

THE QUARRY

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Portrait of a Life in Watercolour

He wakes up to the sound of rain and grey light seeping in around the curtains. His covers have been thrown off in the night, and the wide mattress stretches away empty on all sides. He was woken by a dream, and in the moments before his alarm rings he tries to remember what it was.

Passions were bright in sleep, and colours bold, but they fade quickly in the waking air. He is left only with the sensation of movement. This, as much as the buzz of the alarm, pulls him out of bed. His bare feet sink deep into the dark carpet, and he walks naked to the bathroom where the shower drowns out the rain and the soap

leaches away the last wisps of dream. He closes his eyes against the hot water and the humming fluorescent light and stands in his own darkness.

The shower stops, a few last drops pattering on his shoulders, and he steps out into the steam-filled bathroom, reaching for a towel. The fan is not working properly, and the walls are streaked with condensation. In the foggy mirror, he is only a shadow. He dries himself as best he can in the humid room, and leaves the door open.

Colours are hard to come by here; he decorates from catalogues and glossy winter collection magazines. Opening the curtains lends the bedroom no warmth; the rain has Pollocked the windows in silver streaks.

Dressing requires little thought. Today's suit was bought only last week, shiny and charcoal, with lapels like razors. It is too dark for his complexion, its lines too harsh for his long frame, but it fills the windows of men's outfitters and the pages of magazines, and so he will not wear anything else. His wardrobe is full of dead seasons' fashions. There are suits here, and shirts, and ties uncounted, that have not seen daylight in years. Dust has settled deep on the shoulders and into the lapels. He tells himself they did not suit him, but keeps them anyway.

He leaves the apartment at eight o'clock, with plenty of time for the peak hour commute. Halfway to the elevator, he remembers seeing a tagline in *Men's Fitness* – 'Get 30% of Your Daily Exercise on the Stairs' – and decides to walk to the garage instead. It is six flights down. His glossy black shoes click on the steel stairs and the marble landings. He strips off his blazer and, halfway, loosens his tie and is glad that it is a cold morning.

The garage is mostly empty, and his footsteps echo off the concrete walls. It smells of exhaust fumes, motor oil, and water; the rain has left a delta of tiny rivers down the exit ramp. His car, a tan Mercedes, is waiting beneath an air duct, and a slow drip of rainwater is wearing away the paint on the hood. The car's glossy finish has faded to a satin sheen, and the once-crisp treads on the tires are beginning to blur. He wonders if it might be time to trade it in for a newer model – there have been a few new cars turning up in the office garage lately, Audis, Lexus', BMWs. He imagines parking next to a line of brand new cars.

He'll have to look online for a replacement; he does not trust car salesmen, but knows their pitches will work all the same.

There is traffic in the city – a typical Sydney traffic jam, filled with drivers who have forgotten how to cope with wet roads – and so by the time he pulls in to the parking lot at his office, he is boiling over with self-righteous road rage. Every red light, every missing indicator, every tailgater, has had a stream of vitriol directed at them – but softly, softly; he is too afraid of being heard, and so he mutters a string of recycled and stale insults to himself about female drivers; no, Asians; no, the bloody council roadwork that everyone in the office tells him is a waste of money and time. He tweets about it from his phone as he circles the parking lot. Each tweet vanishes into the ether, never to be read or retweeted. He passes a row of 'RESERVED' signs, each with a glossy new car crouched beneath, black and chrome and predatory. Finally, he finds an empty space, sandwiched between two hulking silver four-wheel-drives, both of them spotless; these cars have never left the city, for all that their owners dream of an outdoor life. He squeezes out of his car, his door a hair's breadth from the neighbouring vehicle, and holds his breath, trying not to rumple or snag his new suit.

There is a coffee cart in the lobby, and he steps from the elevator into the queue of charcoal suits waiting for their espressos and lattes. He cannot decide what he wants; the words on the menu shift and blur into abstract chalk lines, street-art for the terminally caffeinated. Someone has drawn a tree in the corner of the menu. The tiny blob of green is the one bright spot of colour in the chrome-and-marble lobby. It grows in his eyes until he can see nothing else. Last night's dream stirs in the back of his mind.

