

THE QUARRY

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No Longer Human

Kaitlyn Lynch could never quite work out what the deal was with men and their t-shirt wearing display of macho bravado during the coldest days. 'Are you sure you don't want to grab a jacket?' she asked her fiancé as he emerged out of the front door.

'Nah, I'll be alright,' said James Steele with confidence. 'It's not like we're in England or anything. They say an Australian winter is like a British summer, you know.'

'Oh, how about England for the honeymoon?' she asked. 'It'll be spring there and we could stay in Brighton by the seaside.' She was starting to feel a rush of excitement. This often happened when she thought about her future with James.

'I wonder what the UK's craft beers are like,' he said.

As they headed towards her car, their neighbour walked past without so much as glancing up.

'I don't think I've seen that girl once without a phone in her hand,' said James. 'What's her name again?'

'Come on, really? She's been living here a month now,' Kaitlyn chuckled. 'It's Jessica, she's trying to become an Instagram influencer.'

'How does she even see where she's walking? More eyes would do her wonders,' James said.

They were headed to the cinema to catch the latest scary flick. Horror wasn't James' genre of choice by any stretch of the imagination, but Kaitlyn never complained about always going to different pubs and breweries so that he could try the newest craft beers. She only drank on occasion, but she was happy enough to accompany him knowing how much he enjoyed it.

'So, guess what new beer the Harbour Bar brought out?' James said as he climbed into the passenger seat. 'An apple crumble dessert sour ale.'

'Sounds wild,' Kaitlyn said. 'You want to go try it after the movie?'

'You're the best,' said James with a grin that would give the Cheshire Cat from *Alice in Wonderland* a run for its money.

Kaitlyn awoke the next morning to find she was in bed alone. She rubbed the sleep out of her eyes and stood to her feet. She headed towards the kitchen and found James sitting by the table with his back towards her. His head was curled into his arms. 'Are you okay?' she asked. 'James, what's wrong?'

'I don't know,' said James in a trembling voice. 'I woke up like this.' He turned around to face Kaitlyn and nothing could have prepared her for what she saw.

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Kaitlyn collapsed onto the lounge. She'd been to the hospital with James more times in the last week than ever in her whole life. She wanted to scream in frustration. *Why? Why him?* Tears were streaming down her face. It wasn't fair. She couldn't stand to see him so destroyed, and wished she could take some of his pain. The worst part was nobody had any concrete answers. The first doctor who inspected James tried to give them a standard doctor spiel about 'an unidentified disfiguring virus', but anyone could have seen he was just as confused as they were. It was James who ended up consoling Kaitlyn in that emergency room as she broke down in desperation. She'd asked the doctor when he'd be cured, but his usage of the word 'if' instead of 'when' in his response had been the last straw. 'No, no,' she had sobbed in despair. 'We're getting married in Autumn.' Suddenly, another fear hit her harder than any of those preceding it. 'Will our children look like this?' Kaitlyn didn't have any sort of degree in medicine, but she understood his response. The fancy medical terminology he hid behind basically meant he didn't know. They were stuck in limbo.

The next morning Kaitlyn woke up to a strange sensation. As her eyes opened, she was staring at the ceiling but also saw darkness. She was laying on her back, but it felt like one of her eyes was against her pillow. Kaitlyn walked into the bathroom and the mirror revealed what she had become. *Like him.* There were numerous large eyes dotting her head. She counted ten. Her mouth had switched places with her nose, as if her face had been

rearranged upside down. Her head was oval shaped, and her ears were no longer parallel. She approached James and when he saw her, he began to weep.

'Oh god...oh no...I'm so...so sorry, Katie,' he managed to say in between sobs.

'I-It's not your fault. I should have been more careful,' Kaitlyn said. She tried to put on a brave face, but facial expressions were worthless now.

