

THE QUARRY

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Lansdowne

In hindsight, it was a strange way to live. At the time, everything was a little bit odd to me out there so I didn't think anything of it. My grandparents never made an issue of it, so I figured that's just the way it was.

I was staying with my grandparents in a small town by the name of Chesterfield. I spent much of my school holidays out there. The first time I went I had no idea what to expect; I hadn't seen my grandparents in years. Fortunately, they both knew what to expect with me and had plenty of books for me to read with them and talk about.

Chesterfield was essentially there to cater for the surrounding farms. There was a schoolhouse for the local kids, a single-person police station and my grandparents' corner shop, with about fifty houses spread out over the rest of the town. There were

more tractors and 4WDs than any other kind of vehicle, with most people using a horse or bicycle to get around when they had to.

The townspeople and the surrounding district would get their supplies from my grandparents' corner shop. Each person would have a particular product that they'd need for their crops, horse or dirt bike and my grandparents would remember each and every one. It was while helping out in their shop that I met Hank.

The first time Hank came into the store, I wasn't sure what to make of him. He pushed in his rusted trolley (with only three working wheels) and asked for 'the usual, thanks, champ.'

As a nine-year old who had no idea who he was, my eyes went wide hoping that one of my grandparents would come back out front before he asked again. Thankfully, my grandfather unknowingly fulfilled my wish by coming out and getting Hank what he needed. When my grandfather introduced us, Hank noted that I looked just like my grandfather. I must have reacted noticeably as they both laughed.

My grandfather loaded up Hank's trolley, but Hank didn't take it with him. Instead, after paying with cash he got out of a freshly opened envelope, he left his loaded trolley in the shop and wandered back out. I wasn't sure what to make of Hank or the pile of cans he left behind in his trolley.

When I woke up the next morning, the trolley had gone. After my grandmother confirmed that Hank had taken it home that morning, I asked her about him. She explained that he was 'just a silly old man. He never really got used to normal life after the war. Shame, because he has quite the head on his shoulders.' This confused me at the time, although it made perfect sense after I got to know him.

I asked my grandmother why he left his trolley behind. She explained, 'He lives in Lansdowne, down the road. He wheels his trolley up when he gets his pension, buys the food he needs, then spends the rest at the pub and wheels it back in the morning.'

I'd never been to Lansdowne. No one had apart from Hank, since the mine fire forced the town to evacuate. Chesterfield was, in a way, built as Lansdowne's replacement. Hank was the only person who moved back to Lansdowne when the town was declared safe and he remained its only citizen.

It wasn't until a year after my first encounter with Hank that I finally did make the walk down the road to Lansdowne. Hank had had to have surgery on his knees and wasn't able to make his weekly trip up to Chesterfield. My grandparents sent me with a trolley and mobile phone to take Hank's supplies out to him.

An hour and a half of walking down the highway with nothing around but flat fields dotted with the occasional flame tree and I arrived in Lansdowne. It had never been a large town, only having around 100 residents when it was evacuated, and only half of them had lived in what could actually be called "the town". The centre of Lansdowne was made up of two dozen houses, what used to be the shop/post office/police station and a 'schoolhouse' that only looked like a regular house if not for the 'School' sign out the front.

Looking around Lansdowne, I realised I had no idea which house was Hank's. Some of the buildings had large chalk X's on their front door. I was wondering what they were for when I heard a door open. I looked down the street toward the noise and watched Hank hobble out onto the veranda of one of the houses and wave me over. That saved me knocking on every door.

As I approached his house, Hank hopped down the stairs with a crutch under his right arm. I could see the bandages from his operation wrapped around his knee. He gave me a broad smile and picked up a couple of cans out of the trolley, reading the labels in satisfaction.

'You deserve a drink after that long walk,' Hank said to me as he nodded towards his house. Together we lifted the trolley up the stairs and through the front door. He told me to sit in a chair just inside the door while he wheeled the trolley into a different room, carefully avoiding putting any weight on the bandaged leg.

The room I was in seemed to be the main living space, with three old sofa seats and a tea table in the middle, all arranged to focus on the fireplace in the corner. The wallpaper was faded; it might have been bright blue once but now was a grey almost ashen colour. I began to suspect it actually was ash when I sniffed the air.

The room was filled with two things: empty food cans and books. The empty cans were mostly in piles in the corners and out of the way. The books, however, were all over the place. The tea table had at least thirty on it; the other chairs were in a similar state. The chair I walked to was the least covered: it only had ten books on it.

I picked up some of the books and read the covers. It was a broad mix of subjects and genres: *Frankenstein*, *For Whom The Bell Tolls* and *Diary of Samuel Pepys*. I'd read none of them before and hadn't heard of many of them. They were all older copies, their spines held together by single threads in some cases. They smelt old too; many different hands had turned their pages.

'You a reader there, champ?' The voice made me jump. Luckily I didn't drop any of the books but put them down gently before I turned to answer that I was indeed a keen reader.

Hank smiled. He hobbled over to the table and set down a glass full of lemonade for me. He sat down in one of the other chairs with a sigh of relief, carefully avoiding sitting on any of the books.

As he scratched his bandage, he told me, 'I've talked to your grandparents about you. They told me about your love of reading. I wanted to introduce you to my collection.' He gestured to the piles scattered about the room.

I picked up the glass of lemonade and took a sip. Hank gestured for me to sit, which I did although only on the edge of the chair as I still hadn't moved any books off it. 'It's an impressive collection,' I said, unsure of myself.

'Is this what you do all day?' I realised the almost-rudeness of the question only after I said it.

Fortunately, Hank saw the question as intended. He answered, 'For the most part. I have always been an avid reader, and now that I live here alone, I indulge my lifelong hobby and read all my favourites and the classics I never got to.'

