

THE QUARRY

Harold O'Neill's head pounded less from last night's whiskey than from shock, horror, and shame. He touched his coffee to his lips but on seeing a police cruiser tear into Caleb's Country Diner's gravel parking lot he slammed the mug down. He slid out of the booth and stood as two cops, heads down and shoulders hunched, hurried for the door. *They knew.* Chad! Janice. Chad!

By now—five, six hours later—every cop in Connecticut knew about the shooting. Though utterly exhausted and desperate for the coffee, he dropped a twenty on the table to cover the breakfast he'd just ordered and, pretending to head for the men's room, he slipped out the side door.

Every cop knew. Stan Priori would have described him. He'd heard the shots, was running across the lawns and had seen him backing out the driveway then tearing down the street in his Tacoma pickup. Stan would have run through the wide-open front door, seen his open war chest, his Iraqi Freedom War souvenirs, including his god-damned combat medals scattered where he'd thrown them. Seen his army-issue .45 on the floor, gunsmoke still curling from its barrel. Seen Jan writhing on the floor, blood seeping from her shoulder. Seen Chad!

He shifted into gear but suddenly wondered where was he going: Escape? How? He'd seen Jan fall. Seen the spreading circle of blood around the hole in Chad's chest. Seen how in his crazed, alcoholic rage—over a fight about what he couldn't remember—he'd shot his wife, lost his son, his only child. His precious boy. Escape? To what world? He'd lost his world.

Half-fearing, half-hoping the cops would spot him, he pulled onto Route 75 northbound where, after hours of aimless driving, he'd found himself. Vaguely, he thought he was heading for his brother Sam's, way the hell up in in Conway, northern New Hampshire. A long day's drive. But Sam? By then he'd know. Take him in? Instead, he'd *turn* him in. Whatever, 75's no good: Every cop car in the state would be patrolling the main routes.

That meant they'd have few to cover the back roads. Which he knew: he'd grown up Harland, as far north as possible in Connecticut. A mile further he turned left onto Risley Hill Road, the first of miles of country roads that wound beneath hardwood forests, past cornfields, a landfill transfer station, and dairy farms. He'd head westward until reaching Grant's Mill. Then, on a long-deserted road he remembered but not its name, he'd swing north into Massachusetts. Though not knowing if he cared whether or not a cop spotted him, he snaked through bends and turns, up and down hill after hill, filled with thoughts of what might have been.

If he hadn't started on the whiskey when he and Janice began fighting. If he hadn't dragged out his footlocker, hadn't in sheer stupidity and even knowing he shouldn't, snatched up his .45 and shoved in the clip. If he hadn't spun around and fired when Chad rushed him after the first unintended shot felled Jan. But he had.

A mile past Becker's Farm Stand he turned onto Quarry Road. After so many turns, he felt relieved to reach the half-mile-long straight stretch paralleling the base of the old, long-abandoned Graniteville Quarry. As he accelerated he remembered how he and other teens drank beer there and raised hell until the cops kicked them out. A dense row of mature sumacs, oaks and maples blocked his view of the cliff's base, but he caught a brief glimpse of its uppermost reaches. He braked well before reaching the straightaway's end, then slowly, carefully rounded

the sharp, blind turn. And slammed on his brakes, barely avoiding striking a boy in the middle of the road who frantically waved his arms and jumped up and down.

Harold blasted his horn, shouting, “Get out of the road!”

The boy leapt aside but before Harold could pull past him he grabbed the driver’s-side mirror, pleading, “My friend’s stuck!”

“Let go! Get away!” Harold revved the engine.

The boy held on. “Jamie’s stuck!”

“Let go of the mirror!” He revved the engine louder. “I can’t stop! Back away!”

The boy reached in and tugged at his shirt. “I Can’t! You can’t! Don’t! Jamie can’t move! I tried! He can’t move!! Mister help, he’s stuck! Pleeese!”

