

THE QUARRY

Inchman

Stuart Neal

Joshua watched as his mum, Bernadette, plugged in the cracked kettle. He sat on a stool on the other side of their small kitchen, with his head leaning back against the wall. She pushed the button down to start it boiling, the circle around it glowing a faint orange before failing. The pain began to fade in his leg. He wasn't sure if it was actually getting better, or if he was just getting used to it. Still in a daze, he reached down to his leg and felt around the enormous red swelling just above his ankle. The centre mark had barely bled at all, but the surrounding bump felt like something hot was trying to break out from beneath his skin, even after his mum had put the cream on it. She made her way across the room and took his hand away from his leg. She rubbed the back of his hand, trying to soothe him. He could only look at the dim floor, at his bare feet and his mum's floppy sandals. It wasn't yet dark enough to turn the lights on. He wished he didn't know what was going to happen next. The shuddering steam rose from the open lip of the kettle as the gurgling water began to echo around the room.

He had only been playing. It had been past the hottest part of the day, so he hadn't put his hat on. The concrete path had still been warm under foot, so he had skipped across it on the balls of his feet before reaching the cooler grass. He had squished his toes into the soft soil and pretended that they were worms.

The yard wasn't as big as he would've liked. But he could turn it into anything he wanted. Yesterday he had decided it was the surface of the moon. He had made craters in the bare dirt. He had still been trying to think of what today would be when the ant bit him. He had thought it had just been a piece of grass brushing up against his ankle, disturbed by the wind. He had yelped, tried to get rid of the ant, and started to limp back to the searing path all at the same time. He had fallen a few times before getting off the grass, but by then she had heard his screaming.

The wire door clattered back into its frame as Joshua and his mother walked back out into the yard. The sun was falling from view, lighting the clouds from underneath. He felt the faint rays flash onto his leg, reminding him of the pain. He kept up with his mother as she took her time, watching her every step as she carried the kettle, one hand on the handle, the other with an oven mitt supporting the base.

'Look, there's one just there,' his mother said, gesturing with her foot, 'Can you step on it, please? It's hard with the kettle.'

Most of the heat had already faded from the ground, but she had made him put on his shoes anyway. He shut his eyes and stamped. He hoped he missed. After she had carried him inside, calmed him down and rubbed some cream over the wound, she had gone out to find the inchman nest. It hadn't taken her very long to find it. She had asked him to come with her for this part. It didn't sound like a request.

'Why do we have to do it?' he asked.

'It's not your fault,' she responded, without taking her eyes off the kettle.

'Couldn't we just bury the hole?'

She paused to steady the kettle and looked down at him with soft eyes. The expression on her face told him that more questions wouldn't get him anywhere. He averted his eyes and they continued at their slow pace.

The nest opening was about the width of his thumb. It was in a sparse patch of the yard, with only a few yellowing stems lying almost flat against the ground around it. Joshua couldn't remember it being there yesterday. He could see small black movements through the wilting grass. His mother bent over, cradling the side of the kettle as she poured. Steam rose from the mouth of the kettle and the mouth of the nest. She moved her head to avoid it.

The boy had seen an ant farm before at school, with its tight tunnels in squiggly lines. He wondered if the nest in front of him was like that one, even if they weren't the same kind of ants. The deluge continued. The stream coming from the kettle was bigger than the opening, so small rivulets diverted from the main flow, spreading out over the ground like a spider. It seemed to go on forever. He could almost feel the snakes of water cascade through each tunnel and into each chamber. He shut his eyes again, but the sound and the smell was worse than the sight. The muddy smell in his nose, the gurgling in his ears, he could see the boiling liquid snaking through the nest, flowing over hundreds of ants. Only one of them had bitten him. It might not even be in the nest.

The kettle emptied. His mother tipped it upside down over the hole, shaking each and every last drop out of it. Joshua watched as the final wisp of steam dissipated above the hole.

'All done now. Let's go back inside.'

As she measured the water refilling into the kettle, Bernadette tensed her hand. She didn't need much. Just enough for herself. The kettle stayed under the tap long enough for the last fading dribbles to fall in. She put the kettle back onto the black holder, jiggling it around to get it to click into place. A second click followed on as it started to heat.

She knew it wasn't all done. Not after seeing the look on Josh's face. But the boy needed to know, needed to see what to do. He should be free to do what he wanted and understand what comes with that. At least he didn't run back inside afterwards, but his gait had been brisk. Maybe she was overthinking it.

The mug Bernadette selected from the cupboard had a tartan pattern and the beginnings of a hairline crack running down one side. It was the last survivor of a set bought years ago, and one that Josh refused to drink from. The round jar of teabags usually held a potluck of flavours, but when she unscrewed the lid she could see only one label colour. She reached in and grabbed one. Earl Grey wasn't her favourite but it would do for now. The kettle finished boiling.

