

THE QUARRY

I'll Eat the Soil and Everything

Desmond Bravo

Then there was the time I found the woman, the one from Tulsa. I heard that caribou scream when they're injured—but she was very quiet, and only made a faint sound. Not like caribou. The thing with caribou is they know to stay near Canada, but an Okie—pardon me—but her, out here? I couldn't put it together. She had a work visa, a parking ticket, some payment stubs, and an old set of mints in her wallet. Not a phone, or driver's license or anything such. Her name was Sharon LaSalle, twenty-seven, out of a little village near Versailles, curls of hair over her eyes. A song in my head *—oh lemon tree, very pretty, and the lemon flower is sweet*. Apparently, she worked at a carpet store—now her body was dressing California State Route 86, just by the dumping site, the jewels of her brooch knocked and glittering all about the gravel. I feared lifting her up in case she'd fold in on herself—though I'd never seen it before. Cause I feared a lot of things then. I suppose it must've been a few hours I waited with her, by the road; nothing heard but the whistling of the far mountains. Her sand-coloured lipstick, drying on her lips.

Da and I had mashed potato and rye, one cutlet portioned to each of us—but I had to give him half of mine cause I couldn't finish. It was too tender and he'd undercooked it so that it bled still. We put her in the guest room. We'd left her door open so the heat would go in. I waited while he got through his cutlet. Marylou, my aunt and his sister—she lived in East Texas—she used to keep him sane, I think, and she stopped his smoke and things like that. She said, among other things, that my being his daughter evened him out.

'It's a terrible thing,' said Da, as he stuck one end of the straw through his teeth, cleaning. 'Won't do, won't do. Such a terrible thing.' He said he'd have to go calling around, to Salton or someplace. She was just lying out there, heels out on the highway, arms thrown to the side. Cracked femur maybe, and—when he looked her over, this is what he told me—a few broken ribs. She looked like me; hazel eyes like split soles, but it was the hair too, parted down the middle as I did it. The way she was twisted and all, he told me there's only a couple things that can break a femur; as he said this, I noticed he hadn't shaved in a week. He held his mug with both hands, and his habit was weak tea and a pipe after seven.

Why was I there, out on the highway? Same reason the two men were out there, nearby, at the dumping site—combing through a set of bar tables and soiled couches just lying among the wheat grass. It was for the trucks; either to see them, or trawl through what they unloaded. They thundered down from a deep place in the valley, cutting through the wide desert—but it wasn't a brash or young kind of violence, it was old faces behind the wheel, stern and unchanging. Sometimes I'd try to flag them down but they'd rarely stop, hardly ever to talk. I thought all I'd have to do is hitch a ride and go on till I'd passed a couple states and landed in one without guts and coat-hangers and mescaline.

Any one of them should have seen the woman for at least a few hundred feet, but they didn't stop for her. I thought she'd been shot when I saw her. How long had she been lying there? And I did go over, sun in my eyes, heat on my forehead, I did go over to her. I checked her pulse—but then the two men shone their eyes over to me. I called out to them; ran past the bollards trying to flag them down, a heat feeling its way through my chest. They climbed on up, back onto the highway where they had parked a dented car, just a bunch of scavengers—smug round noses, coals in their eyes. I shouted after them. They turned the ignition and sped down the highway, going north toward Salton Sea. With the inexplicability of the situation, our being there, and the drifting plain; all three of us, I suppose, considered ourselves guilty.

It's a sort of thing you do—you make a choice. I carried her to the house myself, placed her in the back room, and wrapped her in two quilt layers, the fuzzy one on the inside cause she looked cold. Da didn't even ask anything or make a fuss when I brought her in, he just came and helped and we carried her into the room together. We took turns treating her; both of us, at separate times. I'd bring a pail of water sometimes, to keep her. Days would pass and there'd be no change; no calls made. She grew pale too, so dreary I had to step outside; saw a tanker filling up on diesel just beside our home, the driver paid my Da eleven dollars for the time. Da asked the driver if he usually picked up hitchhikers.

'Depends,' he said.

He left the station, went over by his cargo vessel; part of a LANCER fleet who ferry galvanized steel, among other things. I sat near the pump, and watched him bob up and down, shifting his mass side to side. He had a lazy eye that took a while to find you. Earlier, he smiled at my Da, but he lost the expression when he came to me—I made eye contact with him, surprised by how it felt to have his eyes on me, to feel my eyes on him. Then he saw me looking at the thing in his hand.

