

THE QUARRY

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Week

Monday

This week I took a total of eighty-nine steps. My apartment, the first I ever owned, sat on the outskirts of the city and was surrounded by grungy streets, pubs, and gay bars. After the government ramped up social distancing rules, things took an atypical turn. The bars closed, the lights dimmed, the laughter faded.

Finally June, the chill in the air was a delightful change after so many humid months but had the unfortunate side effect of misting the glass and hindering my view of the outside world. Inside I looked at the landscapes I had painted of native wildflowers, silver scribbly gums, and the lit-up laneways of Barangaroo at night. Many discovered painting as a therapeutic hobby during quarantine. As I looked at my own artwork I thought 76, 81, 84. All Distinctions, no High Distinctions yet. What was

missing from my work that other artists had? Gritty realism? Childhood trauma? A muse?

Turning on the shower, I stood under the scalding hot stream hoping it would wash away the failure, idleness, and ineptitude of the past few months. Upon my return I saw something I had never come across before.

It was usual for long strands of auburn hair to cover my apartment. They swirled in spirals on the shower, gathered in tumbleweeds on the floor, and occasionally turned up in my food. Something small, and the very same shade as my hair, sat on the table and watched me with wide innocent eyes. It wasn't quite cute, but neither was I. It was the shape and size one might expect a pet to be. When I reached for it, it trembled violently, reminding me of a guinea pig I once had which often shook at the perilous thought of aerial predators. The little puff fit the size of my palm. I brought the creature closer to my face.

'Hello there.'

Its chest beat violently and it let out a little whine. As I used to do with my guinea pigs, I gently pressed my thumb to lower its lip to see its teeth. They were blunt and square, with the exception of two sharply pronounced canines.

Google searching 'small orange rodent with sabretooth-like teeth' yielded only phony doctored images. This could be a new species. One that might be named after me. As the daughter of two zoologists unfortunately I wouldn't be the first in the family for this to happen to. The white-bellied moss mouse *Pseudohydromys sandrae* had already been named in my mother's honour.

On the basis of appearance alone my best guess was that the creature was of the class Mammalia like myself. In fact, it resembled me in its tawny colouring. Questions flooded my mind: What is it? What did it eat? Where did it come from? Is it dangerous?

Right now it looked about as dangerous as the Furby toys from my childhood.

I reached for my phone and took a picture of the creature, sending it to my parents knowing they'd take their time getting back to me. They often got sent these kinds of pictures from the general public. Some family or another would discover a baby animal in their garden, house, or on the side of the road. It would be helpless, a juvenile, too young for the average carer to identify its exact genus and species as its

distinctive features had not yet formed. More often than not the beloved animal they'd taken into their home was none other than *Rattus rattus*. Mum and Dad would also be able to identify this weird animal, if it had already been discovered.

Starting with the 'what does it eat' conundrum I gave it a little bit of food from various food groups; vegetables, grain, meat, all of which it seemed uninterested in consuming. After determining that it was neither omnivore, carnivore, nor herbivore, I gave up. It currently seemed content, so I placed it in a tissue box as a makeshift bed and decided to wait for my parents' insight on it later. Locking the door in case it developed a drastic and psychotic personality change overnight, I went to bed.

Tuesday

Mornings were a slow, painful endeavour. After a sip of weak tea, I regained the presence of mind to think about my creature. I shuffled to where the tissue-bed lay. The poor thing had shrunk! It was now barely the size of my thumb. A wail burst from its mouth. It reminded me of a hungry baby crying but the food I'd left next to it lay untouched. It immediately quietened when I focused on it. Content with the attention. In an attempt to calm it, I petted its head with a careful hand. Though it was an almost imperceptible change, with each pat the creature grew larger. It seemed like the thing needed me. Not to feed it, but to nurture it, perhaps even to love it. It grew to the size of my fist.

Yesterday's discovery had shocked me out of my creativity and productivity. With the new day came a feeling of determination. Out of nowhere this thing had appeared, to me alone, to be my muse. Grabbing my more expensive paints and canvas I lay a protective tarp on the floor and set up a work space.

Within a furious two-hour run of painting in which paint got on just about everything except the tarp, I was done. Yet the creature I had painted was not the one that now stood on four legs before me. The thing had grown to be the size of a puppy. Though it was much hairier than any dog I'd ever seen, a perfect orange sphere. Through the fluff I could see that the creature had two arms and two legs. Two hands emerged from the hair and grasped my own, curling around my fingers and displaying, to my astonishment, two opposable thumbs.

