

The Quarry

Mickey Elliott was my new friend. His family owned the blue-stone quarry further up the road where we lived. Mickey had two grown-up brothers and two almost grown-up sisters. Mickey's dad was killed in an accident before Mickey was born. It was Mrs Elliott who told me that last bit when she invited me into the kitchen of their old rambling weatherboard house for a scone and a cup of tea a couple of weeks after Mickey and I became friends. Neither the Elliott house nor the quarry exist any longer. The house was burnt in the fires that swept through the area in 1967. Shortly after, the quarry was closed for environmental reasons. A four lane highway cuts right through it now.

I was a bit surprised at being invited inside that afternoon because Mickey had confessed to me earlier that his mum didn't go much on me. He told me his mum reckoned I was a bit of a softy, and that I looked around too much. Mickey told me his mum didn't like sticky-beaks, or softies. He said I should try to keep my eyes to myself and talk rough if I wanted to get on with her so, in an effort to impress her, I took to spitting a lot and chucking swear words into my conversation like Mickey and his brothers did. Sadly my feeble attempts at manipulation didn't work. I reckon I didn't fool her one little bit and I never did really get to top grade with Mickey's mum. It was more of a live and let live stand off.

But that afternoon I could have been little Lord Fauntleroy sitting there and it wouldn't have mattered one iota. Mrs Elliott seemed at peace with the world and every creature on it. In between sipping my steaming cup of tea and nibbling at the hot buttered scones, I had at first studied the huge glass-fronted crockery dresser with its shelves sagging under the weight of a hundred plates; many of them with painted pictures

on their fronts; pictures of the Sydney Harbor bridge, of kookaburras and emus and koala bears. There were rows and rows of cups and mugs (also inscribed with a variety of letters and pictures) suspended from brass hooks on the underside of each shelf.

Alongside the old fashioned kitchen range several iron frying pans and pots hung like giant black bats from more hooks screwed into the wooden mantelpiece. On the chimney wall proper there was an ornate oval-shaped wooden clock that looked like it should have been marking out train times in a suburban railway station somewhere, rather than screwed to the wall of an outer suburban kitchen. Its loud ticking echoed in the silences of the room. Above my head the old smoke-stained tin ceiling was festooned with strings of sticky fly-tapes. I could see the dozens of flies glued to their surfaces, some with their legs twitching weakly, almost at the point of extinction, and others beating furiously at the air with their wings, as if escape was still a possibility. The kitchen was filled with the smells of vinegar, cut vegetables and yesterday's fat. I had never experienced anything like it. You could have lost the pokey kitchenette at my house in one of its dark corners.

Mickey's mum was rarely still. She kept fiddling with things. Like she kept rearranging the pans by the fireplace. Turning them this way and that, and then standing back, her head cocked to one side, contemplating them with what could have been an artist's critical eye. And talking all the while - quick little sentences about nothing in particular. Every now and again she would stop and look a bit puzzled, as if she'd forgotten what she was doing or saying. At those times her fingers would invariably stray up to her hair where she would scrub at it furiously like she was punishing herself for forgetting. The scrubbed-up hair with its streaks of grey began to look like bird's wings in flight. I wasn't sure who she reminded me of, Snow White's wicked queen, or Cinderella's godmother.

She told me how she'd been out with the girls that day. Which, from the information I got from Mickey later, really meant she'd just come back from her pub afternoon. She seemed to want to give me a run-down on the Elliott family history. She told me how she and her husband Archie had only intended to have four children. "Two boys for him," she said, "and two girls for me." She sighed then. "Poor Archie though - he didn't get much of his sons. I suppose Mickey's told you

about his father. He blew himself up - a firing that went wrong. Jack and Joey were only about your age then and Mickey was born six months after his death. A return gift from Heaven you might say. I lost one man and I was given another..."

She stopped close enough for me to smell the gin on her breath as she reached past me, this time to scrub at Mickey's black curls with her hand. "My little gift," she said affectionately, and I noticed a tear running down her cheek.

Mickey was embarrassed by her display of sentimentality and fobbed her hand away. "Ar mum," he said. "Lay off will yer."