“Let go I said!” Harold demanded. But, suddenly thinking that some idiot teenager might come tearing around the corner on two wheels, he said, “Let go; I’ll pull over.”

After the boy let go, he eased the truck onto the shoulder, stopped, and glared at the boy. Round-faced, freckled apple-cheeks, blue eyes wide. Twelve, thirteen. Not fifteen yet, Chad’s age. Gray rock dust clung to his uncombed mop of black hair.

Finally, Harold said. “What do you mean, ‘stuck?’ Who’s stuck? Where??”

“Jamie! On the cliff! At the quarry! Please!”

“The quarry? What the hell’s he doing up there?”

“He’s—we went—we were going—” The boy broke off, “You have to get him down! *Ple-eeze!*”

Harold thought a second. “Is he’s hurt?”

“No!” Struggling for calm, the boy explained, “He’s way, way up it. He can’t move.”

“What do you mean, ‘can’t move’?”

“Can’t *mo-oove!*”

“Dammit!” Harold said, “Why not?”

Speaking almost too fast to understand, the boy said, “He’s too scared, I mean totally totally *totally* he thinks if he moves he’ll fall, he’s on this ledge, it’s totally skinny. His hands’re in this crack and won’t come out. He won’t let go!” He stopped for breath, then, struggling for calm, explained, “He’s scared to let go. I said do it, told him to, but he’s too afraid. He won’t let go!”

“Shit!” Harold nodded, said sarcastically, “What—you two numbskulls decided to conquer Connecticut’s excuse for Everest?” He remembered reading, years ago, how skyscraper steelworkers, brave, proud men, are sometimes seized with fear and will wrap themselves around a skyscraper’s girder. It can take hitting their hands with a wrench to make them let go.

“So he’s not injured, not in any actual trouble. And he—Jamie—he panicked?”

“Panicked!” The boy nodded, “It’s scary up there. Really really! Totally if looking straight down. But he won’t let go. I kept saying! But he won’t.”

“Where?” Harold peered up through the windshield.

“Your other window.” The boy pointed past him. “Up high.”

Harold slid over and craned out the passenger window. Well over a hundred feet up, his arms and legs splayed against the sheer granite wall, Jamie looked doll-like.

He slid back behind the wheel and stared ahead. The Massachusetts line was just a half, three-quarters of an hour ahead. He turned to the boy. For a long moment neither spoke.

“Get in.” He ordered.

The boy scrambled around and jumped in, saying, “The way in’s there.”

“I know that. I was here when I was a dumb kid too.”

The Tacoma rocked and bounced over a crumbling roadway of coarse riprap completely hidden under knee-high sumac and maple seedlings. Branches scraping against the truck’s sides made squealing noises, and both he and the boy leaned in to dodge ones that whipped through the open windows.

He stopped the truck at an impassable wall of boulders. They followed a winding path to the boy’s campsite where a green tent sagged under sleeping bags draped over its ridge. Next to an ancient stone fire ring a soot-blackened bail-handled aluminum kettle lay on its side. In a dying fire steam curled around a charred can of Dinty Moore Beef Stew. On a makeshift plank table lay an open box of Quaker Oats breakfast bars, a crumpled bag of broken Chip Ahoy cookies, and several empty half-pint cartons of chocolate milk.

Harold winced to recall camping with Chad on a father/son Boy Scout trip. While their supper cooked they’d bickered good-naturedly over cleanup. Then Chad, seeing two younger boys struggling with their campfire, rushed over to help. He’d have made Eagle!

Just beyond a plank bench two dusty mountain bikes leaned against a rotting fence post, each with handlebar bags and saddlebags flanking the bike’s rear wheels. With a sharp pang Harold

saw Chad kneeling in awe beside his shining new Italian Vittorio Simonelli d'Oro 18-speed road racer, on his fifteenth—*and last*— birthday.

