

THE QUARRY

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The Emperor's Path

*Thirty days have September,
April, June and November
February is alright,
It only rains from morning till night,
All the rest have thirty one,
Without a single day of sun
And if any month had thirty two,
They'd be bloody raining too!*

- Anonymous, Kundasang War Memorial, Sabah, Malaysia

We are forgotten.

Alfie and Howard call out. Think they're being pushed somewhere.

'Keep it up Harvey!'

'Don't let that cage get to ya mate!'

So fucking good to hear them. I put my eye to the widest slit between the bars of bamboo. Can only see the outline of the same Jungle Pine that I saw yesterday.

Fucking bamboo. Every fucking sturdy building here is made from it. The locals make use of it in bloody everything. Wish the Japs designed this cage so I could stretch my legs without crushing my neck.

Think it has been three days in here. It's hard telling the time when you can barely see the sun. The heat and humidity helps: it's midday when the heat gets to you; after that it's afternoon. And at night you'd freeze, of course.

You know it's morning when you hear our fellas walking on their way down to make repairs to the airfield that we built back three years gone, when we got here after Singapore. You never hear them coming back; Japs make sure we work.

Mornings are the best. Just hearing those boys going past, particularly Alfie and Howard. Reminds me of where I am, cause sometimes this cage does things to you.

We're members of 2/15th Regiment, and have been since we joined up in 1940. Alfie is a Queenslander, a league boy like me. He signed up because he wanted to check out his mother's roots. She was a Scottish girl before she emigrated and had him, so Alfie figured that because Europe was where the war was, he could go 'home' whenever we got leave.

Howie's a Victorian, his father played in the VFL for Collingwood. He signed up for the same reason I did; both our fathers had served in the Great War, our grandfathers the Boer War before that. So we got on pretty quickly.

We did basic together in Singapore; that's when Pearl Harbour happened. So when we were told that we were at war with Japan, we thought it would be a walk in the park. Then Singapore happened.

As guests of the emperor, we were put on a ship to Sandakan, this little hidden pocket of nowhere, to build an airstrip. We quickly found out how hospitable Japs were.

Those fuckers remove any honour we have; they just try to break us. They even started making up rumours that Australia was being invaded.

Three days back one high'n'mighty little Jap came by the mess hall while Alfie and I were sharing the most heavenly cig that we'd exchanged with a Sandakan fella. So this Jap started sounding off about our cities being bombed. One bloke asked about Sydney.

'Sydney yes!' came the answer, 'boom, boom, boom!'

'Brisbane?' Alfie asked.

'Yes, Brisbane! Up in flames! Boom!'

'Bullshit?' I asked.

'Yes, Bullshit, boom, boom, boom!'

Our blokes couldn't stop laughing. So, after a typical beating that yellow-stained shit throws me in this cage for being a smart arse. Speak for himself!

We never believe their crap. The locals had come by our camp a few months back and exchanged a broken radio with Howie for two of his gold teeth. We got it working and found that the Yanks had turned the war.

We spread the news, telling our blokes '...what the kingfisher was telling us', so the Japs had no fucking clue that we knew they were losing. Made us think that maybe one day, our fighting lads will come save us.

It's easy to get carried away thinking like that. I did it myself last night!

As always, the Japs checked the cages as always to see who was dead. Then they gave me my first drink in three days.

But the Japs are no problem. It's the silence, when it's not broken by the occasional shot. Only sounds are the jungle: soaking rain that comes down in the afternoon and doesn't stop till the next morning, and the heat that sticks, rips and rots the seams of whatever is left of your uniform and boots.

The silence makes you listen for our boys. You hear them coming, flying in like angels, raining hell on these gits, then taking us far away from this hell-hole.

I hate waking up after that dream. See what I mean?! This cage does things to you. Hope. My best friend and worst enemy—

A Jap unbolts the lock, and flings the cage door open. ‘Speedo, Speedo,’ he barks.