Although I'd talked to Jack and Joey in the few weeks I'd known Mickey I'd never spoken to his sisters. I'd only seen them feeding the meat scraps to the animals in the backyard - two slender dark-haired girls kneeling demurely at the edge of the concrete, kichey-cooing over these three ginger cats and an aging sad-eyed spaniel. They were completely engrossed with what they were doing. They hadn't acknowledged Mickey and me walking through the yard. In the kitchen that day they never stopped working for a moment, one bustling in and out of the kitchen carrying vegetables and meat for the evening meal and the other washing and chopping the vegetables by the sink. Neither of them saying a word - feigning a disinterest that was betrayed by their periodic frowns and swift glances. Though lesser mortals than their mother they were nevertheless still striking in a dark, secretive sort of way. The pair of them had the kind of names that only belonged in books. One was called Silvia May and the other Rose Dawn.

Mickey had told me earlier that it was his brothers Jack and Joey who ran the quarry now and his mother who did the books. Joey supervised the blasting, breaking and loading of the skips and Jack looked after the crushers. Mickey's two brothers were a few years older than the girls; both were over six feet tall with muscles to match. They looked a bit like they had chiseled themselves out of the stone they quarried. "Show Jim yer muscles Joey," Mickey used to say whenever he wanted to impress me, and Joey would oblige. He'd pull this silly face, draw his forearms up with an exaggerated flourish and flex his muscles so he looked just like a Mr Universe or Chesty Bond. Mickey was always showing his brothers off. They were his perfect models.

In their spare time Jack and Joey were amateur competition axe

men and it was Mickey's ambition to add to the collection of silver trophies that already occupied the top shelf of the living room mantelpiece. Already he was starting to practise for the junior chops with one of their lighter axes. The sound of stone on metal was part and parcel of the Elliott's backyard. On just about any Saturday morning if you walked around to the back yard there would be one of Mickey's brothers grinding an axe blade at the sandstone wheel by the shed door. Or maybe sitting on an old stool, axe across knees, putting an even finer edge on the already razor-sharp blade with a hand-held stone. Jack could look up at you as you passed and give you a nod and a smile without missing a beat.

Mickey also had an Uncle Rupert, although it was some weeks before I even got to see him close up. Mickey and I were just mucking about in the yard one afternoon when this old guy popped out of the garden dunny. He staggered towards us and I thought he was going to say something, but he didn't, he just stood there staring, swaying this way and that with this silly looking grin all over his huge red face; then he burped loudly, gave a big wink and fancy wave of his hat before he continued his lopsided stagger to the back door. I only saw him at odd occasions after that, sometimes sitting on the verandah staring at nothing in particular, or dozing in a rocking chair in a corner of the kitchen. He seemed to spend all the rest of his time in his room.

"Uncle Rupert's the family drunk," Mickey had explained when the old man disappeared inside the house. "He's useless. If he ain't drinkin' or eatin' he's sleepin'."

According to Mickey his uncle had gone a bit funny in the head ever since Mickey's dad had accidentally blown himself up. "He won't go anywhere near the quarry any more. He says the Devil himself lives there. Jack and Joey reckon after the explosion he lost his nerve - you know like some men do in wars an' things."

"You mean war neurosis," I said.

Mickey couldn't help scowling. "Yeah, I suppose I do," he said in the kind of growly voice he often used at school on the smart-arses like Arnold Sholter. He was like that - he knew what he was talking about even if others didn't and I guess it sometimes got to him when he couldn't find the right words to express himself.

I sought to repair the damage with a few words of conciliation.

"Anyway," I told him, "your uncle seems like a nice harmless old guy."

As it turned out it was another wrong thing to say because the next second Mickey's ranting and raving. "Nice, yer bloody idgit? Yer can't call drinkin' like a fish an' wettin' yer pants day an' night, *nice*... yer can't call snorin' burpin' and fartin' nice, can yer? An' as for harmless... yer jus' keep away from him I reckon. That's what I do."

He lowered his voice then into this kind of hoarse whisper he saved for those moments of extreme confidentiality and let me into another of the family secrets.

"Besides," he said, "Mum's got to watch him with Rose Dawn and Silvia May like you wouldn't believe. I mean, he sometimes grabs at 'em when they go into his room. He tries to pull their pants down and feel them up. Once me mum got so angry with him she took to him with a cricket bat. She put him in bed for a week." He looked sideways at me then, putting on his growly voice. "But don't tell nobody I told yer that or you'll be in real trouble, ay."

"But why doesn't your mum just kick him out?" I wanted to know.

Threat turned to scorn with his next words. "Yer can't kick yer uncle out, idgit. Besides, he still owns half the quarry, don't he?"

