to those in the riot. Signs, flags, symbols and colours had been turned into weapons. He wondered if Jason had survived, if he'd been arrested or even killed. Leighton sighed and forced himself up.

Leighton exchanged numbers with Bessie, thanked her for saving his life and headed towards Town Hall station.

Bessie watched him stagger until he disappeared into the distance. Bessie felt the wind pick up. The chain brushed up against her breast. She took the chain from her neck and threw it into the ocean.