

# THE QUARRY

Erica Genda

## *The Uselessness of Aversion*

The tension in the room felt like fire. My eyes burned, and my cheeks were wet. It was then that Emma came home, and saw Aaron with his hands clenched in a tight fist. She stood before us and released her shopping bags uneasily to the floor. In the background, the television screen, still stagnant, shone into the dark room. At that moment, I wished I could have turned back time, or been able to force it forwards. I wished to be anywhere other than in that moment.

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I couldn't believe I was here. This moment made me wish to be back with my parents in Melbourne.

Emma greeted me at the door of my new home in the outskirts of North Sydney. It was here that I was to live, with two new housemates. They looked like white supremacists, with their pale and freckled skin, light blonde hair and deep blue eyes. I had friends similar to them in primary school. But the minute they saw my mum wearing a hijab they weren't my friends anymore.

'Yasmin,' Emma said. 'How's it hangin? Happy to have a new roomie! Need some help with ya gear?'

I politely accepted and felt bad for judging her. I was such a contradiction.

Emma carried my big boxes inside, and I carried the small ones. My justification being I am petite and was already exhausted from the mess that was my life. After only a few hours, I was almost through unpacking my life's belongings into my new ridiculously tiny bedroom. In the room next door, I could hear my new roomies yapping loudly. I wanted to join them, but I needed a breather. I lay back on my bed and grabbed my phone to Face-Time my mum.

'Yasmin, my sweetness, you look so sad, what's wrong?' she asked.

'Just moved into my new place. I have housemates Ma...it feels weird.'

'Are they nice?'

In the background, I could hear my father yelling.

'Why is dad yelling?'

'We are making kebbeh, and he's asking for my help in the kitchen. I don't know why - he's made it a thousand times!'

'Did you want me to call you later?'

'Ok Yasmin, just be nice and make friends. It is impossible not to like you. I love you,' she said blowing me a virtual kiss. I rolled over and saw a message from her with a picture of my Dad in the kitchen with mince in his hands. I missed them so much.

'Ey! Newbie. I mean, Yaz, come out!' shouted Emma from the lounge room. 'Thought I'd properly introduce ya to Az, or Aaron as he prefers, who you'll notice sits on the lounge a lot at night. I have a TV in my room for privacy, but sometimes we enjoy watching a bit of the *Bach* together. For the drinking games!'

'Love it,' I said.

‘By the way Az, this is Yaz, or Yasmin - which I like, might start calling you that,’ said Emma as I gave a small wave to Aaron.

‘Righto,’ said Emma, and took my hand as she guided me into the kitchen. She gave me a sheet of paper titled ‘Emma & Aarons Pet Hates’. After that list, there was a smaller list of things *not to eat* or to *get for myself if I wanted any*. There were a few other house rules on the sheet, but Emma told me to forget them because Aaron wrote them and who gives a fuck about him anyway. I thought she was joking, but couldn’t tell. She popped open a bottle of VB and offered me one, but I hated VB, so I took water instead. Emma leant on the counter, waiting for me to say something.

‘Thanks so much’ I said, ‘but I better finish unpacking.’

I was hopping off the bar stool when Emma said, ‘so what’s ya story? New to Sydney or what?’

I raised my eyebrows. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to share everything straight away, but I sat back down.

‘Oh sorry, sensitive question is it?’ Emma continued.

‘No, no! I’ve been here for a while, few years. But, um, I just split with my ex, so I had to get out of his place ASAP.’

I couldn’t look up, as I knew that if I talked about him, my eyes would start to water. *How embarrassing!*

Emma leant over the counter and gave me a bumpy rub on the shoulder.

‘Fuck him!’ she said.

‘Shut up Em! I’m watching the news,’ Aaron called out. There was no wall between the kitchen and the lounge area.

‘Stop being a dick,’ Emma bit back.

‘Sorry, no offence,’ Aaron said, turning to look at me. I nodded that it was okay even though it irritated me. Though I was probably just being sensitive.

