

THE QUARRY

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Miss Phillipa

The doctors all agree that for me to feel entirely myself again (such an admirable ambition) I am to make my way to the seaside for a week.

I emerge from a six-hour bus ride at a foreign bus stop in a foreign town. It is late and I am hungry. I am not supposed to feel hunger and the normalcy of such a physical sensation rocks me. Perhaps it's the local's blasted sea air working its insidious way into my digestive tract. Well, I'll take this holiday, and return to work not a day over one week and see what they have to say about that.

I make my way down cobblestone streets. Nightlights are starting to twinkle into life, illuminating this strange town and its inhabitants. There is a sense of freedom

in all their movements, as though they have imbibed too much of others' good intentions. Well, they will get nothing from me.

There is the sign I have been looking for. A weather-beaten panel over a door stating you could rest your head at the 'Sea-Side Inn' for the value price of \$49 per night. What a delight. The night clerk greets me as I walk in. During our conversation he establishes, via pointed questioning, that I have a credit card and a driver's licence. He mentions the tourist pack they have with maps to interesting destinations, all the beaches and bookstores. Could he interest me in these? He couldn't. I take it anyway for appeasement's sake.

A cheery voice from behind asks me if he could be of assistance and help me with my luggage. I am faintly amused. In all conceivability it is my wasted appearance which lends itself to such solicitous feelings. Certainly no one has ever offered to carry my luggage before.

I am led up a flight of stairs. A door is opened for me and I am left in solitude.

The bathroom smells familiar, as though they, like the hospital I so recently vacated, use hospital grade detergent. I look back at the mirror. How disagreeable. Not quite in blushing youth anymore. Quite the opposite really: pale, washed out middle age. Perhaps I could find my youth strolling these sunburned streets chatting gaily to other figments of my imagination.

I open the window. Bad idea. More of that sea air comes waltzing in as though every open panel of glass is a hand written invitation. It dances with my curtains, then marches through my hair and down my pipes. I shut the window.

There is not much evening left and I plan to be unpacked and fully rested for tomorrow when I shall face the foreign town and all its peculiarities. Tonight I feel the strength has left me.

Sunlight wakens me. It has sneaked in through closed blinds. I never sleep with the blinds open, no need to leave the flight path to the heavens all *that* open. I observe myself in the mirror after I dress. My image stares back at me and reminds me that time has marked me more effectively than any passing love affair. Dances are a thing of the misty past and knitting booties for non-existent grandchildren is supposed to fill my days in happy contemplation.

I venture downstairs. Legs a little wobbly. I wander along cobbled streets towards the distant sea. It comes on me suddenly. One minute I am contentedly strolling along and then I turn a corner and see the endless blue. I have to sit down and catch my breath.

I've never seen the sea before. It crashes majestically upon the shoreline and I feel very little. Not a feeling designed to flood me with the confidence that has been eluding me. Stupid doctors. Sent me to the wrong address.

People are actually stripping off their layers of civilisation and running at the seething mass of unfathomable waters. They are facing it and yelling challenges to the sky. I sit there and eye them doubtfully.

'I am quite comfortable here, thank you young man,' I reassure the darkly handsome stranger who catches sight of my breathless state. I am in no need of assistance and have no desire to thrust myself into the sweeping jaws of foaming waves.

This sea they are all so enamoured with appears dangerous. Look at them plunging in and spending energy one day they will kill to have again. They have no care that it whispers a dirge in its sleepless prowling of our coast. They are secure. They are *young* and how the young feel their own brand of immortality. Just you wait, I think with savage glee. You'll sit here and feel the same feelings of wasted energy. I stand and stretch. My, how tiring all this fresh air is. I make my way to a small café I saw earlier.

I finish my salad and fish. I sit and let humanity wash over me in a tide of raised voices and sweet scents. I shudder and put down my wine, leaving the café, giving no tip. Do I seek the emotions of others? Do I reek of my inner grayness? Is my age a natural insult to their youth? Am I an object of their pity? I hurry away. I am successful I want to shout. I have a house, a car and a bank balance you would be envious of: I could *buy* you all. I halt at that thought, a part of me ashamed.

A group of youngsters come careering passed. One knocks my arm and stops. Pleasant face screws up with worry. 'So sorry missus. Don't know what I was thinking, not to see you there. Hope I haven't damaged anything?'

