

THE QUARRY

Tropical Bliss

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A wave lapped at her feet, sending chills up from her toes to the back of her neck. Her nose twitched, and she sniffled. Grace Moretti's sandy-brown hair reached down her back, just shy of the printed one-piece swimsuit she had on. That winter, the odd twenty-five degrees-celsius day had excited her—at first. But then they kept coming. Week after week, throughout winter, the news headlines announced:

Sydney set for another summery weekend

Slip, slop, slap: spring has sprung early!

Unusual weather highs contribute to shopping lows, says Myer CEO

Grace couldn't stand the way the media embraced the heat without a negative word on global warming. Her feet sunk deeper into the sand. When she had learned about climate change in primary school—five years ago now—she thought of it as a distant future. Something that her parents would have taken care of before she turned sixteen.

The sun broke through a cloud and the heat intensified on her back. The salty ocean air pulled her hair. She turned to look at Long Reef headland. She saw a golfer practising swings before hitting the ball. On the footpath, a couple was walking a pair of excitable chocolate

Labradors, who were nipping at each other's ears. There was a little girl who giggled and waddled quickly in a fruitless attempt to outrun her father.

How much longer would she be able to walk up there, look out and see the rock platform at low tide?

The ends of Grace's world dipped in and out of focus. The trees grew to towering heights and then shrunk down to her ankles, still fully-formed.

Her daughter Melanie cried out. *I have a daughter?* There was a thick white substance—akin to sunscreen—on Melanie's face, hardened and cracked at the edges. She picked the little girl up and soothed her. Melanie's salty tears trapped between her duct line and the sunscreen. She cried harder. A handsome man took her from Grace's arms. Her science teacher, Mr Ivan Heidler. She stared at his tan face. His green eyes and dusty-blond hair gleamed in the hot sun. She felt her stomach turn with fear and excitement.

'Ivan,' she whispered. But he could not hear her. The sounds of protesting shouts interrupted the scene; suddenly, she was thrust into a crowd jostling with anger.

'Keep the mines open! Send the Greenies home!'

She felt herself tripping over her feet as the mob swelled into a seething surge of pushing and shoving. She shut her eyes and reached out to break a hard fall to the ground.

Opening her eyes, she was on Long Reef beach. Mr Heidler stood beside her and held her hand. He squeezed it.

'Isn't it beautiful?'

She jerked away in confusion. The sand beneath their feet pooled like lava and burnt her legs. She screamed, and Mr Heidler melted away.

'Grace? Grace!' Her head snapped up from where it had been laying on her desk. Anika let go of Grace's hair, which she'd been yanking to wake her friend.

'Do you want a detention with Mr Heidler?' Anika hissed at her. She blearily traced the words written at the top of her workbook, *Climate Science*. The sunshine reflected off its plastic cover and bounced a sunbow onto Anika's glasses. The transformation of its burning rays into art.

Mr Heidler had managed to convince the Cromer Campus Science faculty that a term *at least* should be dedicated to learning about climate change. The sunny September day her Year Ten class visited the rock-platform, they'd been dismissed at Long Reef beach. Herself, Anika and a few of their friends had snuck drinks in their bags. They splashed each other at the shoreline, the salty spray and the watermelon vodka-cruisers on their lips. Tipsy, she had stumbled onto her sandy towel and lay down. The sky was hazy from the heat. The shimmering, greying horizon weighed on her mind until she couldn't bear it. Her slurred voice called out to Anika as fat tears rolled down her cheeks. The apocalypse would be so beautiful. One last ditch to convince the deniers that something was wrong, that this tropical bliss had a bitter taste, a ladybug. A warning most just let sit on them.

They walked up Dee Why beach, each sandy step sobering them some more. She wanted to be taken seriously when she talked to her parents about the future that night.

A month on, the dream had revisited Grace in various forms. Sometimes the world she imagined was much less forgiving. There were visions of wildfires that towered and clambered over her Cromer Heights home fence. Tendrils of flame like frying oil sparked and leapt at her as she fruitlessly threw water at the blaze. She could hear Melanie crying, Ivan—Mr Heidler!—shouting at her to run. They got into Mr Heidler's Prius, and the engine wouldn't start. Air-raid sirens echoed across her dreamscape. She couldn't see the sea but knew it was rising. Long Reef headland became an island. But perhaps the sunken rock-platform would be a popular spot for divers; beneath the surface life still flourished. Her dream gave her warped hopes.

After class, Anika and Grace walked to the school canteen. It was that same dream again; maybe she should see the school counsellor?