Harold had promised himself he'd stay sober that Saturday. But then Janice started on him again for the bike's cost, for the overgrown lawn and the won't-start lawnmower, for too little money as always. By two that afternoon he was on his usual barstool at Rick's Sportsman's Cafe. If only he'd fled to Rick's last night—been three miles from home! Three miles from his God-damned .45. Three miles from calamity never to end.

His eyes traced the wall upward. They stopped at Jamie, pressed against a notch in a sheer granite wall whose solid immensity dwarfed not the boy alone, but all below. Before terror paralyzed him, he'd climbed almost to the top.

Harold turned to the boy beside him and pointed upward. "He's Jamie. You've got a name?"

"Theodore, but Teddy really. Ted. The path up's that way." He pointed to a dark place at the base of the cliff.

"I know." Harold looked up again, following shadows that suggested an ascending path. After a long moment he said, "You stay here."

The 'path' was in fact a series of hand-over-hand climbs up vertical handholds and footholds, sometimes mere toeholds. Ledges, level or less so, offered resting spots to catch a breath and quell fear. Most ledges were a yard or less long and a foot or so wide. Occasional longer ones seemed thoroughfares. Harold remembered climbing rigging in basic training. He hadn't minded scrambling up. But at the top he hated looking down.

At twice the height of the trees below, he stopped on a ledge and scanned the horizon. His eyes fell on a pointed church steeple a few miles away and realized that, save for weddings and funerals, he hadn't attended Mass since Chad's christening. He would miss his funeral.

To the east, morning haze lingering over the Connecticut River was fast burning off. He followed the valley's eastern ridgeline. Its highest point, Somers Mountain, he'd crossed over an hour ago. He breathed in deeply, sighed, and gauged the next climb, one vertical for almost twice his six-one height.

Several minutes later he surmounted another even higher climb, crawled onto then stood on a level ledge about ten feet long. At its start, the ledge was a reassuring two feet wide. But at its end, before a corner which blocked the view beyond, it had narrowed to under a foot. Cautiously, he turned and faced the cliff, groped for then found an unseen handhold and, after quelling an urge to panic, then edged around onto an even narrower ledge.

Six feet beyond clung Jamie. So pressed against the sheer rock face Harold might have missed his thin frame were it not for his baggy Patriots T-shirt. Unlike Chad, who had shot up to six feet by seventh grade, Jamie looked scarcely five feet. Faced away to his left, his back to the warming Sun, legs splayed, both his hands were firmly wedged in a fissure high above him. The heel-ends of his dirty Nikes overhung thin air.

Despite his pounding heart, Harold edged a step closer, saying, "Hi, Jamie; My name's Harold O'Neill. Call me Hal. I'm here to help you down."

Jamie's head spun around, eyes wide, lips taut in a grimace. Harold's heart skipped a beat: their pale hazel matched Chad's. Dried tears traced clean paths down Jamie's hollow, unwashed

cheeks. Long-faced with high cheekbones to begin with, he'd grown as may a boy on puberty's cusp the beginnings of a long chin beneath a younger boy's small, upturned nose.

His dark blond hair, sun-bleached to straw on top and brownish at the nape, half covered his brow and curled outward in feathery wisps over his large ears. Thin as he was, his outgrown jeans showed the sturdy calves and haunches of a summer on a bike.

Ignoring his trip-hammering heart, Hal edged a step closer and reached out, saying, "Take my hand."

Jamie whimpered but didn't move.

"Go ahead."

Still Jamie didn't move.

"Jamie—it's okay. I've got you."

Again, Jamie whimpered.

"I'm a bricklayer," Harold lied although during college vacations he'd hauled bricks and cement blocks for his mason grandfather, "I've got super strong hands."

He heard scuffling behind him. Teddy poked his head around the corner. Frowning but saying nothing, Hal turned back to Jamie. Gently, but firmly, he cupped his palm over the back of Jamie's ghostly-white hand. Ice-cold, it felt hard as the rock itself. "It's okay, just grab on."