Mickey showed me through the quarry one Saturday when there was no-one else around. In the dust-covered crushing tower I gazed down with awe at the huge rollers lined with vicious-looking steel teeth. I imagined them turning and grinding away at the raw rock and shuddered at the power of something that could crunch up those huge hunks of iron-hard bluestone into various grades of road metal. Mickey was very matter-of-fact explaining to me how it all worked. You'd have thought he'd worked there many times himself, only he hadn't. Other than running messages for his brothers occasionally he wasn't allowed near it. All of them would have had a fit if they'd known Mickey and me had gone there regularly.

It sometimes seemed to me that quarrying was in Mickey's blood. In spite of his mother's and brothers' dire warnings of the dangers, he couldn't keep away from it. Almost every weekend he would suggest we go there 'to check things over'. I had no idea what he meant, but I went with him because I found the quarry exciting. It was a no-man's

land - a frontier to be explored. In the unused places it was full of wild, crackling gorse, blackberries and fire-weed that towered over your head, high enough in some places to block out the sun. Up one end of the quarry was this concrete shed with a thick iron door where the explosives were kept.

Mickey was always pointing it out to me as if I'd forgotten what it was since last we were there. "An' that's where we keep the explosives," he'd tell me with awe. "There's enough gelly in there to blow up the whole quarry... the whole of Hobart probably." He showed me the neat round holes in the cliff-face ready for Monday's blasting. "See the pattern," he'd say. "Three rows bored inter the rock grain at just the right depth. One goes up then another and another. That way the whole cliff comes sliding down with one gawd-all-mighty crash."

I suppose, what with his old man blowing himself up and all, it wasn't surprising that he had this fearful fascination for explosives. As for me - well, it was all fascinating. I couldn't get over the fact that men actually toiled there and didn't mind the terrible noise of the crushers, or the dust that blew up and covered everything with a blue-grey coating. A dust so fine it puffed out from under your shoes like smoke when you walked through it. It seeped right into your socks so you had to take them off and wash your feet in the creek before you went home.

I didn't feel like explaining to anyone why Mickey intrigued me, but had I, it would have had to include all that went with Mickey - his whole damn family, the quarry, and their huge rambling old house with its echoing expanse of wide verandahs and secret rooms, where, if you were a girl with blackberry-colored hair, a huge-bellied man might leap out at you from the dark passages and fumble at your pants.

I wanted to find out all about them; Rose Dawn and Silvia May and Joey and Jack and Uncle Rupert, and of course Mrs Elliott herself, who, with her darkly mysterious face and electrified hair, seemed more suited to fortune telling or witch-crafting than being Mickey's mum. They were a mile apart from the other families I knew in the district. I mean, most of our family's friends were insurance agents and accountants like Arnold Sholter's old man, or salesmen like mine, who wore blue suits and waistcoats and smelt of lavender soaps and after-shave lotions; who were forever discussing market indicators,

inflationary trends, stock exchange reports and the price of cut cloth, while the adventure of life roared on all around, ignored.

The quarry-men, on the other hand, spat at life, talked dirty and smelt of sweat, motor oil and cordite, and as far as I could see they didn't have a blue suit to their name. Jack and Joey were more likely to drive down the road to the shops dressed in their dungarees and navy-blue work singlets, their shoulders and arms still covered with quarry dust. And instead of a Holden or a Morris, they drove a huge, chrome-bumpered, purple-toned, eight cylinder American Buick, with fins out the back. It looked more like a space ship than a motor car.

Not that my parents went much on Mickey though. They thought he was a bit of a dag and cheeky to boot. But he wasn't really cheeky, he just talked the way the rest of his family talked. They were always taking the piss out of someone, but it never seemed nasty to me. It was how they communicated. Admittedly though, Mickey *was* a bit of a scrubby kid. His thick dark hair was rarely brushed. It hung in thick curls over his face and he was continually flicking it back with either his hand or a quick toss of the head. He looked a little like a billy-goat my mum reckoned. And according to her his clothes were a disgrace too. "Dear God," she was inclined to say, "that boy's clothes just hang around him like they aren't really his own but ones he's begged or borrowed for the day from someone twice his size."

She let me know in a dozen ways why Mickey wasn't the kind of boy at all to play with her son. My mum was constantly inquiring why I didn't choose to play with that nice little Arnold Sholter down the road rather than a quarry-man's son. Bloody hell, Arnold Sholter! The Dinky-kid who loved his toy cars! He and his dad had constructed their intricate Meccano City in an old shed out the back of their house. A pretend city complete with roadways and bridges and Dinky-toy cars, buses and tip trucks. There were cranes towering over half constructed buildings, even the skeleton outline of a wharf and half a dozen painted wooden ships floating on a glass sea. Further away, against the wall of the shed, there was the papier-mâché inference of rising green hills and a purple-toned mountain backdrop. It was all very neat, I gave Arnold that, but playing with Meccano pieces and Dinky-toys hadn't seemed much fun to me.

