

THE QUARRY

Time Lost

Jamie Derkenne

‘Same old same old,’ said Julie, packing her day neatly into four words and using her sleeve to delicately pat the Madeleine cake crumbs from her mouth.

Stefan nodded to say he knew the stuck-in-a-hole feeling. Berlin had been like that. Balmain was becoming like that. He wanted to go back to North Arm, but he wanted company as well. Watching the crumbs part from her lips, he thought the company could be Julie.

Stefan had spent the last six months helping Helmut renovate a terrace. The job was done. Stefan had stopped paying him. Sydney was expensive. He had to get back. Perhaps she would.

‘Move up with me,’ he said, reaching for her hand. Julie said nothing, just stared at the crumbs, her hand limp in his.

‘Money is not a problem. I make good dough. And the valley is beautiful. The nature is quiet and green. People are so free there, not imprisoned by all this city *Scheisse*.’

Until recently, Julie worked for a Broadway chew n spew. To get the job she didn’t even mention the philosophy major. Derrida was slick, but so was constant grease. It was a job, that’s all you could say. She didn’t mind, apart from the money, when she got laid off. Stefan met her a few times when he bought munchies for him and Helmut. Stefan and Julie would talk so much that by the time Stefan got back the take-out would be cold, or eaten. After a few times, Helmut, his voice hungry and stomach sore, suggested he should get the take-out and Stefan get the date. Julie went out with him a few times. He adored her. When he said she could share his bedroom at Helmut’s house, she did.

Stefan was focussed, sensitive and a good listener. Nothing like Helmut. Helmut was a bit off the air, spending hours straightening bent nails and collecting old planks from construction sites. His terrace, a two bedder on the point road, was beautiful or would have been if not for the piles of stuff stacked everywhere.

Julie had never been up north. But the way Stefan spoke made it seem like a magical place, a place where you could unwind and breathe again. She wanted to go to Melbourne

first, put a few things in order, then fly up. Stefan would meet her in Coffs in a few weeks time. Julie thought that Stefan was one of the few men she had ever met who understood what she was saying. The way he tilted and nodded his head when she spoke was proof enough, she thought, of the import he gave her every word.

Stefan lived in a small shed made from ripple iron stitched together with six gauge next to the river on Christina's land. When he got back he realised there were going to be a few problems with Julie moving in. The shed was not an ideal home, though he knew of couples who lived in far worse. Anna and Ivan lived in an upturned water tank on the adjoining property and seemed OK. And then there were the Silk People and their teepees. Still, he could do better than a shed. He had saved up some money. Perhaps he could afford a shipping container.

'I can deliver a 40 footer to you cheapo mate. In pretty good condition. There's only one hitch.'

Stefan had gone into town to make some phone calls. This one sounded promising, Maybe he could afford it.

'So what is this hitch?'

'Full of ruined books. You find a way of dumping them, and the container's yours with ten per cent off.'

Stefan had the 40 footer delivered from Coffs, and positioned exactly where he wanted it, on a rocky outcrop overlooking a small field bounded on one side by the Nambucca and another by a grove of camphor laurel trees. On its side in big white letters was written the words 'Hamburg Süd' which made him smile. It took him a while to work the door bolts loose. When he finally coaxed the doors open he found the container packed with boxes of water-damaged second-hand books. Thousands of them. He managed to stack about 20 boxes of books in the paddock before giving up for the day. He literally had a truck load of books to shift.

The next morning Christina knocked on his shed door. Stefan's shed and container were parked on Christina's land. She lived in the old homestead on the other side of a small

hill. In return for living on her land, Stefan kept an eye on the fences, many of which had disappeared into the river now that it had changed course.

‘Stefan! You need to help me. One of the Charolais is sick.’ Christina was a thin bony woman with eyes like a Jersey. Her reason for living was to enter Charolais cattle into the Bowraville and District Annual Agricultural Show. Among the webs in her mahogany lined living room were festooned the red and blue ribbons of previous victories. She spent most of her days hoeing thistles and talking back to talk-back radio, which lived in one of her ears via a miniature transistor. Her talking back was always in the fields. People said she talked to her cows.

Stefan knew nothing about cattle, but Christina thought he did. Stefan’s father had been a doctor, and some of the common sense had rubbed off. He followed her towards the dam where a creamy white cow sat. Charolais were normally skittish, but this one let both go right up to her.

Stefan scratched behind her neck, the way cows like. The heifer looked dolefully up at him, and then vomited copiously, not bothering to move its body. The vomit was sludgy grey. Some of it seemed to have straight edges. Stefan sat on his haunches and peered at it. There was type amongst the goo. He thought he could make out a word. Recherche?