Picking up the creature by the waist I carried it to the bathroom and sat it on the closed lid of the toilet. What lay beneath the hair? With the curiosity of a scientist I grabbed a small pair of scissors and began clipping away slowly at the folds of hair. The cool bathroom became covered in splashes of orange. After cutting the last layer of hair I looked upon what I had found. What once looked like a tumbleweed breezing past, now appeared to be a humanoid creature, one that resembled a baby orangutan.

In the animal world, brain size is commonly proportionate to intelligence. When the creature had been small I hadn't considered the level of intelligence it could potentially have. It ate and it slept. Now when I took out the paints and canvas, I placed them in front of the creature to see if it had any kind of reaction or intuition. Instead of painting on the canvas it crawled over to the large white wall, arguably in a sense a larger canvas, and painted it with ochre and umber handprints. The effect reminded me of ancient cave paintings, like the parietal prehistoric rock art that dated back millenia.

When I placed paint brushes and sponges beside it, it took these and used them. This indicated a fundamental sign of reasoning, it had the ability to use tools. I painted a waratah on a piece of blank wall space beside it and engrossed by this display, the creature copied with accuracy.

During the hours that past, the creature had grown to be as tall as my waist with the hair on its stomach, forearms, hands and legs, starting to recede.

'I should give you a name.'

In response the creature let out a garbled sound.

'You must be a Weasly.' Or it was at least a very dishevelled and primitive version of this fictional family.

'Wes then.'

Its head jerked toward me, as though already recognising the sound of its own name. His own name.

Like a toddler learning to walk, he moved in a bipedal motion towards me, for the first time upright, on two legs.

Wednesday

I woke up to the sound of shuffling papers and furious scribbling. Turning the bedroom doorknob I came upon what looked like a 12-year-old boy, with perhaps a slightly more protruding forehead and longer forearms, colouring with my texts in the living room.

‘Wes?’

He turned to me and without preamble replied, ‘Yes.’

‘You can talk?’

‘Yes.’

‘How?’

‘Yes.’

Okay so his vocabulary was limited. Amazing still that his mouth had the ability to form the vowels and consonants of the human tongue.

A text pinged on my phone. It was from Dad.

‘Never seen the thing before in my life! Keep the little guy safe, your mother will love this! We’ll come on the weekend to have a look.’

Whether this was a dream or a nightmare I couldn’t tell. Wes had been growing at an astonishing rate. Some animals were like that, it wasn’t altogether unique. The Mayfly lived out its whole life cycle, birth to death, in one day. How long was the lifespan of an animal like Wes, a week?

Not wanting to put a damper on his mood I began taking out my art supplies, pictures, and books. What would he think of Picasso?

Thursday

Every morning with Wes heralded a new discovery. My ability to be shocked had taken on new heights. Yet he managed to do it once again. Or rather, she managed to. This may prove right the maxim that women are more evolved than men.

The boyhood version of Wes was no longer. Sitting calmly at the kitchen bench and eating a bowl of microwaved noodles was me. Or at least a creature that appeared

exactly like me. From my long red hair to my gangly elbows to my impressively small feet. Wes was me.

‘Hey,’ Wes began, ‘now I know this is weird, I don’t completely understand things either.’

I spluttered. ‘Fancy that, my evil twin doesn’t understand things.’

She held up her hands.

‘This isn’t a Phoebe and Ursula type scenario.’

‘How in hell have you watched *Friends*?’ Remain calm, I told myself. This was the creature I had grown and raised myself.

She pointed to my laptop which contained all the free trials I had to streaming services.

‘I binged all ten seasons last night.’ She gave me a lopsided smile, the apologetic one I gave to people when I’d done something worth reprimanding. Our mouths were the same, as was our taste in television.

‘Favourite character?’ I tested.

‘Monica,’ we said at the same time.

Maybe this wasn’t all bad. We talked long into the night as I told her about art, history, and culture. I fell asleep beside her on the couch.

Friday

‘Wes,’ I called when I couldn’t find her.

What emerged from the study was no longer me. Wes had changed again. She was smaller now, had lost her hair and developed thicker looking skin.

‘Hello keeper,’ she greeted with a short wave.

‘Hello.’ I pointed at the hand she had waved with which had transformed once again, and now only had four fingers. ‘You lost a finger.’

Wes 2.0 glanced at her hands. ‘It was a useless vestigial part.’

‘Humans,’ she continued, ‘have destroyed this world with their unquenchable materialism and destructive self-centred natures, I leave here on a mission as one that has moved past their primitive beginnings and evolved into a creature of pure logic. Goodbye young friend, I leave here knowing there are only a few like myself who have the foresight to fix this world.’

With that she/he/it left. The door to my apartment falling shut and leaving me behind inside.