

THE QUARRY

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Contrary Crescent

The street was never quiet around this time of the afternoon, nor in fact this time of year with the summer holidays already well in progress. The old Russian lady with her thousands of grandchildren saw to that, yet none of the neighbours ever seemed to mind. It struck him as odd, as he went round the crescent with the mail, that none of the old fogies on the street ever seemed to complain about the noise coming from Number Seventeen. But then, he thought to himself as he passed the local boys cricket team trekking to the field, it was none of his business. He was not a resident, merely a passerby who came bearing packages, parcels and letters. Not that this would continue for long. The envelope in his front shirt pocket weighed heavily against his chest. Retrenched. The last thing he expected this morning when he showed up, as per usual,

at seven on the dot, was to be called into the office and handed that cursed bit of paper.

'We are sorry to inform you, Mr Barton, that the Western Sydney Branch of the Australian Postal Service is undergoing major reconstruction to their mailing system. As such, expenditures need to be cut and we simply cannot afford to retain such numbers of staff. Enclosed is all relevant information regarding your severance pay and contact information of those who can assist with future possibilities. We regret that we are parting on such circumstances. We thank you for all you have done for us over these past eleven years and wish you the best with the future.'

It was unfitting, he thought, that such terrible news should come on such a lovely day. The morning had breezed over him as he made his deliveries in a daze. Thoughts of the future and its lack of certainty ran through his head in a never-ending cycle of confusion. It was only now, with the inescapable racket that only belonged to Contrary Crescent, that he seemed to be awakened to his surroundings. The thought of never again needing to come to this hodge-podge piece of society didn't sit right with him. He liked this neighbourhood. He liked the way the junior cricketers scuffled their way down to the field at the end of the crescent under the hot summer sun. He liked hearing the noisy play from Number Seventeen and he liked being a small witness to the lives of the people living in this street.

The old Asian lady at Twenty Two was out again watering her plants. She took such pride in maintaining them to a degree of such perfection that he wondered if she stayed out at night making sure the wind didn't move a single leaf or petal out of place. He could tell, from the neatly arranged shoes in the cupboard – which strangely stood *outside* the house – that Mrs Duong was a rather particular sort of person. However, the noise never seemed to bother her in her daily routines. He supposed she was more of the 'keep to yourself' sort. Her mail usually included the general; water, electricity, gas bills with the occasional letter addressed in horribly mutilated English. Every now and again though, a weighty parcel would arrive for her from either Japan or China marked 'perishable'. He often wondered what those packages contained, some sort of food no doubt but as to what kind, he couldn't say. Not that it was any of his concern.

Mr Granger at Number Ten was again out on his porch, as he was most afternoons, catching the afternoon sun while reading the paper. The old recliner with the faded plaid fabric still stood strong and had probably moulded into the perfect fit for the Englishman. The squeals of the unruly kids at Seventeen and the shouts from the cricket team didn't seem to bother him, in fact, whenever a particularly loud yelp came about, the smallest hint of a smirk could be seen on his aged lips as he smoked his Kent cigarettes. Mr and Mrs Granger were a peculiar pair. Some days Mr Granger would stand by the post box leaning on his fence watching the young boys and their cricket antics. His gruff shouts of second hand coaching were barely noticed by the group but often Mr Granger would share a few cricketing thoughts with him as he handed over the day's mail. Aside from the mundane bills, a copy of the *London Gazette* was received weekly along with Mrs Granger's *Quilter's Newsletter Magazine*. In addition to these, a flood of letters from *The East Indian Tea Society* or *The Sangara Rubber Company* only served to confuse him on the couples' interests and activities. Though he supposed, as he was just the deliverer, it was presumptuous of him to even know that much. A chorus of cheers from the boys turned his gaze to their game and memories of his own time on the team flooded back. He had been rather a natural in cricket, or so his coach had said. Still, not enough to earn a living and certainly not enough to be known for it. The boys down the street had no idea he could play. No one on the street would. He wondered if his absence in the coming weeks would even be noted by this strange collection of people.

