

# THE QUARRY

## Peculiar Perception

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The clouds cried and the droplets poured down onto Henry's head.

He ran across the zebra crossing to the shelter of Figtree Mall. Even inside, he could hear the bang of thunder rip the clouds apart. One... two... three... four. He counted the kilometres between each one. Jon Carver had taught his son, Henry, this from a young age, as a coping mechanism of sorts. To act as a comforting substitute for when he was absent. It helped calm the boy down by showing how far away the thunder was, despite how close it sounded. As a child, Henry believed they were bombs. At first it had made Jon laugh, then it became a nuisance. In the end it wasn't the thunder that scared Henry, but the explosion that was his father. Jon liked to call himself a simple man. He believed in good old fashion business, a hard work ethic, and sound family morals. But, he just didn't *get* his son, and Henry could tell.

Henry knew better now than to believe in unnatural ideas like bombs blowing up the sky and fatherly love. It was seven seconds after seeing the sky light up that he heard the bang, crackle, and pop. Once the rain dissipated, Henry was sure that the noise would too. He shook

his shaggy hair slightly with his hands, attempting to spread and minimise the water clinging like a bad smell, before heading deeper into the mall.

His friend Tod had texted Henry awake from an eleven-hour coma earlier than usual this morning. His best guess was that Tod hadn't slept all night—instead, rampaging and trolling the battlegrounds of World of Warcraft. Ordinarily, Henry wasn't opposed to a bit of melee at Warsong Gulch under the guise of his druid night elf. Especially since a few weeks ago he had received Mythical Level 760 bracers in a drop from the boss, Grand Magistrix Elisande. But recently, he had simply replied *busy* to Tod. This kind of thing was becoming a common occurrence.

Due to his morning wake-up call, Henry arrived at the mall earlier than he typically did. It meant he had gotten stuck in the 9 am soccer-mum traffic at the roundabout on Gibson Road leading to the high school, primary school, and preschool. Henry's only thought was what idiot had planned it that way? He also had to wait three two-minute cycles of the traffic lights before Pearl, his old creamy Mazda 3, could finally turn right onto The Avenue. Due to his morning escape, he arrived at Figtree Mall far too early. On the bright side, for once he didn't have to wrestle some old lady or mum with a pram for a parking spot. The threat of just another day munching on chips, sculling soda and mashing keyboards with Tod was enough to force him out of his routine.

His mother had arrived back from her Bali cruise only several weeks ago and therefore Henry's mall escapades had become more frequent than they ever had been. Since quitting her job and entering a premature retirement because—as she often proclaimed—she *deserved* it, Louise Carver had become an inescapable presence in his home. After Henry graduated from high school six months earlier and deferred from a Bachelor of Business at Wollongong University, nothing had happened. At least that was what his mother enjoyed telling him. Henry, on the other hand, knew he couldn't stop the cogs from working hard in his mind as he tried to comprehend his future. It was only at the mall where the world stopped spinning and time was nothing more than an absent thought.

At 10 am, coffee was a necessity. In Henry's mind, caffeine was better and far more important than oxygen. It somehow managed to keep him sane, at least, in his opinion. He was

definitely no connoisseur, and always scooped in at least four teaspoons of sugar. Henry liked the effects of coffee more than the actual taste of it. With an ice-cold latte in hand, he looked around, hoping to find a spare seat somewhere within the vicinity of the coffee shop.

An elderly woman was precariously perched on the corner of a bench. It looked uncomfortable, but Henry guessed that she had plenty of practice at this position by sitting on the bones of young children. He imagined her settling into their bones with a satisfying crunch and a pleased and pleasant smile. He went over and she glanced sideways at Henry as he dropped down beside her. Her skin was saggy, as if trying to run away from her body as it drooped. Much like the rest of the population when they finally saw the truth about sweet old Granny. The rings shoved onto her spindly fingers seemed to be the only thing holding the skin in place. He smiled at her, and she smiled back, but she was obviously uninterested. Even if the idea of escaping life for a day tantalised Henry, he was too old to suit her taste buds. Her eyes kept scanning the area around them. Edith's eyesight was the only thing about her that still worked perfectly fine.

She came to malls much like this all the time, he thought, because it was where the children got lost. One second they were holding Mummy's hand and then they were nothing more than headshots on milk cartons. She never went to the same mall twice. No, she wasn't a rookie at this—that was how you got caught. One had to stay on the move. Henry smiled at the irony of this thought, as the old lady was running nowhere, quick.

As he sat next to her—she looked like an Edith—all Henry could smell was beef. It filled his nose and choked his senses. So, he took a long swig of his coffee and instead, tried to breathe in that meaty aroma. Even after many years of awkward and potent hugs from his mother, Henry still struggled not to gag from her smell. Edith must have been cooking soup this morning. She was planning on having it for dinner. It had to stew all day because the child was not as plump as she would usually like, and muscle tends to need much longer to soften and tenderise than the fat ones. But the fat ones were much harder to get into the pot. Henry couldn't help himself: a scoff escaped his mouth at the thought of this elderly woman, in her tiny wooden cottage hidden deep in a forest, attempting to put a child into a pot, only to realise she didn't have one big enough. Edith looked over. She had a questioning look on her face, but Henry simply smiled, stood up and walked away. He couldn't imagine what she was thinking about him.

The mall was the place where people got lost. No mall in particular; it was just something about the rows upon rows of neatly organised shops that caused people to lose themselves in the sense of chaos. That was why Henry liked it. He enjoyed falling down the rabbit hole and finding himself somewhere completely different. Even though Henry liked to see the darker, purgatory side to the mall that robbed people of their souls, money, and time, he knew in reality, it was nothing more than a concrete-laden building. Yet he still loved to succumb to the mystique and wonder that it drew out of different people. He relished in exploring, not only the shops and places, but also the people it created.

