

THE QUARRY

Izabel Smythe

Lost Things

Kathy heard Ted's voice on the loud speaker as he drove past their front yard. He sounded proud to be a crier, reminding the residents of Asquith to switch on the TV at 11 o'clock for the yearly announcement of the winners under the Resettlement Scheme by the Interim Prime Minister.

Kathy sunk into the bathtub of milky water to muffle the sound of Ted's grating voice. She had met Ted once, a year ago, in front of Woolies, after buying a can of Spam as he handed out voting pamphlets. "Vote for Ted, to stop the spread", not that anyone was interested in what he was preaching. But now here he was, having won the contract for the Hornsby Ku-ring-gai community as the Town Crier. She wondered whether he had any competitors, now that Bridgette was gone. This wasn't a 9 to 5 job just for anybody.

Bridgette, his predecessor, held that position for five years, before passing away. It was Ted who found Bridgette, soaking in the bathtub covered in blood, supposedly from a tremendous amount of coughing after being infected with the Virus. Kathy couldn't believe Bridgette would have been that careless. If anyone was expected to survive this pandemic, it was Bridgette. She always greeted people by gesturing with her hands, chanting "Clean clean clean. Wash, wash wash". She sent out compulsory monthly Zoom meetings to practise good hygiene, as mandated by the new law. The last physical meeting Bridgette organised was at Ted's house, where she instructed on the etiquette and hygiene of purchasing fruits and vegetables from local home growers. Ted lived in Hornsby, the neighbouring town, which allowed her to introduce the intricacies of logistics.

Kathy held her breath under the water as Ted's voice became distant. She lethargically came up for air as she slowly brushed away the Dettol water from her face, squeezing out the excess from her hair. Everything felt pointless, but she had to carry on. It was Bridgette who kept the town spirit going during the outbreak, who blissfully celebrated and engaged the community through emails, phone calls and chats. This would be the first year without Bridgette.

Kathy could hear Daniel stirring in bed next door. She quickly got up, covering her thin frame in a kimono wrap.

'Daniel, you better hurry. The water is still warm.'

She opened the cupboard to put away the Dettol bottle that had been sitting open. Only a few drops were left, but they had to last several days. With quivering hands, she decided to angle the bottle, just a little, spilling a couple of drops into the bathtub. It would be a homage to Bridgette's "Clean, clean, clean", to make up for the recycled water Daniel would be stewing in.

'Is it clean? No petals or eucalyptus leaves nonsense?' he called out.

'Only my period broth to rejuvenate the skin.' She smirked, bending over to dry her hair with a towel. 'Kidding okay, don't waste it. Get in. I'll make our breakfast soon.'

Daniel walked in shivering and naked, moving towards the bath.

'What's for breakfast this time?' he asked as he slid into the tub. 'It's cold.'

‘It’ll be a surprise.’ She kissed Daniel on his wet forehead before walking away. ‘And clean up after you finish please.’

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‘Here you go. The morning special. Baked beans with caramelised bananas.’

‘Fancy,’ Daniel said, sitting up straight on the sofa to take his plate. Kathy walked back into the kitchen to get water to share. She crumbled a couple of mints into a large glass, topping it with water from the urn.

She remembered someone once telling her that mint would become a weed, unless contained. Thankfully Kathy hadn’t listened, because it was now a source of food. Mint had managed to survive the frost of winter and the dreaded summer heat, unlike their parsleys and leeks which relied on water. Water was now too scarce to waste on gardens. The water looked so silky. Kathy caressed the glass against her face, brushing it across her lips, tempted to steal a sip. She heard Daniel calling, almost losing her grasp.

‘No need to wait for me, put it on. Let’s see the show before the Interim Prime Minister gives his speech for the deserving hopefuls.’ Taking her plate and water, she walked briskly back into the lounge. She sat down on the carpet, her legs stretched out in front of the TV.

The show used thousands of remote controlled drones to project 3D visual effects. Sometimes the Government allowed a solo performer to fill in 60 minutes of air time, like now. A young singer was setting up to sit alone with her guitar. She began to play as a blue spotlight shone above her head. Kathy recognised it straight away. It was called *Our Town* and Iris DeMent’s lyrics suited the young singer’s voice. It was so haunting. Kathy felt her heart tighten and the hairs on her slim arms spike. She reached out for Daniel’s hands, only to find his knee. Kathy placed her hands over the knee, resting her head on them, just listening to the voice wash over her. She felt the nostalgia for simple things as the singer’s voice echoed.

