

THE QUARRY

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Singledom

Kara remained happily enveloped by her Ikea quilt as she scrolled through her news feed, squinting from the sudden glare of her mobile screen. A few funny gym memes appeared, followed by some annoying vines of people failing at life, before the influx of Valentine's Day shout outs began to pop up. As her finger swiped the screen, all she could see were pictures of her friends preparing for a romantic evening out with their significant others. Post after post they continued, their captions even cheesier than the pictures themselves that could only make you cringe if you weren't the type to publicly display your affection. For Kara, however, the feeling of loneliness sunk in as her quilt no longer felt like a warm burrito embrace, but a suffocating entrapment into singledom.

At twenty-seven years old, she began to ponder on the possibility of posting up something romantic herself, but alas, the only relationship she had was with a packet of salt and vinegar chips to reinforce her sour expression. Forcing herself to troll through the pages of loved up couples, she stumbled across an interesting article. Reading through the questions and answering with a reluctant ‘yes’, Kara soon began to indulge in her own self-diagnosis: Anuptaphobia. The fear of being or staying single. In bold capital letters, the word appeared to jump out from the screen, echoing in her ears like an entrancing tribal chant of sorrow. She felt a sudden pang in her chest, unsure if it was from her second bag of chips, or her tub of chocolate fudge ice cream, or just the fact that she was alone on Valentine’s Day for another consecutive year since she was born.

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Reuben loathed Valentine’s Day. In fact, he loathed the idea of being in love. Tainted by his parents’ divorce when he was a child, he distanced himself from any potential possibility of developing a relationship, finding solace in the gym where the only object (or objects) of his affection appeared to be the weights. Having never had a relationship, Reuben remained persistent on avoiding the idea of developing any emotional attachment. He was certain that he would be single for the rest of his life. He was his own island, self-sufficient and content. His friends had nicknamed him Phil for philophobia, given his fear of falling in love. Reuben didn’t mind the tag; after all, he knew it was true and he was proud of it.

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As Kara walked through the shopping centre, heart shaped balloons and pink confetti speckled the shop windows. Bouquets of flowers flooded florist stands on the street, attracting a large portion of the male population. Couples walked arm in arm, others with their hands placed ever so snugly in each others’ back pockets, while the

rest simply stood inconveniently in the middle of the paths to share a kiss and snap a photo.

Weaving through the crowds, Kara felt as if she was the only weed in a flowerbed. The word reappeared in her head and rang in her ears. She ran for the elevator in a desperate attempt to escape from the reminders of her spinster life and headed down to do her grocery shopping.

As she perused through the frozen section, bright yellow stickers advertised the daily specials—a lean cuisine meal for two, at only half price. Scanning the shelves, it appeared that they had all been taken. Her eyes panned down to the great stock of single meals that unfortunately remained at full price.

‘Ugh’, she sighed, as she tossed the packets into her basket.

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Reuben enjoyed working the late night shifts at the shops. He always found the customers to be far more interesting than the early morning risers. As he began scanning the next customer’s groceries he noticed an overwhelming amount of pre-packaged meals for one—from teriyaki chicken, to lasagne, to the odd batch of vanilla rice pudding close to its expiration date. Looking up he saw the woman loading them up on the counter. Her hair hung in untamed curls covering her face. She was petite which was quite surprising, given the substantial number of meals she was, or potentially would be consuming, he thought. As he watched her load the last of her items onto the conveyer belt, he noticed she refused to make eye contact, her eyes planted on the floor.

‘Seems like someone’s gonna be all alone this Valentine’s Day, aye?’ he said with a wink.

‘Excuse me?’ replied the woman, looking up with a sassy attitude, tossing her hair out of her face to stare him out.

‘Well you’ve got a lotta meals here only for one, so you’re either having a singles party or a party for one,’ he laughed in an attempt to lighten the mood. He watched on as she struggled to pluck up a response to defend her choice in groceries.

‘That is none of your business!’ she snarled.

‘Don’t worry. It’s better to be single. Look at me! I’m proof!’ he smiled, ‘You don’t need to worry about anyone but yourself!’ he said, trying to make her feel better. His chuckles were met with silence as she stared at him with a hard, cold look. ‘That’ll be sixty-five dollars and seventy cents,’ he said with the hope of diffusing the situation and avoiding any further awkward tension in the atmosphere.

He watched patiently as she rummaged through her purse and handed her loyalty card and cash. Plucking the card from her fingers he scanned and watched as her name appeared on his screen.

‘Kara...is it?’ he said, awaiting for a response.

As she stood before him, he noticed her twitch in discomfort, her face flushed with red, unsure if it was from her rage at his inappropriate joke, or the notion of asking her name.

‘Yes it is...Reu-ben...’ she hissed, her eyes latched on his nametag that hung from the pocket of his shirt.

‘Well enjoy those meals! Let me know which one’s the best!’ he replied, handing back her change and card, relieved to be moving on to the next customer.

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Kara returned home and loaded her first single meal of the night into the microwave. While the microwave hummed in the kitchen, she scrolled through the list of romantic films on her Apple TV, preparing to wallow in her own self-pity. Ding! The microwave called out to her, signalling that her meal was ready. As she peeled back the clear film from the container the steam rose up, releasing the comforting aroma of creamy, cheesy béchamel and tangy Bolognese sauce.

