

# THE QUARRY

## **Yet Another Tuesday**

**Nicholas Lamberton**

Scott bolted down the footpath, his leather shoes creased near the tips from having to bear his frantic sprinting. He adjusted his red tie while he ran, not having the time to properly straighten it while he was getting dressed. Of all the days to sleep through his alarm, it just had to be the day he was due to present the new project plan to the board of directors. They were sticklers for punctuality, and he'd never get that promotion if he were late. If there was anything he wanted to avoid, it was having to welcome Donna back from her holiday with the news that there was no pay rise for him and that they couldn't afford to renovate the kitchen after all. He continued to push forward, only slowing to avoid crashing into other pedestrians. The train station came into view. The platform still had people all over it, but he barely had time to smile when he heard something in the distance. The distinct squeal of a train beginning to brake. Scott summoned all the strength he had and raced up the road. He had barely made it to the stairs into the station when he heard the train pull in. He leapt up the stairs, three steps at a time. The train stopped. He made it to the top and immediately sprinted across the overpass. The train doors opened. He raced down the stairs to the platform, pulling out his Opal card along the way. The guard blew her whistle. He tapped on, and then dived through the nearest door, seconds before it closed.

Gasping for air, he searched for a place to rest his aching legs. He carefully stepped past the standing passengers to the lower level. Not a single empty place to sit. He turned back and checked the upper level. All full as well. He sighed and sat down on the stairs. He pulled his jacket off and rolled up his sleeves. The train slowed down. The train never slowed down at this point. Scott nervously tapped his hands on his knees.

Martha looked at the sweaty man sitting on the stairs, drumming on his knees. City people always looked like they were on edge. Their brains must have been thrown out of whack from being crammed into such a small space. She had been living in the city for about a month now, and she still couldn't get used to it. The odd smells, the slow traffic, the tall buildings, the loud noises. How the rest of the uni students dealt with it was a mystery.

She dug around in her pocket and took her phone out. It was a few years out of date, but only had a single scratch as evidence for its age, unlike the heavily cracked screens she tended to see with similar models. City people seemed to be a clumsy bunch. She got a case for her phone like her flatmate suggested. It was a simple orange shell, with no patterns or artistic flair to speak of, basic, but enough to remind her of home. She opened her photos, navigated her way to her "Home" folder, and was greeted with the picture she took the day she left. Rows upon rows of orange trees stretched out across the farmland. The phone's little screen couldn't do it justice, but she clearly remembered the orchard's citrusy smell, the serenity of the countryside and the inviting warmth of the sun. Her phone buzzed. Mum had just sent her something. She switched over to her messages and found that her mother had attached a video. She plugged in her headphones and played it. Pete, their old Border Collie, was lying in the sun out the front of the house. Mum was waving a tennis ball in front of his face. His eyes remained on the ball, tracking its every motion. Mum threw the ball across the yard. It landed by the fence, but nothing went after it. Mum looked back at Pete, who couldn't be bothered to get up. Martha couldn't help but chuckle to herself. He was such a funny old pup.

Jonathon rolled his eyes at the young woman laughing at her phone. She had probably gotten another like on her Instagram, or whatever they were on. He didn't deny that smart phones could be useful, but it seemed like the youth of today needed them just to breathe. He was able to live without one as a young man, so what was their excuse? That gravelly feeling came into his upper chest again. He produced a pale yellow handkerchief from his breast pocket and coughed into it. A large amount of phlegm coated the handkerchief. He reasoned that his persistent cough probably wasn't a major problem, but he couldn't help but worry anyway. The light of his life had already gone, but he didn't feel prepared to join her. He still owed his son Lucas an apology for ignoring him for his entire childhood. With the damage that had already done, Lucas would only go to his funeral out of obligation. Jonathon would fly out to Chicago right that instant, but he didn't have nearly enough money for that. A letter was affordable, but useless without an address, postal or e-mail. Perhaps the chance for redemption had slipped past him years ago.

The train raced into the underground tunnels of the city and Jonathon rose from his seat. The train arrived at his stop and the doors slowly opened. The passengers squeezed their way out of the train, and he slowly hobbled behind them. He trudged up the stairs, being overtaken by dozens of people, all talking to each other or to their phones. Eventually, he emerged at street level. He walked past a café, dozens of people crammed like sardines inside. A young couple was excitedly talking, holding coffee cups, right in the middle of the footpath. Jonathon frowned. Some people just loved to stay in their own little world.

Over the hissing coffee machines and the hubbub of the customers, Patty heard an old man yelling outside. She wondered why the elderly were always so grumpy. Maybe they felt living so long was so much of an accomplishment that they should have the right to be as angry as they want. She wiped her hands down on her green apron, and got back into making the next batch of orders. Regular flat white. Small cap. Small mocha. Long black. Espresso shot. Regular cap, soy milk. Small flat white, skim milk.

Regular flat white, triple shot. Small—crap! That two looked like a three. She swiped the previous cup, hid it below the counter and started remaking the order. She'd have thrown it in the bin if Chris didn't get fired for that last week. Apparently Jordan really hated product going to waste. She'd need to find an opportunity to drink that botched coffee. All that caffeine would likely leave her anxious. Well, more anxious than usual.

