

THE QUARRY

Bridget Corke

Wednesday

Bing bong.

I look up from where I am crouching on the floor, legs tucked under me and a wine bottle in each hand as I restock the shelves. A face with more wrinkles than my shirt peers down at me through square metal-framed glasses that magnify the eyes to alien-like proportions. Those same eyes follow me as I push myself up from the floor until I am the one looking down.

‘Hi Mrs Foster. Will it be a green ginger wine or a sherry today?’

Those big eyes get even larger, then blink, as she tries to figure out which drink will be the best company over the next couple of weeks; and which will put the smallest dent in her pension. Once a fortnight on a Wednesday, after she has collected the pension from the Centrelink down the road, Mrs Foster comes into the shop to refill her stock. Her swollen hands, riddled with arthritis, finger the

collar buttoned at her throat. A fine gold chain drapes down her chest; a diamond ring with intricate work around the central gem hangs from the chain and swings as she shuffles closer to me.

'Mmm, I think I'll take a green ginger tonight, thank you, Jay. I need a little spice in my life. This is the only way I can get it, ever since Eddie died.' This statement is followed by a wink in my direction. I slap a smile on my face and try not to let on that inside I'm cringing. Mrs Foster needing 'spice'? Nope. Not going there.

In a few strides, I have grabbed the fortified wine and am at the counter. I'm hoping to get Mrs Foster out of here before she says anything else that I'll have to spend the rest of the night forgetting. Slipping the bottle into a brown paper bag, I put out my hand for the coins with which Mrs Foster will inevitably pay. Slowly, she counts out the \$8.90, starting with a few gold coins and then methodically counting out the silver shrapnel.

'\$7.80...\$8.30...\$8.40...'

Finally, satisfied that she has provided me with the correct change, Mrs Foster trots to the door, wine in hand.

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Bing bong.

I'm in the fridge, stacking cartons of Carlton Draught and shifting from leg to leg trying to stay warm, when a man wanders into the shop. He appears to be in his late 30s with a paunch that rests over his trackie pants. He has on runners with the soles worn away and dirt smudged across the front and the top. A frayed t-shirt clings to his chest and back where sweat has soaked through the material, leaving dark patches. He looks around the shop blankly. I catch a glimpse of the bloodshot whites of his eyes and his tiny pupils. He doesn't seem to take me in as he continues to glance around, standing in the middle of the aisle and making no move to get anything. I wonder if he's forgotten whatever it was that he came in for. As he again turns his head my way, he jerks back as he

realises that I'm standing on the other side of the cooler room door. For a few seconds, he stands there looking at me while I stand there looking at him, and then he wanders back out of the shop.

Bing bong.

A group of guys, not much younger than me, maybe eighteen or nineteen, walk in. With heads held high, hands in pockets and some shoving, they make their way to their Holy Grail, the premixed drinks. They crowd the fridge door and pull it open.

'How 'bout two six-packs of the Woodstocks?'

'Nah, we need more than that. Get the Woodies and a ten-pack of Jack Daniel's.'

'Fine, but you're paying for it.'

'Fuck off...I paid last time. This is your shout, you tight arse.'

The smallest of the group looks over his shoulder, sucking on his lip, then turns back to the fridge and sticks his hand in. After some more shoving and arguing, they come over to the counter. Two six-packs and a ten-pack hit the bench. A dark-haired individual with a patchy moustache that looks as though it has been drawn on with a felt tip pen, leans against the counter as he waits for me to ring up the grog.

As I scan the packs of alcohol, I notice that the lip sucker is now standing off to one side, hunched over and with his arm around his middle. Subtle. I've seen enough people shove bottles up their tops to know what a thief looks like.

The patchy moustache holds out some cash, but I don't take it. Instead, I lean on the counter and look straight at the thief. My eyebrows draw together, and my nostrils flare.

'Hey mate... planning on paying for that?'

He turns red and looks down at his hoodie.

'Oh... uh... yeah. S-sorry, I totally forgot about it.'

He puts a cheap bottle of red on the counter along with the other grog.

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Bing bong.

It's five minutes until closing when the same dishevelled man from earlier stumbles back through the front door and sways over to the spirits. He picks up a bottle, looks at it without really seeing it, then puts it back down, too close to the edge of the shelf. He repeats this process as he makes his way up the aisle, every few bottles looking over at me with pupils that seem to be even smaller than before. I tap my fingers on the counter. This isn't looking good for me. Peering over in my direction again, his gaze flicks down. I follow it until I realise I'm looking at the till. Great. My heart begins to thump, throwing itself against my chest as though it can make a break for it. Sucking in a breath, I glance at the door on the other side of the room and then back at the guy perusing the spirits. Who designed this goddamn trap? Someone who obviously couldn't be bothered to think about providing future employees with an easy escape route. Dick.

Christ, where did my boss say the panic alarm was? I can picture Dave's round bearded face smiling up at me, welcoming me to the shop. I remember him telling me about the staff discount, but nothing else springs to mind. I really should have been paying more attention. Now I'm stuck in the shop with this dodgy bloke eyeing the till and a panic button whose location I don't know.

