

THE QUARRY

Michael Cook

Lost For Words

Well here I am, diddling away in a bloody notebook. The doctor asked me to write this—he reckons it will help me get my head together. I'll give anything a go to get out of this nut house. Of course, Gran says it's all for the best, but what the hell does she know? She thinks everything is 'for the best'—even when my dog Booger got hit by a truck and died by the side of the road. Good one Gran.

But before I get carried away, I guess I'd better make an admission. I'm a thief. I've never really told that to anyone before, but then again why would I? It's not something that you just go around bragging about. The shrink in this place reckons I steal because of all the shit I've been copping at school on account of me being a late developer. See, my name is Tony Snatt, but most people know me as Baldy. Baldy,

what a name, it's like a kick to the nuts every time someone calls out to me. Can you imagine? Eighteen years old, and not a single pube to show for it?

I'm not real particular about what I like to swipe, but if I've got to narrow it down I reckon porno mags top the list. Don't get me wrong, I know that the net is chock full of porn, but I sorta like the reassurance of having some material on hand when the lights go out. You see, Gran's a full on greenie and on cloudy days we only have about 2 hours of charge in the battery for the electric lights. I'm not going to call it romantic, but a candlelight toss sure has its charms.

Oh yeah, there's another reason I like to pinch things—plain old fun. I once took some bloke's bike from outside the 7/11 and rode it around for a couple of hours. When I got sick of it I hooned down the steepest hill in our town, the one that leads to the marina. I shot down that hill so fast that when I got to the jetty I almost lost control as I bumped my way over the wooden planking. My mate Noel said that if there was any sort of justice I should have been snapped up by a shark then and there. I laughed at the time, not for a second did I believe in a 'higher power' or any of that sort of mumbo jumbo. But that was before... before what happened at work last Saturday night.

But before we get to that, I've got to tell you about the lead up to it. So I s'pose this story starts on Saturday morning, around 11am. I'd been at the park with my two best mates, Noel and Wippa, and I've gotta say, we were bored out of our minds. Footy season is over, and the cricket has just begun. If there's one thing I hate in this life, it's bloody cricket. Some people call it 'watching the grass grow,' and I reckon that sums up how I feel about it too. Hours and hours of standing there in the field, nothing happening. All of a sudden there's this bloody great leather ball rocketing straight at your head. And let me tell you, that thing is rock hard. If you don't catch it right, look out—you're going to have the sorest hands this side of Hampton. Not only that, you're going to look like a right shit in front of your team mates. I once dropped the ball and got booed—by my own team!

Anyway, there we were, sitting around the kid's playground, bored shitless. We'd just finished off the last of our durries, and were scratching around for something to do. Just as Noel was starting to tell us for the fifteenth time about how he'd seen Jenny Tisdale's boobs through the change room window as she got ready

for the athletics carnival last year, I had a sudden flash of inspiration. I remembered that a new convenience shop had opened down at the Bay Side Shopping Centre. I'd had a look in at it once and seen that it was run by this tiny little Indian fella who wore a turban with a fat red ruby fixed to the front of it. I told the boys about it, and we decided to go down and see if we could pinch a couple of things.

We were in the shop, and as usual Noel and Wippa got cold feet. They just shuffled around pretending to look at things, but I could see that they were freaking out and wanted to get the hell out of there. I think it was because of the little Indian bloke—there was something about the way he was watching us that was sort of unnerving. He was sitting on this high chair behind the counter, real calm expression on his face, and it was like he knew exactly what we were up to. But he didn't say anything, and I wasn't going to be put off by some little bloke with a calm demeanor. I stuffed two Mars Bars, a Twix, and a Cherry Ripe into my pockets as I pretended to look at the key ring stand. When I was over by the magazines, I stuck a porno down the front of my trackies. Not a bad haul, really.

We went to the park and ate the chocolates, then had a look at the porno. It was a pretty good one, but it's tough looking at that sort of thing when you're with two other blokes. You're standing there with a boner that's making a teepee out of your trackies, and you've gotta act like everything's just fine. Ah well, there's worse things in this world I s'pose.

Before I knew it 2pm rolled around, and I said 'see ya later' to my mates and headed off to work at the bottle shop. I only got the job two months ago, couple of days after I turned eighteen. I stand on the check out for eight hours straight, scan the bottles, put them in boxes, and say the same shit over and over again: 'Hi, how are you today? ... That's good... Okay thank you, have a nice day.' Imagine saying that to about a thousand people in a row and you'll have some sort of understanding about how dull it is. So I was standing there, feeling like a cassette player with a twenty second tape in me, when something totally out of the ordinary happened—this string of really funny customers started coming in.

This one old dude came up to the counter, brimming with a crazy sort of energy. He plonked his case of beer down and beamed at me. 'And how are you today young fella?'

‘Yeah, pretty good,’ I said to him, ‘how are you?’

He brought his tattered old wallet out of his pocket with what Mr. Collings, our English teacher at school, would call an ‘elaborate flourish’ and he whipped out a fifty dollar note.

