

THE QUARRY

Elizabeth Robson

The Time Machine

It was a very long time ago for some but not for all. She only married him for his horses, so she said. She was a girl from the city and he was a boy from the bush. She attended Art School and soon found her calling as a teacher and he bred horses and cleared the land. They met by chance; a mutual friend, so he wooed her with his brash looks and country drawl. They were both young and impetuous and it wasn't long before they were married. He sold his horses and took up cattle and wheat farming along the foothills of the Moonbi Ranges. She had dreamed of living a life on the land and she threw herself into that role. She reared children and fought fires and cried when the floods came and I never once heard her complain.

I push open the first door, step through and let it close, slow and heavy. I cannot open it now from the inside without a key. Once inside the vestibule I notice as I always do the marble-topped, side-table against one wall. It stands alone and looks rather conspicuous in this small space. On the wall above the table, is a small oil painting, or rather a reproduction, of Drysdale's 'The Drover's Wife'. I like the painting because the woman in the foreground appears strong and determined as if she has made her decision and she will suffer the consequences without yielding. I

have heard others speak of this woman as ‘sturdy and resolute’ against a world that shrivels and dies. In essence, the idea of survival through inner strength permeates the underlying significance of the image. As I study it, I realise what an interesting choice of painting someone has made. It says far more than words could ever do.

On the table are a visitor’s book and a china vase sprouting plastic flowers. I have never signed the book and for a fleeting moment I think about what I could possibly write within those pages. Maybe not the usual: ‘Had a lovely time, a most relaxing stay. Food was great and the company fabulous.’ I look at the painting and smile. Not today. Ahead is a second door, similar to the first. It too is solid and weighty. I step forward and turn the handle, lean into it and move through into a sun filled room. A warm rush of air with the scent of urine and antiseptic blanket me as I stand clutching flowers and a plastic grocery bag.

To the right are small clusters of dining tables. At one, two women sit facing each other, one holding a ragged, brown bear with a bright blue ribbon knotted around its neck. She looks as if she has been crying. A nurse places a small plastic cup in front of her and a glass half filled with water. The woman sits still then suddenly lashes forward with her hand and knocks the water and the pills onto the floor. The nurse mumbles something about the RN being called and bends to clean up the mess. The other woman seems oblivious to the scene unfolding in front of her and appears to sweep invisible crumbs from the vinyl tablecloth with her fingers. Neither speaks. A light glows softly from a large tank near where the two women are seated, and a big laminated sign is blu-tacked above it, reminding the residents not to feed the fish.

To my left is an open area with windows running along one side, over-looking a grass and paved courtyard. Red and brown leaves fall from a Tallow tree in the centre of the lawn. A man is standing near a small clothes line. He bends and picks up a piece of clothing from a basket and clumsily pegs it to the line. He bends and repeats the action. After he has pegged several pieces up he begins unpegging them and places them back in the basket at his feet. He stops what he is doing and wanders off towards the high fence surrounding the courtyard and stands looking out. A gentle wind stirs his hair and leaves circle his feet. I wonder what he is thinking.

Inside, a horseshoe of upholstered chairs are occupied by other men and women, some dozing in the air-conditioned warmth, others peering as if seeing their surroundings for the first time. No one speaks. Words are lost here.

Mindful not to make eye contact, but smiling pleasantly, I search the room to see if she is seated in one of the padded chairs facing the huge, flat-screen TV, against the far wall. Images flicker vividly between ads as muffled dialogue and music penetrate the space. It is a Sunday and it has been a month since my last visit.

Towards the side of the room I see her. She is about my height but hunched and twisted slightly in the chair. Her hair is ruffled as if by some draught and her hands lie folded loosely in her lap. She is dressed in dark slacks and a light-blue, zip-through jacket, crimson slippers on her stockinged feet. She stares, not at the screen with its flashing images and droning sounds but out of the window near where she is seated. She has the look of an expectant child but something else has settled there – some sense of foreboding, loss maybe.

‘Hello. How are you?’ Pause. ‘It’s Liz.’ Pause. ‘You’re daughter, remember?’ Pause. Take a breath. ‘You’re looking well,’ I say, as I notice she has lost weight and looks quite drawn and pale. ‘Here, I brought you some flowers.’ She looks up startled for a moment, then wipes her mouth with a tissue. ‘It’s ok. You look like you could use some company.’

‘Where did you come from? Are the others here too?’ She sounds surprised and peers around me.

‘Nope, just me. Do you like the flowers?’ I dangle them in front of her face hoping she can make out some familiar-looking shapes amongst the oranges and yellows. She doesn’t look impressed but stares hard through the smudged lenses of her glasses. She points a shaky finger towards me.

‘Where did you come from?’ ‘How long did it take you to get here?’

I pull up a chair next to hers. I sit. ‘Not long. I came from Newcastle. It takes about an hour. I just came over to see how you were.’

‘You shouldn’t have come. It’s too far. Will you be staying long? You can stay the night if you like. You’ll have to find Bill. Do you know where he is?’ Questions are fine. It’s the answers I hate.

