

THE QUARRY

Dependence Day

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I sit on the window seat and peer through the glass, gazing out into the midnight velvet. The starry starry night is made a vibrant Van Gogh, with those distant lights scattering the tranquil sky. The brilliant stars are ablaze like radiant snowflakes, calling out to me as they each promise a new life in the gloom. I place a bruised hand flat against the cool glass. If only I could reach out to them somehow. They're so miniscule even against my pinkie finger, yet so beyond my grasp. However, against the familiar white and black sky, I quickly notice the flash of metallic silver rushing towards me through the window's blurred reflection, and I instinctively remove my hand from the window. My father's crushed beer can had bounced off my foggy handprint with a loud clunk and landed between my blackened legs.

'Fetch me another one, why don't you?' my father grunts. I turn and scowl at him for having interrupted my solace, his plump figure slouched before the television. Despite my

resentments, I oblige and walk briskly to the kitchen. I hear the anchor-woman's soothing voice from the TV as I pass the mouldy sofa, her tone neutral despite having to relay an assortment of dreadful realities.

'Now for today's breaking news, another unidentified aircraft has just arrived on our soil, marking its fifth occurrence this week in the United States alone.'

Another visit? I wonder what it is they seek? As I reach through the refrigerator and retrieve the Miller Lite from its chilly interior, I look over at the back of my father's seated figure and imagine their eventual disappointment at discovering nothing of significance here.

'You take any longer back there and I'll make them bruises bigger than they already are, you hear me?' my father threatens from the living room. His booming voice reverberates throughout the house and the words fade into nothingness, perhaps uniting with his countless other threats. I shut the refrigerator door and walk back to him with quick steps, presenting the frosty can just beyond his shoulder. Snatching the drink out from my hand, he opens it with haste and drinks its contents fiercely, devoid of any gratitude. I make my way back to the window seat and continue listening to the anchor-woman's disclosure of tonight's hot topic, a safe distance from my father.

'Multiple residents of suburban Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania witnessed the arrival of the aircraft but were also quick to dispatch of its mystery passengers.'

The screen transitions to grainy video footage of the triangular mass that remained between the rows of Tudor houses, perched like a bird about to take flight. Its metallic body, surrounded by onlookers, resembles that of the previous four aircrafts that had appeared in other parts of the country; its base decorated with those glaring white lights. The news then cuts to footage of two blanketed bodies being wheeled away on stretchers before returning to the anchor-woman's calm figure.

'And now, here we have fellow resident Martin Louis, one of the nation's proclaimed heroes responsible for the purging of the strange visitors.' I jolt back as my father had let out a sudden guffaw across from me.

'Way to go buddy,' he cheers, clapping. I scoff quietly so he doesn't hear. He never took a liking to foreigners, let alone the extra-terrestrial. I glare at his bulbous figure, his clammy hands clutching onto his beer can as though it was his lifeline, before shifting my

attention back to the television screen. Presented before me now was a close-up of a middle-aged man with dishevelled hair. He spoke in a southern drawl, with a toothy grin.

‘I took them sons-of-guns out with my G98, popped ‘em right between their two eyes. The first one came out of the thing slow and steady, its skin as pale as winter’s snow. People around me were panickin’, backing away into their mothers and husbands, but I stayed right where I stood. It was holdin’ this rectangular-shaped thingy and it was about to put it up to what I believe was its mouth before I took ‘em out, and it fell back like a ragdoll. Wasn’t about to take no chances. There was this red sploosh that had gone oozin’ out from where the bullet struck. The whole thing was nuttier than a squirrel’s turd I’m tellin’ you. And then the last one came out, but this one was little. Skin brown like caramel, it came runnin’ out and charged right at me, screamin’. But little did the little shit know, I had put the bullet right through its head before—’

I jolt again as my father let out another of his hearty laughs, which were reserved only for such merciless happenings.

‘That’s how you deal with them fuckers. Hope they take the hint from here on out,’ he says, smirking. I shake my head only slightly, so he doesn’t see, as the impartial anchor-woman returns on-screen.

‘As mass hysteria continues to spread across our great nation, secretary of defence Marcus Esther has issued another public statement regarding the emergence of unidentified aircrafts, urging civilians to steer clear from any potential future visits. In addition, the United States Air Force has decided to incite “critical action,” taking full responsibility for protecting—’

The broadcast was suddenly intercepted by TV static, the ongoing black and white fuzz similar to that of an abstract moving picture accompanied by steady audible buzzing.