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For the first month, she locked herself inside the house with James. Her mother dropped off essential groceries at their front door and they only spoke on the phone. Each time Kaitlyn was expecting a drop off, she double checked the door was locked and secured so that her mother couldn't enter. Just because her world had been turned upside down didn't mean she would allow anyone else to catch this...this...whatever this was.

In the months that followed, most of the world's leaders acknowledged an emergency pandemic was upon them. They were calling it Severe Acute Appearance Disorder, or SAAD. Kaitlyn and James left the house on occasion for essentials, though each time the glares they received implied they were committing a crime against humanity. The initial horrified reactions had developed into a fearful recognition that usually involved the onlooker taking multiple steps backwards.

As Kaitlyn was walking home from the supermarket one afternoon, she thought of her future. They had decided to indefinitely postpone the wedding since medical specialists around the world were trying to develop a cure. It was a glimmer of hope. Something to hold onto that stopped her from falling into utter despair. The chance of a mundane life seemed so

far fetched now. *I'll never get used to this*, she thought, as she stared at the empty city street ahead. She walked past the multi-story Myer store. It was eerily quiet for a sunny afternoon in the city. A sight of bustling crowds within was a distant memory. *The Silent Spring*. She thought it could have been the title of one of those Lemony Snicket books she'd read growing up. Would she ever have children to read those to?

As Kaitlyn approached her front door, she noticed their neighbour, Jessica, taking the rubbish out. When they exchanged glances Kaitlyn smiled, forgetting this would portray a frown. The glare of disgust she received in return brought tears to her eyes.

Entering the house, she began wiping all of her eyes. She didn't want James to revert back to feeling as guilty as he had before. She found him in the living room.

'You can't go outside alone anymore,' James said, as sweat dripped down his forehead. He passed his phone to Kaitlyn.

As she focused ten eyes on the open article, she was mortified. The headline stated: 'Fourteenth SAAD-positive victim killed by gunshot wounds in Sydney streets. Murderer/s still at large.'

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Fuck, there goes another thousand. Jessica Crawford was glaring at her phone in frustration. There were only so many posts she could upload of herself barricaded in her house and the lack of originality was causing her followers to drop like flies. It wasn't her fault this inconvenient virus had emerged out of nowhere to interfere with her career. It was a precarious time for Instagram influencers and her ungrateful followers should have taken this

into account. Jessica first heard of a Severe Acute Appearance Disorder virus on the internet three months ago. Doctors claimed that contagion periods lasted two weeks, but even when a person wasn't contagious anymore, their physical deformity was so far irreversible.

Legitimacy of the virus was revealed to her two months ago when she had witnessed her neighbours...no, what used to be her neighbours, leaving the house. Jessica was disgusted to find their faces no longer human. If she were to catch this virus then she could kiss her chances of becoming a successful influencer goodbye and she'd sooner die.

She was about to enter the supermarket one afternoon when she recognised a woman in front of her. She quickly lowered her head. In the rare occasions she left home, Jessica tried to avoid unnecessary contact with people to decrease her chances of catching the virus. Avoiding people and not checking her phone were the two rules she'd set for herself while shopping.

'Hi, Jessica,' the woman called out. 'How are you?'

'Not bad, I better get going though, I need...'

'Oh! I was on the phone to your mum the other day,' the woman said. 'We had a FaceTime catch up. She's still as stunning as ever. I bet she can't wait for you to become a successful model too.'

'You'd think so,' Jessica said while sidestepping around. 'I have to hurry along but it was good seeing you.'

After she left the supermarket, Jessica couldn't rid her mind of the encounter. Thinking about her patronising mother made her blood boil. *You just don't have the look. Not everyone can, it's a natural gift.* That condescending tone was implanted into her memory. Sure, she apparently didn't have the natural look, but an influencer could easily edit photos to

cover for that. Once she gained a monumental number of followers, her mother would be forced to acknowledge her success. For that to happen, she couldn't continue to lose followers. With that in mind she pulled out her phone and refreshed Instagram, too agitated to realise what she had just done.