The light fucking blinds me. The Jap grabs my arm in his fist and I fly into the mud. I look for some sort of landmark, and see that lifesaving Jungle Pine. Eyes on it, I get myself to stand up. It’s helping my eyes adjust.

The Jap pulls out another bloke from the cage next door. He’s got ulcers on his ankle larger than a 50p piece. And I see his fucking bone. Looks like he has the runnies too. Must be cholera. Half the boys have it.

The Jap beats him to get him up. He isn’t moving. So the Jap shoots him in the head.

He pulls more of us from all the cages, one-by-one, putting a bullet in anyone who doesn’t get up. Doesn’t matter whether they’re sick or injured.

Another Jap makes us walk. Fucking hurts to put one foot in front of the other, but it’s good to be out of the bloody box. The view down this path stretches out to an open muddy space outside the mess hall.

This view always reminds me of the view from my veranda back home, with the huge paddock of brown grass, and old pine trees lining the driveway. My brother and I used to call them pines ‘carrot trees’, cause they looked like giant green carrots sticking up out of the ground. Was peaceful there too, apart from the sounds of Dad shooting rabbits—

There’s a couple hundred of us outside the mess hall, all shunted in here like beef cattle. I see Howie and Alfie.

‘You little bastard! Nice of you to join us for our little gathering,’ Alfie laughs.

Howie offers me a cigarette. ‘You have to suck the Jap’s cock to let you out?’

‘Nup, just used charm. Bet you would’ve done that.’ I missed these buggers.

A Jap shouts at us to move into two lines, taking my cig before I can light it. ‘No smoking!’

We all squeeze up; they start walking us, out of the camp towards the jungle.

I remember seeing some of our guys being led out like this a month or so ago. Apparently the Japs want to move us inland somewhere, to some place called Ranau. Probably cause our air force boys are getting ready to kick the shit out of them. Well, sorry Japs, but marching us a few kilometres inland ain't gonna do much when you're flying in a fucking plane.

I hate jungle. Of all bastard places, this is the greatest bastard. It's always raining, and on the rare occasions it isn't, the humidity makes you wish it might as well be. The scrub sticks into you more effectively than barbed wire – any cuts from that always get infected. That and the mozzies that eat you alive, and you can barely see due to how thick the canopy is. Jungle works better than any fence; we knew if we ever escaped in our malnourished state we'd be dead within a day. That was if we weren't caught first.

We're being led up a steep path, looks like it has been recently cut. The mozzies feast on us as we all climb; humidity crawls its way into us through our breathing and weighs us down. We're weak, tired, injured, and sick. How do they expect us to climb this?

We march a few hours. How we do that, I don't know.

Then there's a foot in my periphery. A bloke has collapsed, his body wrapped in beri-beri by the looks of it. A few boys try help him up, but a Jap pushes us on ahead.

A few minutes later we hear piercing echoes from behind us cut through the trees. Soon, that same Jap walks past us, his gun sizzling from falling water droplets. He looks down and wipes bits of brain off his lapel, then grabs a dirty white handkerchief out of his pocket and wipes his face.

If I ever get outta this, I'm gonna put thirty bullets through that fuckers forehead.

He walks on ahead. I see above him through the canopy a mountain, towering above the rest of the hills we're travelling over. We know this mountain. The local fellas praise it like no tomorrow, cause some mountain spirit is there. Its slopes are steep and monoliths of rock strut out on its summit, like a crown of thorns.

I fucking hate this mountain. Feels like it's looking down at us, contempt little toy soldiers! Fuck you!

I see Howie; his eyes are to the ground, breathing hard.

'You see Alfie?' I ask between breaths.

‘Haven’t seen him since we left. He’s probably behind us,’ Howie spits in the mud. He’s struggling.

‘Keep it up mate. Think about your girls Double-Ds, that’ll put a spring in your step.’

‘Fuck you.’ Howie shakes his head.

Howie had a missus for close to two years. He’d been planning to marry her before the war got in the way. He didn’t like it when Alfie and I try to get him to talk about her; he liked to keep her for himself. Lucky bastard.

