

Quantrelle

June 22 was the date she paused at in her calendar, this year's winter solstice and meeting her biological mother in a café at Sydney Harbour. These shortened days were like a cram school ticking towards a timetabled but mandatory test she was uncomfortable about. On the shortest day, she'd see the woman who had picked her unusual name because she had claimed that she would stand out from the crowd. She preferred Elle to Quantrelle. She had talked at length with her husband about re-establishing contact with her and about whether at thirty it was a good age to consider adding a child into their life. Today, her calendar reminded her of a catch-up with friends.

"Sorry, haven't seen you for a while. This little one gave me a cold." Sonia wiped his snotty nose and rocked the stroller. Baby scrunched up his face as if about to cry. He cried. She examined her friend's face, dark-shadowed eyes covered with an uneven smudge of under-eye concealer and un-brushed hair in a ponytail.

"Poor darling. You know you can call me if you need anything when I'm not working at the childcare centre." Elle leaned over and took him on her lap, planted a kiss on his chubby cheek and babbled a few words. His face and eyes lit up. Delighted gurgles replaced the bawls.

"Thanks love. Look at the way he's making eyes at you. Actually, next Saturday I've got an appointment for an hour. Could I drop him off at yours?"

She vaguely remembered a routine dentist appointment in her calendar.

"Yes sure."

Fey laughed. "Just one hour or four hours like last time?"

"Oh, I don't mind. He's adorable." Elle reacted in her usual accommodating manner.

“Aww look she’s clucky, Fey. You’re so good with kids, Elle.” Sonia smiled ear to ear at her.

“Well, of course, I know how to look after kids. It’s my job.”

“You’re a natural, regardless.” Fey complimented.

“So are you and hubby having kids soon?” Sonia asked. Fey rolled her eyes at Elle.

“Umm, indecisive actually.”

“You must have talked about it before you married!”

“Yes, of course, but it’s an ongoing conversation.”

“Don’t take too long to think about it. Look at me, a few years older than you, and I had to go with IVF. Plus a baby adds another level of fulfillment, believe me. Don’t know what I’d do without a child to keep me busy now.”

“Oh come on Sonia, don’t pressure her. It’s not all that it’s cracked up to be Elle. My little girl is wonderful but not easy to start with. It’s not for everyone.” She watched the sweet pre-schooler drawing quietly and kissed her on the head. “You have to be sure that you want to be in it for the long haul and the right reasons. Not to keep yourself busy.”

“Whatever reason do you need if you are capable of having a baby? What if he wants children? You know it’ll be harder to find a man who doesn’t want their wife to be a mother as you get older.” Sonia insisted.

Fey shook her head and turned to Elle. “Well, I recall that with your first boyfriend you didn’t want children, right Elle. Have you changed your mind?”

Sonia didn’t give Elle a chance to reply. “He was a bit older and look what happened to him. Married with kids.”

Whether it was because she didn't want a child with that man or she didn't want a child herself seemed like an open question for her friends to debate about as if she wasn't there. True that she had no inkling of wanting a child then but her feelings had not changed that much. She searched for that surging biological instinct whenever she was at work, whenever she had her periods, whenever she was with her friends or husband but nothing. It was equally true that she did have a caring nature, a quality that helped her with a job she loved. She strived for the best care for all the children at the childcare centre she managed. Is maternal instinct synonymous with caring?

Sighing, she passed baby back to his mother. "Well, my man is fine either way. I've got to go. See you at the opening night, it's in your calendar, right."

"Yes, wouldn't miss your group exhibition." Fey said as they kissed each other on the cheek.

Having no pressure from her husband was one of many things she loved about him. When she relayed the conversation, Steve snorted.

"Sonia has ulterior motives for wanting you to be a mother as well. When has she ever called you without wanting something else? A baby isn't a pet or accessory she can pass on to you whenever she wants to play."

"I don't think she's that bad."

"Don't let her walk all over you is what I'm saying. You shouldn't have changed your dentist appointment. You could do it as a favour next time."

"I know you're a stickler for things but I don't want to be mean. She needs a break."