'What, and have your mum find out your super-crush on *Ivan*?' She elbowed Anika in the side.

'He's just a really good science teacher,' said Grace, blushing. 'Anyway. Aren't you scared?'

'Not really. Dad says they'll just push up the prices of petrol and we won't be able to travel as much.'

She watched as Anika pulled a passionfruit out of her bag. She asked her if it was locally grown; Anika squinted at the fruit's small sticker.

'South Australia.'

Was that in season? She had no idea.

'The world isn't going to end because of a passionfruit, Grace.'

‘Shut up!’

That night, she curled up on the brown living room couch beside her old tabby cat, Moozie. She closed her eyes. The television whirred with the opening music of the ABC News. She felt a pillow slowly push into her stomach. She groaned.

‘Gracie, Gracie! You’re so grumpy these days!’ Her father, Renato, stood over her.

‘I heard you again last night,’ Her mother Leigh called from around the corner in the kitchen.

‘I had a baby again, Mum.’ After much deliberation, she had divulged parts of the dream to her parents. Parts being everything except for Mr Heidler.

‘You take the world too seriously, Gracie,’ said Renato.

She jumped off the couch and planted her hands on her hips. ‘No, you don’t take it seriously *enough!*’ He put up his hands in mock-surrender, and she glared.

‘Honey, we’re lucky. If the planet does... heat up or whatever, we can afford to adapt,’ said her mother. She came up behind her and stroked her daughter’s hair slowly. But Grace jerked away, angry.

‘That doesn’t matter! What matters is, is...’ Her face contorted and her eyes went hot with tears. She turned away. No one understood what was going to happen, not even climate scientists. It would be too late by the time they did.

She turned to avoid the disappointment on her father’s face and didn’t stop running from her mother’s reprimanding shouts. She dashed up the stairs into her room with a slam of her door. She slumped into herself. Her breath quickened, faster and faster, until she was gulping and gasping for air. At the sound of footsteps approaching, she linked her hands over her mouth to cover her lungs’ desperate wheezing. She felt her head pulsing and her eyes fluttered. Leigh knocked and called Grace’s name. She gripped her face tighter. She held her breath - one, two, three - and exhaled for six counts. She grabbed the nearby dresser and pulled herself to her feet, almost falling over in the process.

‘Come in,’ she rasped out.

But no response came. She leaned on the wall and caught her breath until her head cleared. She collapsed into bed. Eyes, weighted heavily by her dread of the dream, shut in reluctance.

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‘Mum, I can do it!’

Grace looked at... *her* daughter. Sitting on her mother’s lap, Melanie pushed herself off. She sighed. Melanie was getting old enough to put on her own sunscreen now. She had taught her how to cover every inch of exposed skin with the thick, gooey substance. A much stronger formula than before. It did not sink into the skin but rather set on top of it; at the end of the day, it was peeled off.

She could hear chatter in the background. Voices were announcing the end of the hot season excitedly and condemning the deniers viciously. Clashing tones and pitches made Grace’s head spin. She clutched at it and closed her eyes.

She opened them to the heat of the fifty-degree rays, suddenly trudging with Melanie to school. She had visions of Ivan —Mr Heidler—and her comforting Melanie. The five-year-old had a rash that developed into ulcers.

Then there was a doctor, who looked exactly like Grace’s mother. But her hands had kept turning into snakes. She watched the wrinkled lines wax and wane on the woman’s face as she spoke, the snake-hands reaching and hissing at Melanie. She pulled Melanie back, frightened. She could never hear the doctor herself. Her daughter’s face was contorted with callouses, taut and rough with pain.

In the dream, it was always May. The temperatures had cooled to low fifties, but the heatwaves rolled in whenever they pleased.

She stirred at a scratching at her door. Half-asleep, she let in Moozie, who meowed her gratitude. As Moozie settled into bed, she woke up more. She checked the weather on her phone; it was still twenty-one degrees at four in the morning. She felt too tired to be sad or scared, but too awake to go back to sleep. She dreamt about WWII briefly. In lieu of her recent imaginings, it was a relief to her. But then the dream had morphed into a disastrous future again. A war dream would be easier to deal with—certainly one that had already happened.

Sometimes the dream began at the birth of Melanie; other times it would start with Melanie at the doctors. She was always with Mr Heidler, and they always had Melanie. If her sleep went unperturbed, the dream would evolve into a full-blown apocalypse, where she

carried Melanie in aching arms, where she would lose Mr Heidler—Ivanin the throes of bushfires and floods.

