

# THE QUARRY

## Harvest

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I grew up a lot that night, the way adults do. I was placed in front of doors that opened into fields no child should know about. New feelings stuck themselves onto me and slowly started to burn. My skin had already turned black before I knew where the pain was coming from. A word I heard only a few times before, shaped itself into its dark meaning. Guilt had only been a word I would hear on TV by those stylish men and women on the news. But the word quickly became a weapon that my parents were throwing between each other.

My younger brother Aaron was nowhere to be found. We had been playing in the park at the end of the street and when I couldn't see him anymore, I turned back home. On our bare feet, my mother dragged me back to the park to look for him. When she asked what I was doing, I took the drawing pad out of my pocket and proudly showed it to her. Unimpressed she threw the pad on the ground and told me that I was supposed to look after him not just draw stick figures.

Once we were back in the house, she made a few calls and the neighbours started to fill the front yard. Soon after it got dark, policemen were crowding our house, leaving the front door open. Their black leather boots were drumming the stairs, walking in and out of my brothers' room. I

was summoned to the kitchen by my father who told me that the police have to ask me a few questions. My mother was standing at the corner of the table with her head towards the ground. She was talking loudly while her left hand was moving uninterrupted as if she just dropped something and could not pick it up. When she saw me, she quickly turned and wiped her eyes. My parents, two policemen, and I sat down at the kitchen table. The older policeman was asking questions. A few times he asked the same question with different words as if my answer was wrong. My mother would always find a way to cut me short and answer the questions for me even though Aaron and I were by ourselves in the park. There was something in her voice I could not recognize. It seemed as if someone else was talking.

Three times we went through everything. Where we were, what we did, who else was there, and if anyone saw us. And three times my mother made a mistake. The same mistake.

‘His T-shirt was definitely green. I dressed him this morning,’ my mother repeated.

‘But it was blue. You have to believe me,’ I said to the policemen, hoping they would take my word and not hers.

A search party for my brother was organized that night. Our neighbours gathered in the living room. The coffee table was full of batteries and Mr Lee from across the street was placing them inside flashlights. My mother wanted to go as well but my father and his sister Grace insisted that she should stay home. With her head constantly nodding she was walking from the kitchen to the living room and back saying that Aaron must be hiding somewhere. A large map was unfolded on the kitchen table. The search party was divided in two teams. More policemen entered the house, some of which had dogs.

‘Team A will search Heathcote Park and team B will search Dharawal. We can search the Royal National Park in the morning,’ one police man said.

‘We can’t think about tomorrow. We have to find my son by daylight,’ said my father.

None of the policemen lifted their heads from the map. Aunt Grace placed her hand on my father’s shoulder.

Some left with their cars and some on foot. Although my mother said she could look after me by herself, Aunt Grace remained in the house. It was past midnight and my mother could not sit down for more than a few minutes. Aunt Grace made tea for all of us, but my mother’s cup

remained untouched. My yawns got bigger and bigger. After a long blink, it was daylight. The search parties were in front of the house. My parents were in the kitchen, whisper-shouting at each other. My mother was accusing everyone of not looking hard enough for my brother. No matter how many times my father tried to tell her that they did everything they could she would wave her hand and talk over him.

‘I don’t need the police to make posters. I can make them myself,’ my mother said while walking towards her study.

She slammed the door shut and my father went to the front yard with coffees. Aunt Grace made a fruit salad and let me eat it on the couch. She turned on the TV for me but the volume was too low. By the time my mother came out of her study, the search parties were gone. Another search party was organized for that afternoon.

My mother placed a pile of papers on the coffee table. Half of the page was covered with a picture with Aaron that was taken a few weeks before. I took one poster and ripped it in half. The description was wrong. For the first time, I screamed at her that his shirt was blue but she only stared at her teacup that was still full. When I got up the rest of my fruit salad fell on the floor. This made Aunt Grace get up and immediately start cleaning but my mother’s face was like a sculpture.

I ran towards Aaron’s room and stopped at the door. The air was still and everything smelled like him. The light cream carpet had multiple boot prints on it. I wondered why the policemen didn’t take off their shoes. Carefully, I started going through his shirts and found a green one. This was enough proof that I was right until I found a blue shirt. Taking all the shirts, I ran back down taking two stairs at the time. When I reached the living room Aunt Grace looked at my mother and then quickly moved her face into her teacup. My mother ripped the shirts out of my hands and opened her mouth as if she was about to scream. When my father walked in she closed her mouth and almost smiled. Dad took the shirts and we looked at them together. He didn’t talk much so I went to sit on his lap, something I hadn’t done for a while. With his hand shaking, he felt the fabric while my mother was looking at the front door with her hands folded. The wave of silence was broken by Aunt Grace who picked up the remote and turned the volume up. On the right side of the screen was the same picture from the posters. I knew that the lady was talking about Aaron but her voice could not reach me. The sounds from the TV echoed beside our still bodies.

