

Cleo and Clarke on Sunday by Elizabeth Cronin

Clarke and I stood in the queue at McDonalds, just past 10am on a Sunday, bleary-eyed. It was rare for us to be up at such an obscene hour.

“Bloody hell,” said Clarke, “can’t this thing move any damn faster?” She glared at the people in front.

“Have another freaking kid why don’t you?” she hissed, as the young family dithered between ordering fruit or hashbrowns. I patted her arm in solidarity.

“I’m just so hungry,” she moaned. “I need something gross and greasy. Soak up all the booze.” Clarke always got cranky when she was hungry and crankier still when she was hungover, so this had the potential to be the perfect storm. I didn’t want her making a scene; we once got banned from Burger King that way. Although I could understand her point- the line was moving at a glacial pace.

“Are they slaughtering the frigging cows themselves back there? Winnowing the wheat? Do you think we’ll get served before menopause kicks in?” Her voice rose in frustration, and parents threw us filthy looks, dragging their children as far away from us as possible. Finally, we reached the cashier.

“I’ll have a bacon and egg McMuffin combo, with a hot chocolate” I said, pulling out my wallet.

“Apologies, Ma’am, its past 10.30, breakfast is finished,” said the spotty male cashier, pointing at the clock, looking far from sorry. I looked in disbelief, and turned to Clarke, fearing her reaction. She was apoplectic with rage. I seized her by the arm and dragged her out to the street, knowing a full meltdown was only seconds away.

“TYPICAL!” she bellowed, “BLOODY MULTINATIONALS THINK THEY OWN THE WORLD!”, and abruptly marched toward Cathedral Square. I caught up with her, as she entered Starbucks (the hypocrisy of which, after her multinationals comment, I was not about to point out.) Starbucks thankfully had a lull in the mid-morning rush. We each ordered a Venti coffee (caramel macchiato for me, white chocolate mocha for her) and maple-walnut scone, and sat in the weak winter sunshine, without moving or speaking until they had disappeared.

“So, what’s on the agenda for today then?” I asked. “Something exciting I hope. We’ve got pretty much a whole day in front of us. How often does that happen?”

“I’m pretty broke at the moment, Cle” she said.

“Well, there must be something fun to do for free in this city. Touristy stuff, or things that are supposed to entertain you while they educate you, or whatever.” I looked around me. To my left was a busker, about 10-years-old, wearing a suit and playing the violin. I wondered where his family was, and why he wasn’t playing Xbox instead, like a normal child. The screeching filled my head. I could see no rhyme or reason for his dismal performance, which, judging by the lack of audience, certainly wasn’t winning him any friends. I myself had taken wildly against him.

“EARTH TO CLEO,” bellowed Clarke in my ear. Startled, I turned to her. She looked at me pointedly.

“You weren’t listening to me at all, were you?” she asked. “WELL, as I was SAYING, there’s a visitors centre right there, we should check out cheap stuff to do.” She gestured to the right. I could honestly say I had never been in there. But what did I have to lose? I nodded my agreement, and we got up and walked to the huge double doors on the side. I pushed at them, but they wouldn’t open. I tried again, putting my back into it. In frustration, I pulled at them, but success evaded me. I turned to Clarke for assistance, and found her almost wetting herself with laughter.

“Those are decorative, or something,” she said, gasping once again with mirth, “they don’t open.” A couple of Japanese tourists were pointing at me, and snapping pictures. Even more pathetically, the real entrance was scarcely a metre from where I stood. I felt my face flush. *What did I have to lose*, I chastised myself, *oh, only my dignity*. I grabbed Clarke and bolted away from the Visitor Centre (and my shame), across the Square.

After a few minutes’, I slowed down, as Clarke was wheezing in a particularly unattractive manner (like the heater in our flat on a cold morning). I knew the art gallery was down the road, and was advertising a free exhibition of surrealist New Zealand art.

“Sounds trippy,” panted Clarke, “sounds cool”. We walked in, tailing a group of tourists, whose choice of identical unnaturally tight pants and t-shirts gave them away immediately as Americans. “It is like, SO FUNNY that Noo Zeelanderrs have their own little art scene,” hollered one of them, his ‘McCain/Palin 08’ t-shirt straining across a magnificent pair of man-breasts. The others guffawed in concurrence, hitching their tiny leather fanny packs up around their well upholstered bottoms. They kept up their commentary at every piece of art. “Are there even ENOUGH OF THEM to have done THIS MANY PAINTINGS?” they would yell, prompting the rest of the pack to become overwhelmed with their collective wit.

“That was barely even a joke,” I whispered to Clarke, just as she said “can we leave?”, and we made for the door as fast as we could, sighing in relief at the relative silence the outdoors held.

We plonked down on the concrete steps, now slightly warmed by the sun, and stared at the people in the cafe through the glass walls. A few looked back at us, annoyed.

“Check out the sculpture,” said Clarke, pointing upwards. “It’s intense.”

“‘Reasons for Voyaging’,” I read off the plaque beside us. “Stainless steel and totara”. Clarke looked confused.

“Is there one prescribed Reason for Voyaging by the artist, or are we supposed to have our own?” she said, and appeared to be giving it serious thought. Then she turned to me- “Reason for Voyaging: I want to look at some cool art, but I can’t because I’m afraid of what I might do the Americans, causing the NZ-USA relations to regress to the no-nukes years.”

“Well then, let us voyage elsewhere.” I linked my arm through hers and hoisted her up, and we walked down the street pretending to paddle a boat.

We browsed a few stalls at the weekend arts market, and then continued down the street to the museum.

“Have you ever been here?” asked Clarke, and I shook my head. She pulled me inside and we grinned when we saw the displays. They were pretty cool, actually- we both crawled through the tunnel of the ‘Moa Sink Hole’, giggling as we squeezed out the end. The next room was ‘Body in Action’ and we spent some time sliding down the tongue and crawling through the intestine. A family, possibly the same one Clarke had cursed in McDonalds, looked on with disapproval, as a row of children waited silently for us to finish. To be fair, I don’t think we were the intended demographic for the display. Sufficiently shamed, we slunk upstairs to the Antarctic Room.

“Check out this dude!” I said, motioning to the bust of an intrepid Antarctic explorer. “He looks exactly like an older version of that guy, you know, Kevin, that you went out with last year!”

“Uncanny,” she agreed, and we stood in awed silence. The fellow in question was apparently Roald Amundsen, who was blessed with a large hooked nose.

“I want to bear his children,” she said, and we fell about laughing. His head and hood were bronze but his nose had been burnished gold by repeated rubbings. Clarke and I did our part, taking pictures of ourselves in various poses with Roald. A museum employee, cleaning the glass displays, snickered at us.

“Enjoying yourselves?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I think we may have worn out our welcome here,” observed Clarke, and we made for the stairs.

The sun was beating down on us outside- a perfect winter’s day.

“Botanic gardens?” suggested Clarke, and we walked through the gate. Couples were milling round on the grass, holding hands and listening to music.

“Watch it!” I said, yanking at Clarke, who had narrowly avoided standing in a pile of poo of indeterminate origin.

“Look in the weird fountain design!” she said, which was adorned with peacocks and some crazy looking fish. As we watched, a small boy emerged dripping from the depths, spluttering with surprise. His father grabbed him by the arm and hustled him away.

“That is totally something you’d do, Cleo,” she said, ruffling my hair.

“Oh really?” I said, in mock outrage, “I seem to remember someone falling into a puddle just last night!” Clarke socked me affectionately in the arm.

“You know, I think my hangover is completely gone,” said Clarke.

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