That is what he decided to do today. On days like these, when the sky was crying buckets of rain, there was really no choice but to stay inside. He turned left and right, and right, and back around the way he came, only to turn left. Past the bright colours of Cotton On, the light and airiness of Swarovski, and the clatter and hubbub that was the food court. It was all at random. That was the best way to do it. He kept travelling in this labyrinth for quite a while. He couldn't tell exactly how long. There wasn't time to check his phone. His head had to stay up so he could see the world that existed around him instead of the pixels that plagued his phone.

On a lap past the food court, a young man stepped his New Balance trainers directly in front of Henry and blocked his path, almost as if he knew where Henry would be. The top button of his vintage collared shirt strained against his Adam's apple as he spoke.

'Hi mate, can I grab a minute of your time?'

Although a cap obscured his face, Henry could see the truth. He saw the dark violet bags that clung underneath his eyes. The scratchy and scruffy beard that came only from weeks of not shaving. The man's hands clenched at his sides as he grasped a blue clipboard. It was plainly obvious, even to Henry, that it had been weeks since he had slept well at all. It wasn't from the many assignments he had piling up though. No, he didn't care about those at all. It was the dreams that kept him up at night. Dreams of the future, of course.

Henry knew that it all began one drunken night with his five friends, an Ouija board and the internet. It was a fun night at first, rounds of shots every time the board answered a question. Throughout the course of the night, up until 4 am, they only became cruder and cruder. It was the next day, when his hangover was ebbing, that he fell into an internet wormhole.

Henry knew far too much about internet wormholes; they started with searching tomorrow's weather and ended five hours later on Wikipedia, looking at the breeding cycle of Fairy Penguins in Northern Tasmania. But Louis—as Henry decided he looked like—had ended up falling into a hole of Southern Louisiana dark magic. At 2 am the next morning he found himself on some questionable website overflowing with spells, pigeon in hand, and knife on the coffee table in front of him. Days later, Louis still couldn't get the blood out from underneath his fingernails. That wasn't the only thing he was struggling with. It had done something to him, and although most of these mall-goers couldn't see it, Henry could see that the man in front of him had unknowingly made a blood magic trade to see the future.

Louis could see the small problems that would arise tomorrow. Like a traffic jam on the Princes Highway he would have to face on his drive to work, or that they would run out of milk in two days at 9 am. Those things used to matter to him. He would normally lay awake at night worrying what he would have for breakfast if there was no milk left. But now those worries didn't even make him flinch because he had seen his own death.

He had barely even made it to his job handing out flyers this morning. Henry was shocked that he was actually here in one piece. Although Louis didn't know exactly when it would happen, he knew that he would be in a car crash. Seeing your own death wasn't exactly fun and it had shaken him to the core. Henry though, just smiled at Louis for the first, and perhaps last, time before ignoring his questions and continuing to lap the mall. It was an awkward *enjoy your day and your death* kind of interaction. Henry wondered what he would do if he knew what was lying in wait just around the corner. He'd probably move out and away from the iron grip of his mother for starters. At least he was safe for the time being, he concluded, as he lost himself.

Eventually, as always, he gave up. He found a lone silver metal chair and collapsed into it. He could feel the stiffness begin to set in as his muscles quietened. They had been screaming from the constant walking and now they were settling down, their complaints becoming less severe.

Across the café sat a young girl. Henry guessed she was eighteen, just like him. Though she seemed to be relaxing in the newly-opened Starbucks, her mind was in the dungeons, wrestling with her latest problem. She sipped coffee and stared at the book she had propped haphazardly between her jean-covered legs. Henry tried not to judge her based on her taste in

coffee. He was sure that she had a no-foam-caramel-cappuccino with three sugars in her hand. It was easy not to judge her though, because she was beautiful. Henry shuffled in his silver throne, made awkward by his own creepiness. He couldn't help but notice things about her. Her long blonde hair continually fell in front of her face and blocked her view of the book. Henry had only been there for a few minutes, and already he could tell that reading was second nature to the girl. Henry was stopping himself from going anywhere else because he enjoyed watching her unique quirks, like the way she thumbed the corner of the page with anticipation. Or how her foot tapped to the rhythm of her reading.

She was just his type. Weird enough that not many understood her, but not weird enough to fit into the Dungeons and Dragons scene with ease. She still loved board games and card games, of course. She'd spend every Friday night with her friends, laughing and eating as they threw cards down on the table. She was unusually good at cards compared to everyone else. Henry shuffled in his seat and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. On Saturday nights she would go to the casino. That was how she was paying her way through university, by counting the cards on the Black Jack table. No one knew, no one suspected her. I mean, who would? *Just look at her.* Even Henry could barely believe it himself.

Henry did know one thing for sure—he was intrigued by her. So, he waited until he heard the crisp flick of the page and knew it was his moment. The chair screeched against the tiles as he stood and walked over. He put his hand on the back of her metal silver throne.

'Hi,' was his opening line, and hers was dropping the half-full coffee cup into her lap in surprise. It was meant to be the end of the chapter—Henry had planned to make a suave literary joke. Instead, he looked down at the warzone that was her lap, at a loss for words, before mumbling something that he hoped sounded like an apology, and staggering away with his tail between his legs. He couldn't believe it. Henry knew it was much earlier than usual, but he just couldn't bring himself to stay at the mall. What if he saw her again? He kept walking, head down, out of there, to where the bombs were still going off in the sky, to the bomb of a life that waited for him at home.