Changing the topic, he asked, "Are you still going ahead with it, you know, meeting your biological mum after all these years?"

“Yep,” she mumbled. The uncertainty in her voice gave him the fuel to try to dissuade her again.

“Let me gently remind you why you were put into that lovely foster family...”

“I know. I know.” she interrupted. In her case, genes didn’t count in establishing a strong affection for her foster parents and siblings.

“Why now? After all this time? What if the meeting doesn’t go as planned?”

She didn’t reply. No illuminating reason why now after all this time. Perhaps it was a genetic tug. She wasn’t sure she had a plan.

“Call me and I’ll be there quick smart if you need me.”

“Yeah, I know thanks.”

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June 21 was a foggy morning. She stumbled to switch on the light. The meeting was arranged for ten o’clock but she wished it was later. It was taking her a long time to wake up. At the cafe, her mother was looking out the window. She was much the same as she remembered, with a short mop of unruly hair and ruddy skin. On closer inspection, her skin was drier with wrinkles and her hair greyer. Her shirt and long pants were an updated version of what she always wore. Not too many surprises.

She opened her mother’s gift, a nail kit set with nail polish, more suitable for a teenage girl than a working woman. Her nails were kept short with a clear gloss.

“Thank you, it’s lovely.” she said in a polite tone.

Her mother took the lemon out of the water, sipped it and said “What’s wrong with plain water? That’s all you used to drink, Quantrelle.” The way her mother said her name made her flinch. “Never gave you anything sweet or artificial.”

What about the soft drinks and burger meals she used to get for dinner? She let it go, batted a silent ball towards her and looked down at the menu. The waitress came and went with their order. The ball was in her mother's court. She took it up.

Her talkative mother mentioned her previous step-father, her new boyfriend, and other people she didn't know in a long verbal stream as if she was on a stage with an audience. Thankfully, the food and hot drinks arrived. Her mother stopped talking and she stopped pretending to listen.

After a few noisy gulps, her mother pointed at her ring finger "Are you married?" and kept on munching.

"Yes, to a wonderful man."

"Children."

"No."

"Planning any, Quantrelle." This time her mother lifted her head to look at her with a familiar, disapproving look.

She shrugged. When she was a toddler, her mother had thrown some object at her face, then blamed her for the bloody nose rather than take her to the doctor. She scratched her crooked nose. She would never let this mother handle any child of hers if she decided to have any.

"Don't leave it too late. He must wonder why he's never met me."

Not wanting to divulge too much personal information about her husband and her life until she sussed her out, she didn't say anything. She shrugged and drank her coffee, hugging the toasty cup with both of her hands.

"What have you told him? He must know how they took you away without my permission."

The sun's soft buttered rays sought her through the window so she shifted her seat to get in front of it before replying.

"He knows everything." The truth about everything that happened.

Changing the subject so that she wouldn't be led into a topic without being in control of it, she asked. "Where are you living now? Are you working?"

"Everything? How you were ill?" Her mother didn't budge.

"Yes and the reason why I had panic attacks." She replied in a calm, even-toned voice, surprising even herself with the manner in how she delivered it.

Her mother responded with a wide smile and paused. When she finally spoke, a strange glint in her eyes sparkled. Was she enjoying this conversation?

"Because you were ill, so you were taken to a special home to get you fixed. I was appalled by your illness. What you put me through that time was awful! I got to live normally again after that."

By the time she was twelve, her mother and step-father's beatings had taken a visible toll on her health. What was wrong with her mother denying this? It dawned on her that what she had submerged and unvoiced wasn't what she wanted after all. She didn't need an apology or acknowledgment to live her best life. No, she didn't need it at all from this stranger. She stood up and threw some cash on the table. Her mother grabbed the cash. She didn't look back.

On her way home, she thought about her supportive partner. They were in sync about being childfree. She didn't need to prove anything to him or anyone else or herself. Being fulfilled with her work, with her art and with her relationships was enough. She had a hearty schedule ahead. Tomorrow was her studio day, Sunday was lunch with her foster family, work next week and the following weekend a short

get-away up the north coast. The sun was shining more light into her day so she was looking forward to the days becoming longer and warmer.