The barista is talking. He is at the front of the queue.

'I'm sorry?'

'What can I get you?' She is dye-red hair and torn jeans, tattoos, piercings, impatience. Her shirt is smudged with coffee grounds and chalk dust, bright streaks out of place in the chrome-and-marble lobby. He blinks at her and tries to read the menu.

‘Uhm...’ It makes no sense to him. Cursive chalk letters spell out drinks he thought he knew, but now... Hoping for the best, he mutters ‘Same as the last guy, cheers.’

He walks away clutching a cup of chai-scented disappointment. Behind him, the queue moves on, and he is forgotten. He packs himself into a full elevator and tries to reach the button to take him up to the office. Too late, he realises the elevator is going down.

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The office is filled with a busy silence, the white noise of fingers rattling on keyboards, the whirl of printers, the muted mumble of his colleagues with their heads together in corners, and under it all the endless rattle of the rain against the floor-to-ceiling windows. He can see his cubicle from the door. Some of his co-workers decorate theirs, pinning up photos of their kids or the colours of their football team until Management requests their removal, but he has no pictures to share or colours to sport. Curled inside the grey felt walls, he fires up his sleek silver office computer and prepares to start the work of the day.

A knock interrupts the start-up whirr of the PC, and a suit leans over the top of the cubicle, looking much better on its owner than his own does on him.

‘G’day, mate. Sorry to interrupt, got some A1-N1’s we need you to fill out. Just drop them off with the secretary when you’re done. Cheers.’ And like that, the suit is gone, leaving behind a brick of forms in a manila folder. He sighs, and searches his desk for a pen – he wants blue, but there isn’t one, only black. He opens the folder and drags over the first of the forms.

When the office has settled down, and the last stragglers have arrived with their coffees and their excuses, he logs in to Facebook. There is nothing to see, and he watches it eagerly. Someone he vaguely remembers from high school has had a baby. Someone else has just lost their dog. A co-worker has posted a selfie of his new car – #Sydneytraffic. He ‘likes’ the picture, then realises the co-worker will know he’s on Facebook instead of working, and un-likes it before bowing his head and filling out six forms in quick succession. For the next ten minutes, every time someone walks past his cubicle he thinks it must be Human Resources coming to talk about proper use of company time.

The forms march from in-tray to out, each one requiring signing, double-signing, initialling, details, details, details. After a couple of dozen, he notices something written on the back of each:

WRITE-ONLY DOCUMENT – DO NOT MARK THIS PAGE

He has filled out a dozen more before he realises what this means.

The rain patters on the windows. Outside, the sky is a sheet of dove-grey cloud and the streets are dark, though it is not yet midday. He wishes for colour, and turns again to Facebook, but there is nothing new there. He looks at the online catalogues of Armani, Hugo Boss, Yves-Saint-Laurent; the models are dark-haired pallid streaks in black and grey suits too much like his own, and looking at them makes his head ache – or perhaps only reminds him that it is aching. He clicks further afield, deeper into the internet and away from A1-N1's, chasing travel ads of holiday destinations in bright greens, blues, and golds, as ephemeral as dreams. He rubs his forehead and pinches the bridge of his nose, trying to shake the malaise – it must be the weather, he thinks, and that'll clear up in a day or two – but this does not help. He'll look for a new car, he decides, and he searches the websites of Ford, Audi, Lexus, BMW, each advert promising newer, faster, bigger, better cars – but looking at the pictures, he can't see how they differ from his own. The thought troubles him, and he throws himself back into his work.