Jamie's lower lip trembled. He shuddered, then through clenched teeth squeaked, "I can't!"

"Sure, you can. Sure you can," said Harold in the reassuring tone he'd used when Chad, almost five, said he couldn't ride his first two-wheeler without training wheels. "Just take my hand."

“I can’t let go!” Jamie cried in the soprano boys have before voice-change. Hal remembered once when Chad answered the phone, he’d mistaken him for Janice. “Teddy says I’m chicken. I am! A coward!”

“Screw you, Jamie Francis Quinn!” Hurt, Teddy yelled, “Never mind me saying chicken! I was an asshole for saying that!! Don’t you too be one! Take his hand!”

“Language, Teddy,” Hal said automatically. In silence, he thought.

Finally, he said, “Quinn? Quinn! An Irishman? Like me?!”

Jamie flicked up his eyebrows, then nodded.

Harold spotted a small chain around his neck. “Irish Catholic? Just like me?”

“Altar Boy!” Half teasing, Teddy chimed in.

“Was.” Jamie grunted.

“He quit,” Teddy sneered, “Wouldn’t join kid’s choir either.”

Seriously, Hal said, “Okay boys, time to get cracking. Jamie, you made it this far. Which absolutely proves you can make it back.”

Just then a police siren sounded two short blasts.

A cruiser lurched and swayed up the roadway and stopped behind Harold’s truck. A policeman climbed out, looked up for a long time, then went to his trunk and bent in. Rising, he put a bullhorn to his mouth. In a metallic voice he commanded, “You! On the cliff! Come down now!”

“WE’RE COMING!” Teddy screamed, then explained to Jamie, “This real old lady that stopped said she’d tell the cops.”

Hal knew he’d never see Conway. Surprising himself, he felt relief instead of alarm, felt that something settled at last. “Okay Jamie, you heard the cop.”

“Come down!” the cop repeated, then asked, “Injured? Is anyone injured?”

Hal yelled, “No, officer! The boy’s just panicked!”

“I’ll call the State Police rescue squad,” The cop ducked in his cruiser. A moment later he emerged, studied Harold’s license plate. He reached in for his mike, spoke in it, then through the bullhorn asked, “Sir! Are you Harold O’Neill?”

After a pause Hal said, “I am.”

Two State Police cars rumbled in and jerked to a stop. Four troopers jumped out, three with pistols drawn. The fourth aimed upward a telescope-equipped rifle.

“There’s kids up here!” Enraged, Hal shouted, “I’m unarmed!” Fleeting he wished they’d come to the house last night. On time

Through the local cop’s bullhorn, a trooper commanded, “Mr. O’Neill! Spread your arms, your legs, and turn around slowly.”

“He can’t!” Teddy screamed, “He’s helping Jamie! And there isn’t enough room to turn around! Put your guns away!”

The troopers looked at each other. After a moment, one by one they holstered and the rifleman cradled his weapon in his arm. After conferring briefly, two ran to the ledge. Distant sirens drew

closer. Several minutes later a fire engine lumbered in, followed by two more State Police cruisers.

A quarter-hour later a panting trooper, heavysset and hair graying, gained the ledge. Shaken by its narrowness, he hesitated while Teddy, arms waving, insisted, “Wait! Hal’s helping Jamie!” The trooper frowned, started to speak but said nothing. He studied the way past Teddy and didn’t try to pass around him.

Hal slowly worked his fingers around Jamie’s spindly wrist and, with gentle but steady force pried his hand from the fissure. Jamie yelped when it lost contact with the rock. With surprising strength, he fought to put it back, but Hal held it firmly until he ceased trying.

“I’ve got you, man,” he said, remembering how boys his age relish hearing themselves called ‘man.’ He edged closer; when their feet touched Jamie wailed.