‘What the shit?’ my father bellows in frustration. With a flushed face and gritted teeth, he stands and trudges towards the television, through the sea of empty beer cans, and gives it a good beating. Expectedly, it was to no avail as the droning static remains. And yet, he continues to strike it with the flat of his palm repeatedly, as if it were my own body. I watch and listen to the incessant thumping, again, and again, until what had been the black and white distortion was finally replaced by silent blackness, against jagged cracks which now pervade the screen. I watch as his head slowly turns towards me, his chest heaving

rapidly. Our glowing-red eyes meet momentarily as he stands enveloped in darkness, while I remain seated, bathed under the effervescent moonlight.

‘Why don’t you go to bed, Aeryn?’ he snarls, foamy saliva sprouting through his bared teeth. I comply and get up from the window seat immediately, allowing the surrounding darkness to swallow me as I pace towards the dilapidated staircase. ‘I’ll be with you shortly,’ he adds as I ascend the stairs.

I enter my room and slam its lockless door shut before lying on my bed, teeth rattling in the chilly atmosphere. I look through the half-open window, up at the dazzling sky once again. The stars are more luminous now than before, I realise, as I watch the blip of a shooting star soar through the night sky. They come and go unexpectedly, but I appreciate the warmth they generate as they pass by. But then, that familiar cold feeling creeps in as I hear his crescendoing footsteps, heavy against the peeling wood, and ceasing once he has reached my bedroom door. His menacing shadow is cast through the door’s bottom gap, and I grasp my blanket, pulling it up over my chin. I focus on the cragged ceiling as I listen to the hinges creak and watch his shadow gradually expand as he prowls towards me at a leisurely pace. Close by, I hear the familiar sound of his belt unbuckling, followed by the slow undoing of his zipper. I look back through the window, up at the shining stars, and as I sense his hot liquor-scented breath against my face, I watch them gradually extinguish, one by one, leaving the sky a total black void... a blanket of darkness.

With a closed eye and a conscious mind, I continue lying in the freezing darkness, tossing and turning endlessly over crumpled sheets. The obnoxious cacophony of chirping field crickets, alongside my father’s snoring from the adjacent room, only heightened my insomnia. The throbbing from the fresh bruises along my arms and legs didn’t help either. However, my frustrations eventually subside as I hear the sudden sounds of deep humming and whistling from outside, followed by the profound buzzing of a trumpet. Could it be?

I get up and approach my bedroom window. The breezy air had turned into gusts of warm wind. I look out at the open meadow, unable to locate the sound’s source as only the typical sights of the Missouri countryside appear before me; the ever-swaying greenery

amongst vast marshlands and the occasional car headlights zooming by in the distance. That was until the triangular mass had materialised before me, hovering above the flat expanse of grass. I watch, perplexed, as three dazzling white lights slowly transpire, one by one, as did its burnished body. It looked just like the others that were broadcasted throughout this week's news.

I immediately scamper out of my room and run down the staircase, skipping three steps at a time. I couldn't believe it... they were actually here, of all places! I continue descending the stairs and, as I reach the first floor, I am suddenly stopped by his sweaty palm, placed against my bare chest. I was so engrossed by what I had seen that I had failed to acknowledge his stout silhouette before me. In his other hand, I could see the outline of his .308 Winchester rifle. He places an index finger against his lips and lets out a faint 'Shhh.'

'Stay put, girl,' he commands with a raised hand and sets off towards the front door. Again, as to not challenge him, I abide by merely making my way to the window seat and gaze through the now steamy glass, at the landed aircraft.

'Who's there?! Show yourself!' was the first thing I heard my father yell as he stood out on the porch, his legs quivering like jelly. While it was a shame I was to remain inside, it was satisfying to watch him in such a vulnerable state. His gun's barrel was instantly facing the aircraft. It stood on three legs, so its bottom remained hovering over our grass a good 200 inches. It wasn't too large, nor was it too big; about the average size of a tennis court. I knelt before the glass, transfixed, watching the vehicle's lights go out as a set of stairs descended from its base. I looked intently up at the head of the staircase, where there was nothing for a while but steaming darkness.

But then I saw it... a moving outline of a figure within. I climbed subconsciously through the window and tippy-toed my way towards my father.

