

THE QUARRY

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All Good Things

You probably know the feeling.

Boarding lounge, ten minutes to go. Bottle of water drained and tossed, carry-on at your feet, pass and passport in hand, one last message then switch to flight mode. No, off.

I wonder who's going to be sitting next to me?

This flight out of Arctic Kirkenes would land in Oslo mid-afternoon. I scanned the crowd for solo travellers, because I was one. The silver-haired man in a dark grey suit? Mining? Shipping? Bureaucrat? But he joined the priority queue for business class, so not him. The woman who hugged an over-sized handbag? Much my age, pleasant enough

company for a couple of hours. An itinerant worker? Or a student dreaming of summer's libations? Who hasn't played airport roulette?

Then I spotted him. *God, I hope it won't be him.* But I had that sharp feeling. You just know.

He was still rows away, but I could smell him. Stumbling over his carry-all and duty-free bags, he worked his way up the aisle. A heavy sourness of stale cigarette smoke and alcohol had impregnated his clothes, saturating the air he pushed through. Late thirties at a guess, scrawny, with an edgy air of neglect that was more stray cat than aloof domesticated.

Just my luck...

He checked his seat number, searched for the correct row, then with a curt nod slid down beside me, his long legs barely accommodated.

Thank god I reserved the window seat.

We buckled up.

Kirkenes quickly fell away beneath the plumes of smoke from wildfires across northern Scandinavia. The dazzling fjords spilling into the Barents Sea were no longer visible, nor Kirkenes' timber houses and the verdant beech forests along the Pasvik River.

I'd spent some time in the second most bombed place of World War II. Trapped by the furious ambitions of the Nazis and Red Army for the ice-free port of Murmansk, Kirkenes had been laid waste. Scorched earth.

I'd wandered among delicate bright Arctic blossoms, which had burst open with the impatience only a brief summer could inspire; heard the orange-legged seagulls honk like geese.

Now all lay behind me.

Ever so faintly, the voice of my Danish father seeped in. *All good things come to an end.* He had a wistful fondness for this Viking proverb. When I was a child, it accompanied

‘no more ice-cream’ or ‘pack away your toys’ or ‘time for bed’. Now I understand he was thinking of his own life, its unspoken disappointments, the many losses brought about by war and migration, and lives beyond repair. But the tipping point... How do you recognize it? Can you?

Only two days ago I’d arrived in a heatwave. In fact, we’d had to stop walking across the tarmac to make way for a departing plane. Petrol fumes in the ripping hot wind posed a danger as the plane swung onto the runway. What had I expected of mid-summer in the Arctic? Certainly not bedraggled flocks of moose lolling by the dusty road-side, nor gasping birds, not such heat where there was midnight sun.

I asked the flight attendant for coffee; the man next to me said, ‘Whisky, no ice, and a Coke.’

Finally we exchanged some niceties. He smiled curiously when I said ‘Sydney’, his pale blue eyes alert.

‘Gum?’ he offered.

‘No thanks. Well... okay.’

He was from a coastal town on the Vardanger Fjord. ‘Vadsø. It’s very small. Far away from everything.’ His face relaxed at the thought, and he suddenly looked younger. ‘Peaceful. Surrounded by nature. Not so much stress.’

I guessed Vadsø had the same frontier feeling as Kirkenes, a world belonging to tough men and brutalist edges. ‘But why do you stay there?’

‘For the past 2 years I’m a cook in a café.’ He gave a little smile. ‘Nothing much but it’s okay.’ He paused. ‘To be honest, it’s been good for me.’

I recalled my last meal in Kirkenes. ‘So what’s your secret for cooking reindeer steak?’

He laughed with disarming openness. ‘Fry quickly on a hot plate, then serve with lingon berry jam and gravy. Have you eaten cloud berries?’

‘Only as jam.’

‘They’re Arctic berries. They grow in marshes and are only picked in August. It’s hard work. That’s why they’re expensive, but also special.’

I tried to imagine remote Vadsø in the long months of darkness, when snow and ice were impenetrable and the cold burned bitter. It lay at the heart of Sami culture. My Danish grandmother, whom I only knew from a formal black and white photo, had sent me one of my first books. Elli-Karin, a Sami girl, tended the reindeers while her father repaired their turf house before winter returned. I loved that book, and through it, my grandmother. Both are long gone. On this trip I didn’t get to a Sami village, and the closest I’d come to reindeers was the recipe of a cook who was flicking through the in-flight magazine.

‘But don’t you get lonely?’ I persevered. ‘Or want to move to the city some time?’

‘Why?’ he shrugged. ‘The people are nice. We don’t live in one another’s pockets, but we care for each other. I can trust my friends to watch the house while I’m away. And I do the same for them.’

He folded one lean hand over the other, then drifted off to sleep. Strands of fair hair fell across his face as his jaw slackened.

I leaned against the window, the view partially obliterated by a wing. Below glided pleated mountains and the shiny confetti of sparkling lakes. And there were no borders – no Finland, Russia or Norway. Ah, how lovely the blue!

Twenty-four hours ago, I’d been in search of lunch. Outside a run-down cafe a board announced: *kebab and pizza special*. Despite the uninviting interior, I placed my order.

‘How many?’ asked the man at the till. His tone was abrasive, maybe due to his poor English.

‘Just the one.’

‘One? Are you alone?’ Both question and enquiry.

I took a bottle of water from the fridge, then sat at a small table by the window.

At the rear, a family shared lunch. Two women in Islamic dress presided over a gaggle of children, a lively happy group. The youngest looked about the same age as my little grandson.

