

THE QUARRY

Drown Me Out

Salvatore Pedavoli

My thoughts, like smoke,
cloud my mind.
I cough and splutter.
It's killing me.

I'm holding the rim of a steel sink, focusing on my reflection. My heart is almost in time with the muffled music outside. I can feel it pulsing in my throat.

Pull yourself together.

Someone staggers to the sink beside me and starts washing their hands. They spit up something and cough. I brace myself and leave the bathroom disgusted.

As soon as I'm back on the dance floor the beat reverberates through my entire body. My ears are screaming.

I work my way through the crowd of dancers. Escaping through a security door and down concrete stairs into a quieter room. The walls are thick, it's as though the room upstairs doesn't exist. The music is softer. The faint fog of the melody drifts through the space.

'Welcome back,' says Tony as I approach my small group, 'I bought you another whisky.'

A glass of amber liquid sits on the table between him and his friend, Nicky. I thank him and take a sip.

‘You like Fireball, right?’ he asks.

I nod and sit down.

‘Sophie will be here soon,’ says Nicky.

Tony asks me how I’m feeling and I shrug my shoulders. I’m terrified, but he doesn’t need to know that.

‘All you need to know is that she went through a bad break up,’ Tony explains, ‘And she really loves fancy cheese - like you!’

Well, that’s wonderful. We can spend the night talking about cheese and her shitty ex boyfriend. Fantastic. I’m going to be the guy she vents to all night. I bet this is all just so Tony and Nicky could go out but *not* feel guilty about their sad friend. Figures.

You’re just some nice guy that girls talk to. Not a real man they want to hook up with.

My knee bounces out of time with the music and I glance around the room as though she’d suddenly appear. I don’t even know what she looks like, I don’t understand why I even bother.

Nicky jumps up suddenly, tapping furiously on her phone. She announces that Sophie has arrived and whisks away to go find her.

I take a deep breath. Tony asks me if I’m alright.

‘I really didn’t need to be set up,’ I say, ‘I *can* find a girl on my own.’ I smile. He’ll think it’s a joke if I smile.

Tony gives me one of his impish grins. ‘Yeah, I know - but you’ve been busy with work, and kinda stressed out lately. Plus, Sophie said she wanted to come out, and you guys’ll get along really well. Trust me, you’ll like her.’

That doesn’t mean she’ll like me.

A person worth being,

I wish I was worth knowing.

If only pretending to be someone else,

was as easy as wearing their clothes.

In the moments leading up to Nicky returning with Sophie, my stomach had rung out all its acids and my heart started violently beating within my throat. I’d rehearsed nine different ways of saying ‘hello’ without settling on which one I’d use.

In the end it didn't matter because, when they arrived, I was looking down at my knees and didn't notice them approach.

'Sophie, this is Erik.'

I look up just as Sophie says hello. She's a small girl with a veil of blond hair that falls gracefully over her shoulders. Her blue eyes rival the bright lights of the dance floor.

Oh, those eyes.

I manage to say hi.

Sophie looks at me with a soft expression, and for a few seconds we're in silence. She fidgets with the straw in her drink. I should think of something to say, but in that moment all I can think about is how much she actually knows about me.

How blind is this date to her?

'Erik,' says Nicky, pulling me out of my head, 'Sophie likes blue vein cheese - tell her she's nuts.'

'But... I like blue vein?'

She lets out an exasperated sigh and tells us we're both crazy. She and Tony decide it's time for a cigarette. They bolt for one of the smoker's rooms without inviting us.

Sophie sinks down into one of the chairs.

'She says the cheese thing every time I meet someone. You're the second person who's been on my side.' She sips her drink and cringes.

'Strong?' I ask.

'It's basically vodka with a shot of orange juice.' She inhales sharply, 'Not the worst Vodka Sunrise I've had, though.' She nods in my direction, 'What've you got?'

'Fireball Whisky.'

'That's the one with cinnamon, right?'