'What the fuck are you doing here? I told you to stay inside,' he says in a hushed tone as I arrive at his side. But I don't listen this time and, instead, I edge closer to the aircraft as the shadow from within enlarges. I hear the sharp cocking of the rifle behind me, followed by my father's set of muttered profanities.

And then, what appears to be a pale bare foot has emerged from the gloom, followed by another. What came next were a pair of naked legs.

‘Get back here, Aeryn,’ my father shouts this time. ‘Before I shoot the both of you.’ I remain where I stand, however, and continue to watch as it descends further down the aircraft’s staircase. What looks like its groin, followed by its exposed stomach, manifests from the darkness. As it makes its way a little further down, it places a hand on the staircase’s railing, while the other hand holds a rectangular object, seemingly the device that Martin Louis had described in the news from earlier. By then, my father’s third and fourth arm have grabbed the gun’s stock, for steadier aim.

And suddenly, with a tumultuous bang, the unknown figure tumbles down the set of stairs, like a ragdoll, landing with a great thump on the grass. Wafts of smoke escape from the rifle’s barrel beside me.

‘No!’ I yell and begin running towards the aircraft and fallen figure. I promptly hear my father’s own fleeting footsteps from behind as he quickly catches up to me. My dad grips my arm tight as we both tower over the body.

‘What the hell are you thinking? You’re gonna get us both kill—’ he began to say, gasping for air, before I escaped his grasp and knelt before the injured visitor. It was a brave course of action stimulated through seemingly unfounded courage. Perhaps it was due to the other-worldly being that lay before me, which made everything in this world seem inconsequential. By now, I had expected my father to have grabbed me by my neck, lifting me up from the ground, though that had yet to occur. Whatever facial expression he may have at this very moment, I do not know, for I have devoted full attention to the body, now lying in a pool of red liquid.

It has two short legs which sort of resembles ours, and I see the bullet from my father’s rifle lodged inside one of its kneecaps, from where the red liquid exudes. Its hanging genitals looks just like my father’s, albeit smaller. But it only has two arms, much shorter than ours. I inspect its small hands and notice that it has only five fingers on each one. I grasp its trembling left hand, which was caked in the red liquid, with my six fingers and it encloses mine with its own. It feels deathly cold to the touch and its skin is so unbelievably smooth and light, as opposed to our dark blue and purple complexions.

I continue to scan its body upwards. As I observe its head, I see these weird curly brown strands that protrude from the top of it, whereas ours are merely smooth and clear. And while its ears do look similar to ours, its face bears a pair of dull-brown eyes instead of a single glowing-red one. There is also this strange thing jutting out from underneath its eyes.

Its tip consists of two holes which expand and contract repeatedly. Below this is its half-open mouth where, inside, contains many chattering teeth that are unusually flat at their bottoms.

I almost stagger, however, as it suddenly opens its mouth wide, and makes a high-pitched whistling sound. Its hand's tightened grip had prevented me from falling back.

'Please help me,' it utters with a voice, while too light and feeble, was hoarse and wheezy like ours. And as it seems, it speaks our language too.

At once, I hear my father's approaching footsteps as his shadow engulfs its body completely.

'We must get rid of it,' my father orders. 'We don't know what the thing is capable of. It could be dangerous.'

Wordlessly, I slowly stand and face him. It was obvious that the creature wasn't from this world, but that doesn't necessarily mean danger. The only danger present at this very moment is the thing that stands before me.

I sit on the window seat beside his bandaged body, with the rifle in all four of my steady hands, and peer through the glass, gazing out into the midnight velvet. It, who remains sprawled across the grassy field, illuminated by the aircraft's gleaming lights, ceases to be a threat. The starry starry night is made a vibrant Van Gogh once again, with those distant lights scattering the tranquil sky, coming closer and closer to us. I look down at him as he lies next to me with closed eyes. I had heard him speak through the rectangular device, once I had brought him in to safety. 'This one doesn't appear to be hostile,' and 'Come to Missouri, it's safe here,' were some of the things I heard him say while he looked at me. So now, I gaze at the sky once more. The brilliant stars are ablaze like radiant snowflakes, calling out to me as they each promise a new life in the gloom. I place a bruised hand flat against the cool glass as they come even closer now. And, as the metallic bodies that surround them slowly emerge from the darkness, their triangular masses slowly transpiring, I find myself smiling for the very first time.