“Don’t sweat it, man,” Hal said. Then after a silence, said, “Altar boy? Me too. That damn choir, too.” Almost flippantly and too fast, he chanted, “Hail Mary full of grace, blessed is the fruit of thy —*art thou among of wom—womb!*”

“Jesus,” Jamie said.

“I skipped ‘*Blessed art thou!*’” Hal chuckled. “It’s been a long time. Sister Agnes forced me to solo *Ave Maria*. I was so scared I threw up, had to change my robe. They only had one extra and it was too small. Went barely below my knees.” Jamie snickered. Hal went on, “When my voice started changing I quit. Anyway, I felt closer to God fishing. Or just being out on the water. We had a canoe.”

“We sail,” Jamie said, “A yawl my dad has down on Long Island Sound.”

“Yawl?”

“Yawls have two masts. Little one’s in the stern. That’s the back.”

“I know stern’s the back!” Hal laughed. “I’m an ex-navy lieutenant.” He grimaced to remember sailing up the Persian Gulf, then, on land, seeing charred, twisted Iraqi soldiers napalmed in their trucks. And a family, including four huddled children, all turned to charcoal by a misplaced incendiary bomb.

“Sleeps four. Dinghy’s a sailing dinghy too.”

“Sounds cool,” Harold said, then, gravely, “Not like up here. You know, Jamie, being scared’s okay. Hell, I’m scared too.”

Jamie's eyes went wide. “You?”

“Sure. See, it’s like my grandfather, the mason, said: ‘Forty years, I slapped bricks on mortar. And every day I go up a ladder, I’m still scared. Why? Cause the day you’re not scared, that’s the day you fall.’ So Jamie, let’s both be scared. And get the hell down from here.”

“But—” Jamie stammered, “—But—I can’t!”

“Of course not!” Hal shot back, “As long as you don’t move, you’re safe! Right?”

Scowling, Jamie nodded.

“Safe! But for how long? Till you’re hungry? Those Quaker Oat bars wearing off? Till you’re thirsty? Sun’s getting hot. He released Jamie’s wrist and watched his hand shoot back into the fissure. “Or you have to pee? Pee!? With both hands stuck in that crack, how’ll you whip it out? Or what? Pee your pants?”

Jamie shrugged.

Hal crossed his left arm over and past Jamie's. A chill ran down his spine when he thrust his hand into the fissure to find it accepted only his fingertips.

“Good man, Jamie. Listen, I’ve figured this out. Press hard against the rock and hold still. I’m going to straddle you.”

“Noooo!” Jamie squealed. “You—*We’ll* fall!”

“Hey man, you listen!” Hal said, “I came all the way up here so *you* don’t fall. You think I’d let *myself*?” More firmly he said, “I’m counting on you, Jamie. *Just, be, still.*”

Whimpering, Jamie clenched his eyes shut and ground his cheek into the wall.

Hal took a deep breath and held it. Exhaling, he slid his left hand as far as possible beyond Jamie's. Inhaling again but quietly to hide his fear, he set his right hand on Jamie's. Sure Jamie heard his pounding heart, he backed away from the rock face as far as he dared, then said, “*Ave*—Say it Jamie! Sing it!

Hal in a monotone, Jamie hoarsely but in tune, they sang Schubert's, “*Maria, gratia plena*—” but stopped when Harold swung his left leg around and beyond Jamie's own.

“*Mari*—,” Hal's voice choked as, unable to find a foothold, his leg flailed in midair. After seconds that seemed hours, he found barely enough ledge to accept the ball of his foot.

He jammed his fingers in until he couldn't bear the pain, then shifted his weight onto both feet. Jamie's back touched his chest and he felt trembling but wasn't sure whose it was. The top of Jamie's head brushed his chin; a faint scent of woodsmoke surprised him until he realized it was the boy's hair.

“Okay, Popeye The Sailorman,” Hal wisecracked, “You’re battened down like a hatch in a gale.”
Then, gently, he said, “*Hail Mary?*”

“*Mother of God.*” Jamie replied.