Grace used her phone to search in the dark for her 4Ocean charity bracelet. A glimmer of green beads, half-hidden under a jumper, caught the light. She reached, and her heart leapt to her throat. Grabbing the bracelet faster than strictly necessary, she hid back under the covers. She slipped the jewellery on. Moozie purring at her side, She tried to remember the last time she felt safe at home. Or anywhere, really. In the past month, her fears had only seemed to ratchet; whatever guise she had been living before was long gone.

Even in Science class the next morning, the dream sat at the forefront of her mind in vivid detail.

‘And that would be...’ Mr Heidler cast his eyes around the room. ‘Grace?’

‘Coastal erosion?’

Mr Heidler smiled at Grace; with a quick nod affirming her answer. She looked away quickly and savoured the moment. She pulled up her school cardigan sleeves. She almost didn’t bring it, since she kept sweating on the walk down to school. But it was cool in the classrooms.

She snuck a glance at Anika, who raised an eyebrow back at her. Much to Anika’s annoyance, Grace had refused to use her phone in Mr Heidler’s class and resorted to passing notes instead.

Invite him to Bridget’s??

She rolled her eyes and mouthed, ‘No.’

Anika pushed another note over; she was prepared.

Presentation night??

She blushed. She *had* planned to ask Mr Heidler since he told her about the volunteering opportunity at Dee Why Surf Lifesaving Club. She volunteered her weekend mornings cleaning up the beach. It was a contradictory process; she would begin the day with a heavy heart, wondering what trash she would pick up and what the wildlife might have already consumed. By the end of the two-hour shift though, her step had a spring, and her smile was wide. She’d dig into the staff fruit platter, tan her legs in the sun, forget what had disturbed her sleep just hours earlier.

Early Saturday morning, Grace was on the bus. She was fond of the view from Edgecliffe Boulevard over the long strip of Narrabeen beach. Out on the horizon, the sun broke through the overcast day to highlight a small strip of white-gold water. She watched, mesmerised. No one was waiting at the stop that boasted the view, and before she knew it, she was looking at ritzy houses again. She unfolded her hands from her lap to put her hair up; it was beginning to stick to the back of her neck. She tightened the bracelet. Maybe she should skip buying drinks this weekend. Spend the money on another fundraiser-bracelet. She looked out the window again. There was smog on the horizon.

She would definitely save the money.

‘I dunno, I’m saving, and mum was suss last time—’

‘You can have some of my drinks, I’ll have some of yours next time. Just come!’

Anika struck a pose in one of Grace’s favourite dresses. She’d asked Anika over to help her pick an outfit for the Lifesaving Club Night. She wanted to look mature for Mr Heidler’s promised attendance. Much to her delight, he was ‘Keen to support the local community.’ She shook off her excited thoughts and put on one of Anika’s get-ups. It was a navy floral button-up, paired with her high-waisted white jeans. She loved it but refused Anika’s offered stilettos in favour of her own trusty tan flats.

They drove down to the surf club and unbeknownst to her parents, her mother parked them next to Mr Heidler’s metallic-blue Prius. Anika snorted. They walked into the community hall, and she fumbled with her notes on volunteering. Her speech was met with polite clapping and some enthusiastic whoops from Anika.

‘The world needs more people like you,’ said Mr Heidler, approaching her afterwards. He looked her in the eyes and put his hand on her shoulder. ‘Keep punching!’

Her face turned beet red, and her voice wobbled as she gave her thanks. For the rest of the night, she floated.

It was a cool May day; a pleasant twenty-seven degrees. The sun sizzled the tip of Grace’s nose, and she reapplied more sunscreen. In Year 10, Anika shrugged off applying sun-

protection to anywhere other than her face and shoulders. By high school graduation—Class of 2020—Anika was generously coating exposed skin with sunscreen.

She fiddled with her bracelet continuously.

‘You’re making me nervous, and I’m not even speaking!’ said Anika. In twenty minutes, Grace would present her first set of climate analytics to the CSIRO with Ivan. She asked Anika for lunch beforehand but had only managed half a salad and a black tea.

‘Ivan’s done this for years—I’ve just graduated!’ She groaned.

Anika reminded Grace she was wholesome and winsome and all the other ‘somes. She rolled her eyes but smiled gratefully. Anika farewelled her when Ivan arrived. He took her hand and showed her a picture of the new Long Reef marine sanctuary sign. Behind it, the headland was out of focus. Full of life, vibrant as ever.