

THE QUARRY

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Gay Abandon

I remember thinking: surely it's normal to expect that when you look down at your foot, it will be there. Perhaps it's planted in a shoe, pinned on top of a gravel road, or in my case: immersed ankle- deep in a rock pool. But it's absolutely there where you left it. And while my right foot still glimmered back at me, distorted through the ripples of the cool water – totally pale and unremarkable, my left foot did not.

Growing up beside the ocean you're taught that an octopus can and almost certainly will kill you. And it's not the giant kraken, that beast of the depths, that you have to worry about; it's the little ones.

Exactly the kind of little one that was suction-cupped and camouflaged on my (still thankfully attached) foot.

As you would expect from most eight-year-olds, an age where flexibility is a skill prized alongside intelligence and cardiovascular athleticism, I kicked my left foot up into the air, careful not to angle it such that the octopus would detach and hug me square on the face. Fortunately I timed liftoff perfectly and witnessed eight limbs circling in the air like a tiny carnival ride. It soared above and landed with a plop onto my uncle whose white t-shirt transformed into a Rorschach test as the cephalopod squirted him with ink. My uncle was good with his hands, and almost as if he had done this a million times, detached the octopus and placed it back into the rock pool. I suppressed my trauma and feigned resilience, earning the approval of my family.

'That must have been terrifying!' my father said, having made himself conspicuously absent throughout the ordeal.

'Oh, I just dealt with it,' I replied, looking serenely off in the distance. Good boy.

This wouldn't be the last time I ruined one of my uncle's shirts. He came to my rescue again a few weeks later at a Carols by Candlelight concert. Just like any other effeminate child that age, I felt the only way to truly appreciate an outdoor carols event was to watch whilst lying on my stomach, my delicate fingers poised over the holes of a recorder firmly pursed between my lips. I'd blow along loudly to Jingle Bells or White Christmas, as best I could of course.

Bored out of his mind, my younger brother took the opportunity to repay me for a million and one perceived slights and body slammed onto my back.

Crack.

The recorder hit into the roof of my mouth, crushing my hard palate. Instantly, I tasted metal. I wasn't in any pain; I just didn't know why my mouth was suddenly full.

My uncle picked me up like an errant octopus and threw me over his back as he ran across the field to an adjacent hospital, all while a cascade of blood flowed from my mouth and onto his white shirt, turning it a festive scarlet. To onlookers, it appeared that my uncle was abducting a tiny vampire. Rushed into the emergency ward with all the flourish of a presidential assassination, I beckoned the doctor close to me and asked if I would ever sing again.

Priorities.

Another of my uncle's shirts was destroyed, along with any ambition I had for me and my recorder going pro. My hard palate healed, as the rest of me always seemed to, just in time for the next spectacular pratfall. One day I'd be sprawled on a concrete driveway, my footing having slipped on wet grass as the shitzu to which I was attached lunged violently forward on his lead; the next day I'd be drowning in a Papua New Guinean swimming pool whilst on vacation. We took to bringing an extra pair of clothes for me in the car whenever we went out. I was like Narcissus with parental supervision.

'There's not a body of water in existence that you won't fall into!' my mother would say. Her criticism was always served with a side of guilt, but that's my mother. 'You should have been born catholic,' my significantly less guilt-ridden aunt would say to her.

My mother had given birth to a son with talipes, commonly known as clubfoot, and she felt responsible. Though a seemingly mild case results in an oh-so-cute slight turn in of the foot, in my case it meant annual surgery lest I never gain the ability to walk. My parents were sent home from the maternity ward with a baby plastered up to both thighs, and heads full of worry.

An early operation saw my legs hinged outward with a metal bar between them; the agony so acute I'd spend my nights screaming. My parents felt helpless as their child writhed in front of them. But my mother's misplaced guilt at my childhood condition was unwarranted. In reality the fault lay with U.S. President Lyndon Baines Johnson. My father's exposure to 'Agent Orange', a carcinogenic chemical developed by the US military to destroy the jungle canopy during the Vietnam War, had really done a number on me. Twisted feet, under-developed calves.

‘Even if the surgeries are successful, he’ll always struggle to run on sand,’ the doctors told my parents. For a child living by the sea this was quite debilitating. The beach was now only for walking.

I was an inspiration.