“What now?” Hal said after a moment, “Shall we say the Rosary until angels show up and fly us down?”

Jamie moaned.

“Okay man—let’s rock! He slid his right foot two inches back toward the corner. Jamie hesitated, then followed with his.

“*Gratia! Gratia plena! Again!*” Hal edged his foot six inches more. Jamie followed. Then, together, they drew their left feet over. “*Gratia plena, Jamie. Keep going, Popeye.*”

Jamie snickered.

After several more sideways steps they rounded the turn. With growing confidence and ignoring the trooper’s orders and Teddy’s bubbly cheerleading, they crabbed their way to the ledge’s slightly wider center.

Hal let his heart slow, then quipped, “Okay Jamie. It’s been great doing the ‘*Ave Maria*’ tango with you. But the music’s stopped. You ready?”

“Uh-huh.” Jamie muttered.

As Hal’s swung his right leg around him Jamie’s legs buckled. With a wail he fell to his knees, slumped forward and, sobbing, touched his brow to the rock.

“Jamie!” Teddy cried and knelt before him.

The trooper leaned over them, asking, “Son! You injured? Where?”

“He’s okay,” Hal bent and placed his hands on Jamie's shoulders.

Seconds later he choked back a sob, lifted his head and looked back over his shoulders at Hal. As he rose to one knee, Hal thought he saw him furtively make the sign of the Cross. He then straightened and, with Hal’ help, stood.

“I’m okay. I’m okay!” he insisted, “I’m okay, they just—my stupid knees!” In his quavering smile, and in the growing light in his eyes, Hal knew his panic had fled.

Laughing, Teddy squealed, “Quinn, you idiot!”

“Me an idiot?” Jamie grinned, “*You’re* the idiot who said, let’s mountain-climb the quarry!”

“Boys!” Assuming control, the Trooper towered over them. “Position yourselves between me and—” He stopped, frowned at the narrow ledge, then said, “No, follow me down. When we get to where it’s wider, transition ahead of me, then descend between we two officers.”

He glared at Hal, who offered his wrists. Reflexively the Trooper reached for his handcuffs, but he paused, saying, “Mr. O’Neill, you’ll need your hands for the descent. You’re sure you’re unarmed?” Hal pictured his .45 on the floor. He raised his arms and, the boys watching in dismay, turned around.

“Follow us—Cautiously,” the trooper ordered, adding needlessly, “Single file.”

Hal watched them go one by one down the high climb. He smiled to note how nimbly, and fearlessly, Jamie scampered down hands and footholds.

Seeing him safely with the others, Hal lowered his right foot onto the topmost foothold. He was lowering his left foot down when it froze in midair. He looked over his shoulder at the boys and the troopers below.

He lifted his eyes to the sky, the ledge, then at the corner. Suddenly he clambered back up and dashed to it.

“Hal! Come back!” Jamie shrieked from below and before the Trooper could stop him he scrambled cat-like back onto the ledge. “Hal!”

Turning his back to the wall, Hal edged around the corner, crabbed sideways, and stopped at Jamie's place.

“Halt Mr. O’Neill! Halt and descend!’ The bullhorn blared, then, “Boy! You there! Go back down! Go to the Troopers below.”

“Hal! Harold! Mr. O’Neill!” Jamie yelled and edged around the corner, pleading, “Come back! Hal! Please come to me!”

Hal scanned the horizon, then looked upward at the sky. “Go down, Jamie.” He said calmly, firmly, and eyes still skyward.

“Mr. O’Neill!” Another cop appealed, “Janice, she’s wounded, but she’ll recover! Give yourself up! You fired in passion. That’s just manslaughter!”

Harold looked to the heavens. As Chad had done the instant before he fell, he spread his arms like wings, opened both palms as if to welcome the void. He closed his eyes, whispered ‘*Hail Mary,*’ and was about to plunge forward when Jamie's hand touched his.