She never thought that being a barista would be stressful at her last job. It was in a cozy little place in the suburbs. Even during peak periods, she could brew at her own pace, and more importantly, make some friends. She still remembered Mrs Ball and her endless stories about her children, and Jake the writer who always came in at 1pm on Tuesdays, ordered an iced coffee, then sat at a table with his laptop, moving his fingers across the keyboard like a pianist until closing time. Here, it was all business for the patrons. Just grab and go. She always made sure to hand out orders with a smile, but only out of professional courtesy. Gradually, the crowd inside began to thin. A few more, and she could take a breather. Two regular caps. Large flat white. Large mocha. She wiped the sweat from her brow. Crummy café or not, she took pride in her work. That pride did a lot to make her smiles look less forced. Patty called out the last few orders and handed them off to the customers. Another job well done.

Pablo sipped his mocha and watched the girl disappear into the back of the café. Her smile was rich with passion and cheer. She must've been into him. He probably should've asked for her number. Next time. He left the café and made his way down the street, taking in the sights. Cars honking, storefronts showing all manner of luxury items, a cavalcade of different kinds of people walking every which way. The whole city was a smorgasbord of stimuli. So why was the well of inspiration still dry? He finished off his coffee, and then got his sketchbook out of his backpack. Its cover was a flat blue. The colour of the sea. But while an ocean could hide all manner of interesting secrets beneath its plain surface, the sketchbook only had dead ends under its cover. He flipped through the pages. Unfinished drawings of parks and mountains,

rough faces, drafts of abstract pieces. Nothing inspired, nothing that should be continued.

He stuffed the book away. Artist's block was a natural dilemma to have, but it didn't have to strike in this critical period. He still didn't know how he could pay next month's rent. They say that a true artist doesn't do it for the money, but that idealism isn't attractive when food and shelter are at stake. His next piece had to be more than simply good. It had to be a moneymaker. He briefly considered making some post-modern art, something really basic that questioned the nature of the medium. No. He was almost broke, but he still had standards. Typical post-modern art always came off as an excuse to be lazy, and too many people had already asked the question "What is art?" without even attempting to answer it. But maybe he should be the one to try and do it. He turned around and began making his way back to his apartment. Pablo may not have had a plan, but he had drive. And sometimes, that's all you need to get things done.

Steve watched a Mediterranean-looking man jog right past him. Most people didn't give Steve the time of day, but tourists in particular tended to ignore him. They were so caught up in the glitz and glamour of the city that its dirt and mess was invisible to them. He sat up on his thin mattress and looked down on his few possessions. An indigo blanket, a few bottles of water, and an empty Chinese food container with some coins in it. Depending on the charity of strangers was risky business. He could only really count on receiving one note a week, and even that wasn't certain. The vast majority of passersby acted as if he didn't even exist. A few dropped in some loose change, but not nearly enough. Debit cards had become so convenient that few still carried cash, and it wasn't as if he could set up an eftpos machine at his spot on the sidewalk.

It was not a life he should be living, but it wasn't as if the life he left behind was much better. Every day, it was a guess as to whether his new bruises would come from his father or his brother. His mother wasn't any help, more interested in drowning her own pain than soothing anyone else's. He needed to leave. But with no money, no skills, and no friends, the street was the only home left. A cluster of coins landed in his container. He turned towards the woman who dropped them in and

thanked her. She just kept walking. Steve looked at the rest of the people walking past him, hoping someone else would be casually generous.

Michael almost threw up from the hobo's stench. He noticed the change on the ground and frowned. All that hard-earned money was given away to someone who'd just spend it on drugs. He shook his head and tightened his violet scarf. There was no point in dragging it out. He reached the stairs leading underground. Only fitting that he was getting closer to hell. He made his way into the train station, his heart beating faster and faster. Sweat poured down his face as he descended down another flight of stairs to the platform. With the morning rush over, there weren't many people waiting for a train. The only other person at the far end of the platform with him was a bald thug wearing a white T-shirt and jeans.

Michael's blood ran cold and his legs shook. He found it difficult to believe that he came this far. Could he really go all the way to the last stop? He thought about his family. He did everything he could for them, so why did they think that wasn't enough? He thought about the guys at his former workplace. Why didn't anyone take his side? He may have made a few bad decisions, but he did his fair share. Were they just waiting for an excuse to kick him to the curb? He thought about Miranda. Why did that bitch make him think there was always someone he could fall back on before she broke his heart? They weren't spending that much time together, but he didn't have all the time in the world. Everything didn't have to be about her, did she really need to betray him like that? He wiped his eyes. Every road he walked was paved with thorns. He had been asking himself if humanity was just that cruel for a few weeks, but an answer wasn't what he needed. What he needed was a way for the pain to stop.

He looked at the timetable. One more minute. He stepped up to the yellow line. An indistinct sound could be heard deep in the dark depths of the tunnel. The sound got closer. His heart raced. A light began to poke around the bending tunnel walls. He braced himself. Suddenly, a hand gently guided him away from the platform's edge. The bald thug smiled at him. 'Careful, you might fall.' The train roared into the station. He stood frozen. Why the hell would this meathead be so nice to him? The

doors opened, and the bald man moved aside to let everyone get out. He then stepped in and turned to Michael. ‘You coming?’ Michael shook his head, and the man headed to the upper level. The doors closed, and the train departed. He was left alone on the platform. The next train was just fifteen minutes away. He thought about that man, and everyone he had blamed. Michael turned and walked back up the stairs. If he was wrong about one person, could he really be right about anything else?