By this time, I had learnt that asking personal questions could be considered inconsiderate, but I was also too curious to not ask questions when I had one I wanted to ask. So I asked Hank, 'Why do you live here alone?'

Hank smiled grimly and sighed ever so slightly. 'Because of some mistakes I made that I couldn't fix.' He leant forward with his elbows resting on his knees and he rubbed his unshaven face. I was worried that I had hurt him by asking but he seemed to make peace with the story as he began, 'When I came back from the war, I had experienced some things.' He spoke slowly and carefully chose each word, being very aware that I was still a kid. 'These things stuck with me, they call it post-traumatic

stress disorder now, but back then the closest thing they had was shellshock or battle fatigue.’

I thought to myself that this must have been what my grandmother was referring to when she told me about Hank. I wondered how much she knew of Hank’s life story.

Hank continued, ‘I found myself trying to deal with my condition while also trying to get into the workforce. There were a lot of former soldiers trying to find work back then. I was lucky; I found a job working in a steel mill. Hard work, it was, but simple enough. It was not long after that I met my wife, Sally.’

I noticed Hank got a little smile in the corner of his mouth as he remembered meeting Sally. I could also see the tears in his eyes, reminding me that something must have happened for him to end up alone in Lansdowne. I wanted to stop him from crying so I butted in, ‘Was she pretty?’

That made Hank laugh softly and smile. ‘Yes she was: blonde hair, bright eyes, and the sort of smile that made everyone around her want to smile too. She was also quick-witted and knowledgeable.’ Hank sighed again. ‘She really was just about the perfect girl.’

There was a long pause as Hank tried to gather himself and I thought about the idea of the ‘perfect girl’ and whether I’d ever get to be that to someone. I wasn’t all that fond of myself at that stage so the idea of someone else being so attached to me seemed unbelievable. Hank rubbed his mouth again. ‘Here is something very important for you to learn now: you treat your people right. You hear me?’

I was kind of thrown by the way he suddenly got worked up, but I understood the sentiment so I nodded quickly.

Hank nodded back at me. ‘See, that was my problem. Well, one of them. I just didn’t know how to treat my people right. You have to be honest with yourself, first. From what I hear though, you know how to do that.’

I felt myself shrink back into my chair. I wished my family wouldn’t share my secrets with other people. They keep calling me brave; I’m just trying to feel comfortable and live. I remember that being a consistent theme in my thoughts back then.

Hank tried to put me at ease. ‘Yeah, your grandparents told me about you. Don’t worry. We’re different, we need to support one another.’ He breathed in deeply as he looked around, and it seemed more like he was surveying his domain than just the room. ‘I’ve found something resembling a place of my own; I’m sure you will too. Hopefully it’s a lot more populated and welcoming than my little corner of the world. I think that would suit you more.’

I rubbed my hands in the nervous way I did when I didn’t know what to say or do next. Hank was still staring into space with a sad smile on his face. Wanting to stop the silence, I asked him, ‘So is this your whole collection?’

‘No, not by a long shot,’ Hank answered with a slight laugh. He pulled himself up onto his crutch again. ‘These are just the ones I’m up to right now. I keep a few hundred in whatever house I’m living in and keep the rest in the other houses.’

‘The other houses? All of them?’ It didn’t seem real for someone to do such a thing.

Hank nodded. He moved over to an opening next to the front door and went through. I followed him and came into a stuffy room filled with even more books, although this one was more ordered, with the books arranged on bookshelves.

Hank stood at one of them and started looking through the shelves. ‘I have the other houses arranged like this. Except for the ones I’ve already lived in. Those are filled with empty cans. Don’t go in any of the buildings marked with an X.’

I nodded, only half listening to what he was saying because I was too caught up in seeing what books were there. *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Gilgamesh* and *The Once and Future King* are the ones that I remember noticing, mostly because those are the titles that stuck out at me at the time.

I heard Hank pull some books off the shelf as he said, ‘Here we are. These should suit you nicely.’ He moved over to me and handed me four large books. I looked at the top book and saw *The Hobbit* was its title and there was a drawing of a dragon snaked across the bottom. Flicking through the pile, I saw the other three books were *The Lord of the Rings*.

‘Those there are what started my love of reading about, oh, 50 years ago,’ Hank told me. ‘I think you’ll enjoy them.’

I looked up at Hank and thanked him profusely. He just waved it off and walked me out to the kitchen. I helped him unload his cans and put the books he had given me in the trolley. Hank walked me out to the street and saw me off. The trip back to Chesterfield was much easier than the trip out to Lansdowne; with my new books to look forward to, I was also much quicker.

Over the next ten years, Hank and I continued and developed our friendship. Whenever I went up to Chesterfield to visit my grandparents, I would also make the walk out to Lansdowne to see how Hank was getting along. We would talk about books and my life back home. He would provide great advice on just any about topic I asked him about. He even supported me through my transition, even as I lost some friends who wouldn't deal with it. It was partly thanks to him that I worked up the courage to start the process. Once I started university, I couldn't make the trip out as often as I'd have liked as I had study, work and a romance to maintain at home. But, no matter if it had been a year or more between visits, we could still talk freely.

Hank died last month. I made the trip out to Chesterfield to visit his grave with my boyfriend. I didn't realise how sad I was until I saw the words written on his headstone. He didn't leave me without saying goodbye though, his collection of books was left to me along with a parting message: 'Audrey, you've been a friend. You treated me right. Thank you. You'll live a good life as a good person. I'm sorry I never got to meet your man. You are his perfect girl now.'

Walking back to the car, I had to lean heavily on my boyfriend as my knees refused to hold me up properly. As he drove, I stared out the window in the direction of Lansdowne and thought of Hank, my friend, and his little corner of the world.