He looked down. 'Dollar-ten gum. You want a piece?'

I nodded; he slipped me one. Then I unwrapped the piece and bit—it was tough. We watched each other. The wind lifted his hair. Odd thing was, he'd never cuss like the other drivers.

'I'm hooked ever since I worked in Mecca,' he said, taking one in his mouth. 'It's also a matter of I like cold cuts too. Certain things I just can't give up,' he said. He was trying to get me to talk, but I couldn't really get the words out. 'Well, it's just the way I was made,' he added. After he left, I remembered how he watched me, his jaw chasing the stick of gum. He had a way that when he stood over you, you seemed to be in his shadow no matter where the sun was.

Da came home late, he poured himself a glass of milk, sat, sipped it. He got up and went over to her room—he didn't speak to me. He'd done this before, during the day, he would go and check on her and stand there, minutes at a time. Couple times, I saw him. It was never any more than him with his fingers flowing through her hair; but it wasn't a father's hand he laid on her. I knew he hadn't made any calls. Sometimes I'd go in too, drawn, I suppose, to her dress, to her perfume that had begun to wane; her body, still, of a

new kind. All around the room, the scent of smashed lemon and saltwater. The sediment on her nose, from dust, from oil, the knotted-up pores—the glow that was there and not—in a sense I wanted what she had, lying there, before him, in the bed quiet.

Da returned and sat back at the table. He twirled a bit of his hair, breathed in, and it seemed like he wasn't ever going to speak. He took his pipe out, lit it, and instead of stepping outside, he just sat there and kept smoking it. Stared straight ahead. It was like all that interested him was the table wood. I knew she was gone; I tried to look at the table too. With his finger, he reached and dragged over a small placemat. There were nutshells and things from all the dinners on the table, and it wasn't taken care of; those past few days, we didn't really clean or anything. He scooped the shells into the placemat and then dusted them onto the floor. They fell like sawdust, or mites, but when they fell to the floor you lost sight of them. I didn't understand why it mattered now, to clean the table. Then I was asked to get the shaver. I did so, brought it over. And I started on him. By the end, you could see his jawline again, slumped and unpronounced. I thought maybe I could just up and float away, like they show the soul in cartoons. But I knew that I was to be me, only me, and no one else, not ever—would always be—stuck as me. All the filth, it stuck to me.

Morning-time, Da was standing over her again, steadying himself by the light that broke through a slight access in the window. He leant down and said, 'We never took off her jewellery.' He held her lobe and—so carefully—he undid the clasp of her earring, a tiny orb, and removed it. Then he did the other ear. He placed the pair on the headboard. That's when I felt this burning, it was strumming up inside me—certainly, I felt it, and I didn't think on it.

'Ain't it a good thing?' I said. He flinched. 'Cause she was trouble and she might've got us in trouble.' I watched him; he wouldn't budge. 'You were always with her,' I added, and saw how that made him brush at his hair, cause he was hot.

He turned and he only partially widened his eyes at me. He tilted his head and he twirled his hair, 'I don't think you mean that.' And he kept repeating it over and over. 'You don't mean it.' Then he looked at the headboard and then to her. He felt her cheek, his hands fell to the fabric of her dress. I didn't move. He brushed her hair; his throat was dry. Then he took up one of her earrings and placed it gently on her forehead; she, still as a bone. I watched as he did it. He stood back. He told me to watch and see. This earring would not shift its place from now till night; and under darkness, that's when he'd bury her. He looked

so old and fragile, I thought if I just pushed him over, he'd crumble into a million pieces, scatter, till there'd be nothing left.

If you look over the horizon you can see the Mexican panhandle, down by the cavernous plains. The little houses there, with pennant flags across them like those you see on racing tracks. Down that way, not a single mountain in sight, and all of it lighted. But look north, and there was Salton Sea, the surrounding sand turned grey, lined with fish bones, protrusions, hard shells. I was over by the same ditch as where I found her. All I could see was an old catcher's mitt, with a sock rolled partway over it. I stopped over by the highway and waited. And waited. I pursed my lips, and waited. I wore a beige-coloured short dress and a set of slippers, and I was wearing her earrings.

The truck rolled over from the distance and the driver stopped by me, off the road. He looked familiar. He looked at me with his lazy eye and nodded, 'Miss dollar-ten? Get on, if you're going south.' The truck was a hulking thing, and broad on its side the LANCER banner, red and white, in great, sharp letters. I told him that wasn't possible. He looked at me again. I was just waiting for him to say something else—he wasn't going to let me go easy, I'd known that.

