

THE QUARRY

Elizabeth White

Another Man's Child

NOW

It is a clear evening in late July. Light leaks into the old house from the moon and the street lamps, through the louvers of the enclosed verandah. Outside the Queenslander, a mother and baby possum are crawling along a power line running from Kathleen's roof down towards the street. They are the only creatures, human or animal, active at this moment in the evening. Kathleen doesn't notice them. But if she had, she may have felt a sense of camaraderie. Wishing she had a parent to guide her through her own juncture of uncertainty.

Hours before the daylight will creep into the house, Kathleen slips out from beneath the blanket that covers her and her husband Leo. Her feet sink into the worn-out grooves in her old blue slippers. The synthetic fleece is threadbare, loosely hugging her skin. She slides off the bed and grabs her fluffy dressing gown off the armchair in the corner of the room and walks towards the kitchen. She treads lightly on the wooden floorboards, floating like a ghost secretly in the dark. She senses that even though hours have passed since she turned off her bedside light, she hasn't slept at all. While she is bothered by the lack of rest, she is not surprised by her mind's inability to cease activity for just a few hours.

When she was a child Kathleen would struggle to sleep the night before her birthday. Excitement and anticipation overwhelmed her young body with the need to grasp for the coming day with moments of joyful and untroubled restlessness. These days her mind rouses her body in dark hours, leading her through a labyrinth of fear and agitation while the approaching day lies dormant.

Kathleen falls easily into the pattern of her usual morning habits. She reaches the kitchen without giving any attention to her surroundings. The microwave beams 2:45 in a blue light that illuminates the area. Kathleen notices a cool breeze blowing through the window above the sink that causes ripples in the white mosquito net curtains that hang between the house and the outdoors. The air is fresh on her skin and ushers her towards wakefulness. Up until this point, she has tried to ignore any sense of her feelings since her father died last week.

From the moment she received the phone call from the hospital, Kathleen was set into motion. She began to constantly collate lists in her mind. What needed to be accomplished? Family members began to fly in. They congregated together and spent hours around the dining table in Kathleen's house. Everyone had a story about Hugh. They'd laugh and then find themselves crying about the memories that now felt like they were vanishing. For short moments she sat with them, unable to focus, not remembering how to listen. She would rise from the table and set off, busying herself around them, ensuring that all the arrangements were made. Her sister Beth and brother Neil kept offering to help, but she was the last one who had seen their father. She had tried to take care of it all. She could tell her siblings were frustrated with her; the evidence of their conversations about her always on their faces when she entered a room.

Finally, she relinquished and made them responsible for the wake and sharing a eulogy. But she refused to let them start sorting through his home. Not yet, not yet she kept saying, pretending it was because of her grief. She couldn't risk them finding anything, not before she'd had a chance to look for some kind of evidence for herself, or at least until they knew the truth about her too. Why had it taken Hugh till his last day to tell her that she wasn't his daughter? And without being able to give her an explanation, why bother telling her?

The whisper of this Friday morning stirs her from the daze of the last week. Her father has gone, and now the morning of his funeral has arrived. For the first time this week, the weight of his loss is starting to reach her. She doesn't feel ready for the day that is ahead. Her father will not be there to comfort her.

Kathleen takes the kettle from the stovetop and hears leftover water from its last boiling slosh inside the iron pot. She pours the water down the sink and starts to fill it from the tap. She stares straight ahead, looking through the mosquito net mesh towards the palm trees that separate her house from the neighbour's.

She recalls the last time she saw her father, the afternoon before he died. The phase of remaining spirited had passed and his manner was bleeding with frustration and anger. He was seventy four. A month before, he had been healthy, death had not been on the cards. All it had taken was the one cut on this leg while working in his garden. It had led to an infection. The infection turned to gangrene. A fortnight later, part of his leg was gone. When the surgery wound struggled to heal, they realised the infection had reached his blood.

When they had last been together in his hospital room, Hugh had roused on Kathleen whenever she left his side for a moment to grab a coffee. He'd said that she was selfish to abandon a dying man. She could have yelled at him then. She could have poured out the anger and disarray that was bubbling inside her, but she held onto hope that he might tell her clearly what happened. When he slept he remained troubled, unable to bear what he had become, an old man who could no longer fight off death. It was chasing him with pitiful ailments and afflictions that might have been avoided. Once a man of natural exuberance and catholic hope, dying was making a ruin out of him. For the first time in her life, Kathleen noticed the loss of conviction in Hugh's eyes. He knew it wouldn't turn out all right after all. And here she was trying to understand why he'd never told her sooner. Who was her real father? Why did her mother never say anything?

Kathleen turns her attention back to the kettle. Water is overflowing out the top and from the spout. She turns off the tap and pours out some of the water. She puts the kettle on the stove and decides not to turn it on. She doesn't want to take the risk that she might stir Leo from his sleep. She wants to be alone with her thoughts in the darkness.

THEN

Hugh arrives home. There's a car parked in his driveway. His eyes scan the rearview mirror. There's a smudge of dirt on his forehead. He had barely looked at his reflection this morning. He had scrambled out of bed in a roadside motel and hit the road. After two months driving trucks during grain harvest, all he could think about was annihilating 900 kilometres and getting home to his wife and kids. God knows how long he'd been getting around like this, blind to this conspicuous smear on his face.