For the next few days, Aunt Grace brought my meals to my room. Groups of people, some of whom I'd never seen before, were leaving in the mornings from our house always returning without Aaron. My parents kept coming into my room to talk but always separately. They insisted I should return to school, so I did. The drive was no longer fun and the radio's buttons were starting to collect dust. My mother would drive in silence and often made short stops to give people posters, which made me the last one to arrive to class. At the sight of my mother, who no longer followed her grooming routine, some people backed away and other parents would pull their own children closer. Because I was also the last one to be picked up, the other parents felt the need to smile pitifully and offer rides home. Unable to speak, I would only reply with shy nods.

Watching my friends getting picked up made me feel as if I'd swallowed something sharp. After an entire day of complaining about what their siblings did to them, they could spend half an hour close together in the car and argue some more. Aaron and I never did this. We didn't say mean things or hit each other.

The days started to get shorter. I was waiting at the edge of the curb, away from my friends. We had just gotten out from school and I didn't want to be next to people or talk. Without saying goodbye, I started walking down the street. I knew that only a few noticed and it was really hard not to turn back to see who was looking but my face was deep under tears. On a wooden pole on my way I saw a poster. All the phone numbers underneath were gone and one corner was unstuck. From my backpack, I took out a marker and completely covered the word 'green' then wrote 'blue' above it. I threw the backpack on the ground and opened the zipper. There should have been some tape in there somewhere. Determined to find it I took out my notebooks but I still couldn't see any tape. Behind me, a pair of steps was slowly approaching.

'Did you lose anything?' asked Jonathan who lived next door.

'Do you have some tape?'

'Yeah,' he said looking through his backpack.

I took the tape from him and stuck a piece on the loose corner. When I turned, Jonathan was putting the notebooks back in my backpack. I stretched my hand to give the tape back and he told me I could keep it.

Jonathan's mother and my mother used to take turns to take us to school or pick us up. This stopped after my brother disappeared. Aaron was too young to go to school and my mother would take him with us in the mornings. Strapped in his seat he would look out the window and name the colours of the cars passing by.

Jonathan helped me put the backpack back on. I thanked him and started walking down the street.

'Do you need a ride home?' he asked.

I didn't answer, I just kept walking. With the marker in my hand, I wrote on every poster that came my way. I don't know how long I walked for but even though it was almost winter, I could feel my shirt stuck to my back. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a car pull up next to me. My mother got out of the car and came to me running.

'Are you going to make me look for you too?', she asked. 'You can't just leave school like that.'

I looked straight at her and for the first time in a while, she looked back. From her pocket, she took out a used tissue and wiped my face.

'Let's go home,' she said opening the door of the car.

'I can't come home right now. I have to fix the posters and look for Aaron.'

'Please Eve, get in the car.'

She never really said please before and the word almost hit me. I went past the door and got up in the front seat unsure if I was legally allowed to sit there. She shut the back door and came behind the wheel. We didn't speak but it felt like we were both in the car, together again. She drove straight home without stopping to give posters.

When we got home there was an Arts&Craft paper bag on the counter. My father was putting groceries in the fridge which were bought by Aunt Grace since my mother no longer paid attention to these necessities.

'This is for you,' my father pointed at the bag.

Inside it was two drawing pads, a piece of wood and water-soluble pencils. I had stopped drawing since that day but I didn't think they would notice.

Five years later my parents and I were having dinner. I was allowed to cook now and was preparing roast beef with mashed potatoes. My mother and my three-year-old brother Alan were in the backyard. Alan had just discovered gardening and the pleasure of digging. The TV in the living room was on Chanel 7. Something made my father get up from the kitchen table quickly and I followed him in front of the TV. Two boys that were playing in a park in Penrith had disappeared the week before. The two families were holding pictures with their children offering a reward to anyone that had valuable information. My father was not looking at the TV but through the living room windows at my mother and Alan whose pants were covered in dirt.

Throughout dinner, my father smiled and was encouraging Alan to use the spoon himself but I could see he was holding back tears.

Two weeks later I came back from school, a police car was parked in our driveway. The door was ajar so I pushed my body inside. My mother was holding Alan in the middle of the living room and my father was on the couch with a cop on each side.

‘Just wait in your room please,’ my father said.

‘No! You have to tell me.’

‘They think they found Aaron.’

‘They think?’

‘They may have found Aaron’s...’

‘Where?’

‘Megalong Valley.’

Because my father and one of the detectives, Mr Burton, became friends over the years, I was allowed to accompany them. After a long drive, we arrived on a farm. The entire place was surrounded by police. My father remained in the car. Behind the farm was what looked like a barn. Inside were surgical instruments and mattresses on the floor. The sheets were no longer on the

mattresses and they were still kept in their plastic covers. Mr Burton said they kept them like that so they wouldn't need to change them if the 'patients' would piss on them or bleed out. This was the place where the elite would buy organs for their sick children. Only one of the children from Penrith survived but without a lung. The other didn't make it. Mr Burton didn't tell me why.

On the floor were laid out children clothes. Mr Burton said they knew which belonged to the boys from Penrith but the rest of the clothes were a mystery. I walked near them and I recognized Aaron's shirt. The shirt was blue.