‘How did you guys meet?’ I asked Emma,

‘He’s my brother’s best mate. My brother moved out with a girl, so he moved in. Helps pay the rent, so he's not that bad - Are ya Az?’

She had a cheeky smile on her face like she thought he was great or something.

‘Please, don’t listen to her. Call me Aaron. I’m not a bogan like *some!*’ He joked.

I laughed, even contemplating the VB for a moment. It seemed to me that I had walked into a wacky, yet playful friendship and I felt like I was being invited to join in the fun. That was the nicest way to think about this situation.

‘So what did this guy do to you?’ asked Aaron, not paying attention.

I didn’t exactly want to get into the details with someone who wasn’t even listening.

‘Did he cheat on ya?’ Emma prodded.

‘Um, yeah,’ was all I could say before I lost it. I began sobbing into my chest as quietly as I could. I must have seemed like a complete lunatic.

‘Oh shit! I’m sorry babe. It’s okay, Yasmin. Don’t worry. A week from now you won’t even be thinking about this fucking idiot.’

Emma’s tone was suddenly not so loud anymore. She came around to my side of the counter to hold me. That was the moment we became friends.

Emma spent a lot of time with me after that night. She took me out often. Not to clubs, but to dinner and bars where we could enjoy each other’s company. I had become stressed about being on my own. And I felt anxious about being around people who I didn’t like or didn’t like me! But now we were drinking VB every Friday night. The taste was dismal, but the company was nice. It was comforting to have someone like Emma. We spoke about the important things in life just as easy as the not so important things. I loved that. Aaron joined us on most Fridays too, but he was hooked on the news. It was tiresome. Terrorist bombings and sieges were always being pushed onto viewers, like some kind of fear mongering. No one wants to hear about that on a Friday night. Plus, I found it funny, in a not so funny way that they never spoke about the effects these things had in Middle-Eastern countries. Like Lebanon, where my parents were from, or Syria, where people were likely to die if they stayed or if they fled. I hated seeing all this hate coming from faux Muslims, making the world hell for the good ones. At first, it just broke my heart. Then, I grew furious. Emma would tell Aaron to ‘shut that shit off’, as she could see it visibly upset me. But he never listened.

‘Don’t you find it depressing to watch the news constantly?’ I’d ask him, interrupting a small pecking session between him and Emma.

‘Nah, my dad homeschooled me, and we did a lot of news watching. He always said that it’s good to be informed. There’s a lot of crazies out here.’

He motioned to the lone gunman on the screen who had just been caught. I didn’t think anything of it at the time, just agreed that the man was crazy. But I guess Aaron and I had a different view of what led to crazy.

I became sidetracked with a message from my mum. Another photo, it read, ‘My Turkish friend from work made me this Kanafeh. You would love it! Wish you were here! Miss you!’ Her missing me was nothing new. Ever since I moved to Sydney, our emotions ran high, and we found it hard to be apart. I knew she would have felt it more because I had less of a need to call her as I was finally settling in. Our catch-ups became less frequent, but we always had a way of letting each other know we were still there. I sent a message back saying, ‘ I love you Ma, tell Dad I say hi and I miss you both. Will call soon.’

I think she knew that I had to make a life for myself, and I was beginning to.

‘So are you two official yet or what?’ I asked sitting on the lounge as Emma and Aaron nestled up to one another.

‘Oh stuff off,’ Emma cringed slightly but looked happy.

‘Well, why not I guess,’ Aaron said smiling. They kissed, and it wasn’t even gross, but I still threw a pillow at them.

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It had been about two months since Emma and Aaron had hooked up exclusively. I was sitting on my laptop at the kitchen bench as Aaron watched TV. There was a brief mention of a protest happening in Melton on the news, which is close to where my parents live in Melbourne.

‘What is that?’ I asked,

‘Anti-Muslim protest, they approved a Mosque in Melton,’ Aaron scoffed.