'Those are some funny-looking earrings,' he said. I felt them, hers; they were cool on my skin. He smiled so that his cheeks fell out a little, and his face went rosy. He looked sweet but also a little sickly.

'I want to go north,' I said.

'Figures.' He shifted on his seat. 'I'm not really going north until tomorrow. You come with me into town, and then I'll take you up to Salton Sea.' His smile again, those cheeks, his teeth all knotted up in black.

I took each step, carefully up into the behemoth; the metal handrail stung with heat and the truck vibrated, it was like climbing into a machine gun. We got out onto the road.

'Your daddy won't come calling?'

I didn't answer—the driver said he didn't mind anyhow. He asked me a great many questions though I didn't think much of them. My answers were always plainspoken and I don't think he liked that about me. He would, every now and again, look at me and just smile, silently. Even when I wasn't talking, he'd just look on over and I knew where and how he was looking. I wasn't young, that much was true—and he knew that. He just looked at me, those eyes closing around me like an open jaw. 'You're a very pretty girl. Anybody ever tell you that?'

After he made his drop off, we went back the way we came, continuing north. We passed the house and the station.

'I haven't been to Salton Sea in a while,' he shouted, over the open window. 'When I was a kid my dad used to take me duck hunting and fishing up there. Can't do that anymore. Rising salt in the lake killed off most of the fish, so the ducks can't eat.' He cleared his throat and kept his eyes forward. 'Could you hand me over something, just under the dash,' he tilted his head slightly, 'no not there, under there—yeah. Glove box.'

I handed him a small tube of gum. He unwrapped a packet and raised the piece of gum to his mouth, bit down and pulled, stringing it out. Then he gathered up the rest just using his mouth. It was fascinating, how he worked for it. 'And then there's those people in Ohio,' he said. 'Poor souls. They've said it's about twelve now, missing. My mother, she called me; she's all the way down some-other-place, and she asked me if I'm okay.' He snorted. 'I'm okay.'

I said I didn't know about it, which I suppose was true. But now that I knew, it didn't seem to change a thing about them or me. I'd never been to Ohio.

'Sonofabitch!' His gum had fallen out. He held the wheel with one hand and felt around and then brought it back up to his mouth. We swerved a little, and it jolted me—and I saw them clear as anything, ahead of us. I shouted out.

He slammed the breaks down and the truck was slow and turgid, like an old creature, it resisted, then it came to rest on a stretch of ditch—the load heaved on one side and the cargo spun so that it was almost partway off the highway. I was sweating.

I jumped out and down the steps. Ran forward, away from him, and stood on the highway. We were close to the Sea, but we weren't going any further.

Earlier, just as we were coming to that stretch of road—I held my breath a little. I kept trying to think of what twelve people looked like, if you stood them side by side.

‘You don’t suppose there’s any reason for all this?’ I asked.

And he said, ‘I don’t suppose much at all, but I know it’s people.’

I saw the plains out there and a small field of fennel bulbs—and the harvesters all up and down, tall and short men, clipping at them. And then I could almost feel the bulbs in my hands; dust, dirt in my hands. Piles of dirt on top of me. Gathering dirt. Gathering all around me and piling onto my body, trying to suffocate me.

And there I was, standing on the highway as the driver panicked beside me and couldn’t find the words anymore. Before me were about four motionless bodies, thrown or tossed about—and cold too, and distant, so that their eyes were glazed and open. Two men, a young woman, and a little girl—and dirt all along them and among them. I thought that I could eat that dirt out from under them, eat all that rotten dirt and send it away.

The last thing that he had said to me, and he squinted his eyes, saying ‘I was gonna tell you something but I forgot it, I forgot what I was going to say. Here, do you know where we are—’

Gradually, as I walked between them, I began to think that they were—and I know this—that they were all my children and I could see myself in all of them. I felt it somewhere, like a heat burning its way out. I wanted something to come out, anything. I’m ready now you sonofabitch—you fucking sonofabitch, you devil, come on out! Come on. I was wailing out all the way to hell and back, even to the distant mountains, cause it all seemed about to wake up—but was piercingly silent.

‘—very soon we’ll be approaching the once-great Salton Sea,’ he said before. ‘It’s amazing how many people gather about when they learn a place is dying.’