

Gold Fever

Insidiously, darkness outlined the confines of the tiny room, and I heard my voice from the outside as if it belonged to a stranger.

Johnno was knocking on my door, but I made no move to open it.

“Yeah, got gastro or something, mate. I’ll let the supervisor know, but I can’t come in.”

His grunt was disgusted, but I didn’t care.

Not when my insides were boiling and the colour was leached from everything it touched.

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Beyond the reach of my cap lamp, the darkness pressed in, as heavy as the five hundred metres of rock hanging above.

I scrambled up the slope, work boots sliding on the debris, breath ragged.

I found a clear spot and stood, peering into the holes at the back of the face to make sure the explosives had cleared. My forehead was sweaty beneath the lamp, my underarms swampy in the poorly ventilated space.

It was the last re-entry before we had to report to the magazine, routine, matter-of-fact, until it wasn’t. I turned from the face, noting the detonators had all gone off when my light fell onto the chunks of stone.

Something glittered.

I wavered.

You would think that working in a gold mine would have cured me. It wasn’t like a cold. It couldn’t be treated. No pill or passing of time would banish it forever. It was a feeling I got that lit up my brain, lifted the hair on the back of my neck and warmed my belly.

I still passed jewellery shop windows back home, and the sparkle within made my hands rub together and my mouth fill with spit.

I saw it in my sleep. In my tiny 3 by 3 room, with the emaciated pillows and humming air con, I dreamed my little dreams of gold.

But I never got near the stuff.

The actual ore got pulled out by the tonne, but it came from another stope in another tunnel.

It wasn't unusual for gold dust to end up in my gear, the treads of my boots. We were in a gold mine after all, except we were development, not production, and our charges were set to hack out a new portal, not a gold seam.

I had heard rumours occasionally, the boys telling tall tales over a beer in the wet mess. Stories of nuggets as thick as your fist, worth enough to retire on, smuggled out in lunch boxes, drink containers and down trousers. Somehow, it was always a mate of a mate that had achieved this enviable feat.

I chuckled along to the stories, but I didn't believe them.

Security was too tight. A thousand checkpoints to pass through, a thousand places to get caught.

I think it's what my family had been counting on.

It was my father-in-law who'd gotten me this job, after the incident at the last mine. God knows what stories he told to get me in, but I had promised. Both him and the missus.

I was done with all that. Finished. There were more important things in life.

But seeing that sparkle, nothing felt more important.

I dropped to my knees, my lamplight on the thing half-buried beneath my feet.

It was a beacon in the dark, a lure, a siren's call.

My gloves scrabbled to unearth it, to wrench the thing from beneath the stone, dirt flying, too much noise, too much noise.

"You right up there, Daz?"

Johnno waited by the bomb ute for me to call all clear. Had been waiting for too long. His voice had no anxiety yet, no concern.

“Fine, fine, fine!” I called down to him, my words strained and weird. I hoped he wouldn’t notice. My hands moved of their own accord, digging, digging, my breath a scuttle.

I strained to listen for him, for his boots on the stone, but I couldn’t hear anything over my own noise.

It came free eventually, the gold rock about the size of a paperback, too big to fit in my pockets, too bulky to hide under my shirt.

I charged down the rock pile, electricity in my limbs. My lamp lit up the ute and blinded my offsider enough so he couldn’t see the rock at my side.

“Go ahead and call mine control, Johnno,” I called, “this heading is good to go.”

He cursed me but jumped back in the ute to pick up the CB.

I slid in beside him, deftly kicking the rock beneath the seat.

For 14 hours, the rock tapped my ankles like It had a question that I couldn’t answer. Every time we stopped to charge a face, I thought I was cooked.

I made too many mistakes. I tripped. I dropped things. I pissed off the magazine keeper.

Finally, the shift ended. Johnno pulled up in the ute bay. He said nothing, but his movements were jerky and stiff. His side profile in the dim light was like a deflated balloon. Years of sun and smokes had carved deep lines. He wasn’t even that old.

It’s never a blessing to look into your own future.

He sighed once, really deep. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to realise he was pissed off. I didn’t want that. Johnno was a good bloke. He had covered for me, bought me beers, and pulled me in line when I needed it.

I waited for the inevitable spray.

But he didn't say anything. He shook his head and got out, disappearing into the change rooms.

This was the part that could sink me. Shift change. Two crews milling about instead of one, double the people who could see me.