I couldn’t figure out his tone. I took my laptop to the bedroom and Skyped my parents. My dad answered, and I could see my mum in the background crying with her head down. My dad was whispering like he didn’t want my

mum to hear. He told me about a man who threw a beer can at his car as he drove past. The man then yelled, 'What're you hiding under there?' to my mum in the passenger seat, referring to her hijab.

'It's horrible Yasmin. Just horrible! I don't know why these people hate us. We don't do anything. We keep to ourselves! These people, they come and even eat at our shop! It's like they have lost their minds.'

I found it hard not to cry, but I didn't want to show my dad how much it hurt me too. He needed to see that I was okay.

'Your mother and I are worried for you. What is it like for you there? Is it multicultural? Are you okay?'

He looked desperately sad. I couldn't help but shed a tear.

'It's okay dad, tell mum I'm fine. I have friends, and it's not the kind of place where that stuff happens. I'm safe.'

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Following the Melton protests, I had a sick feeling in my stomach that wouldn't budge. But I never voiced my concern. I called or messaged my parents every day. They weren't distressed anymore, but I couldn't shake the anxiety. It was time for dinner, but I didn't know if I could stomach a full meal, so prepared a coffee and was going to sit with Aaron and watch some TV. As I was about to sit down, he yelled, 'Fucking Muslims!'

My heart began beating fast and hard; I could feel it against my rib cage. I tried to sip my coffee but my hands were shaky, and I ended up spilling some. I tried listening to the news, but Aaron just shouted over the top of it.

'What a twisted, fucked up race! Shoot them all!'

At that moment, I realised that Aaron had no idea that I was Muslim. I clenched the paper towels I had used to clean up the coffee. Aaron kept going and going like he was having a conversation with the television.

'Can you shut up!' I snapped.

He paused the TV. There was silence between us.

'You know you're being completely racist right?'

'What's it to you?' he said. 'I can see you're brown, but I didn't think you were some Arab.'

'I'm Lebanese. My parents are Muslim. They're good people, and it's disgusting to hear this shit in my living space,' I replied. My voice shook, but I stood strong.

'Well let's get one thing straight then, yeah - this is *my* place, and I'll say what I want - you can get the fuck out for all I care.'

Aaron pointed towards the door, and I knew he meant it.

'I don't get it. You can't seriously watch one crazy person on TV, who just happens to be Arabic and think we're all murderers?'

'It's not just one crazy person. There are heaps of you.'

'That's not us. That guy stalked that girl; he didn't kill her with some extremism motive, that's just the news spinning shit... Or, you, you're spinning shit!'

'I'm telling you, Muslims are violent and fucked up. You can see it with your own two eyes.'

He gestured towards the TV.

'You are *completely* fucked up Aaron! I hope you know that.'

The tension in the room felt like fire. My eyes burned, and my cheeks were wet. It was then that Emma came home, and saw Aaron with his hands clenched in a tight fist. She stood before us and released her shopping bags uneasily to the floor. In the background, the television screen, still stagnant, shone into the dark room.

'Turn it off,' Emma said, her voice trembling. 'Turn it off now, Aaron!'

'Are you seriously going to do this?' He threatened.

'Do what?' She said 'Stand up for my friend?'

I never spoke about my background with Emma, but she wasn't an idiot. I think she had noticed the photos in my room of me with my parents. She knew I wasn't like them.

'To be honest Em, I don't think I can live here anymore,' I said and turned away towards my room. I had to get my car keys so that I could get out. I didn't know what I expected from Em, and I didn't want to get in between her and Aaron, even if he was a racist asshole.

‘Don’t go,’ she said. As I walked to leave she grabbed my arm, ‘it’s just stupid talk. It doesn’t mean anything. He didn’t mean it.’ I felt sad for her defending him like that.

‘I bloody do mean it!’ he said. ‘Next thing you know, she’ll be wearing a fucking burka and yelling Allahu Akbar at me!’

I exhaled a shocked kind of sigh. I had to leave. Emma rushed behind me, but I couldn’t stop. I didn’t have any more words.