‘Seems to me she’s eaten something she shouldn’t have.’ he said. ‘Probably she will get over it in a day or two. You should just make sure she has some water with a bit of molasses.’

Christina nodded.

‘I see your new container has turned up. Should be an improvement for you. By the way, you haven’t seen my radio? I’ve dropped it somewhere.’

Stefan made a corral out of star stakes and pig wire so the cattle couldn’t get in, and moved the boxes there. He spent the rest of the day stacking more boxes from inside the container. It was hard work. Spring was still some way off. The nights were cold and the mornings frosty, but there was bite to the daytime heat. By noon the air was damp and hot. Every now and then he’d break open a box to see what sort of books were inside. They were mostly novels, and a lot of self-help books. Sometimes he would come across a

philosophy book, and if it wasn't too damaged he'd take it inside, thinking it might be something for Julie to read. He also kept a few German authors, even though they were in translation.

He stacked about 100 boxes into the corral. Christina would probably evict him if she knew he had been poisoning her cattle with literature. Maybe he should just chuck the lot in the river. He shook his head at the thought. If the Bowraville Argus was to be believed, the river was already polluted enough downstream. He thought about burning them. Burning them made a lot more sense, as he was in constant need of firewood for his Aga.

He had shifted the Aga from the shed just the day before. The Aga was small and positioned right next to the door of the container. Any further in and the whole container would become an oven. Stefan used it to bake German sourdough, which he sold at the Community Markets. The Aga needed fuel that burned slowly, and evenly. Not too hot. He'd give the books a try.

As he worked he noticed the sick cow had come over to see what he was doing. She seemed better already, but wasn't grazing, just looking at him and chewing her cud as he piled the books alongside the container. It was unnerving having the cow watch intently. It was like she knew what he was doing. Stefan put down another box of books, and using it as a stool, sat down and stared at the cow, catching his breath.

The cow made a noise like someone clearing their throat.

'She'll be no good for you,' said the cow as it chewed its cud. Stefan stared back.

'Was that you? Did you speak?'

The cow said nothing, but went on quietly chewing, its jaw moving silently sideways as if it was working up to say something.

'I must be going mad. I would have sworn the cow said something,' Stefan muttered to himself. The world was spinning.

'My point is that you yourself don't see what is obvious. I am talking to you. That is obvious. She will leave you. That is obvious. But on both counts you refuse to believe the truth of your own senses.'

Stefan stared slack jawed. Not only did the cow speak to him, but the voice was ethereal and beautifully modulated. A wonderful speaking voice, but one that sounded tiny and far away. It was like a man's voice. It had a slight lisp perhaps, but one that was hard to detect, and probably a result of chewing while at the same time speaking.

‘You can speak!’

The cow languidly slid a thick blue tongue into one of its nostrils, flicked it around, and then continued chewing silently.

‘I heard you. You can speak!’ Stefan repeated.

‘But did you understand anything of what I was saying?’ the cow said.

This time it was Stefan's turn to be silent.

‘You say she's leaving, but how would you know? You know nothing of my relationship with Julie, nothing at all. You know nothing about me. And you have never even met her! How do you say you know these things?’

‘I know how these things work. I've digested quite a bit of human thought. And besides, why shouldn't you trust me? I am a cow. Why would I lie?’

Stefan tried to ask more questions, but the cow remained silent. Eventually she sat down in the shade of the container quite close to where he was working. He watched her intently, but after a while she stopped looking at him, and closed her eyes for minutes at a time. Some time later, with some heaving and snorting, the cow got up, and walked slowly over to where the rest of the herd was grazing.

Naturally, Stefan said nothing about the talking cow to Christina. And he decided that it was against his best interests to say anything when he picked Julie up from Coffs Airport.

‘Are you sure you want to be here?’

Julie laughed. She wasn't the least bit sure, but she wasn't going to tell Stefan that. Stefan had worked hard to make a little home out of his new shipping container. He'd even managed to build a small deck overlooking a gully and the Nambucca where they could sit at night once the weather warmed up.

‘Such a beautiful place.’ She kissed him. It wasn't the answer he was looking for.