Holding her hot meal with a tea towel, she planted herself in her sofa and started what would be a binge night of romantic re-runs and pre-packaged meals. Staring at the lump of lasagne before her, a sudden cackle of laughter rang through her ears. The image of the check out chump judging her shopping choice infuriated her. Each beep

of the scanner felt like a jab to her gut, stabbing away at her feelings of inadequacy. How dare he ridicule her like that! As she replayed the whole scenario in her head, the steam of her lasagne fizzled down.

But as she continued to reflect on what had happened, she pondered on the possibilities of his intention. Maybe he didn't mean to insult her. Perhaps he was just trying to get the conversation flowing. As the contents of their small conversations raced through her mind, she began to reassess his body language. The wink. The smile. The fact that he openly stated he was single without ever even being asked. Perhaps he didn't mean to ridicule her. Perhaps he just wanted to have a chat. Perhaps he was flirting.

'Yes...flirting,' she whispered to herself, afraid that someone would hear.

As she replayed the whole spiel in her mind, she began to magnify each scene. She would be the leading lady, and he the gentleman.

'Reuben,' she said. It had a nice ring to it, she thought, as she continued to repeat it and imagined the possibility of them being together.

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Reuben stood in his usual aisle. It was strangely quiet for a Thursday night, he thought to himself as he fumbled with the cash in his till. In the distance a familiar figure approached. Squinting his eyes to get a look, he soon recognised it to be the crazy, meal-for-one chick from the week before. He watched as she made her way towards him, her shopping trolley filled with everything but pre-packaged meals. Plastering on a smile to mask his discomfort, he greeted her with his chirpy check-out-chap voice. 'Hello again!'

'Hello,' she replied.

'Kara, isn't it?'

'Yes, Kara.'

Reuben was slightly surprised by her significantly chirpier attitude, a vast contrast from their first encounter. Fearful that any comment on her grocery shopping

could potentially result in a public display of her revealing her previous character, he avoided any discussion of food.

‘So, how are you today?’ he asked.

‘I’m well. As you can see there are no frozen meals for me today,’ she chuckled.

Oh no! Reuben thought to himself, struggling to ignore the awkwardness of the situation. He could feel himself flustering at the idea of any confrontation with this woman as he tried to work up a response.

‘That’s nice’, he replied. Short, simple and sweet. Surely she wouldn’t find that offensive, he continued to think to himself.

‘How are you today, Reuben?’ she asked.

The sound of her voice saying his name, sent goose bumps running through his body. Discretely scratching his pocket, he plucked his nametag off and hid it under the counter, fearful of any other potential creepy customers.

‘I’m pretty good, thanks,’ he uttered under his breath, still managing to maintain a calm demeanour.

‘That’s good,’

A few moments of silence passed as he continued to scan and weigh the contents of her trolley. As she stood there before him, watching him intently, Reuben began pondering for something to say.

‘So have you got any plans for this weekend?’

‘Nope. Nothing really. What about you?’

‘Erm...I’m just heading to that film festival in the city. You should check it out,’

As the words escaped from his lips, her eyes widened.

‘Oooh... that sounds like fun. Maybe I will.’

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Kara wandered through the gardens, sifting through the clusters of picnic blankets and people strewn across the grounds. After a solid hour of scanning the premise, she spotted Reuben sitting by himself near the back. Adjusting her top and sweeping her tangled curls behind her ear, she approached him.

‘Hey there!’

Surprised at the sight of her, Reuben almost choked on his packet of chips. With a few loud coughs and a pounding of his chest, he managed to utter a croaky response. “Oh hey!”

‘You here by yourself?’

‘Umm yeah. My mates couldn’t make it. You?’

‘That’s a shame. Yeah I just came by myself too. Mind if I take a seat?’

‘Uhhh yeah go for it,’

Unpacking her bag she laid out her own picnic blanket beside him and an assortment of foods to feed more than just one person.

‘Want some?’ she asked, offering him some crackers and dip.

‘Thanks!’ he said, scooping a generous amount onto his cracker.

As the speakers blared and the opening credits rolled, the entire audience hushed down.

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Despite reluctantly obliging in offering her a seat, Reuben began to enjoy Kara’s company and more importantly the assorted range of crackers, chips and dips she brought with her. The more he chatted, the more he felt comfortable, unperturbed by their previous awkward moments of silence at the shops. As the movie finished and the last of the picnic blankets was folded away, he walked her to her car. Offering to take him home only exacerbated his feelings for her, her kind and caring demeanour surpassing his expectations.

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By the end of the night, Kara was tired and bored of listening to Reuben. He was, as she had originally thought, an obnoxious pig. He had eaten all of her snacks, and even double dipped, leaving nothing for her to eat and no room in the conversation to speak. She couldn't even enjoy the movie as his voice bellowed through the gardens, annoying not just herself, but the entire audience. He unashamedly laughed at the most ridiculous times of the movie, completely oblivious of the people surrounding them, leaving Kara to feel the stares of the rest of the audience pierce through her very soul.

As she drove him back home, her repulsion towards him only grew, as he continued to burp without any consideration for her nose. She soon realised how content she was with her single life, with no need to look after anyone but herself. She had the freedom of doing everything by herself and relished in her independence.

Pulling up to his driveway, she could feel herself regaining her freedom.

'Well I'm really glad you came tonight!' said Reuben, stepping out of the car.

'Umm...yeah,' said Kara unsatisfied.

'Maybe we can do it again?' he asked, closing the car door behind him.

Imagining the idea of what their future would be like together as a couple almost made her vomit as the taste of celery and guacamole crept up the back of her throat.

'No thank you,' she said as she drove off back home to her pocket world of singledom.