I open my mouth to deliver a blistering lecture, and close it again on a teeth-clenching smile. 'Oh no dear, I am perfectly fine,' and I turn to walk back the way I

have come. Had I once been that age? All limbs and freckles and bursting forth with a vitality that alarms middle aged ladies so much? Seems unlikely. I always had an old and slightly jaded soul, just had to grow into it. I am well on the way. Perhaps being more elderly is going to be better than I imagine. I curl my lip in derision. May as well get that knitting out.

I am in an open aired plaza. I hear snatches of conversation. People glad the weather was holding, glad the storm of last week had blown over and *delighted* the local council was putting on a dance in two days, right here at the Plaza, wouldn't you know? No, I didn't know. Bother and damnation. My room overlooks the park attached to this Plaza. How annoying.

I find myself in a bookstore. A little light reading might pick my spirits up. I make my selection - there isn't much to choose from - and return to the blistering street. I hasten back to my room, my sanctuary, and lean heavily against the door as it closes behind me. I frown down at my light and whimsical novel. It is full of romantic nonsense. Whoever would enjoy a chauvinist telling you what to do all the time? So controlling I could choke, but I have it now, so may as well get on with it.

Evening approaches. Marta Hermann's novel on Lady Westerling's Romantic Sojourn put me to sleep hours ago. I turn my head to look out of my window. Daylight has receded. Dinnertime approaches once more. There is a lovely little corner in my host's dining lounge tucked obscurely away from nearly everyone's view I can hide in for dinner. I eat a little more salad and a lot less fish. There is no red meat on the menu.

I feel eyes upon me. I glance surreptitiously across my garlic bread. Seated just within sight is a man. Well, nothing too portentous about that. I make no acknowledgement that he is looking in my direction. While I was the looker when younger, I can't imagine turning heads now but there you go. Fair's fair. The man may have forgotten his glasses. I finish my meal.

He has approached my table hiding behind a waitress. No warning. Pleasing deep voice says he can't help but see I am alone and asks if I would care for a nightcap at the bar. Disturbing. I can't imagine what encouraged him. I frown majestically and refuse politely. He smiles at me and suggests a holiday for one is never as much fun as having someone to share the tedium with. A kindred spirit in the most unlikely of places? I say I am too weary from my day. A second suggestion is forthcoming. What

if we were to walk the beach together in the morning? I agree, if only to remove this obstacle from between me and my room.

I am in my room. My heart is beating a little too fast. This man has upset my calm. I cannot help feeling I have committed a grave error of judgement. Not to worry, there are a million ways of seeing off unwanted attention. I close my blinds and allow Lady Westerling's ridiculous palpitations to put me to sleep.

It is Tuesday. I have a *date* to go walking on the beach. Good grief. What had I been thinking? I sit and ponder how to escape this demanding social event. I am not a social creature. (Sometimes I am, however, Master of the Understatement.)

A knock sounds on my door. Not here already! I have never dressed so fast. I answer the door in bright yellows and brilliant whites. Enough to paralyse the best intentions. It is a maid. Would I like my orange juice here or out on the terrace with my gentleman friend? I have forgotten his name already! It is supplied with amusement.

I'm not saying Amery and I are friends upon our return to the motel, but we have talked and know a little more of each other. I agree to meet him for dinner and retire to my room. I am in turmoil. I lie on my bed. This Amery is a wonder. Most disturbing. My eye wanders over Westerling... Perhaps I can fit in a chapter or two before dinner.

As usual, I have drifted to sleep. I glance at my watch. Good heavens, I'll be late. I study my wardrobe. Somehow, it all seems a little out of place now. I choose the only evening-looking garment among the meagre contents of the cupboard. I eye my rather sombre appearance.

Amery has booked a table in a neighbouring restaurant. He takes my arm, to direct me to the right doorway I can only presume. My stomach flutters and I quickly put it down to hunger. I am faced with a beaming waiter – may he take my coat? It is much too grand to call this scrap of material a coat, but yes, he could take it if it makes him feel any better. Amery smiles at my tone. Amusing, am I? At least meat is on the menu. Amery quietly studies what they are offering. He does many things quietly I am discovering. Fascinating. Perhaps it's his age. He's probably said it all before.

Dinner is a strange affair. I find myself searching for interesting pieces of myself to place into his silent and warm companionship. I wonder if my doctors would be smiling in satisfaction.

I am glad when it is over, I tell myself. In reality, I think I have enjoyed someone else's company more than my own for the first time in years. Disturbing. I am faced with the inevitable good night scene. Do I commit myself to further dates? I am in a quandary. Amery escorts me to my door. I know where to find him if I would like some more company, I am informed. I close the door. Having fulfilled my promise to talk to another human being on my holiday, I am now under no further obligation to continue doing so. I go to sleep on the thought that while no obligation exists, a *desire* might. Thoroughly disturbing.