Forms spiral across his desk, each beneath his pen for only a moment before leaping away, glistening with fresh ink. With each finished form, the words **WRITE-ONLY DOCUMENT – DO NOT MARK THIS PAGE** stare up at him from the desk. He wonders what the forms are for, but reading them doesn't help. Like the coffee menu earlier, words he thought he knew might as well be Aramaic now. He wants to ask someone, but he can't remember who gave him the forms. He peeks over the top of his cubicle hoping to spot them, but all he sees are charcoal suits, charcoal suits from wall to wall, as if the entire staff had been printed out of a photocopier. His head is aching and the rain beats **WRITE-ONLY** against the windows.

He does not slam his pen down, but caps it and sets it neatly in place on top of the remaining forms. He abandons his cubicle, walks to the rain-streaked window and rests his head against the cold glass. In the street below, the headlights of passing cars

flicker in the fog. Behind that pale curtain, it does not matter what make or model they are – each is only a passing shadow. He wonders if, were he to walk out into the mist, the cars would see him in time to stop; and if they did not, how long it would take the other grey suits to notice that he was missing.

He returns to his desk, grabs a fresh form, and uncaps his pen with a pop like a cracked knuckle. When his hand descends, it describes great curling swoops and gyres on the page, signing and initialling in florid cursive. He fills out the whole form in moments, then takes up another. This time, he draws a little tree in the corner of the page. On the next form, he draws a car. The next, a man in a suit. A man without a suit. A cartoon *Mona Lisa*. He gives her a nose piercing, and she looks a little like the barista downstairs.

He reaches for the last form, fumbles, and it slips off the bare desk. Reaching for it, he is suddenly struck by what he has done. If he is found out, he will be... what?

He fills the last form out slowly. His writing is cramped, his signatures ordinary. He reaches the end, and turns it over.

WRITE-ONLY DOCUMENT – DO NOT MARK THIS PAGE

He looks at this for a long time. At last, in hurried strokes, he draws a smiley face under the bold text. *Whoops*, he writes. It looks tacky, forced, and all of a sudden he wishes he could take it back. He takes the forms he has scribbled on and stuffs them in with the rest, squaring the edges against his desk. With trembling fingers, he tucks the pile of forms back into its manila folder. With weak knees he carries it to the secretary's desk. She's on the phone, pinning it between her ear and shoulder as she flashes out a smile and an open hand to take the heavy file.

For the next twenty minutes he watches and waits. At last, she puts the phone down and takes up the stack of forms. She disappears into the head office. He swallows, wishes he hadn't finished his chai tea so he could wet his mouth.

The door of the office opens, and the secretary slips out. He drops his head down, typing furious nonsense into a blank Word file as she returns to her desk.

He waits. Someone will come soon, he thinks. His manager, or perhaps he'll get a call from HR, or maybe they'll just tell him to clear his desk – which won't take

long – and throw him out. But nothing happens, and continues to happen. The office stays quiet. The only phone that rings is the secretary's, and she answers in too low a voice for him to eavesdrop. Keyboards and the rain keep making their soothing white noise.

At lunch, he gives in, and goes home early, prepared – if anyone should ask – to claim a touch of 'flu. No-one does. He walks through the lobby, empty except for the barista closing up her coffee cart. He drives, too fast, through the soaked and foggy streets with the rain scribbling accusations on his windshield. Home again, he leaves his suit in a crumpled mess on the floor and collapses into bed, staring at his open wardrobe. He falls asleep that night with the sound of rain washing over him.

He wakes up to the sound of his alarm, and lies with the covers tucked smoothly around him. He turns the noise off, and lies for a moment, remembering. Across the room, his wardrobe hangs open. Dusty wool glimmers in the early sunlight. Already yesterday feels like a dream.

In the office lobby, the barista smiles at him as he orders a cappuccino.

'Hey, I like your suit. Blue looks good on you.'

The other workers watch him in the elevator. He can feel their eyes on him as he walks to his cubicle. A grey figure, last glimpsed behind a stack of forms, stops in the hall as he passes.

'Looking good, mate! New suit?'

He grins, and brushes some dust from his lapel. Behind him, the sun shines through the windows, and turns the office gold.