I slid the rock up inside my shirt and made to follow, turning off to the right before the door to the dirty side of the change rooms. I ignored the shouty signs that told me I couldn't enter and pushed through the door into the adjacent hallway, walking purposely, eyes straight ahead as if I belonged there. Two workers in their office uniforms cast a frown at my dirty high vis, but I didn't slow.

Twenty-two steps took me through a door on the other end, out into the late day, and in a single movement, I pitched the rock on top of the air con unit that rested just outside the doorway. I didn't pause. I didn't look back. I turned tail and ran back the way I had come.

I returned later on foot, half walking, half jogging the thirty-minute journey in darkest night to retrieve it, stowing It in my lunchbox before wheeze-jogging back.

Up close, It didn't look like a gold nugget. It was too neat, too clean. One side was smooth, ice cold to the touch, the surface licking at my fingertips. It still gave me that same tingle, the warmth in my belly, but It looked strange, and bigger than It did that morning when I pulled It from the ground.

There was no way the thing was natural. It wasn't a gold nugget. It was something else.

I saw only what I wanted It to be.

The face where I had found It had no voids, no caverns and no caves inside it. There was no way to tell how it had gotten lodged into the solid rock. Or even what It was. It didn't have any discernible features, nothing to make It look like an actual object.

The hours stole away and snores trembled the walls between the rooms while I stared at the thing, examined It from every angle and had the same questions I had before. When I eventually crawled into my bed, my belly was gnarled and empty. I missed dinner as I studied It, missed a call from my wife, missed a knock on the door. I couldn't tell if I was sleeping or still awake.

I stole from a broken sleep to a butcher bird's maniacal laughter, though it was far too early for them to be awake.

I cracked an eyelid and immediately saw the rock on the far side of the room, larger even than the night before, a malevolence reflected in the low-light.

I had deposited It on the desk across from the bed, the bar fridge whirring beside It.

I found It when It was just bigger than my two fists. Now It was the size of a microwave, though if I looked at It squinting through my left eye, It seemed larger still.

If I looked at It out of my right eye, It was as if black lines ran from It. The black lines seemed made of the dark, and they lined the spaces between the door and the wall, sliding beneath the edge of the blinds, around the light switch and TV.

I blinked and the world righted itself. I blinked again, and it slid once more to black.

My alarm sounded, I slapped it off.

Panic. Fear. Anxiety. Too much emotion to fit inside my chest. I looked at It and my gold tingles were still there. My brain buzzed, my stomach was hot. It was magnified x1000, a feeling that brought the bile burning inside my throat and kicked my heart's rhythm into overdrive.

The cleaners.

They came every day when I was at site. Making the bed, taking away the rubbish, vacuuming the floor.

I could never seek to hide the thing. The second someone entered my room; they would see It. I would lose my job. They would take It away.

No.

I wouldn't let them take it. I couldn't go to work and leave it unguarded.

I holed up in the room, fobbing off Johnno when he came to grab me for the bus, all the while the gold rock grew, its presence filling one wall.

A medic came after I missed lunch, knocking timidly on my door.

"Darren?" A guy's voice. I spied on him from between the window blinds. He was a big guy, young, fresh-faced.

"Darren, are you there? Shift boss said you had gastro. I just need to check up on you."

He stood for a while at the door in his green uniform, a serious expression on his face.

I didn't open the door.

I didn't eat. Couldn't eat. Not when the rock was so large I couldn't get into the fridge anymore. I couldn't go to the dry mess for food. I couldn't leave the rock. Couldn't bear for it to pass from my sight.

I felt weirdly trembly. Like I did have gastro. I couldn't use the toilet. I pissed into a water bottle by the bed. It grew larger.

The room lightened fully, the day passing overhead, heat rising. My eyelids were dry, my mouth parched. I had turned off the air con at some point and was coated in sweat, my insides and outsides cooking.

Still, it grew.

I sat against the wall on my bed, legs drawn up, as the rock filled all available space, my eyes riveted, not frightened.

The rock was the centre of all things. The only thing in my room, in my life. It filled my vision, and though I boiled alive, I smiled.

It must have been night when they came, forcing open my door when I ignored their knocks, the medic, Johnno, and some of the boys, pulling me from the room though I bucked and twisted and shouted to be left alone.

Into the night, which had not cooled at all, torchlight in my face, voices twisting around each other.

“The rock!” I screamed out at them, “It’s mine!”

“He’s cracking up.”

“It happens, you know, these young guys...”

“Not used to underground.”

“He been drug tested?” The medic’s voice. There were some shuffles around me and then Johnno’s voice, loud and clear, cutting like a knife.

“He got caught on the gear at his old site.”

The rock grew larger still, though I couldn’t see it.