The song was playing in the background the night Daniel had surprised her by slipping a daisy diamond ring onto her finger and proposing. Kathy hadn't suspected a thing earlier that morning, when Daniel had telephoned her at work. He wanted to go out for drinks at the Glenmore Hotel, to celebrate his win. A case he tirelessly worked on, including weekends, on behalf of a migrant family whose application for Australian citizenship was rejected by the Department of Immigration. She couldn't be more proud of him then or now. It was what was left of his savings that was keeping them afloat, allowing for rations at Woolies when it was *essential* to go outside.

She missed going out, seeing places and going to the galleries. She missed hearing the background buzz that accompanied the drinking culture at Australia Square. Particularly when unwinding from sitting behind a glowing screen, like she used to, clattering words across a page, as the dictation filled her ears.

The music ended and the blue light once crowning the singer shifted and began to follow the footsteps of a figure walking towards the microphone. The face of the Interim Prime Minister filled their TV screen as he began to speak. Kathy had recalled him being much younger. She could tell in his voice, and see in his eyes, the tiredness which weighed heavily on his face, making it sag with dense lines. How quickly he had aged! He had only been in this position for less than a year. He thanked the two models who pushed the Lottery Machine onto the stage beside him. The machine started rolling, the envelopes inside ruffling theatrically like clothes in a washing machine. Kathy heard the names being announced one by one.

'Daniel, you know, before, when the Resettlement Scheme began, you helped people with their application forms, to be in the draw to win the vaccine lottery. Were those cases difficult?'

'Shhh! Shhh! I'm trying to listen.' Daniel said as he tried to ignore her.

'But I want to know. How is it decided? Who and when? I wonder what our chances are?' she asked him inquisitively.

Daniel glanced at her impatiently, but said nothing and turned back to watch the lottery draw. Kathy stared at him angrily for a minute before erupting.

'You never share anything with me. We never talk anymore.'

Daniel continued to sit silently as a smile crept across his face.

‘Didn’t you hear? We won baby! He picked our envelope, the Johnsons in Asquith from New South Wales. Did you not hear what he said?’

‘It’s been too long, I have forgotten what our surname sounds like,’ she replied as she stood up and headed towards the kitchen with their empty plates. Daniel followed her, standing by the kitchen bench with his arms folded, watching her irritably.

‘What’s wrong now?’

‘Nothing. I was merely curious. Aren’t you? Regardless of how many deaths, there are still millions of Australians. Where will we live? It’s been six or eight years now, and not a word from any of our friends or neighbours who have made it. Remember the Watsons next door?’

Kathy had wondered what happened to the Watson family after they were relocated across the border. She had asked them to check in via Zoom once settled into their place, to let her know everything was fine. Bridgette had texted her a month later about the Watsons because she hadn’t heard from them either. Soon afterwards, Bridgette set up a Zoom call with members of the community forum, to figure out why there was radio silence from all our relocated friends.

Bridgette had a nickname for the lottery after the second year, she called it “Border Feud”. It became a popular game played on Zoom, state against state, instead of footy. That was until The Project brought up the problematic Resettlement Scheme and the ongoing mockery. Both were seen as insults to Australia Day, scarring not only the Indigenous community but excluded families due to their refugee status.

Houses were graffitied with “L” when people were identified as winners. Then someone had the idea to call it “Will you accept this envelope?”, to reflect the ignorance of the Government in its failure to recognise the diversity of multiculturalism in Australia. If you don’t look white, you don’t qualify to win a vaccine.

A few years later, someone leaked live footage of elderly citizens being pushed and shoved into metal cages by military officials, because the nurses weren't able to tick all the boxes to present the elderly with a vaccine.

As a distraction, Bridgette had set up a closed Zoom chat for the Hornsby Ku-ring-gai community, playing *Dingo got my Vaccine*. Kathy threw her name into the pool and Bridgette would call out player names randomly, until someone shouted “Dingo got my vaccine.”

