

THE QUARRY

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Crazy Norm

‘Can I have a word?’ Olive asked Norm.

‘Sure,’ he said, shuffling outside.

Norman stood six-foot tall between Olive and the café, blocking her from her own business. *The sooner this was dealt with, the better*, she thought.

‘Norman, you can’t come in and drink the water anymore.’ Olive smiled as she said this; she was too nice, even whilst booting him out.

‘You can’t talk to Sophie either, not unless you’re ordering a coffee—don’t tell her she’s beautiful, don’t bring her wine—’

‘Why not?’ he implored.

‘Because it’s not appropriate. You can order food or drinks, but stop pestering her.’

‘Can I wait for the bus, inside? You’ve let me do that...’

He was trying to salvage some of it—any of it—he didn’t have enough money to buy coffee every day, didn’t even like coffee... But he liked Sophie. Oh, she was a pretty one.

‘But Olive...’ The boss lady was shaking her head.

That’s it. Another place he wasn’t allowed to go. He looked down at his scuffed shoes and a good idea popped into his head: he would stand (and smoke) at the bus stop and watch Sophie from the street! He liked her little jeans that were shorts, she wore them with thick black stockings. A hole was beginning to wear out near her

bottom, she needed to buy new ones. He wondered if that was something he could bring her.

‘And no smoking near the door either—you can’t smoke within four meters of the café.’

How big was four metres? Probably all the way to the bus stop.

Olive had reached her limit. He’d already been in twice today, standing at the water jugs pouring himself endless cups, staring at Soph, then sitting and shuffling the magazines. He was bothering the customers. *Sweet Norm, but not right in the head.* Yeah, she felt sorry for him, but he was stalking Soph, who was too young to handle it. This is my café, Olive thought, and I must deal with the weirdos.

Norm wandered off toward the chicken shop, where he liked to watch raunchy video clips; at least he would be out of her hair.

Norm was absent the following day. And the next. He must be catching the bus at a different stop, thought Olive, and she felt relieved; she had tons on her ‘to do’ list before her cruise holiday. This would be her first proper break in five years since she started the café. She finally trusted her staff to keep things rolling, it was time for a recharge. The night before her departure, Olive sweated in the dark and stared at the ceiling. But whatever worries that bothered her, she pushed them away with her plans: sleep-in every day, pretty cocktails, spa treatments, yoga at dawn looking out to sea... *It will be alright*, she whispered to her pillow.

On Monday morning Norman stood outside the café, smoking and admiring the pink clouds blanketing the horizon. He was serene and looked a little bit stylish. Wearing a wide-lapel, baggy brown suit and an old trilby felt hat, he’d traded his cruddy old Reeboks for leather brogues that were buffed to shine. Neither was he carrying the Coles bag that usually accompanied him everywhere. He sat on his bench, puffing away.

This was how Soph discovered him as she trotted up to the café door. She gave Norm a polite wave, but he barely noticed her; he was off with the pixies. Soph felt nervous. This was an important day, being trusted to manage the café. The pavement was riddled with puddles, the wind messed her hair, and her legs were cold. *Autumn’s coming*, she thought, fumbling with the keys; it was always a struggle to open the café door... *that’s right, the square key first, then the oval one.*

‘Can I help you, Dear?’ Norman was standing right behind her. Sophie flinched, the key found the sweet spot, the lock sprung open.

‘No thanks, Norm,’ she blurted without turning around, thrusting the door shut behind her. He stared through the glass. She couldn’t lock the door—that would be admitting he’d spooked her—but she avoided looking in his direction, even though he was just standing there. He could read the ‘closed’ sign. Sophie began the usual routine: warm up the coffee machine, slice the breakfast fruit. She put music on and checked her watch: Paz, their morning chef, would arrive in twenty minutes.

The rain began to pitter-patter. Norman sat back down on the bench, opening a collapsible umbrella he’d stowed in one of the generous pockets of the suit. In the other pocket was an old tin—carefully packed and extremely precious. Today was a special day and he must be bold, face his fears and reach his objective. He had been awake most of the night, plotting.

The café began to warm up. Sophie made herself a strong cappuccino and stirred the muffin mixture: apple, coconut and white choc chips. She washed the salad greens. A new album was playing because everyone had got bored of Jarryd James, now it was Lana del Rey. She lowered each chair down from the table tops as if they were dance partners, to Lana’s purry voice.