The Russian grandmother too sat on her verandah. The squabble of children bustled and writhed on the lawn below as she sat with a bowl of beans on her lap stringing them no doubt for dinner that night. Now and then a bark of Russian could be heard as she scolded them for some misdeed or another. As per usual, upon realizing he had mail for her, she shot off a quick string of Russian – which he supposed were actual words but to his ears sounded like the sharp yips of a wolf – and one of the grandkids ran down to meet him over the letterbox. Her long braids swung as she raced to the fence and she beamed up at him as she held her hands out for the mail he had crossed the street to bring.

'Baba asked me to get the mail,' she explained.

'You kids always help your grandma, don't you?' he said, and with a quick grin of his own he handed her the small bundle of letters and turned to leave.

Behind him another shout of Slavic gibberish resounded and he turned just enough to see the young girl let out a gasp.

‘Ah! Sorry. I forgot to say thank you for bringing the mail!’ For a moment he stood shocked, before he dipped his head in acknowledgement and was once again treated to her rosy smile. With that, she ran off to deliver the letters to her grandmother before once again joining the game that her cousins had started.

Endless games of tips and hide and seek around the old fir tree that stood proudly at the centre of the front lawn drew peals of laughter from the rowdy children. At Christmas, that old fir tree was lit up and decorated so thickly one could barely see the pine needles. It was the time when not only the grandkids, but the old biddy’s entire mob of a family came to decorate it. Aunts and mothers brought plates of steaming food and set it out on the long table outside. Number Seventeen always smelled so good around Christmas and he was always grateful that after this street he was on break and could go and find food to appease his growling stomach. Uncles and fathers brought ladders and helped the young ones up to decorate even the very top of the tree to the point where he worried it may just bend over from the weight of all those ornaments. It was by far the gaudiest thing on the street, yet seemed to inspire the rest to put *some* effort into decorating their homes for the holidays.

Mrs Duong too, took pleasure in decorating her already perfect garden for the Christmas holidays. Though, he suspected that the decorations were more for the coming New Year with how late she started to put them out, this past year in particular. Lights had been cautiously woven through slender branches, the bulbs painstakingly arranged to give the maximum amount of shine through the leafy green. Above the door, a wooden plaque had been be hung, the inscription some Chinese characters that he would never *really* know the meaning of, but had always assumed meant ‘Happy New Year’ or something of the like.

It was Number Ten that really let the street down with the one simple, yet abysmally abused Christmas wreath that was hung on the fly screen every year. As far as he could recall, in the eleven years he had been a postman in this neighbourhood, that same wreath had been displayed – first of November till the end of December. This last year had been no different. He suspected that it had something to do with Mrs Granger’s insistence rather than Mr Granger’s proactiveness for the Christmas

holidays. Nevertheless, it was there year after year, constantly abused by the hot summer winds and flash storms, not to mention the incessant Christmas beetles that liked to call the plastic bristles home for a few weeks. He was glad to know that it was safely tucked away awaiting next year's chance to shine once more.

The celebrations would begin at Christmas. Number Seventeen would assure that the whole street would be packed with cars as the whole family came over to celebrate. Strangely, none of the neighbours seemed to mind having their parking spots stolen. It was a bizarre kind of silent understanding between the residents of the street that this was a yearly occurrence that would be tolerated.

Likewise a week later for the New Year, Mrs Duong's many visitors stirred no anger within the crescent. The flock of relatives that came to visit with their ridiculously loud conversations in rushed Chinese were left peacefully alone. Delivering the mail during this time ensured he smelled a variety of spices and herbs he had never even heard of before. This year's mix of the spicy scent of chilli combined with the sweet aroma of honey had sent his stomach juices into overdrive and heading to the nearest Chinese take-out for his lunch.