Kathy remembered that it was around this time that the Prime Minister restructured the Government and altered some of the policies. Everything was to be locally owned and produced to support local communities and industries for economical regrowth.

The Police’s role also changed. They now worked at checkouts in stores, because not only was the Virus killing people at a faster rate, it was also contributing to people committing crimes.

The Prime Minister then remodelled the system, introducing heavy fines and strict curfews, but was swiftly voted out of parliament. People rallied for a system that would let them be *free*, allowing them to go back to jobs, holidays and the movies. They wanted a people’s Prime Minister.

That same year, Bridgette was appointed as the Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Town Crier. Kathy had then asked Bridgette what does this mean? Would she be allowed to finally catch a bus to a beach, to press her toes in the sand?

Bridgette could never keep a straight face, it wasn’t in her nature.

‘Oh you crack me up sometimes Kathy,’ Bridgette answered. One could only imagine that Bridgette’s house shook as she laughed at these types of questions. ‘*Essentials only!* Like shopping for food or medical needs.’ She reminded everyone.

Kathy felt that Bridgette's laughter was more contagious than the Virus. Watching her laugh on screen was enough to make anyone laugh with hysteria. And she gives the best virtual hugs that smelt like hot chocolate dripped in churros. Kathy would kill for a hug or some churros right now.

Daniel’s stern voice rang in her ears.

‘We won’t be able to survive here Kathy. It’s not going to be enough. Give or take a couple of years, the Hornsby Ku-ring-gai community will become a cemetery. We have to keep moving forward. This is our last chance to live. A couple more hurdles, then we can truly start living again, like the old days.’

‘Maybe I want something different.’

‘I did it for us. A few years back before I lost the job. I wanted it to be a surprise. I thought you would be happy.’

‘I...I am. I’m grateful. It’s just people on Zoom have heard rumours about the other side. Bridgette didn’t believe that the Government is doing what they claim to - protecting people of Australia. She believed it to be a hoax. A ruse to lock us up in a facility, conduct a test and to study us like guinea pigs.’

‘Ridiculous! Stop misinterpreting things. This is not like any other virus scientists have previously encountered. There is no one vaccine for everyone. Remember Patient 1 in the UK who had an adverse reaction? This is the only solution the scientists have arrived at. Tailor a vaccine for each individual biochemistry. I don’t think that either of us would be of value if we developed Guillain-Barre Syndrome.’

‘So, what’s next for us then?’ she asked, worryingly looking up at him.

‘We wait for the knock on our door,’ he replied, stepping closer, gently placing a kiss on her head.

‘When will that be?’

‘Could be today, tomorrow, weeks, months. I really don’t know. We have to be ready, read books, do some practise questions from previous years and start building strength. They may show up anytime.’

She pushed away from him, picking up the notepad and pen from the kitchen bench.

‘I need to do our inventory,’ said Kathy as she opened the pantry.

Daniel strode back into the living room, leaving her alone in the kitchen.

She stood contemplating, staring blankly at the empty shelf. A few cans of baked beans, Spam and jelly mixes. What could she possibly make with that? Every morning, that jelly screamed at her. But it was just another *non-essential* item in her cupboard. The fridge had been turned off like their other electrical appliances, except for the TV and their laptop. These were occasionally turned on for essential updates and Zoom. Daniel was right. They couldn’t possibly continue living off herbs, bananas, mulberries and sour figs. They had used

up almost all of their water supply in the tank, and with the start of summer, it would only become scarcer.

Her skin suddenly felt moist as tears rolled down her cheeks. She felt herself crumbling. Yes, Daniel was right. Being this close to hope was only playing on her fears. Kathy was frightened, uncertain about what their lottery win meant. They weren't fit enough to pass any physical examination. Their bones were too weak and fragile. Being indoors also probably stunted their brains from lack of stimulation. They wouldn't be able to comprehend any of the general questions in the quiz. How could they contribute to *New Australis*? What could she, a simple clerk, possibly give back to society in this new place? Daniel would be fine. He was a lawyer, then a resettlement adviser, and he could easily reinvent himself across the border, perhaps as a teacher. That's an *essential worker*. But she, she knew, would become another one of those lost things. A part of the old world that doesn't exist anymore. Unable to recognise who she once was.