

THE QUARRY

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No Woman's Land

There were no spaces left to lay down on the grass, so quite a few ladies sunbathed on the rocks that circled the women's sea pool, like lizards, like litter, like a colony of seals. Their luminous arses wreathed the giant sandstones.

I looked at them and thought, *I was twenty-something, once*. I debated taking up residence in the old handball court up the back corner, usually the reserve of saddle-bagged pensioners or hairy-lipped lesbians. *Rocks or court?*

The court was supposed to be a quiet space, there was a new sign—**no music, no talking, no phones**—what wasn't specified but everyone knew, *no clothes*. One woman was already there, baking herself like an overcooked gingerbread. This snug, private corner was created by two adjoined concrete walls; this had once been a space for fit girlies to bounce balls around when it wasn't the done thing to do in public.

The woman slept. *Thirty-ish*, was my quick assessment. A sliver of shade cowered in the corner. I put my things there, as far away from her as possible.

Down the steep cliff steps to the sea pool; time for a swim, time to cool off and get a feel for the place. *Time to fit in.* The water was busy. *There are too many people in the world already.* One or two strokes were all I achieved before some Russian dame with her hair piled up nearly kicked me in the head. All shapes and colours, some of the women were swimming topless, others kept themselves discreet in shorts and singlets. A Muslim mother and daughter explored the rock pools in their burkinis. We all frog-kicked, floated, caressed the clean seawater, and avoided putting our feet down on urchins.

Talk, talk, talk, so many women, so many words. Beside me I heard Chinese interspersed with English: ‘Never again, I said!’

Crones exercised their flabby arms with aqua punches; ultra-slim teens minus any pockmarked cellulite slid their perfect thighs into our cool green world like elegant herons. They’d never drank alcohol, you could see it in their skin. I took possession of the pool corner that poked out into the ocean, carved straight into the rock, and faced a blue horizon. Cleansing waves spilled over the edge, I let the frizzy foam spray all over my face. *Like my husband’s gush.* I thanked the sea for its Merlin healing tricks, Mother Earth for her massaging wetness.

Back up the cliff in the hot court now lazed three Arab women: a pair of sisters or maybe best friends, *twinning*, had arrived and spread out in the space between the lone lady and my sarong; two designer handbags bullied my beach bag, competing for the shade. Perched on their elbows in unison, their set of buttocks were lithe shiny olives intersected with G-strings. Why did women show their bottoms at the beach nowadays? I found it a bit off-putting. I remembered when going topless was all the rage, but we don’t really do that anymore, except down there in the Ladies’ Pool where men can’t particularly see us unless they’re kayaking past, hell-bent on a fitness mission. Everyone used to do it, didn’t they? Or was I remembering it that way because I was young back then, and that’s what we young people did. Getting your tits out in public had felt rebellious, even though it was okay by law; it was a political freedom. *They’re just nipples, get over it!* Blokes didn’t seem to mind at all, although it wasn’t something you did in front of your Dad. These days it’s a bit outrageous—my kids died of embarrassment and begged me to put my top back on at Cave Beach. *Ahh, I see now—you do it with your friends.* But now my friends were more inclined to cover up their post-baby bosoms, wracked with hard labour and

gravity. I wondered if there was a link between the feminisms of the day and which body parts we exposed when sunbathing... perhaps there were also variations depending on one's age. I tried on a bummier costume in my mind.

The pair started chatting at full volume, waking the first woman from her sun trance.

'You look like my friend Fatima,' I couldn't help but overhear. She was indeed a Fatima, but not their one from Bankstown. This nude Fatima kept her knees together enough to keep her secrets.

In my head I pointedly re-read the rules under the *QUIET* sign. It distinctly said, **no loud talking**. My jaw wobbled but I decided not to be a fussy old cow, in case they thought I was being a bit racist. Then, one of the sister-friends turned her phone volume up to torture me with some shitty dance-pop. I stuffed my earpods in and stripped my wet swimmers off, resigning myself to bronzing the parts of me that still looked Irish.

The summer holidays were over; I was free again. This trip to McIver's Ladies Baths was to celebrate my kids going back to school. *Nourish myself*. I needed to untether from their universe. God this was lovely. It was so hot, the twins decided to go for a swim.

I finally gathered the courage to turn over, I needed to cook my other side. My pubes were sparse—it's a fact of life they don't tell you that happens after forty—balding. All those years of waxing etc and now I wish I had more lushness down there; it'd be ironic if Seventies-style bush became a thing again. Lying flat on my back, my tummy-fat roll stretched out in a less offensive way. Sweat dribbled down between the cracks. A big floppy hat covered my face to protect it from burning. *I am a naked flower*.

A timeless minute went by.

Sloshy wave sounds and cicada drone rolled through the heat.

Then, a little boy, maybe three or four years old, climbed the short fence separating the handball court from the grassy area where his mother sat, and perched himself up there, hovering right above my face. This was not how my day was meant to go, I had just dropped my son off at the school gates, I'd done my time. He was ruining the moment.

The Arab girls were back and cooed sweetly, giving him the attention he craved, ‘What’s your naaaame?’

Don’t encourage him.

He clung like a monkey to the fence, making toddler chirrup, settling in for more of their girl-love. A helicopter buzzed along the coast so I shifted my hat to hide my yoni from the sky.

‘Go see Mummy,’ I urged, ‘Bye bye.’

‘No, no, no,’ he shot back, and rearranged his penis, staring at my nipples as if it were lunchtime.

That. Was. It.

‘Excuse me, is this your son?’ I thrust my head over the fence to locate Mum. She was mid-conversation with a girlfriend, having a lovely old time. My boobs wobbled under my sarong as I spoke: ‘He’s staring at me and I don’t like it.’

He was probably only two, but I had not driven all the way across the city to this sanctuary for women, only to have a boy feel a throb. I didn’t care if he was just a kid. I registered the look of horror crawl over her face when she realised I was accusing her baby of being weird just now. Words kept spilling out of me:

‘I have just dropped my child off for his first day of high school, so I don’t feel like babysitting,’ and promptly lay down again like a collapsing deckchair. I felt like crying.

All that mediation was obviously not working. I had failed some test. I remembered a meme from Instagram earlier in the day: *It’s a lot easier to be angry at someone than it is to tell them you’re hurt.* Your son is hurting me.

I miss my little boy.

The Arab sisters couldn’t believe it. There was a ‘discussion.’ They included Fatima. All three looked at me as if I’d levitated. I couldn’t hear what anyone was saying because (a) the language barrier, and (b) I’d jammed the earpods back into my boiling head. Instead, I caught the eye of the presumably elder sister and held up my hand—flat palm facing down to the ground, then twisting the wrist so my

palm faced up again, then flickered it back and forth—palm down or palm up? *Was that okay, what I just did?*

She grimaced and gave me a weak thumbs-up.

You young ones, you're people-pleasers, I thought. But her eyes said, *Wow, you just did that?*

Yes. Yes, I did. He was annoying us all, admit it.

That was another thing about aging, you give different zero fucks.