

THE QUARRY

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Riot

Sarah had spent much of the previous week in bed, rising only at night to make a piece of toast and smoke a cigarette. Cradling her phone in her hand, she would scroll through the news, bouncing between any online media outlets she could find. She had called in sick for each of the three days she had been rostered on.

On the days she woke to silence, she would move to the large computer in the study. Her body was weak with an intolerable sadness she couldn't articulate. The larger screen aided in her rumination and she spent hours searching and reading. The photographs on a larger screen hit her harder. Faces reached out to her, bloody and weeping with a sorrow that grabbed at her chest, pulling her down lower and lower. Was this what the crushing of a soul felt like? If she, on the other side of the world, in no way affected aside from measly words on a page and photographs on a screen, if she could feel this dread, this pain, then what about them? What must they feel? Her guilt compounded the feeling of losing little bits of herself, fragments of innocence were being chipped away.

Still, she looked on. Images of masked men stalking cobblestoned streets, carrying knives bigger than she knew possible. Wailing mothers and press conference

promises. Later, in the comfort of her darkened room, she wondered what they did with the bloodstains. Perhaps a lone council worker with a wet broom and bucket slowly scraped it away, his hope and faith swirling dejectedly alongside the diluting blood.

She had not dreamt last week.

Sarah ate her muesli, unblinking as images of steel barriers and riot squad police flickered across the television screen.

‘Members of The United Patriots Front are now arriving on Stafford Street with police already here to...’

A note sat on the kitchen bench:

Will be home late. Please do your washing and make something for dinner. Being productive will make you feel better. Mum xx

‘...composed of Neo-Nazis and fundamentalist Christians and led by convicted criminal Blair Cottrell.’

Her spoon hovered over the breakfast bowl as she watched steely faces pace across the screen. Black eyes matched leather jackets embroidered with words of menacing fear.

Sarah slipped on her thongs, wincing as the rubber grazed at the blister between her toes. She was sick of thinking. Her fingers tingled with the urge to check her phone. She stood quickly, before her thoughts tangled themselves. Pulling her bag over her shoulder, she walked out the front door.

Sarah’s usual seat on the bus was taken by two teenagers, not much younger than her but exuding a confidence she lusted for. She sat a few seats behind them and put her headphones on. Both girls had long hair that fell thick and heavy across the neon blue seats.

Sarah could hear their voices over her music. One was loud, the other had a pitch that would bring dogs to their knees.

‘Noooo, don’t draw the M like that, there needs to be space for three more words, remember!’

The girl shrieked to her friend.

Sarah pulled one headphone from her ear.

A piece of black cardboard stretched across the girls’ knees, a thick white pen hovered over an *M*. They continued to argue over letter placement and size - they too must be heading to the rally.

The bus ride to Stafford Street was usually short, but the road closures meant frustrated drivers were taking detours. With every swaying stop of the bus, Sarah felt familiar, dizzying nausea. She gripped onto the seat in front and looked out the window. Crowds of people stood ahead, holding angry placards. She had arrived. As she stepped off the bus, the cool fresh air instantly releasing the knot in her stomach.

The girls got off behind her, one holding their sign, the other carrying a shared backpack. Sarah turned, curiously squinting against the mid-morning sun. The girl holding the sign noticed Sarah’s interest and raised it.

‘NAZI SCUM NOT WELCOME HERE’

Her eyes widened.

‘It’s great isn’t it?’ the girl beamed.

‘Yeah, it’s.. it’s great – amazing. I wish I had one.’

The girls continued walking alongside her.

‘Don’t worry, you can come with us, we can take turns holding it. I’m Celeste.’

The girl with the backpack held her hand out and Sarah was again struck by their self-assurance, their ability to just be.

‘Thanks, I’m Sarah.’

‘Olivia,’ The girl with the sign strode on, smiling back.

‘Let’s go!’

More people had arrived since they had left the bus and a clear separation of groups had occurred. Some wore mostly black with the Australian flag either draped across shoulders or sitting high on carried poles. Others carried placards, some just

pieces of paper with illegibly scribbled messages, others professionally printed with screaming red letters.

PROTECT OUR PEOPLE SECURE OUR BORDERS!

A quiet fell over the three girls as the crowd swept them in. Sarah looked around and was surprised by how far they'd moved.

It was like getting caught in a rip, she thought, the waves might be small, but they were strong.

The vigorous chatting between Olivia and Celeste was replaced by tentative whispers, then they stopped walking. They were on the wrong side, only by a few metres, but they were now surrounded by large, bulky men, many of whose faces were covered by bandanas, only their eyes visible. And angry. They reminded Sarah of the men she had seen on the news carrying machetes. Dizzying, she grasped Olivia's shoulder to steady herself, but quickly let go, embarrassed at the intimacy of the touch. Despite Olivia's reassuring glance, Sarah was reminded of how long it had been since she'd let someone hug her, how foreign the pushing of bodies against her felt. Skin against skin.