The boss and his cook moved to chairs at the entrance, chain smoking and talking away empty hours in the sun.

I paused on my way out. 'Is that your family?' I nodded towards the gathering.

'Yes, my family.' Although surprised, he was pleased by my question.

Children's carefree laughter filled the cafe. The child who reminded me of my grandson leaped from his chair and ran to his father, dark curls bobbing.

'You have a beautiful family.' Curiosity got the better of me. 'Where are you from?'

He frowned, stroking the head of his son. 'Why you want to know?'

'Just interested.' I told him I was from Australia.

The men glanced at each other. 'Syria,' said the boss. 'We are here from Syria. Three years.'

'In Sydney I teach English. Some of my students are Syrian.'

He relaxed. 'Good students?'

'Yes. And very nice.' That made him happy. As I turned to leave I had the impulse to say, 'I hope you have a good life here. After everything...'

Later that afternoon I joined a small tour group to where Norway ended and Russia began.

A young soldier was throwing a ball for an indefatigable shepherd. Barry had been on border duty years longer than his handler. On cue, he leaped into his box at the rear of a black SUV, to be chauffeured back to the compound and dinner.

According to our tour guide: 'This is where thousands of Syrians crossed the border on bicycles. Have you heard about it? Three years ago, European countries were trying to stop the flood of refugees. But there was another way - the Arctic route through Russia. The asylum seekers got visas. They went to Moscow, then they managed to get right up here, to Murmansk. But it was illegal to cross the border by foot, so they bought bicycles. Thousands of bicycles. They rode across the border. Now no-one knows where most of them have gone.'

Our little tour group gazed silently at the close dark hills of Russia, the stark watch-tower, and the boom gates where a pair of armed soldiers faced each other stiffly.

‘They say fifty tonnes of bicycles were abandoned,’ marvelled our guide. ‘Filled about thirty containers.’

Ladies and gentlemen, we have begun our descent into Oslo...

My flight companion stirred. He glanced about disoriented, rubbed his hands over his face, then gulped the last of the Coke. My blocked ears had already noted the dropping altitude. The landing gear clunked into position.

‘Are you staying long in Oslo?’ I asked.

He hesitated. ‘Actually, I’m going to Tallinn.’

‘Ah...’ Years ago I’d roamed through Tallinn’s beautifully restored Old Town.

He combed his fingers through his hair. ‘I’m going to visit my family. I was born in Estonia and lived there most of my life, before moving to Norway - you know... work.’ He turned the empty Coke can in his hands. ‘And I’m going meet up with my son. I haven’t seen him for two years. I will take him to Vadsø for a holiday. To my house, for the first time. He’s fourteen and likes fishing. Then I will bring him back to Tallinn, for school.’ He smiled.

With the wheels’ impact on the runway, the opportunity to push that life’s door further ajar passed.

As my flight companion eased out of his seat and reached to retrieve his things from the stow, I noticed the design on his t-shirt. ‘*Father Ted!*’ I laughed. An Estonian from Vadsø, and a fan of that British sitcom! Its title was emblazoned in Gothic letters across three eccentric Irish priests, exiled to remote Craggy Island. ‘I love *Father Ted!* I’ve watched all the repeats.’

‘Me too! It’s my favourite. I get together with my friends and we have *Father Ted* evenings. We laugh ourselves sick. I’ve got the whole box set, every single episode.’

He patted their faces, greeting old mates, then broke into a crazy Irish accent: ‘Ted: “So you took Father Jack out for a walk... and you lost him. Again.” Dougal: “Well, Ted, like I said last time: It won’t happen again.”’

And I fell into Mrs Doyle, the housekeeper: ‘You’ll have some tea... Are you sure you don’t want any? Aw go on, you’ll have some. Go on go on go on go on go on go on go on GO ON!’

And we laughed loudly amid the impatience of passengers who jostled in a slow conga line towards the exit.

He placed his duty-free bags on the seat. ‘For my son,’ he smiled, as if guessing I’d assumed alcohol. He tucked the next boarding pass into his passport. ‘Have a safe trip home,’ he beamed.

‘You too. And have a wonderful time with your son.’

He turned and eased into the queue, then strode briskly towards the transit lounge. No looking back. Boarding for Tallinn.

I went the other way, taking the metro into Oslo, where I discovered the apartment of Henrik Ibsen. It was here he wrote *The Doll’s House*, which my students generally liked. Ibsen lived there on his return from self-imposed exile in Italy, despite his wife’s reluctance to again endure Norwegian winters. Just before closing time, I shared Ibsen’s view of the street, saw his writing desk and chair, the lamps and cosy timber panelling, his works of art - all evidence of success.

And oh! So remarkably, Ibsen’s dining table was set with hand-cut crystal goblets, identical to those I’d inherited from my parents, passed down from my Danish grandmother and great-grandmother. Exactly the same! Those elegant wine glasses had graced my grandmother’s table in Copenhagen, a long time ago.

In Sydney, I will clutch these moments like the bright bunch of floating balloons I’ll take to my grandson’s birthday party.

I bake a cake in the shape of an aeroplane, decorating it with chocolate icing and a thick shower of sprinkles. So colourful, so joyous.

My daughter lights five candles, and her little boy's flushed cheeks glow in the incandescence. As we sing *Happy birthday dear Charlie!* he sharply sucks in air, then blows for all he's worth, to extinguish the dancing flames in a single breath. Then he asks for the candles to be relit, so that he can do it again, and again.

But as drops of wax melt into the icing, my daughter says, 'That's it now, Charlie. Time to cut the cake.'

The knife does its work, and for a while we surrender to spongy stickiness, silently finding bliss in all these good things.