‘I’m sure he’s about somewhere.’ I contemplate briefly whether or not I should remind her that her husband, my father, died three years ago. ‘So, what have you been up to?’ A vacant, silly question really. I didn’t need to ask it to get the answer. What has my mother been up too? Let me guess, shall I? Sleeping? That’s a given and eating soggy, steamed fish and plastic mashed potato while sipping a thick, milky drink through a straw. Oh and how about the lashing out at staff and the few vulgar

insults she tosses around when things aren't going quite her way, especially at sun-down. She looks at me, curiously and asks:

'How old are you, Elizabeth?' Not unexpected. This is a question she tosses around every few minutes. In fact it's a question she's been tossing around for many months now.

'How old would you like me to be?' I smile at her but she frowns and sighs. This is the dilemma: if I tell her how old I really am she becomes upset because she has no comprehension of real time anymore. At the last visit she seemed quite content to think of me, her daughter as thirty-something. That could possibly make sense. It would mean that she was *possibly* in her early sixties; again, quite reasonable. However, time moves swiftly in this incongruent world and the lines have shifted once again. I must tip-toe very carefully. This is how the conversation will swing today:

'I'm forty-seven.'

'Oh, rubbish! You are not! How old are you really?' She rubs her frail brow with frail fingers. I notice the chipped, pale pink polish on short, filed nails, obviously a favour from one of the staff. I smile to myself, thinking how horrified she would be if it were brought to her attention. She lived for her horses and cattle – no room for girly delights.

'Ok, I'm twenty-five,' I lie.

'Twenty-five? Really? Oh.' She looks at me and nods. 'That's nice.'

When I was twenty-five, my parents retired. My father had sold the farm and instead took up fishing with as much gusto as droving cattle. Mum was content to end her teaching career and threw herself into her pottery and drawing. She was also an avid reader and enjoyed discussing the latest novel or Art Australia magazine that had recently arrived in the post.

It wasn't noticeable, not at first, but over time books seemed to take longer to finish and there was always some excuse about not finding the right glaze for a particular pot. Her studio became messy and she spent more and more time lying in her chair on the veranda, paper half read. I visited them both whenever I could but then came the phone call.

My father was scared and shaken, to say the least. He had never witnessed such hostility and confusion before. There were no obvious tell-tale signs. The piece of timber she wielded was her rifle and she meant to destroy whoever stood in her way. The valuable china and glassware on the side-board didn't stand a chance.

When I finally arrived, the bruises down my father's left side and the look of incredible grief in his eyes said enough. It wasn't long before a diagnosis was made and for the benefit of both, they were moved.

I remember the shopping bag. 'I brought you some more underpants and some singlets. You didn't seem to have many, last time I was here. I will have to get someone to put some name-tags on them before they go astray in the laundry.'

'You didn't have to do that. You keep them. I have plenty.' She dismisses the underwear with a curt flick of her hand and reaches for her walker.

'Where are you headed, mum?' I bundle the flowers and shopping bag under one arm and push myself up and out of the chair with the other.

'I need to go to the toilet'. She hauls herself up on tremulous legs and looks vacantly about. Her spatial awareness is diminished now that she only has sight in one eye, and she frequently forgets that she can't see particularly well out of the other.

'Ok,' I say, 'let's go to your room, then.' I take hold of the front bar of the walker and begin to guide her through the maze of chairs and slippers and walkers and sticks. She pushes forward with great gusto and grumbles under her breath when she becomes snagged on furniture or unfortunate limbs that are left unattended by their owners. 'Whoops! Sorry! Just hang on a sec, mum. Ok, this way – no, no, this way. That's it. Turn. Turn! Sorry!'

Finally beyond the corral of chairs, we head down the corridor towards her room. The décor is soft and comfortable. We could be in any four-star hotel if it weren't for the polished, timber hand-rails and brightly decorated name plates on the doors. We stop in front of an open doorway half-way down the hall.

'Is this my room? But I don't stay here do I?' She looks worried and shuffles to a halt. 'Where are we, Elizabeth?' If there is one question I hate more than any other, it's this one.

I try evasive action. ‘I see it’s nearly lunchtime. Bet you’ll get something good today. A Sunday roast, maybe.’

Head tilted, she looks at me and asks, ‘So how old are you?’

‘Twenty-one.’

‘And how old am I?’

‘Eighty-three.’

‘I am not! Tell me the truth.’

‘Ok, thirty-five’

‘Am I really?’

‘Yes. No. Look – let’s go in.’

The afternoon moves slowly, creeping its way into dusk as I sit in a padded chair next to the woman who is my mother. The light plays games with her hair; thin and white, it glows softly against the pallor of her skin. Soft, jowly flesh crinkles along her jaw and thin, dry lips softly part. Her eyes are closed as she slips in and out of fretful sleep. Soon she will wake and I will be gone. The demons that she fights in the witching hour of the early evening are not for a daughter’s eyes. These are monsters she must slay single-handedly.

I prepare to leave. I wave down a nurse with keys jangling on rounded hips and ask to be released. She smiles and says, ‘Thanks for coming. See you next time,’ as I slip past her and into the real world. When my mother wakes she will not remember that I have been there. She will not remember the flowers or remember my age and one day, in the not-too-distant-future, she will not remember me. I should feel comforted in the knowledge that for my mother, time does not travel forward. Life for her is a time machine that only travels into the past – her past, and she will grow more youthful as her body fails.