‘If I were any better I’d be twins!’ He said.

I could see from the sparkle in his eye that he really meant it. He winked at me, swung the beer up onto his shoulder, and headed for the sliding doors at the back of the shop. Now, as I was saying earlier, it’s pretty rare to meet a customer with that sort of personality—most of them wander up to the counter with faces that are a mile long. But not this old bloke, so I decided to call out after him—you know, something nice and enthusiastic.

I opened my mouth and already knew that I was going to say ‘have a top day mate’, but all that came out of my mouth was this sort of strangled groan. I cleared my throat and tried again, but the second time was even worse. My throat sort of quivered and I let out a reedy whistle, like the sound a kettle makes when it’s boiling. The old dude turned around and looked at me, and all I can say is thank Christ for hearing loss—he beamed at me again, tapped the case of beer that was up on his shoulder and gave me a big thumbs up.

I turned to face the next customer. It was this real uptight looking guy—grey business suit, thin black tie, neatly clipped moustache... the sort of guy you’d sketch out if someone asked you to draw a picture of anal retention personified. I didn’t feel too embarrassed in front of him about my strange sounding voice, so I decided to see if it was still playing up. I opened my mouth and felt the ‘hi, how are you today’ begin to slide up my throat on its well oiled tracks, but about halfway up something went wrong, and all that came out was a giant burp. The businessman looked up at me, and it just goes to show that you can’t judge a book by its cover—he burst out laughing and decided to lay a choice anecdote on me:

‘I just got back from holiday in Fiji. While I was over there my credit card got stolen—I still haven’t reported it, the thieves are spending less than my wife would. I figure I’m better off.’

I couldn’t believe that such a square looking guy could be so off the wall. Who tells a story like that when someone burps in their face? I opened my mouth,

expecting gales of laughter to come pouring out, but there was nothing—no sound at all. Not even an unexpected shriek. As I stood there, jaw swinging in the breeze, I heard a noise that made the hairs on my arms stand up and start to quiver. At the far end of the shop a great big chuckle started up, and when I say chuckle, I mean a real deal belly laugh. Someone up there was having the laugh of a lifetime. The businessman dragged his eyes away from my face and peered up the aisle. The customers behind him were doing the same—the usual look of bored impatience gone from their faces.

I leaned out over the counter and tried to get a better look at where this laughter was coming from, but I couldn't see—the row of waiting customers was blocking my line of sight. Now, as I'm sure you would imagine, I was at this point more than a little bit freaked out by my lack of ability to speak. I tried muttering 'fuck' beneath my breath—you know, one of those helpful curses that serve to knock the needle on the mental pressure gauge back a few clicks. And would you believe it if I told you that although nothing came out of my own mouth, at the far end of the shop the laughter suddenly stopped, and someone yelled out 'fuck' at the top of their lungs? I bet you wouldn't believe it, but I'm telling you, that's exactly what happened.

A few of the customers started to get upset about this weird behavior—they put their bottles down on the floor and walked straight out of the shop, noses in the air. I can't say I blame them; the place was beginning to take on the air of a nut house. With this thinning out of the line at my register I was able to get a better look up the aisle, and who do you reckon was standing at the far end of the shop? Yeah you guessed it: the tiny little Indian bloke from the Bay Side convenience shop. He saw me looking at him and wagged his finger at me, and then he called down to me. 'You come into my shop and you put my livelihood in your pockets, isn't it?'

I stood there staring at him, and I'm telling you straight, even if I could have answered him, I'm buggered if I would have known what to say,

'Well then young fella, I come into your shop and I put your voice in mine.'

It's hard to explain what happened next. I remember standing there staring at him, and I couldn't seem to look at anything but the ruby that was fixed to the front of his turban. It started to glow, and I could see a bright red beam pouring out of it. My forehead started to get real hot, like the beam was flowing straight into it. And then I

heard this voice. I feel weird saying it, but it was like the voice of God—clear, loud and completely inside my mind.

‘Your lifetime, your choices, your fate. I see you baldy, I see you Tony Snatt.’

And then all of these images started pouring in. I saw every time I’d ripped someone off, I saw my sneering face as I rode that bike into the bay—and then I saw Jim Trill, this little fella in year 9. He was getting whacked across the face by his piss-head dad, and his dad was yelling at him.

‘You ungrateful little cunt-handle, can’t even keep ya god damned fucken bike from being pinched. Eight hundred bucks down the drain.’

I saw Jim’s mum crying in the next room, biting down hard on the edge of a tea towel so the old fella wouldn’t hear her.

I remember my head felt like it was about to explode. White heat boring straight into the front of my forehead, right where Gran told me the third eye is located. Have you ever felt peak rage, sorrow, regret and terror swirling through your mind at the same time? I hope you never do. My mouth was clamped shut, but the last thing I remember was a piercing scream that cut through everything—straight through the images, straight through the feelings. Everything eclipsed by the scream.

So here I am, diddling away in a bloody notebook. I still can’t speak, but to tell you the truth, I don’t have a whole lot that I wanna say at the moment anyway.