She walked out of the kitchen and into the adjoining main room, her cup in both hands. The placemat at her regular seat was askew, so she corrected it as she sat down and rested the

mug there. She tried a sip, but stopped just short of her lips, letting the warmth and aroma rise from the mug. She held it there until the steam became too much and set it back on the worn placemat.

The table was old too. The wooden surface had been worn down to the comfortable smoothness of a well-used and cared for work surface. Any scent from the table had since vanished. She ran a hand over the tabletop near the edge. Her fingers began tracing numbers and letters on the tabletop. At first they just seemed to be random, but soon they became recognisable. Her phone number. Today's date. Her father's name. After each she wiped the imaginary script clean and started over.

She could remember when the table was new. Not the exact day that it had arrived, of course. The whole house had looked different then. The house still had its weatherboard walls, but it had been painted a different colour. She had helped her father decide. But she could remember her secret shaded spot in amongst the bushes, the one that no longer existed. The branches of the tree that had provided most of the cover had grown too long and wide and had drifted toward the house. The entire tree had to be cut down, and the surrounding scrub had been cleared out with it. Now the sparse grass had taken over most of the yard, the fence had grown taller, and the path had been paved.

There had been inchmen back then as well.

She had been sitting in her shaded spot reading a book when her father had called out to her. She couldn't remember her father's face, but his voice was still sharp in her ears. He knew where she was, of course, but he still pretended. She had to get on to her knees to get low enough to get out of her hollow. Her father had taken her hand and walked with her over to the nest he'd found. It was well hidden beneath a rare patch of thick grass. She had wondered how he'd found it.

'See them? Nasty little buggers,' he had said, leaning over with his hands on his knees. 'But we know how to deal with them, don't we?'

She had nodded. She had only been a bit older than Josh was now. The kettle her father had used was stout and wide and made of cast iron. It took a long time to boil. She remembered once when she had tried to lift it, when it was empty and cold, but couldn't manage it. She couldn't remember if he had any malice when he poured. Did it matter?

On the tabletop she traced a figure eight over and over again, each one starting where the last ended. On the last, she changed the movement and turned the figure into an

ampersand. She wrapped a hand around the now lukewarm mug of tea and took a mouthful. Bernadette heard the rumble of mattress springs jostling around from down the hallway. A cough followed it.

At the very least they were more pleasant sounds than the others she heard earlier today. Her mind drifted back to the muted scream that came through the wall. The sound replayed in her ears to the twitching of her fingers. She drained the mug. She played the scene in her head again. Her response had been fast, but maybe it had been too harsh. Maybe he'll have settled down by now. After she had poured, he hadn't exactly run back inside, but it was at least a brisk walk.

Another memory came upon her, of a boy on the news from a couple of years ago. He had been bitten. Only once. But for him, it only took one. She traced out 'anaphylactic' and brushed it away. Not much else important must have happened that week, so it stayed on the news for a couple of nights. It had happened not too far from them. Near enough to make you pause, but not close enough to really be affected. But she hadn't wanted to push too hard.

She had Josh tested when he was a baby, as early as she could book. It had been just a standard one and there hadn't been any positive responses, so she had thought nothing of it until that boy on the news. She couldn't remember if inchman bites were even included in it. At least she had the answer now.

Bernadette stood up, ready to talk again. She made her way to the hallway, where Josh had left her a trail of discarded shoes and socks, leading down the corridor to his room. She collected each as she passed them. The second sock was only a foot from his half open bedroom door. The small sign she'd bought for him for his birthday was hanging crooked, the J hanging lower than the H. She tried to straighten it with a nudge, but it ended up askew the other way. She peeked in and elbowed the door fully open when she saw him. He lay on the bed on top of the covers, facing the wall away from her.

She left his pair of shoes next to the door. She could tell that Josh noticed her but chose to remain facing the wall. The mattress wiggled as she sat down next to him. The red swelling on his leg still caused her to wince as she looked at it. She could almost feel the heat radiating from the bite. It would fade, but not for a few days. She would need to reapply some more cream soon. She gathered the top of a sock and guided it over his foot on the non-bitten leg. The other, she left for the time being. A sniff made its way to her ears. Josh sat up and pulled the sock on the rest of the way.

‘We had to do it, you know,’ she said, wrapping one arm around him. ‘That’s what we need to do. They can’t live here with us.’

He nodded.

‘If you get bitten again, I think you should have to boil the jug. I’ll help you carry it out, but you should do the pouring.’

‘I won’t.’ His response was immediate.

Bernadette took a deep breath in but caught the sigh before it left her mouth.

‘Get bitten again, I mean,’ Josh said, looking up at her with a small smile.