I’ve never been with a girl. Not even a smooch. Mother told me I had to be a gentleman to women when I moved from home to the city. First girl I’d spoken to properly was a girl who watched my first Manly Colts game. Her brother was the captain. We didn’t talk about much outside of what happened on the field.

Eventually, after a few more mountains, the night arrives quietly, but with it the rain. We stop for a break, which is a blessing. Howie collapses. Come on you!

I steady him on a stump next to me, before falling against a tree myself. I listen, hoping to maybe hear our fighter planes. Fucking silence makes you think like that. I drift out quickly.

I’m back home. Dad is showing me how to use his old sniper from the Great War. Think this was from a few years back. He likes shooting rabbits to stop them eating his beef cattle’s grass. Those gunshots across the farm are such comfort, means Dad is home; making rabbits drop like flies. He never misses.

Mother doesn’t like him showing us how to use his sniper; she said he spent more time polishing it than he did with her. But we still love him. At dusk everyday he’d march back home, rifle over his right shoulder, with half-a-dozen rabbits for that nights stew. We marched behind him; playing toy soldiers. At night, we’d eat with Mother inside, but Dad sits out on the front porch, eating by himself. He’d be there all night. We’d always drift off to sounds of him wiping his nose with his old handkerchief. He always sniffled at night—

The jungle welcomes me back. A Jap is beating everyone awake to be on their feet.

I'm alive? I genuinely thought I would not wake up. How unbelievable. I look over at Howie on the stump next to me, his body deathly still.

I poke him to get him up. Doesn't move.

'Howie?' I poke him a few more times.

Then I get it. I'm not bullshitting myself.

I'm glad he didn't have to wake up to this again.

We start walking in lines, going past the lucky ones who didn't wake up. I don't know how I'm still going. I'm just walking. One foot. Then the other.

All Japs are bastards, especially their emperor. Suppose this is how they do it in Japan, make a path just to watch how many of us drop. It's probably some cultural thing. I remember in basic training when they talked about the psychology of the Jap, how they all had the mentalities of dark-age warriors. I almost feel sorry for these Japs around me, they probably did not even know what a gun was till the war.

There's a mist coming down. I hear shouting up ahead. There's a boy leaning on a bamboo tree. His eyes are staring into the canopy, dunno what he is looking at.

A bunch of boys are trying to get him to stand up. You can do it mate. Come on! Why aren't you getting up?!

Two Japs shout at him. He keeps staring. So they bayonet him a dozen times. His eyes are still looking in the same place.

I'm just walking.

A few hours later the man in front of me collapses, so a Jap blows him away through the back of the neck. He gasps, air escaping from his lungs as he desperately tries to take a few last breaths.

One foot, then the other.

This fucking mist. The fucking trees. The fucking rain! More mud and more fucking rain. I'm just walking.

Minutes go by...

Hours go by...

I'm just walking...

Hours...

Hours...

No one's coming for us. No one will ever come. They've left us here. Alone.

Are we nothing? Just absolutely fucking nothing?! I guess to you we are.

I feel a bit dizzy; there's mud... around my knees, I think. I'm just looking through the mist, looking... For something.

Is that...?

I think I can hear engines. It's our boys! There's a Jap shouting at me, but he doesn't matter. It's over for him.

I'm saved! I can't wait to see home – Dad and Mother will be waiting for me. I'll be with my brother. We'll see Dad's face at the sight of his sons in uniform marching up the hill towards him. No toy soldiers anymore, now we are real men. They'll sit us down to a beautiful roast chicken, with pumpkin, onions, and boiled potatoes. And Dad won't be out on the veranda anymore. He's with us. We'll sit and eat as a family.

There's something cold touching the back of my neck. A sound pops my eardrums. I feel a sudden need to grab the back of my head, I have to stop something flowing—

It stopped.

'When you go home, tell them of us and say,

For your tomorrow, we gave our today'

- Australian Kundasang War Memorial, Sabah, Malaysia