So it was, on this fairly usual February afternoon that he found himself with a flyer in hand and a group of giggling Russian girls running back into their grandmother's house. The printed paper was nothing special itself. A simple design printed in black on fading green paper. The words '*Street Fête!*' surrounded by a jagged cloud lay proudly at the top of the page. Below was listed a variety of stalls, games and events that were to take place. Beneath that was the general when-where inventory as well as a contact number listed as Mrs Granger's. His hands crinkled the paper slightly as the wind sought to steal his invite from him.

He was surprised then to be on the receiving end of such a present. After all, he was the man who came simply to deliver the mail. The note was folded carefully and seemed to further weigh down his pocket as he went about the rest of his day.

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The evening felt twice as cold with those little bits of paper radiating their essence from his pocket. Still, he tried to weather it, absorbing himself in making dinner, doing the laundry and vacuuming. When he had finally exhausted all the household chores he could do in his menial apartment, he sat down with a drink to

face reality. The envelope was taken out and gently laid down. The neatly doubled note was carefully unfolded and placed on the small kitchen table beside it and its contents read three times over.

With a sigh and a sip of his whiskey he wondered if it would be reasonable to attend. After all, he would soon no longer be the friendly postman of the neighbourhood. And yet, the thrum of excitement in his veins everyday as he realised his next stop would be that small little crescent was unmistakably something he would miss. Downing his drink he grabbed the flyer, his coat, keys and his worn leather wallet and set out.

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From his vantage point across the grassy green he could see the lights illuminating the stalls and people – lots of people – families, couples, friends milling about in the semi dark. He could already smell the sticky sweet scent of Mrs Duong's cooking as well as the smoky aroma of the Russian lady's barbeque. There was some sort of a stage set up outside Number Thirty One and although it was quite a ways round the bend, he swore he could see Mrs Granger with her ridiculous red hair, a microphone in hand.

He made his way down to the beginning of the crescent. Moving with the flow of the crowd he took in the magic of it all. As he expected, Mrs Duong did indeed have a booth. It was constantly swarmed by a mass of people as the sweet promise of delicious homemade food wafted through the throng. Every spot on the large tables was taken up by large pots, which probably would be more aptly called vats. From these steaming vats poured the heavenly aroma of genuine Asian cuisine. As he followed his nose over, he was surprised by a sudden yell.

‘Ah! Mailman-san!’

He turned to see the face of the shouting voice only to see quiet, *keep-to-yourself* Mrs Duong waving madly at him from behind her booth.

He raised his hand in acknowledgement and she waved him over. With no choice but utter rudeness left, he made his way to the extremely busy stall. Reaching the front by some miracle or other he found Mrs Duong's round face wearing an ear to ear smile.

‘Mailman-san, here, here!’ She said in a mish-mash of English. Her hands held a plate piled high with every sort of delicacy she had on offer tonight. His thoughts became panicked as he was forced to begin balancing the piled plate between his own hands as she laid a pair of cheap wooden chopsticks overtop. ‘Ok. You eat well, ne?’ She grinned while nodding so persistently as if prompting him to also follow with the action.

‘Ah, but I— the money?’ He managed to stutter as the crowd pushed him in from behind.

‘No, no, no,’ she tittered, in a pleasant sort of way. ‘This is thank you for Mailman-san’s service.’ And with a final nod, she turned to take the orders of the mass standing before her.

Shuffling further down the street and resting on Number Nineteen’s brick fence he smiled to himself. Taking a bite of the sticky sweet pork he settled down to watch Mrs Granger’s show.

Half way through his meal his vision was obscured by the gaudiest shade of pink. Focusing his eyes he realised it was a flyer and traced the chubby little hand holding it to the grinning face of one of the cricketing boys.

‘So mister, do you play?’ the boy asked.

Warily his eyes shifted once more to the leaflet before him. Reading the blazing words a small smile of his own unfurled on his face.

Wanted! Local Cricket Coach.