For the next few weeks, things seemed to go smoothly. Stefan burned books in the Aga, using it to bake bread. He had come across a case of Thomas Mann, in English translation, which burned particularly well. It was strange how different books burned in different ways. Burning Nietzsche was next to impossible, even though all the books were completely dry. An entire case of DH Lawrence remained damp no matter what he did. Stefan had even taken to placing the books on the steel roof of the container during the daytime to help dry them, but after weeks *Sons and Lovers* not only remained damp but mold had begun to grow across the pages. He would have to dig a pit and compost them. For the most part the Aga was well fuelled and Stefan's bread baking business boomed. He left the container doors propped open because of the heat. They lay in bed listening to the sounds of frogs and night birds, feeling the night breeze on their faces.

Life settled into a quiet routine. Julie seemed happy, forever saying how different the Nambucca was to either Sydney or Melbourne, but Stefan couldn't get the cow's words out of his head.

One morning he got up early, and put his gumboots and Drizabone on. The air was cold enough for breath clouds, and there was a thick frost on the grass. He walked over to the camphor laurel grove and looked around. It was still too dark to see properly, but he soon spotted the herd, their thick white coats giving them the appearance of ghosts in the gloaming. The entire herd, about twenty breeders, a few calves and heifers were sitting under a thicket of trees where it was a few degrees warmer than the open paddock. He trod carefully, his boots not even crunching the frost. They still sensed him. They all turned their heads his way to watch him come.

Even though they were Charolais, not one of them stirred or showed the least sign of agitation. Stefan got up so close he could almost reach out and touch them. He smelt their sugary breath. He realised he had no idea which of the cows was the one who spoke to him.

'Which one are you?'

The cows said nothing. A few were chewing cud, but several more weren't even doing that.

'One of you spoke to me. I heard you!'

Some of the cows didn't even seem to be looking at him any more, but through him, like he was invisible. It was an unnerving feeling.

'You need to explain yourself. Why will she leave? What have I done? Why won't you speak to me? It won't happen, you know. I will leave her first.'

'Stefan?' There was a catch of concern in the voice. Stefan looked from cow to cow, trying to work out which one had uttered his name, realising too late that the voice had come from behind him. He turned around.

Silhouetted by a dawning sun pinking her ears, Julie stood at the edge of the grove, holding out a hand as you would if helping someone over a stream.

'Julie?'

'Stefan, what are you doing? Who are you talking to? Is Christina there? Are you talking about me?'

Stefan was silent for a few seconds trying to work out what to say.

'No no. No-one is here. I was just checking on the cows. I was clearing my throat.'

Julie came closer, looking around. It was clear she didn't believe him. Stefan knew he had to act. Far better for him to leave her than she to leave him.

That night, while they were sitting around the Aga burning some Günter Grass, Stefan told Julie she should leave. She burst into tears.

'Look, we aren't meant for each other. This is clear to me. It's better we split now and remain friends than later on become enemies.' The words sounded hollow.

Julie sniffed and patted her eyes with her sleeve.

'It's Christina isn't it? I heard you talking to her this morning.'

Stefan opened his mouth to say he had been talking to a cow, but thought better of it. He nodded sagely. 'Yes, you are correct. It was Christina.'

Julie's face contorted in agony and she started sobbing once more. That night Stefan slept on the roof. The next morning he took her into Macksville so she could catch the

Sydney Express. He offered to wait on the platform with her, but she said no. Her grief had turned to anger.

Later that night, alone in his container, Stefan started to feel bad about the whole situation. He would drive into town and try ringing her in the morning, but it all seemed so hopeless. Why had he done it?

After a few hours the moon rose. The container doors were open as usual, as he was baking for the Saturday markets. Unable to sleep, Stefan put on his gumboots and walked towards the camphor laurel grove. The moon was full and heavy. The light cast strong shadows across the fields. A flicker of shadow made him look up. A cloud, but perhaps not. Something that for all the world looked like Anna, skirts, boots and all, flying across its face as if on the zenith of a giant leap.

Stefan felt sick. Something was happening to his brain he was sure. Was he hallucinating? He wondered what he would look like from such a height.

This time he recognised the Charolais who had spoken to him. It was the way she was chewing her cud. She'd move her jaws from side to side for a few seconds then stop, then start again.

'Why did you tell me to leave her?'

The cow looked up at him exactly the same way Julie did when she was asking him to explain why she should leave.

'I know it was you. You told me when I was taking books out of the container. I know it was real. You told me.'

The cow swallowed and lifted its head as if to say something. Stefan waited. The Charolais, its head held high, bellowed so loudly that the sound echoed through the night. It was a cry of sorts, the sound a cow makes when it has lost its calf, or is calling for a bull. An elemental sound so loud and forlorn that for a second or two Stefan wasn't sure if it was him or the cow making all the noise.