Wanting to really lean in to the trope of the inspirational cripple, I didn’t shy away from running through the playground at pre-school. Surely I’d discover I could run like the wind, like little Forrest Gump leaving his plaster behind in splints and dust as he sprinted toward the horizon. Lying on the ground with the wind knocked out of me, as other small children ran toward the finish line, quickly disabused me of this notion.

I had a natural aversion to sport of any kind from about then on. I also had the perfect excuse: ‘I’d really love to run around the oval, but...’ I’d shrug, wince, and look down at my plaster. Concerned teachers and peers would nod sympathetically.

I was a superstar.

On those rare occasions when I’d be out of plaster, I’d swiftly discover a way to get back into it. My mother’s burst appendix offered a rare opportunity for me to play nurse, and her request to retrieve a hot-water bottle from the next room set me off running through the house. On the way back I tripped on a small step and broke my leg. That was two people off to hospital in the one ambulance, efficient if nothing else. It’s not like I was doing this deliberately, not at all. But I can’t deny that special feeling of being at the centre of an emergency.

I pitied the able-bodied. How dull. At this point I feel it’s important to point out that I never actually wanted to hurt myself on purpose. Seeking out octopuses, falling into bodies of water, or teasing my brother with an opportunity to smash a recorder into the roof of my mouth was nothing more than mere happenstance. It all just kinda worked out for me. But could I really have been that clumsy?

One significant perk of being the subject of worry is that it excused the ostentatious and flamboyant way I would carry myself. It was not uncommon at my parents’ house parties for me to sidle up to a dinner guest and ask knowingly: ‘Do you... recognise me?’ Often their only reaction would be to laugh (this kid!). I didn’t know why I was asking it, I just knew that I wanted to ask a question that sounded

like that. I wanted them to know I wasn't one of those kids who chased balls and ran around. I was better than that. Special.

That all came to an end in high school. Nobody pities you when your injury is the result of someone tackling you in the corridor. Nobody comes to your aide when you get smacked in the face with a basketball. Clumsiness can be forgiven, but weirdness deserves swift punishment.

And there's no sympathy for those who get hurt because of their *éclat*, let alone their *savoir-faire*. The accidents stopped.

I retreated indoors; away from bodies of water into which I might fall, away from trip-hazards, away from the sun and the sea. While the retreat was a welcome reprieve for my scarred and battered body, it was also an acknowledgement that gay abandon was the root cause of both my early stardom and my adolescent angst. Head down. Don't fall in the pool, Blake.

It took a while to get back to where I was. Long after I'd left school, long after my legs had been fixed, long after I learned that to be camp was a virtue and not something to be fastidiously concealed; I ventured out once again.

Having never seen the fireworks on Sydney harbour, this year was gonna be a fresh start, a new me, a return to an authentic self. I walked down to the water, and in the brightness of the year's final rays of sunshine I planned my route to a rock on Mosman headland. Come midnight that rock would offer a solitary but spectacular view of the festivities.

What I had not counted on was that the sun would go down, and that my familiar and brightly lit rock-face would turn pitch black. That same journey to my rock that I'd plotted hours ago was now an exercise in extreme-braille. The only way to tell craggy outcrop from shallow rock pool was the faint glimmer of moonlight on slick and slippery sandstone.

Moving oh so slowly, feeling my way as I went, I raised my left leg to lift my body onto a boulder but it slipped, and dropped beneath me. I felt a shred, not a painful one, followed by a prickling sensation that swept over my entire body. I angled my phone to illuminate a new chasm in my shin.

I was eyeballing leg bone.

I climbed upward, beyond the rock-face, through the bush and beneath low-hanging branches, blood cascading into my shoe. I emerged on a deserted street margined by mansions. There, I sat on the gutter holding my leg together until the ambulance arrived. Alone, I sat in emergency as the doctor stitched me back together, plucking shards of oyster and flotsam from the maw in my leg. As the New Year fireworks played on my mint-condition iPhone, I cursed my luck. No one was even here to pity me. Once again I was punished for my recklessness. I inhaled deeply to steel myself for the next stitch just as the doctor said something that, in hindsight, was exactly what I needed to hear.

‘You’ll never believe what’s going on in the next room,’ When a doctor says this, you know it’s gotta be good. ‘Some kid just exploded his anus with a fire-cracker. It looks like mince-meat in there,’ she continued, raising her eyebrows and shaking her head as if to say: *kids these days*.

What the fuck was I supposed to say to that? Is he okay? Of course he wouldn’t be.

‘Poor kid,’ I said. ‘The lengths some people will go just to be noticed.’