My heart begins to calm as we settle into a discussion about alcohol. Conversation with Sophie moves fluidly. I'm struck by how easy it is. She asks questions, and gives answers that I can respond to. She doesn't seem nervous at all and that puts my mind at ease.

I look down into my near empty glass and wonder if it's time for another drink. There's a soft tingling in my head. It's muffled the intrusive voice that's been whispering unkind words. In its place is a tipsy friend who wants to have fun.

Sophie starts to ask about where I work when she's interrupted by Nicky. She and Tony have returned, shrouded in the smell of cigarette smoke. They command us to scull our drinks because it's time to dance.

We gaze at each other and, without thinking, I wink at Sophie. She smiles as I consume what's left in my glass and follows suit. Her face scrunches and she exclaims that it was too much vodka.

Tony urges us onto our feet. Eventually we make our way down to the dance floor. Everyone seems to be packed in tightly; I wonder how we're expected to dance. Tony takes hold of Nicky and together they disappear into the throng.

Sophie leans toward me, 'I need another drink.'

We fight our way to the group of people lining up at the bar. I buy rum and coke for both of us. We drink slowly, sticking to the edge of the room. I'm bracing myself for the inevitable discomfort of being within the dancing crowd.

'I can't dance,' Sophie admits.

I look at her and shrug, 'Same.'

Sophie downs her drink and waits for me to do the same. We ditch our glasses. I'm surprised when she takes my hand and pulls me. She leads me through the fray to a less dense corner of the room. We stand at arms length and move awkwardly to the music.

I want her closer to me.

She isn't moving her hands much. I take hold of them and wave them around. This makes her laugh so I pull her towards me. She doesn't object. Her hands crawl around my shoulders. I hold onto her hips. We're moving with the music, bodies pressed against each other.

I become aware of every limb she'd be able to feel and a voice inside my head whispers:

Can she tell?

The voice dissipates when she looks at me. Those bright blue eyes take hold. We're so close I can feel the warmth of her breath. I could kiss her. Should I kiss her? Would she let me?

I dreamt about a beautiful girl
with eyes as hard as stone.
She told me I wasn't enough.
What woman could love half a man?

It's almost three in the morning. Sophie and I are sitting on the balcony of a hotel room playing Snap as quietly as possible. Tony and Nicky have taken up the bed. We were letting fate decide who gets the couch.

Sophie is very competitive.

'I don't think it matters,' she says, her eyes are trained on the pile between us, 'I probably won't sleep anyway.'

'Why not?' I move a card towards the pile, her hand twitches and I laugh.

She doesn't answer until I place the card down. She swats my hand. It wasn't a matching pair.

'I usually sleep with a noise machine, like one of those white noise things.'

I watch her hand pull a card from her deck.

'What's that do?'

'It's supposed to, like, block out negative sounds...' she puts the card down and smacks it almost instantly, 'Haha! Suck it!'

'You cheated, your hand was hovering.'

Sophie laughs and scoops the pile towards her.

'So, why do you need to block out negative sounds?' I ask.

'Ah, it's like...just something I read ages ago. So, I tried it and now I don't sleep easily without it. But I have, like, mild anxiety and it's been helping with that.'

A gentle curtain of rain begins to fall. I stand and walk to the edge of the balcony, extending my hand to catch a few drops. There's a lingering haze in my mind. The intrusive voice is quietly murmuring in the background. It asks me to find out how much she knows.

If she's gonna reject you, you may as well find out now.

'You done with Snap?' Sophie asks, 'Do I get the couch? Did I win?'

I turn around and lean on the balcony, 'Nah, you cheated.'

Sophie stands and points at me, 'I won.'

I call her a cheater again. She moves towards me, sticking her head out under the rain for a moment. Again, I question how much she knows about me. Is she waiting for me to bring it up? Does it even *need* to be brought up? Maybe this night won't go any further than drinking, dancing and playing snap on a balcony.

After a prolonged silence, she leans back and looks at me.