My old man, who had also seen the Sholter's shed, had told me many times what a clever kid Arnold was. "Now there's a boy with brains. He'll be a fine architect one day." My dad was inclined to scoff at anyone who used muscles rather than brains to earn their living. It was his way of having a snide shot at the Elliotts. "Mark my words," he said whenever the question came up, "having a good brain is more secure than having a healthy bank account."

He said it as if he was one of those with the brains; as if him wearing a blue suit and maroon tie and saying things like "can I be of service sir" in a menswear shop, took brains. My parents were always on at me about it. Always trying to break us up. They kept taking me to their friends' places where I'd get introduced to their friends' sons and daughters and we'd all sit around on their Genoa-velvet armchairs balancing cups of tea and cordial on our laps, listening to our parents chatting aimlessly about nothing and we their children, little angels, smiling fiendishly to the front, trying to avoid the direct eye contact that could have given us away.

"You go outside and play with Peter or Rex or Jeanie," they'd say after I'd had a drink and a biscuit. And Peter or Rex or Jeanie would lead me awkwardly outside where I'd be shown minor points of interest in a back yard that could have been my own. I had to go along with it of course, so I said yes and no in all the right places and waved them all goodbye nicely when I left, and then the following day I was back up at Mickey's place waiting for the next instalment of the Elliott family saga.

The Elliotts were Catholics and that also added another layer of mystery for me because my family were proddies - or so Mickey called us. My mum went off to church occasionally but my old man never did. I'd often heard him saying he was only C of E because you had to be something and they were the best of a bad bunch. And whereas our house had no references to anything religious outside of the odd Bible or two in the bookcase Mickey's house was full of religious reminders. There were religious tracts and pictures on the walls of their main living room. One picture of a cluster of smiling angels helping Jesus ascend to Heaven, another of the baby Jesus in his mother's arms, and another, less easily identifiable one, of this long-haired woman trying to drag a girl in a flimsy white dress out of a very dark cave. There were other things too - a crucifix at one end of the

main hallway, and an almost full-sized alabaster figure of the Virgin Mary standing at the other, greeting you with welcoming smile and outstretched arms the moment you stepped through their front door.

Mickey's attitude was always a bit deprecating when it came to referring to all things religious in my presence, but I noticed he didn't dare say the same kind of things to his mother. He told me once his mother had wanted to send him to a Catholic school but Jack and Joey wouldn't let her because they still remembered their own years of suffering at the hands of the Christian Brothers. I'd pressed Mickey on that one. I wanted to know all about Jack and Joey's suffering. I imagined all kinds of things. I imagined Jack and Joey being clapped in chains in the medieval dungeons of the sandstone edifice on the hill for not learning their Scriptures; ten strokes of the cane across their bare bums every time they got their spelling wrong, and thumb-screws if they couldn't do their sums.

But Mickey was always a bit reticent about coming up with the exact lurid details of the horrendous crimes he insinuated had been perpetrated against his brothers. He'd only shake his head and tell me he'd been sworn to secrecy. I don't reckon he knew anything more about it than I did. I reckon he was just pleased he was allowed to go to the state school like me, where the worst you got was six half-hearted cuts from the headmaster for being cheeky.

Mickey's family went off to Mass every Sunday morning and I would just hang about their backyard waiting for them to return. I suppose you could say it was on one of those occasions when my friendship with Mickey, and my fascination with the Elliott family first started to crack. That Sunday I'd arrived at the usual time and found the back door already open. I had knocked several times, and even stepped inside and called down the hallway, but no-one came. The house was silent and seemingly empty. Perhaps, I kidded myself, they'd left the back door open for me. I tip-toed tentatively down the hall to the kitchen and peered through the open door. The only occupants in there were the old liver-colored spaniel playing dead on the rug by the stove and two orange cats gazing with slit-eyed suspicion up at me from the shadows under the table. I could smell meat roasting, hear the fat spluttering gently from deep in the oven, the wood crackling in the firebox and the railway clock on the wall counting out the hollow seconds. Without Rose Dawn and Silvia May bustling back and forth, without Mickey's

mum directing them in her husky no-nonsense voice, or Jack and Joey leaning back against the mantelpiece smiling quietly to themselves, or old Uncle Rupert snoring away in the corner, it just didn't seem right. It looked as if it shouldn't have been deserted - like its real occupants had been spirited away suddenly by some unknown force.

