

THE QUARRY

New best friends

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Light golden grass covered the narrow field running alongside the old bluestone pool that the town's creek had once fed. The slashed patch of land was coarse and parched, much like all the grass in the small town of Bluestone Creek during the hot months. Two children played in the mess of dead grass that had been cooked by the dry summer heat. The sister and brother were wasting away their long school holidays. More than for her own enjoyment, the girl played to keep her brother entertained, as her mother continually asked her to do. Jessica used her brother like a play baby, and he loved it. But, sitting in his pusher, Shane didn't know the feeling was love. All he knew was that he became suffused with a sense of warmth, and a tingle pulsed from inside him when he was with his sister.

Jessica looked at her little brother sitting below her and remembered the moment she got to hold him for the first time, thinking about how light and precious he had felt wrapped in his baby blanket. She was six then. Now three years older, she wished he'd stayed little and precious. He even smelled nice back then, she thought. Now he just tagged after her and demanded her attention. Girls at her school were starting to play netball, and do pony club, and learn ballet. Some of them were even

doing classes to make real working computer games, which she thought sounded fun. But she didn't know anyone who had to care for a play-baby brother like she had to.

She was tired before they arrived to play in the dry field, and even though she knew her mum would be angry if she came home without her brother being worn out, the summer heat made her feel like she was going to fall asleep. She bent down, collected a handful of dry hay and sprinkled it over Shane's head.

'Oh no, it's raining. We need to leave,' she said.

Shane squinted into the falling stems of yellow and beamed. He asked for it again. She threw a new handful into the air, and he laughed at the feeling of the grass gliding across his face as it fell.

'Again!' he said.

She said no, it was time to go home. He pushed himself deeper into the pusher, drawing his legs in on himself like a turtle.

'Get out, I'm not doing this again,' she demanded.

'No.'

'I can't push you on this, you're too heavy,' she said, pointing to the rough ground.

'Please?'

When she heard his pleading voice, her defences dropped away. It was the one thing that made her see the vulnerable little boy she had once held in her arms, and he still needed her care.

'Once we get to the road, okay?' she said.

He unravelled himself from the pusher, and she began dragging it towards the road home.

As the two children dawdled out of the field, Shane stopped, mesmerised by the deep hole surrounded by old bluestone blocks.

'What,' Jessica asked.

'No water.'

She pointed to the radiating white blob in the empty sky, and told him the sun had sucked the water away. It might be back at winter she reminded him. Dust floating from crushed dry grass under their feet caught in her nose, making her sneeze.

'Bless you,' said Shane in his little voice.

‘Thanks,’ she replied, and began to walk. She knew he would follow. He hated being far from her.

The sun was low by the time the children reached their front gate, and the lengthening shadows from the huge cypress trees at their front fence provided some pleasant relief from its heat. Jessica’s white joggers were brown with dry dirt, and her arms felt like jelly from pushing her brother over the potholes scattered along the side of the road. He was flopped like a rag doll in the seat, his feet hanging centimetres from the ground, asleep within the first few minutes of their trek home. With no light shining from inside, she could see the empty black windows mirroring the dying shrubs, and random trees dotted through the yard close by their white weatherboard house, and she knew her mum wasn’t home, again.

She inserted her key in the peeling front-door, jiggling it so the key would turn. She gave Shane’s limp hand a soft squeeze, and stood him up out of the pusher, then disappeared down the creaking hall to put the frayed canvas stroller away.

Entering the living room a few moments later, Jessica was partially blinded by the TV that silhouetted Shane as it talked at him. She flicked the light-switch. Shane sat transfixed on the tattered couch in-front of the pre-remote TV within poking distance. A breakfast bar was crowded with letters and a mixture of fresh and slightly rotting fruit. A yellow note sat on the dining table in the middle of the room. She picked it up from the worn pine, and read her mother’s hand-written scribble, with an urge to push something over.

‘Where’s mum?’ he asked.

‘She’s working,’ she replied as she always did

‘I’m hungry.’

‘Yep,’ she said, pulling the pre-cooked dinner out of the fridge.

Their house creaked and smelt of old wood, but she always felt warm and cosy tucked up in bed. Although she was sometimes jealous of not doing what the other girls at her school did, she couldn’t imagine not taking care of her brother. She heard the soft

rumble of his snore in the bed opposite hers, and a silent chuckle blew from her nose. The front door squeaked open, and she turned away from the bedroom door to face the window. She curled up tight and pulled the covers to her head.

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Towards the age of twelve, Jessica hit puberty, and things began to change. And then one day, Jessica's mother brought home a wonky pony; a gift from her boss who didn't want it anymore.

It was autumn when the chestnut mare began munching the overgrown grass at their house. The bow in the mare's back almost reached Jessica's waist, but her head was the same height as hers. She named the pony Trip for her turned in front hooves. She told her brother he was too young to ride her.

'You'll fall off. Mum only wants you to watch,' she said.