What is she thinking when she looks at me? If she doesn't know, does she just see a man? What kind of man does she think I am? What was her ex like? Does she wonder if I'm better than him? Does she wonder what secrets I'm hiding?

Would a real man have tried to kiss her by now? Was she waiting for that? Does she think something's wrong with me because I haven't?

My heartbeat quickens because she's still looking at me. She's expecting something from me. I can feel it. I look down at my shoes.

Real men are in control.

'Erik,' she says.

Real men aren't afraid.

I look at her.

Real men don't have secrets like this.

Sophie moves in front of me. She cups my cheeks with her hands. They're soft against my skin. I look at her. She closes the gap between us; kisses me very gently. I feel it surge through my body, but only for a short moment.

I pull away from her.

half

inauthentic

fake

liar

Sophie steps back and apologises. She blames it on alcohol and suggests it might be time for bed. Her voice is shaky. I've upset her. Why did I pull away?

'It's not you,' I say quietly.

She laughs and warns me not to use that line. There's a bitterness in her voice and she turns to the balcony door. I move to stop her, grabbing her shoulders. She pulls away from me.

'Did they even tell you?' I say curtly.

She turns, 'Tell me what?'

They didn't tell her? No, they did - she's just pretending not to know. Or, maybe not.

I don't know!

Idiot. Should have kept kissing her.

I back away from her and return to the balcony. I'll have to tell her now. You can't just drop a line like that and pretend it was nothing.

'Tell me what?' she repeats, she moves beside me.

I shake my head. Maybe she'll back off.

She lets out and exasperated sigh, ‘I know...*enough* about you. I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have kissed you. It’s too sudden, I’m just...’

I look at her. She’s leaning on the balcony again, gazing out into the rain.

You’ve upset her.

‘If it’s too quiet I start thinking,’ she says, ‘and if I start thinking too much I’ll make myself cry.’

‘So, you kissed me to stop yourself from thinking too much?’

After a few seconds she smiles, laughs slightly and looks at me, ‘It sounds stupid when you say it out loud, but yeah,’ she turns with her back to the rain. ‘I just...need something to block out the...’ She waves her arms around her head for a moment, ‘Voice.’

‘You sound psycho. I just use alcohol...or music.’

‘We all have our ways of dealing with shit.’

‘So you make out with random guys?’

Don’t say that!

She frowns, ‘I hang out with people, yeah...’

‘I’m sorry,’ I say, ‘I shouldn’t have implied...I mean...’ I shrug, ‘I’m a dumbass.’

‘You are.’ She’s smiling again.

I glance at her. Has she been feeling like this all night? Has this all just been her way of covering her anxieties? Was she just trying to block out an intrusive voice?

Isn’t that exactly what I was doing?

‘You hide it very well.’ I say.

She bursts out laughing, covering her mouth. She shakes her head, ‘Hide what? My crippling anxiety?’

I nod.

‘Well,’ she turns and taps me on the chest lightly, ‘Now you know it’s all just a facade.’

I’ve made a suit of armour,
with the skin of men I’ve known.
I’m Frankenstein and his monster,
a Mister Hyde that I’ve sewn.

I hold the rim of the porcelain sink, focusing on my reflection. It’s quiet enough that I can hear the steady ticking of my heart. I breathe slowly. I’m going to tell her my secret.

It's almost four in the morning. Neither of us believes we'll get any sleep. We've decided to share the couch, but we've pulled the cushions off and manufactured a bed on the floor. We're going to talk until one of us falls asleep.

I breathe in deeply.

When I come out of the bathroom she's lying on the bed, curled up on her side with her back to me. There's a blue blanket thrown over her legs; it might be big enough for the both of us.

I lay down beside her.

'Sorry I took so long.'

No response. I prop myself up and lean over her. Her eyes are closed and her hand is hanging over the edge of the couch cushion. Her phone lies just below it, there's a video playing.

I nudge her gently but there's no response.

She's fallen asleep.

There's always next time.