I stood in the hallway, torn between curiosity and guilt, unsure what to do next. I thought of all those closed doors. I thought of Silvia May's and Rose Dawn's room. What would it look like? Would they have grey blankets and hand-embroidered quilts on their beds like we had at home, or would they have factory made pastel-toned chenille bedspreads with a central floret of roses and blue-bells like Arnold Sholter's sister had on *her* bed? Would there be twin dressing tables with heart-shaped winged mirrors and delicate curved legs, pressed against each adjacent wall - scatterings of face powders dusting their rose-wood shine? Perhaps there would be clusters of scent bottles, silver compacts, lipsticks, brushes and combs nestling on embroidered cotton doilies? And below, protruding from one of the round-fronted drawers, you might even get a glimpse of secret girl-things - like a pink slip, or a corner of black lace, or the top end of a silken stocking.

I was busy thinking all this when I heard the creak of a floor board behind me. I turned hurriedly to see Uncle Rupert's great bulk looming out of the shadows from his doorway. His voice was wheezy and hoarse, "What d'want boy?"

"I'm looking for Mickey," I told him. I was surprised by my sudden shaking.

"Well he ain't here."

I started to go back outside but he moved in front of me. His mouth was shaping more words but nothing was coming out. I smelt the malt-sour reek of beer on his breath. I could see his eyes burning through the painful mask of his blotchy red skin. His black bulk filled the passageway. I wasn't sure if he wanted to tell me something or grab hold of me. I had to do or say something, but my legs and my mind had both quit working. Eventually I just said the first thing that came into my head. I tried to make my voice sound cheery but it came out more as a broken squeak. I said, "It's a nice day Mr. Elliott isn't it."

Nice? It was the same stupid word I'd once used to describe the

rambling shape of the man who was now towering menacingly over me and blocking my escape. I heard his cough rumble in his chest and, as if that was what he was waiting for, the words came tumbling out. "I want yer to tell 'em what goes on in this house boy... them uthorities. Tell th' police - they'll know what to do."

"Of course," I said. Nodding my vigorous consent I tried to move past him, but he was still blocking my way.

"You tell 'em," he said, "that they keep takin' me money. They steal from me. They keep me locked in me room... and them girls... them two little bloody angels... always on bloody heat, runnin' around in their tight little undies tauntin' me... an' then tittle-tattin' to that bitch of a mother of theirs. She beats me yer know, like yer wouldn't believe. And them boys too, that Jack and Joey, they robbed me of me fair share of the quarry. You'll tell 'em that, won't yer."

"Sure, Mr Elliott," I said, "I'll tell them, I promise."

His face was within inches of mine. He was peering closely at me. "Don't I know you boy?" he said, "ain't you th' one always lookin' around - always reckonin' yer know things?"

He gave me that same rheumy-eyed wink he'd given Mickey and me in the yard the day I'd first seen him, but this time there was no hint of humour, just malice and cunning. "But I'll tell yer now, ya don't know nothin' boy. D'want me ter tell yer th' real story about young Mickey's dad... me brother. It was them who killed him yer know. It wasn't me like they reckon. It was them boys who'd been messin' about round th' holes th' day before. That's how it went wrong. Not that they'd ever admit to it. But I was there yer see. I seen it all."

I tried to move past him again but there was more he had to say. He suddenly reached out and fastened his fingers on my arm. I felt a strength there I couldn't have believed possible. I felt my veins start to throb with the pressure of the blood building up. He was puffing the hot words into my ear. "Tell me boy have you ever seen what's left of a man after an explosion... bits of flesh, bits of clothes, splatterin's of blood and guts, all over th' rocks. Not even a foot, or a hand - not even a head ter bury - nothin' but a box of stained bits an' pieces. You tell 'em that too boy. You tell them uthorities that, ay!"

He let go my arm then and swayed away with a terrible groan as if he'd been shocked by his own words. I took the chance to squeeze past

him and head for the back door. I didn't wait for the rest of the Elliotts to come back from church that day. I went home instead to think about it but I couldn't come to any conclusion. The following day I hiked up the mountain to look down on the city below, but still nothing came to mind, and I guessed that most of life was going to be like that - not being able to be certain about things, no matter where you stood. There'd likely be something you'd miss taking account of...