Olive’s cruise ship was probably departing the Sydney Heads this very moment. *Shame about the weather*, thought Soph, although it would no doubt be perfect in the Pacific Islands. She decided she would fish out her black jeans from the bottom drawer when she got home. Paz finally bowled up; his cheeky Peruvian grin beamed from under a beanie. He sniffed the air, perfumed with baked muffins, then darted back out of the kitchen, ‘I gotta get some tomatoes,’ and headed for the greengrocer down the road.

Laying out date and banana bread slices, her head buried deep in the cake cabinet, Soph realised a figure was standing on the other side of the glass—a man in a brown suit. Still holding the metal cake-slice, she stood up, her face blank as a round plate.

‘What would you like, Norman?’ It was in fact opening time.

Norman stood as erect as his old back could bear. ‘How are you Sophie?’

She scanned him for clues: hair swept back into a damp mat under a hat, saggy face scrapped of the usual grey stubble, cheeks faintly pock-marked with acne scars probably from decades ago. His eyes were shimmering in their watery sockets,

dull yet sane green points trained on her like gunsights. He was waiting for her answer, not shuffling his bag or feet for once.

‘I’m well, thank you Norm,’ she replied, and suddenly, Soph meant it. She was twenty-two and in charge of the most popular café in the street, and not afraid of *Crazy Norm*. Today he seemed less... imbecile... more a clean, quiet soul... albeit still bothering for her attention. She could handle him.

Paz bounced back into the cafe, ‘Forgot the money.’ His chirpiness vanished when he realised who was standing there. He moved slowly behind the cash register, flicking his eyes to Sophie in a bid to gauge her reaction.

‘Just grab that twenty bucks under the sugar,’ she said, pointing to a note she’d stashed earlier for such errands.

Paz considered staying, to make sure Norman was not going to get weird; but Sophie was acting confident, so he figured she had it covered. ‘I’ll be back in a minute,’ he declared, hoping Norman would get the hint and not hang around.

‘Okay—oh—get some salt, too, will ya?’ added Sophie.

She decided to show Norm who was boss now.

‘Norm, I’m very busy. Is there anything I can get you... otherwise I’m going to have to ask you to wait outside for your bus.’

Simples.

‘As a matter of fact, I would like to buy a cup of tea,’ he said, ‘Take-away.’

She wondered why he was ordering a drink—he never buys anything.

‘You realise it’s three-dollars-eighty?’

‘I realise that, my dear, and I have money.’ He plucked a fifty dollar note out of his pocket and lay it reverently on the counter. It looked as though it had been ironed.

She arched one eyebrow and delicately placed the cake-slice down, picking up the note, rang up the tea, then counted out his change. His large puffy palm caught the money as he watched her fingers with obvious fascination. Her body amazed him, the way young skin clung to muscle and bone underneath.

Soph turned to make tea, slightly worried he might start raving. He sometimes mumbled to himself or read the paper out loud.

He watched her flick her hair out the way. She was so much like an African mammal, like the zebras he’d once seen at Taronga Zoo—taut, exotic—he

remembered how their buttocks quivered when flies bothered them, they'd flick their bushy black tails. His father had taken him to Taronga for his fourteenth birthday.

'My father died last week,' he said.

'Oh, oh that's very sad. I'm sorry to hear it.' She stopped dipping the teabag for a second.

'Ah, he had a good innings. He was in the Navy, you know. I'm taking him to Coogee—some of his ashes, that is.'

Norm patted his father's cigar tin in the pocket.

'I think he'd be happier there, back with the ocean.'

It would be just Norman to do the scattering; he didn't know how to contact Dad's old Navy mates. 'I have to catch the 373 from Circular Quay,' he thought aloud.

'Do you want some sugar in your tea, Norm?'

'I'm not taking my medication anymore,' she thought she heard him say.

Today was so weird.

'Oh,' was all she replied, heaping two sugars in. Then noticing the time: the 7:10am to the city will be along any minute. She placed the tea in front of him.

'There you go, Norm, and a complimentary muffin to help you on your mission,' *oops, now she was encouraging him.* 'You'd better get moving if you want to catch the bus.'

'Thank you love, you're very kind,' he said, squishing the warm paper bag into his pocket alongside the tin.

Norman picked up his tea carefully, like a large child. He thanked Sophie once more and left, passing Paz, who had returned with the tomatoes and salt. He stepped back into the damp street, glittering now from the morning sun that had worked its way free of the heavy cloud and was giving the early commuters something to be cheerful about.