I cannot believe the quickened pace this holiday is now setting. A veritable whirlwind, I fear. Tonight is that Council-approved concert. I see a note slipped under my door. My disloyal heart leaps. Amery? A notice, actually, for all those who wish to help in providing supervision for the concert. Oh my, now wouldn't *that* be fun? I shudder.

A knock. That helpful maid again? This time I answer in my dressing gown, note in hand. Bright delighted smile. Am I supervising? Certainly not. Pleading gray eyes. I shall have to think, I say, putting those pleading eyes on the shelf for later.

My in-house phone rings. Amery. Have I received a note? Yes, but I am determined not to be a part of it. I am admonished. Surely I will not turn my back on a bunch of children? I fume. Coercion. Had he spoken to a certain pair of gray eyes? Chuckles flow down the line. It is possible - didn't they work on me? Certainly not, but *he* does. I am a registered supervisor before breakfast is done. Dreadful, but my resistance is weak (perhaps I should change my reading material).

Today I refuse to see Amery out of conscientious objection. I plan to idle my time away watching the waves. I need time to think, away from this insidious feeling. I am most assuredly letting myself be swept away with events. Holidays always seem to work against our nature.

I sit at a bench, Greek Salad in hand. A group of young, lithe bodies pass me. One stops. It is gray eyes, off duty and rearing to fling herself into the onrushing embrace of water. Will I be swimming today? Highly unlikely, though I *do* wear my

outdated navy suit under my dress for reasons best described as the same recklessness that took me on my date last night. We are joined by the rest of the gaggle, swaying in slips of material that surely have no legal right to be called *anything*, let alone clothes. Have they perfected sincere, puppy dog eyes, this generation? I am overwhelmed with beseeching sets of them. I fear I must swim or dream of hurt, reproachful looks for days.

The water is cool and nibbles in a friendly fashion at my toes. The gaggle of youth dances off until waist deep. It's a little disconcerting, this close inspection by seething masses of salty water.

Sunburn has turned me from fluorescent white to fluorescent red, and discomfort interrupts me. I have studied the patterns of water for *hours*. I face Amery and masses of screaming partygoers in relatively few hours. I leave gray eyes fluttering them at a hapless group of young lads. Ah, for the grace, and innocence, of the young. Though come to think of it, that glance was definitely not innocent.

I pass through the lobby. Could they suggest Aloe Vera for my skin? They could indeed. I retire to my room to shower and apply layers of oil. I observe my reflection. A faint resemblance to a sautéed underfed lobster.

I wake later to flames marching down my back and across my shoulders. Dressing for this concert proves challenging, but luckily, hours later the concert is over. Relief. I am on fire. Sleep beckons and I crave my solitude.

I spend Thursday bemoaning my lobster-like state. Gray eyes is on afternoon shift and brings me drinks whenever Amery is lax. I believe I am not good company by the looks that pass between the two. Amery insists on staying by my side, however. Incurable.

Sleep is an uneasy and fitful friend. Friday looms near and threateningly similar. I take painkillers. I may still look poached, but at least I can't feel it, so I take a walk with Amery. Amery takes hold of my hand like it is something precious. Am I completely unaware of his feelings? There is no response to a direct attack. This Amery has wiggled himself into my holiday and stolen my calm self-possession. The afternoon is spent in joyful discovery of a kindred spirit. I amaze myself.

It is Saturday. My week is almost over. A last day to sit and watch the ocean. A last day to indulge in endless chatter with my Amery. It is warm and my skin requires the shade. I am happy in his company. I am aware of the each of the hour. There are rare quiet moments today. It is as though we know every word matters. Amery's silence is gone. All the words he thought he had said and done with now tumble out in a fever. I am not silent either.

I shall always remember my Saturday. There is nothing said I wish to repeat. Our words are for us alone. I just know it has opened a world of possibility where once I saw inevitability.

Only six days? Who could credit it? Sometimes it takes the smallest amount of time to work the greatest changes imaginable. I look over at the bed in my little room and see his peaceful face sleeping there. Somewhat cynically, I smile at my contentment, such a new phenomenon. Life has given me another chance and I go forward to grasp it with both hands. Sometimes a miracle comes along.

The sea air stirs my curtains and I cannot help but breathe in and fill my lungs to bursting point. A warm voice laughingly tells me to leave off from my solitary contemplation and come to bed. I look again at the quarter moon and reach out to close the blinds. I hesitate. Crawling into bed, I glance over at the wide-open view and wink at the stars and the moon.