After tentative whispers and silent instructional head-jerks, the three slowly pushed their way towards the line of police separating the two groups. The crowd was surging forward. The air felt heavy with anticipation, like watching the lighting of fireworks, the nervous trepidation before the sparks caught and flew into the air. Sarah held her breath against the acrid odour of bodies mingled with stale tobacco. Celeste led the way, the poster secured under her arm. They moved quickly, sidestepping and hopping until a man stepped straight into Sarah's path, separating her from the girls. He was tall; she was at eye level with the FUCK ISLAM emblazoned across his thick, dirty jumper. He smirked, his teeth bleached white in perfect symmetry. Sweat beaded upon his lips, threatening to run into his open mouth.

'Excuse me,' Sarah said. She looked down and stepped to his left.

He moved to block her.

'You're not excused Lefty,' he responded to a few pitiful cheers around him.

Sarah flexed her fingers, teeth clenched, a tingling in her stomach. She searched the crowd for the girls, but they were lost in a sea of national flags and the pulsing collective rage.

She looked up, steely eyed.

‘Aren’t you hot?’

His smile gave way to a frown.

‘What?’

‘I said aren’t you hot? In that jumper. Aren’t you hot? It’s 30 degrees.’

‘The fuck? No. I’m not hot.’

Sweat dripped from his eyebrows and cascaded down hollow cheekbones.

Sarah caught sight of Olivia a few metres away, her elbows locked behind her by a man twice her size. He laughed as she kicked and screamed, looking at Sarah with a determination, a conviction that refused to be squashed.

Sarah liked making herself small, especially when the weight of the days became too much. Knees pulled to chest and blankets up to earlobes, she was almost undetectable when her mum would come to check on her. A small mound on the bed like a pile of unfolded washing. An insignificant presence. Olivia’s eyes, fierce with purpose, reminded her that there was more than blackened bedroom windows and bad news.

Sarah raised her voice, ‘You’re really sweating. I think you need to take your jumper off. You might overheat.’

Her voice, although loud and demanding was patronisingly sweet, hiding a gurgling swell of emotions. She stared into his furious blue eyes. The man puffed out his chest, pushing it towards her. Unmoving, she laughed at him loudly, heartily but without the familiar rush of warmth. She continued to laugh despite the sneer and gritted teeth that hovered inches from her face.

With a sharp kick in the shin and a flurry of angry words, Celeste had pulled Olivia from the clutches of the still-laughing protesters and they pushed their way towards Sarah, quickly pulling at her arms to leave.

‘Stupid bitch,’ the man yelled.

‘Far out girls! What were you doing?’ Celeste yelled once they had escaped the throng of thick necked nationalists.

‘He was a piece of shit,’ Sarah replied.

Olivia was quiet.

‘Well, yeah of course but the police were so far away and wouldn’t have seen any of that,’ Celeste said. She and Olivia looked concerned.

‘I’m sorry,’ Sarah said, confused. Hadn’t they met only an hour before? It had been a long time since she’d seen her friends. There was only so many times she could lie or make excuses about going out before she stopped responding and they stopped asking. She was happy with her room and the television. But she appreciated the company of these strangers today. They began moving towards the sea of colourful banners.

ONE RACE = HUMAN

A chant was beginning just as they connected with the counter protesters; a group that now seemed much larger than the other side.

‘DON’T GIVE IN TO RACIST FEAR, MUSLIMS ARE WELCOME HERE, RACIST, SEXIST, ANTI GAY, FACIST BIGOTS GO AWAY!’

The volume rose with each round and Celeste held her banner high.

Sarah yelled and sang until her voice cracked. Olivia slung her arm around Sarah’s shoulders as they swayed back and forth, the crowd moving as one.

Sarah’s feet hurt; new blisters had emerged between each toe. The United Patriots Front had shrunk considerably in size as the afternoon wore on. Their catalogue of ‘war cries’ was limited, and their voices barely heard over the much larger crowd of counter protesters. Many had slunk away as the sky turned an orange pink and the shadows grew longer. Her phone buzzed in her back pocket. Her mother: *Are you ok? Please come home now. But I am glad you got out of the house and I am hoping it was productive.*

Sarah smiled. She didn't want to think about tomorrow. Deciding whether she would stay in bed for the day sapped more energy than she had left. Today, the holes inside her had shrunk somewhat, and that was enough for now.

Darkness began to settle upon the city street. The air lost its spark, and a quiet calm fell as the police dismantled the steel barriers.

The three girls, weary but content, slowly walked back to the bus stop.