

THE QUARRY

Platform 14

Gemma Boffa

Trains rush past.

An old piece of machinery, dripping in graffiti, opens its doors with a groan and people spill out onto the platform. They push and pull. As a mass, they gravitate towards the exit. The group collects people like droplets along a stream, leaving the station to carry on.

Worker bees stride in shoes that have been shined down to the rim by women bred to stay inside. Their hungry fingers, hairy and plumped with expensive sterling silver rings, grip briefcases with intensity. They angle their bodies past the rest of the crowd, eager to take their first step inside the office, to fill a glass from a tap of instant sparkling water, to smack their wet lips together and sigh and mention to the others trailing behind them how this truly is the life.

School girls chatter and laugh, lounging in the sun on the overweight platform. They flit back and forth through conversations, chewing sticks of gum with gnawing, wide jaws. They pop spearmint bubbles into the faces of stubbly teenage boys while they whine about the upcoming formal and how they haven't even found a date yet. The gaps between their teeth tighten within metal braces until there's no space left behind. Their hair braids frame youthful smiles and they dance along the station, ignoring the bustle of people around. Queenie sits on the bench, paint peeling around her thighs. One of her lenses is smudged, quickly she wipes her glasses against a decrepit edge of the worn-out jacket that lives in her bag. She hurriedly squashes them back onto her nose and subconsciously smooths down little strands of hair to frame her face. She recommences her surveillance.

The commotion of the morning on Platform 14 brushes past her as it usually does, and she sits, safe in her little spot where her initials are carved into the belly side. She watches, waiting for the tap of a steel-capped cane to jut out from the rest of the noise. For a one-sided smile to appear out of the mass like relief from a dust storm. For the blend of body odour, cigarettes and lavender to rise from the smell of trackwork and greet her.

Young women in active wear stretch their limbs against handrails, sipping from ambiguous plastic bottles and snapping generic fitness tips at each other that they all read in the same article. University students shuffle in a coffee-deprived sludge, sleep embedded in the corners of their eyes. A woman plays with her dog next to the staircase, feeding it snacks every time it performs a miniscule trick. An old man picks at his teeth with a weathered, dirt-encrusted finger. A scruffy teenage boy waits by the cubicles.

Bull shuffles awkwardly. The smell from the toilets works its way under his skin, his head, it permeates into his clothes. He gazes at the city buzzing by, dazed by the sun streaming through the filthy, scratched Perspex that borders the ticket gates. Squinting, his eyes flick to the plastic banded watch on his freckled wrist. It reads twelve minutes past eight – Sloth is late.

He doesn't exactly know what Sloth looks like. What if Sloth is already here and they've both been waiting, side by side, in the station for each other? No. He glances at the

people around them. The text simply said Sloth would be wearing a *red flannel* but Bull can't spot a single lick of colour through the constant stream of people, bustling through the six ticket gates, trying to force their bodies into empty spaces. Bull sighs. His hand grips against the money in his pocket, sticky with sweat that drips between his fingers. Ninety dollars. Rolled up neatly and tied up with a rubber band that Julie found lying around.

A red flannel suddenly appears from within the crowd.

'Bull?' His voice is deeply Australian, thick with a country accent. His smile, Bull thinks, is somehow too confident for a twenty-two-year-old boy with a receding hairline.

Bull nods, his fingers shaking inside his pocket. Sliding up and down against the notes. His heart stammers against a bird-boned ribcage, choking in between each pulse.

'Huh. For someone named Bull, I thought you would be a bit – bigger?'

Bull puffs out his tiny chest. Sloth could definitely take him in a fight. 'So that makes you Sloth then. Makes sense you would be late.' Somehow, his voice does not break.

If Julie was here, she would be hissing at him in tiny stilted breaths. *What are you doing Bull?! Pissing off our one contact?!* But Julie wasn't here. She was stuck in a stuffy school hall using a scratchy, borrowed pencil to finish off the last of her trial English exam. Bull has to step up.

Sloth pauses then laughs. 'Fair enough,' he says, shaking his head. 'So – uh – just the seven today?'

Bull looks around, fervent eyes darting from pole to pole. No one seems to be watching. In the chaos of morning coffee and frantic phone calls, no one is paying attention to the freckly teenage boy in an oversized jacket, torn t-shirt and rolled up jeans, awkwardly shuffling in his worn-out shoes next to the bathrooms. He pauses, locking eyes with the young woman sitting on the scratched bench, her glasses glinting in the sun. He's seen her here before, he thinks. Always in the same spot. Never doing anything other than watching

the people around her. For a moment, their eyes remain locked. Then the woman looks away, head shaking.

Bull pulls out the clammy roll of notes with a weak hand, wincing as he wipes his palms on his paint splattered pants. Sloth takes the money almost lazily, barely in any rush, pockets it with ease, and pulls out a strong-smelling bag. Its perfume bleeds through the open-air building. It seeps into the pointed stiletto heels of ladies waiting in line for the singular, decrepit cubicle; it soaks into the holes of the brickwork that crumbles around them.

In a school hall on the other side of the bridge, surrounded by mismatched school uniforms of green and white, Julie sighs. The point of her pencil prickles against the paper, then snaps. The tiny trickle of lead rolls over her exam. She blinks at it. Then at the now useless pencil still clutched in her dry, small hand. Minutes bleed into each other, seconds swirling together. Around her, frantic pens slide across printed lines in a last-minute dash to record half-hearted answers. The giant clock at the front of the hall, which until this point had been ticking in a rather insidious way, buzzes, signalling the end of the final exam. Students are jolted out of their academic hazes and pass up their papers. Sunshine greets tired, weary eyes, as they congregate on the lawn, discussing how question three was somehow impossible to answer. Julie looks at her frayed, sweaty fabric watch. Bull must be finished by now.