He never complained about his sister's decision, just smiled watching her enjoy trying to guide the pony around the backyard. She was like a warm breeze that he floated along with. And he made sure he told her how good she was doing day after day.

When she asked if he would lead them down to the dry patch by the pool for their first adventure, his insides buzzed. Shane guided his sister as if she were a breakable object. He struggled to choose whether to look where they were going, or toward his precious cargo. But as they got closer to the field by the pool, he spotted the patch flecked with green, and he jabbed his finger toward the vibrant earth.

'Jess, look,' he said in a hush, careful of his excitement spooking the mare.

'I know, why do you think we're here?' she said.

Jessica told him that Trip loved fresh grass. There had been plenty of fresh food at their home when they first got the pony, but now the yard was dust.

They stopped where a good patch of green lucerne had sprung up by the dry crease of a creek. As Shane was trying to tell the horse to eat up, Trip and his sister took off into the field beyond. He tried to follow, but the horse kept roaming to new greenness. Jessica laughed as the quirky animal lurched her around the tantalising field. He struggled to stay close and felt an unusual twinge in his stomach, one that he didn't like. The air was thick on his skin, and he began finding it hard to breathe. With the constant pursuit of his sister, he grew tired and had to sit on the clammy grass to

recover. And without realising, he started shaking his head, and he wanted to go home. All the while, Jessica giggled and bounced around the field on their wonky horse. He had never seen her like it before.

The winter school holidays arrived shortly after their adventure to the pool. Shane spent the first day of holidays trying to lead his sister around their barren backyard, but she continually told him to go away. She had brought a new school friend over to see the horse, and they didn't need him to help. From then on he only watched from their shared bedroom window as his sister's new friends arrived to play with the horse. He had never seen her with so many friends before, and the sight of them playing irritated him to the point of exhaustion. He couldn't stop thinking about his sister enjoying playing with other people but not him. It filled his mind and interrupted his bedtime. When he should have been asleep, he wasn't. He would sit up in bed looking at his sister fast asleep meters from him, just looking at her, hoping she would turn over and ask him how he was, but she never did. In his dreams he was invisible and would poke himself when he woke up. He began believing his sister had forgotten who he was, and he didn't believe she knew his name anymore. He had hardly been outside the house for the entire holidays, and towards the end of them, a feeling of sickness stuck in his stomach, and at times, it made him retch.

On an icy Saturday morning, at the end of the school holidays, Shane watched the little pony through a crack in the curtains of his bedroom window. It was standing almost motionless in the chill air with steam coming from its nostrils, and tiny twitches rippling every now and again against the cold. It had trod little hoof prints into the frost. His sister was lying sound asleep in her bed between the window and her brother. He stuffed his arms into a jacket and went out.

Bewitching grey clouds had been appearing over the distant hills for days, teasing with winter rain. The creek was still a barren crack running along the edge of the town. Shane sat on the side of the old bluestone pool shivering in the cold, his jacket providing little warmth. His feet jiggled trying to warm-up above the chaos of

blackberries and sprouting grass blanketing the hollow. He studied the lazy blood trickling from scratches across his hands and shoved them into his pockets hoping the annoying pain would disappear with the cold. Tiny drops of water hit the dirt and dead weeds below his feet. He studied the horse he had just led into the pool and tied to a bramble of blackberries. The pony had made him feel sick for the last two weeks, and his head throbbed from his hot thoughts. The mare trilled while she nibbled at the blackberry bush, and Shane sat with his face squashed in confusion. He began to think about his sister as the horse chewed unfazed, and his heart started to pound. Drifting in the winter breeze, more drops of rain splashed around him from the blackening sky.

Rain teamed down outside the open front door. Shane rushed inside, skipping his soaked feet across the dry entryway, and went directly towards his bedroom. The door was open, but his sister's bed was empty. He looked outside and saw her cleaning the horse's feed trough.

Jessica knew something was wrong before she spotted her brother sidling around the side of the house, looking like he wanted to run away. She took a breath, as if for the both of them.

'It's okay,' she said.

She didn't raise her voice, or get angry, even though she knew her brother had done something with Trip. She had seen his footprints with the horse's in the frost when she went out to brush it. Neither of them spoke. She watched him staring at the ground and saw tears trickled down his cheeks. She snatched her brother in her arms and tried to squeeze the happiness back into him.

They walked from their house toward the old dry pool. She slung her arm over her brother's shoulders as they walked through the rain.

'Look, it's trying to jump back to the clouds,' she said pointing to the rain at their feet.

'What?'

'Nothing, I was joking.'

Shane pulled at his sister to walk faster, but she was enjoying walking in the rain with her brother.

‘It’s okay,’ she said.

‘But the pool.’

‘Mr Sinclair said it hasn’t been full for sixty years.’

‘Huh?’

‘It’ll be fine.’

As they walked toward the old dry pool to collect their wonky pony, Jessica looked at her brother by her side. She told him she loved him. And his smile was like a warm blanket.