

THE QUARRY

Mykayla Castle

Fenced In

The phone call shouldn't be such a damn struggle.

Your mobile sits on table, placid as anything, open to your contacts and waiting for a single tap. Earlier this morning, you climbed onto your kitchen counter to reach a glass on the top shelf. Right now, you aren't sure you can bring yourself to raise an arm in your phone's direction.

The bright screen fades a little, greyed out, but not yet off.

You stand up and tread the familiar path from the dining room to the kitchen. Three steps forward and two steps left; you open the fridge and stare at the half-eaten yoghurt and the glad-wrapped ham, the sticky brown layer on the second shelf.

What's the worst that could happen? You are, at heart, a catastrophiser. Your mother says sometimes you need to get over yourself, and she's not exactly wrong. This is one of those times.

You close the fridge.

She could be busy, you think, or her business could have shut down, or maybe she has one of those accents you really, really can't understand and feel so incredibly terrible about—

Somewhere in the past, that kid you used to be is laughing, jumping out from behind doors and giving your poor mother a heart attack. That kid probably wouldn't recognise the you behind your eyes. The tenth circle of hell is standing in your Mum's kitchen, arguing with your own self-confidence.

Or, what's left of the kid says, she will answer and ask you if you are ringing about a haircut, and what kind you want, and when you're available, and if this time would work for you, to which you would say 'Yes, a trim, Fridays, and yes'.

You stare, this time at the condensation ring left on the kitchen bench by your morning juice. *Alright, but it's not that simple.*

It is, in fact, that simple.

And yet your phone screen has locked, and the blank, blackness of it feels like the inside of your head. A little cracked, a little useless, a lot like Nietzsche's void.

Just do it, you tell yourself, exasperated.

You go sit on the couch instead. Ten steps forward from the kitchen. your laptop is on the coffee table. You scoop it up, speed through the password and switch screens from the hairdresser's Facebook to the one that is halfway through YouTube's instant regret playlist.

The leaden feeling in the pit of your stomach stays, shifts to a crackle of kinetic energy. Though you hold yourself still and utterly immovable, it shivers through your fingers until you clench them closed.

You make it through about twenty weird memes before you crack and pause it.

'I really do need a haircut,' you say out loud, as if that will speak it into being. You haven't had one in about six months, and your cute little bob has started to look more like a mullet. You had to swap hairdressers when you moved, but they didn't do a great job. You still took the loyalty card when they offered it, though.

Your sister recommended this salon to your mother, and then to you. It isn't that you're afraid of the actual cut itself; if it turned out a disaster, it'd grow. That's what hair does. You aren't scared of making a fool of yourself on the phone, you do that pretty frequently and at worst, you'd just never contact the hairdresser again.

Sometimes, you aren't precisely sure what holds you back. You can do each of these individual things: tap a number, make a phone call, schedule a meeting, maintain a polite conversation, tap the red 'end call' circle. You're very certain on this point: you've done harder things in life. This should not be a stumbling block.

And yet. And yet.

You think of it like this: there is a fence in front of you — invisible, but you know it's there, pickets and all. You know, because whenever you come near it there is the tectonic tremble and the fault lines in your veins. Others step around it, or over it, or through it, but you stop and stare, trying to convince yourself that with every step forward you won't trip, your toe won't stub on air. Sometimes you walk away from the fence, and when you return, it isn't there. Often, you are stuck at the same patch of dirt that you were before. Immobile.

Mobile. The phone. It strikes you, as it does every time, that the fence might not actually exist. You picture, clear as the sky outside, that in one of the planes of the multiverse there is a version of you that has stood in the kitchen with a phone pressed to their ear and smiled as they asked for a trim.

You go and take a shower. De-greasing your hair is a chore, but it makes you feel more human. You're reluctant to leave the water, but your skin gets itchy from the hot water and your fingers are hollowed with canyons, like a strange second fingerprint, from being under for too long. Your clothes stick slightly to your skin in the humid air.

The phone is still where you left it.

Sometimes, it is that easy. Outfit and artifice go hand in hand and pull you along. It looks, it speaks, it sounds like a person, it must *be* a person. This is the sort of fence you try to trick, wander up with a fake moustache and a silly hat and bluff through it, as if it's more of a gate.

It is not that kind of fence today.

She picks you up on Friday, and she tells you all about her tattoo— pink and pretty, she says she's been wanting it for years. You believe her, but you remember when you were both in Year Nine at school and she wore flannel and had an attitude on the weekend. Did she want a pink tattoo then? It was a lot of petals for someone who liked the colour black.

Her car is too stuffy, the aircon on low (God knows neither of you can afford more petrol), the windows a little bit broken. It's too hot outside. Off the water, the breeze is cooler. She picks up a pane of glass for her father, you go get lunch, then she drops you home.

You had taken your phone with you of course, but somehow it feels like it never left that table.

Afternoon light leaks into your room one drop at a time, greenhouse warm and wholly taken advantage of by the cat. The rush of cars and the blaring horn of a train echo distantly. Swaddled in sunshine and cotton, on the verge of a nap, it's pure chance that you hear anything at all, let alone the dull vibration of your phone.

hey

Squinting at the screen, brain soft and tired and floppy, you feel your heart scrunch up into a smile.

howdy aha

what's up

not much tbh just like. Life

ahhhh yes like it has been for the last 20 years

why are you like this

anyway wanna come over? i have donuts

lol sure

It's warm inside the blanket burrito, and you're about as functional as melted cheese. It's hard to overthink. You hesitate a bit, but you punch in the number you'd saved weeks ago. And, just like you knew they could, your thumbs move. A compromise.

Hey is this jacey? I was wondering if i could book in a trim, thanks!

Send.

You haul yourself out of bed. The cat complains. You shove errant feet into jeans and then socks and then shoes, check the water bowls and lock the door when you leave. You hook your phone to the car, choose the playlist you want, turn it up. You leave the street.

And the world doesn't end.