He grabs his bag off the passenger seat and thrusts himself out of the car. The door slams and he gets another glimpse of his dirty face in the car window. He must have been in a daze to have missed that.

He scales the stairs of his Queenslander home. His kids are running along the inside verandah, their little footsteps coming towards him. The front door opens. It's his mate from work, Reg Currell.

'Reg, what are you doing here?' asks Hugh.

'Hugh, mate, just leaving. I dropped off your roster for next fortnight, left it with Jean.'

'Oh, thanks Reg. I thought they sent you to the Riverina?'

'Nah, the Magill family put in orange trees this year, they didn't bother with grains. I've been in the depot since spring. Servicing the trucks doing local loads.'

'Rightio.'

'Yeah well. I'll see you Monday. You look spent, mate. You know you've got dirt on your mug?'

'I noticed. Thanks.'

Reg slides past him and bobs down the stairs. Hugh steps into the verandah. Neil and Betty lunge towards him embracing his knees and tugging at his arms. He sees Jean step out

of their bedroom and onto the verandah. She looks different. Her skin is sun-kissed and healthy. The fabric on her dress pulls tighter over her breasts than he remembers. The effect of being away for two months is reflecting back at him. He's overlooked more than some dirt. His wife is pregnant.

NOW

St Michael's is stony cold. Warmth radiates from the bar heaters mounted along the sandstone walls inside the church, but it doesn't seem to reach Kathleen, she sits fighting away shivers in her pew. Leo places a hand on her leg. She wonders if he's trying to secure her; keep her still, keep her grounded. She hasn't even told him yet. She feels like there is nothing to say. How can she ever make sense of her real parentage? Her childhood? The fact that Hugh was the person who she felt loved her more than anyone? What does it mean now that he was just another man?

Father Gibbons seemed like he'd spent the last thirty years waiting for Kathleen when she had knocked on his door a few days ago. He'd been just a young priest when Hugh called asking him to come and see his wife and her child in the hospital. Hugh had told Father Gibbons straight away that he wanted him to christen this other man's child. But, after that he had committed himself to loving her like she was his own. That was all that Father Gibbons knew. Her mother never came to confession, and it wasn't his place to ask. He believed from the outside that Hugh seemed like he was reconciled.

Kathleen had told him that Hugh's final request had been clear. He wanted Father Gibbons to tell the truth about how they'd met, at his funeral. Kathleen had felt uneasy knowing she was about to be at the centre of a commotion. But she wanted to believe that the truth would have value if it came from a priest.

Kathleen had never felt out of place in the family, and her parents were still married until Hugh died: because of her dementia it seemed like Kathleen's mother had passed away a long time before. Drifting out of herself slowly over the last 10 years or so. But maybe there had been a growing absence in her mother for all of Kathleen's life.

Neil sits back in his seat after sharing his eulogy. Father Gibbons rises. Kathleen is aware of the drama that he is about to set into motion. But she almost feels like she needs drama right now. Something to align her with the sense of upheaval that she has traversed over the last week. She watches him reaching the lectern, and there she decides to hold her

gaze. The silence amplifies when the secret is spilled out to the congregation of mourners. And there she continues to look, when the burn of the heaters finally reaches her, with the stares of them all.

THEN

The dream has finished.

Hugh's feet hit the cool floorboards; he pushes himself up with both hands, he has no reluctance leaving the warmth of his bed. He is awake.

He ambles out of the bedroom and into the hallway. His eyes are still adjusting. The wash of a pink dawn delicately illuminates the way. His feet patter on the wooden slats. The sound of another cry reaches his ears. The lament that disturbed his sleep. His hands reach out to the walls to guide and steady his movements. He is a veteran of the five am shuffle, a hurried pace towards the summoning cry from Kathleen's bedroom. The daily exercise. A stumble and scamper.

Through the open doorway he extends his arms into the cot and collects the crying baby. The child burrows her head into the hollow between Hugh's neck and shoulder. Her eyes hover above sleep, her breath settles into an even rhythm. Hugh's feet move them gently around the room. If he does this right the whole family might get an extra hour of sleep.

Jean has followed him into the room. Her hands seize hold of Kathleen's body, and she cradles her towards her own chest.

'I'll take her,' Jean murmurs.

'It's alright, I had her.'

'She's mine. I'll take care of it.'

'Jean, I don't mind helping.'

'You go back to bed.'

Hugh stops in the doorway, facing back towards their bedroom. The exhaustion of trying to forgive Jean is getting the better of him. He breathes in deeply and lets his shoulders round into his body. He wants to keep the promise of his vows, but it's a contest he can't win. He can't claim the child of another man. But when her cries call him from sleep in the early

mornings, instinctively he fathers her, doting at her little tears. He makes himself responsible for her existence.

NOW

Magpies chortle in the large pine trees. Kathleen climbs onto the large wooden fence beside the road. She feels the need to enter the cemetery the same way she did when she was a child on the occasions when Hugh brought them here to see his mother. She sits at the top of the fence then catapults herself towards the ground. The echo of her father is beside her, flying away without her.

Fresh soil is piled high from the day before. Kathleen stares at the earth, angry at the confusion and frustration that he has made her bear. Sadness would have felt simple compared to this. She sits on the wet ground and scoops up a handful of soil, and then lets its fall back down between her fingers. She can't make peace with the immeasurable chasm that has been dug between her and the truth.