I think about calling the cops. He hasn't made a move yet, but the longer he stays here, the more the knot in my stomach tightens and bile rises in my throat. When I put my hand into my pocket and feel nothing but a few empty gum wrappers, I remember that my phone isn't here. I left it at TAFE this morning. Bloody hell. I was so tired that when it was time to leave I left my bag in the locker.

I reach for the landline on the counter only to see the fluoro pink post-it note stuck on top. It's broken and won't be fixed until Friday. While I go through my options, I watch the man continue his way around the shelves. Maybe he won't try anything. My heart continues to pound in my chest. Trying to get out and save myself while leaving the rest of me to deal with the situation at hand.

Maybe he will leave like he did earlier, although, now that I think about it, that could have been him casing the joint.

Bing bong.

We both look over at the door as Mrs Foster enters. She doesn't seem to notice the man standing a few metres away from her.

'Jay, I got home and decided that I might as well buy a sherry too, just in case of emergencies.' She winks as she walks down the aisle towards me. I glance at the man who has now turned and is facing us.

'Sure thing Mrs Foster.'

The sherry is on the shelf half way between us. I edge around the counter and try to calmly make my way towards the bottles. He hasn't changed his position; he just continues to stare at me. His dirt covered hand moves near his side, and I see a flash of silver. Yep, pretty sure that's a knife. I grab the bottle closest to me then head back to the counter in an awkward side shuffle, ensuring that my back is never turned to him. I place the bottle on the counter and notice that Mrs Foster has begun to open her purse to pull out more coin shrapnel.

'This one is on the house, Mrs Foster.'

'Oh no, I can't possibly take it for free, it's-'

'Please just take it.'

'No, that wouldn't be right.'

'For Christ's sake just take the bloody bottle!' I shout, shoving it across the counter and into her hands.

Her eyes open wide and her mouth quivers. I've never been anything but pleasant with her before, but if that was a knife, she needs to get out of here before the shit show begins. As I walk to her on shaking legs, preparing to shoo her out of here, the man takes a few steps forward. I freeze, not sure what my next move should be. He is looking at the ring on the chain around Mrs Foster's neck and raising his hand, which I can now clearly see is holding a knife.

'Gimme the riiing,' he slurs as he lurches forward.

Mrs Foster stumbles back into me. I can feel her body quaking against mine. She's so small that the top of her head barely reaches my chest. Her hand wraps around the ring, and she shrinks back from the knife-wielding nut job in front of her.

'I said gimme the ring.'

'No! Eddie gave this to me fifty years ago. I'm not giving it to you.'

'I don't give a fuck about this Eddie bloke. Gimme the goddamn ring,' his attention shifts from Mrs Foster up to me, 'and you, gimme the cash!'

My big hands become useless, causing me to fumble with the till. I'm basically swatting at the register and hoping that it will open. Jesus Christ! Finally, the drawer dings open and I grab all of the notes, shoving them into a brown paper bottle bag. When that's done, I grab a handful of coins, then look at the knife-wielding fiend.

'Uhhh, did umm... you want the coins as well?'

He stares at me for a few moments as though weighing up whether or not it would be a good idea.

'Nah, too much hassle. Just the notes and the ring.'

'Look m-mate, it's her engagement ring given to her by her dead husband. I can get you a Hennessy Cognac from the special liquor cabinet. That one's worth about three and a half grand. Probably more valuable than that ring.'

The longer he is here, the more sober he appears which is frightening in its own way. His thick brows pull down to meet the creases in between his eyes. I hold my breath as I wait for his answer.

'And how will I make any money from that? I don't know anyone in the market for a fancy bottle of grog, but I know plenty of blokes who'd fork out for a nice piece of jewellery. Now stop pissing about and hand it over, you stubborn old bitch.'

I look at Mrs Foster and see her jaw tighten and her eyes narrow. No one's coming to help us and Mrs Foster isn't going to back down. I round the counter and push Mrs Foster aside, barging into the intruder. Having not fully come down

off his high he is still unsteady on his feet, and he falls backward onto the wooden floor. His free hand latches onto the front of my polyester shirt, taking me down with him. I wriggle and pin down the arm with the knife, but he's strong, despite his unhealthy appearance. We roll on the ground. He tries to stab me while I avoid the blade and try to hold off the arm attached to the knife. Every breath burns my lungs, and my arms ache as I try to wrestle the knife from his grasp. The man's struggling begins to weaken and I let my gaze drop to the knife.

THWACK.

I rear back and place my hands on my forehead. The fucker head butted me! The pain in my head feels like my skull has been cracked. A hard ache radiates from the point of impact to the base of my head. I try to stop focusing on the pain remembering that the bastard has a knife. He's coming at me with it now. With one hand still clutching my head, I scramble backwards until my shoulders hit the counter. He's still advancing on me, and there isn't anywhere else for me to go. I close my eyes and wait for the inevitable.

CRACK.

I hear a hard smack and open my eyes to figure out what has happened. Through bleary vision my watery eyes, I see Mrs Foster standing over the two of us, her bottle of sherry raised and fire in her eyes. She kicks aside the knife in the man's limp hand. My heart continues to race as my aching head tries to take in the scene before me.

'I'll take up that offer of a freebie Jay.'