

# THE QUARRY

## Squinting Against the Sun

Laura Neill

Tess opens her eyes. A sandwich sits half an inch from her face, the crust nearly grazing the tip of her nose. A mangled mess of chicken shoved between two planks of frozen bread.

She rolls onto her back and scratches at a crust of dried spit in the corner of her mouth.

‘Right.’ Mick is sitting on an upturned milk crate in the corner of the room. ‘Two days is enough sulking time, kid. Better eat something or I’ll have the coppers round here charging me with child abuse.’

Tess hauls herself up. Little brown dots freckle her vision.

‘Can I’ve a smoke?’

‘Since when do you smoke?’

‘Please.’

Mick tosses the pouch to her and she teases out a clumsy lump of tobacco. The wax-white band of skin on her ring finger sends a spear through her empty guts.

‘Your mother rang again. The bed’s all made up for you down there. She’s offered to come get you, so you don’t have to drive.’

Her mother. Flitting around like an insect trapped inside a lampshade.

‘Just a few more days.’

‘Tess, mate. She’s bloody beside herself. And you know I’m not—’

‘Dad. I’m not here for your famous hospitality, alright?’

‘I know what you’re going through, kid. I remember it.’

‘I’m surprised you remember anything,’ her voice cracks.

Mick looks at his hands. A fly lands on the corner of the bread and begins to clean itself with its furry feet. Tess doesn’t shoo it away.

‘Hey, listen.’ Mick straightens up, clasping his hands together. ‘There’s a south-easterly blowing. Why don’t we go for a paddle later – like we used to.’

Tess watches the fly crawl over the sinews of chicken flesh. Mick rises to his feet and pauses at the door, as if about to say something else, but then changes his mind. The door closes.

She crushes her cigarette into the top of the sandwich. It extinguishes with a soft hiss.

Mick trots across the dirt the canary-yellow kayak under his arm and his wetsuit peeled down to his waist. Tess trails behind him, shrouded in a beach towel despite the heat.

She steels herself for recognition, but the streets are empty. On the corner, the surf club stands unchanged, like an old photograph. The hours she’d spent in that carpark, scratching her name on the salt-crusted breezeblocks, listening to the beer glasses clink inside. How she’d climb up the lifeguard tower to try and catch a glimpse of him behind the bar. The smell of his uniform when he’d finally emerge, stale beer mixed with a perfume too sickly-sweet to be her mother’s. Those late night “dinners” of canned spaghetti “thickened” with a raw egg. Once, a dinner roll filled with the cold horror of apricot yoghurt that she’d hurled against the wall.

When she'd finally left, there were still flecks of dried yoghurt stuck to the lounge room wall.

On the beach, the sun is blinding. A string of surfers bob like black beads in the water, waiting for the next set to roll in. The tide is retreating, leaving behind crusted tidelines of debris; scraps of fishing net, cuttlefish skeletons, scabbed stumps of cunjevoi. Mudjimba Island stands stoic against the horizon, her green bulk fuzzed in the heat. 'From here, it looks close,' Mick used to tell her, pointing out to the island before pushing her out on the kayak. 'But it'd take you a day to get 'round it. So don't get any ideas.'

Now she stood on the same beach, with the same kayak, looking out to the same island. As if nothing in the universe had shifted.

'What a pearler,' says Mick, beaming at the water.

Tess's legs are gelatinous with exhaustion. She trudges behind her father as he drags the kayak down to the shore, following the groove the hull cuts into the wet sand. They wade out until the water licks at their knees and the kayak butts and nudges between them.

Mick holds out the paddle, squinting against the sun.

'In you get.'

'Me?' A thousand excuses bottleneck.

'What's worse, out there or in here?'

The words hang suspended between them. Tess takes the paddle. Mick holds the fibreglass hull still as she climbs in and straightens out her legs.

'Go easy now, don't go trying to—'

'Dad. I know.'

They wait for a break between sets and Mick pushes her out. Tess strokes forward, slowly at first then gaining strength, dipping and scooping, rising and falling

over the increasing swell of the waves. The water grows darker and she paddles stronger, rope-burn in her shoulders and biceps. Every stroke in perfect synchronicity with her ragged breath.

Dip, scoop.

Churning water.

Slicing further, deeper into inky murkiness.

The island drew closer; the outlines of foliage now visible on the crest of the headland. At this time of day, there'd be a long afternoon shadow falling behind her. The water sparkles, gold on tile-blue. She closes her eyes, but the light remains, shifting, flickering on the insides of her eyelids.

On the shoreline, Mick stands tiny and concave like the spine of a broken shell. If she hadn't arrived unannounced yesterday, he'd be leaning on the balcony of the surf club right now, a beer in his hand, looking out to the same horizon.

He raises his arms now, in a semaphore wave.

Tess tries to turn the kayak, but her arms are heavy. The horizon gently lifts. A set is rolling in.

It seems to happen in an instant. A crystal wall of water, shards sparkling, curled, poised. A rollercoaster drop. Tess is thrown from the kayak, water crashes, blasting, deafening, her body grinding into the sand. She claws and breaks the surface, dragging a lungful of air before being forced back down again. Galaxies explode behind her eyelids. She instinctively thrashes, her toes curl and cramp. Lungs tighten, ready to explode. A lifetime of seconds.

She'd heard that trivia fills the mind in the moments before drowning, but all she sees is a series of quick, colourful images.

The green island.

Yellow fibreglass.

Red bricks, splattered with yoghurt.

Seawater scorches down the back of her throat as she tries to stroke forward. Then a yank, a tearing in her scalp. Her head snaps back and her face breaks the surface. She can hear someone else's gasping. She grows heavier and heavier and then

her heels are dragging, bumping along wet sand and she is plopped down like a rag doll on the shoreline.

Her chest swells again, this time quick and urgent. She leans forward and coughs up slimy foam and bile-infused seawater.

She coughs again, and drags in a breath, her lungs burning. A string of saliva dangles from her chin.

Breathe. In and out. Her whole body pounds.

Mick holds her upright, one arm across her chest and the other hand cupping her forehead. His grip trembles.

Tess gives his hand a squeeze.

‘Next time we’ll go on the river, eh?’ The joke rings high and he forces a chuckle.

They remain on the shore as the tide recedes further and their shadows slant long and lean across the sand. Nobody approaches them.

After a while, the pain in Tess’s chest fades, replaced with a new sensation; a growling ache in her stomach.

A piece of yellow slices her periphery, as the kayak slips back onto the shore.