Jessica was a five-minute walk away from her house when she heard a groan. She turned to find someone laying on the side of the road.

'H-help me,' the man croaked.

As she approached him, she suddenly jumped back at the sight of his grotesque face.

'Car p-pulled up. They shot me twice. P-please,' he begged.

'Stay away,' Jessica said, moving further back. The man was losing a lot of blood, but she was sure as shit not going to risk exposing herself.

'P-please.'

She ran home.

The following day she noticed an article online that reported news of the victim she'd encountered. He'd died from his wounds, leaving behind a wife and children. The article also stated he had picked up the virus two months ago and was well beyond being contagious anymore. It wasn't her fault he had decided to go outside alone when a group of murderers were out there, slaughtering people who had contracted SAAD. She also would've had to touch her phone to call an ambulance. She hadn't been home to wash her hands yet, there was nothing she could have done.

A week later, Jessica woke up to a strange sensation.

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For the first Summer since she could remember, Kaitlyn Lynch's skin tone remained the same shade. The streets only accommodated those fortunate enough to have escaped the wrath of SAAD. Arrests were taking place by the day but the vicious cult of SAAD targeting murderers seemed to gain followers faster than they were apprehended. Police had their hands full with regular criminals and an emergence of underground organisations that were illegally manufacturing and distributing guns. Due to this, Kaitlyn and James were among the many who never left their homes. One afternoon as they were sitting in their living room, James noticed a person standing by the road.

'Katie, look. It's our neighbour,' said James, peering out the window. 'Oh damn, she's caught it too.'

Kaitlyn jumped up in alarm. 'She can't be out there. What about the drive-bys?'

James shrugged. 'Don't know what the hell she's thinking.'

Kaitlyn's mind was racing in a panic. *She's been nothing but horrible to me. The look of contempt she gives me whenever she sees me...she's still a human though.* 'I have to do something,' Kaitlyn said, determined. 'I'm going to go grab her and bring her inside.'

If she were going to do this, James couldn't let her go alone. 'Alright, let's move quick,' he said.

James took the lead with Kaitlyn crouched behind him. 'You see anything suspicious?' he asked. He was sure if they were quick, their chances of grabbing the girl and getting back without being seen were hugely in their favour. A detective would later inform him about the

cult member who'd been regularly patrolling their street once word of a SAAD-positive Instagram influencer had surfaced.

'I think we're good,' said Kaitlyn. 'I can't see past the bend though.'

'It's now or never. Stay behind me,' James said. They ran towards Jessica, half crouched with their heads forward like ninjas. James grabbed Jessica's arm. 'What the hell are you doing? Come on, get inside.'

Jessica looked at him, her multiple eyes weary. 'What's the point?' she asked. 'Just let them come.'

James pulled her back towards the front door. She didn't fight his grip nor stand her ground. She was a mindless vessel existing in spacetime, allowing the laws of motion and gravity to guide her movement. Kaitlyn opened the front door as James pulled Jessica towards it. *Almost there.*

There was a loud screech of tires. 'There's the fucking bitch!' a voice bellowed.

They were a second away from the entrance, a force slammed into James as he tumbled inside the house with Jessica while the sound of gunfire echoed throughout the street.

There was blood on his shirt. He couldn't feel pain. *Not mine?* He realised Kaitlyn had tackled them inside the door. 'Katie!' She was hit.

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A marriage celebrant stood in James and Kaitlyn's living room. His mask was wrapped tight around his face, but his words of unification were clear and powerful. Kaitlyn stood by James, leaning on him as he helped her stand. James held her left arm while her right forearm was aided by a crutch. Her leg cast displayed 'James & Kaitlyn Steele 28.04.2021' in permanent marker. Jessica stood behind as the only guest. Isolation rules were still in place, but the special occasion deserved this miniscule violation. Along with the trees of Autumn, Kaitlyn had let go. There was still no cure, but life was too short to let that control her. She locked eyes with James, and all of the facial disfiguration in the world couldn't have concealed their happiness.