The young man thrusts his hand out. Clutches the bag. Tucks it into his pocket. Departs.

Trains rush past.

Queenie crosses her legs, her glasses twinkling in the light from the rising sun, the glare sparkling across her eyes. Chaos engulfs her. Peak hour descends into a mid-morning shuffle. Late risers stagger from platform to platform, seeking shelter and a shaded place to sit, where they can wait for a destination that suits their fancy.

From her vantage point, she can see the group of new mothers coagulating, ready for the ten-thirty-two train into the city. Every week they meet, strollers clogging up the flow of

passengers. The women fuss over their spawn. Feeding them packaged puree and daintily wiping at the miniature mouths, that so resemble their own. A little piece of mashed pear manages to escape. A high-pitched squawk beckons from one pram, and then another, until each mother is bent over her child, regurgitating soothing words of comfort that their own mother must have murmured to them at one point or another.

She lets her eyes rest on them for a dangerous, overextended minute. Something rises in her, something she wishes she could keep clenched down. The mothers push their identical strollers onto the carriages, laughing with each other absentmindedly. They disappear inside the train, carried away to the zoo or the movies or whatever adventure awaits today. She watches the train depart with a sigh that begins deep in her ribcage and rises through to her eyes. Crescent moon nail marks have been cut into her palms without her even realising. Slowly, she lets go. Adjusts her glasses. Places a stick of cheap, fruity gum in her mouth that releases a wave of mild flavour, inducing a small rush of saliva. The tiny underlay of mint causes her nostrils to slightly flare. Queenie pauses. Absentmindedness temporarily incapacitates her. The lazy sun meanders in the sky, pathless. It urges her to lose focus, to relax. She recommences watching.

Julie steps onto Platform 14. Her socks sit lazily around her freckled ankles. Her tight brown curls hold all the humidity that the sun could spare. Her fabric watch has amassed sweat and it clings, sticky and tight, to her wrist like the wisps of a dandelion, until the wind curls through the station, and it shimmies its way to freedom. Julie takes in the old couple sitting on the wrong platform, their lined hands clasped together as they wait for a train that won't come for them. She sees the mop-haired banker leaving early for a lunch meeting which, he hopes, will result in a promotion. She sees the young woman with red-rimmed glasses watching the crowds in the same way that mirrors her own. She sees Bull, waiting for her against the ticket barrier, a nervous smile stretched across his pale face, a smile that relaxes and morphs into something sweeter and younger when he spots her.

They approach each other slowly, cautiously.

'How did it go?' Her voice is scratchy and tired, Bull notices. Purple lids are drooped over her brown eyes, long thin lashes flicking side to side as she keeps careful watch of their

surrounds. In her faded school uniform, she looks like a child that someone let loose onto the world, a child that knows a little too much. He coughs a little, clearing a murky throat.

‘I picked it up, all good.’ Uncertainty clouds his face for a second that passes too slowly for Julie’s liking. She grabs his hand with a possessiveness, a tightness that causes him to grimace ever so lightly, a grimace that Queenie spies from her seat.

She’s spending too much time watching the young couple. But her attention continues to wander, with nothing to bring her back to Platform 14. There’s no mixed blend of cigarettes and lavender. There’s no tap of a steel cane. There’s nothing keeping her here. She turns away from the two, twisting in her seat.

Queenie bites into a doughnut, the powder and jam bursting with unlimited sweetness, soaking into her gums and making her nostrils flare from the overextended release of sugar. The sky turns a crisp starfish blue above her sun-drenched head. Midday arrives and departs with a sigh, and afternoon sheds her skin like a cocoon, spinning silky clouds into the world.

The worker bees’ hungry hands exhausted from a day of repetitive droning, make the passage home, once again visiting Platform 14. Their belts are tightened over bulging stomachs. Their shoelaces, strapped like armour, contain wandering feet. As the sun sets on another day bred to look just like the others, they sit in pairs on carpeted train seats. For a second, they allow themselves to wonder about the point of it all. But that thought is squashed, alongside all others, once they draw out their individual devices and allow the news of the day to be filtered to them through a lens. Queenie can’t help but imagine them travelling home to families that sit around the dinner table and say prayer together. Every night they tuck their little girls into bed with a protective swoop of their wings that guarantees sweet dreams.

And the schoolgirls, with their tight braces and even tighter braids, head to after school jobs where they work for a mediocre wage so they can save up money for parties and alcohol and festivals and drugs. They study on weekend mornings, scraping for an A but only ever attaining a B. They smoke and hide the cigarettes in between their socks so that their little sister never finds the pack. White collar dreams of offices and law firms and

conferences on medicine infiltrate their study sessions until all they think of is working for that ATAR that their private school promised would be granted. They ride the trains at midnight, pulling their skirts down over too-orange knees, watching the world from the safety of a carriage that delivers them almost straight to their door. And they sleep in beds that are remade everyday by a mother who wistfully remembers how she felt when she rode the trains with her friends.

Night descends on the back of a summer haze. The click of cicadas ebb and flow, drowning out the conversations that are beginning to die down. Queenie dreams. Queenie waits. She sits at the station, watching the hordes of people going home, looking down the line of train carriages for the familiar steel-tipped clink of her father's cane. For that one-sided smile. For that scent that sometimes she swears she made up. And it doesn't come. And neither does he.

She drifts home, her soul thin like the edge of a crisp butterfly wing. Her bed offers no solace, and she only sleeps to pass the time until the morning trains push off from platform 14. There she will be, tomorrow and the next day and the next day. Watching and waiting.