

Author's Note

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Black And Bitter, Thanks

Two coffee mugs sit on the scratched, laminated table that is the centrepiece of my kitchen. One is blue and chipped in half a dozen places. You might say it has character. The other is green and unremarkable.

I pour filtered coffee into each mug. My hands are steady, but the joints in my fingers ache as they often do these days. Milk goes into the green cup, followed by sugar. More than is good for me. I don't add anything to the blue one. Steam curls above its rim like an accusing finger. Memory is hard and unforgiving, like a metaphysical spoon stirring the bitterness in.

It's raining outside. The sky is grey and oppressive, matching my mood.

The letter from the Department of Welfare Services is still propped against the windowsill. I should take it down. Or burn it.

I sit this way for a long time. Watching the long black cool. Sipping my own diluted brew. Wishing I had the courage for something stronger. Remembering someone who did.

We met in a bar. One of those forgotten pubs that felt like an RSL except it wasn't. Dozens of unemployed, many of them not much older than me, congregated within its walls. They'd stare at you, as if you'd interrupted a family gathering, clutching their form guides and their fourth beer of the morning.

It was a Thursday. The monotony of my administration role had driven me out of the office. I wasn't quite so old then, although if you looked closely in the reflection of my life, you could see time was about to tap me on the shoulder.

Beer in hand, I wandered through the intermittent gloom and tired furniture, restless without knowing why. Sunlight angled through grubby windows, strips of light slatting across the floor. The carpet was sticky, the smell of dead cigarettes overpowering. Hopelessness filled the air, thick as incense. You breathed it in and it knew you, knew that you were divorced and had no family that gave a shit about you, knew that you belonged here. *Welcome brother*, it seemed to say. *Welcome to the rest of your days*.

The clack of billiard balls drew me deeper into the pub.

I've always loved pool. It's a skilful game when played on a full-sized table. Clarence was holding court, giving two other guys a lesson and earning some beer money along the way. My first impression of him was a lasting one—he leaned over the table, broad face intent as he focused on a long pot, pale blue eyes narrowed beneath thick white eyebrows.

"Bad luck, mate. Do you wanna play for double or nothin'?"

They say a face can tell you the story of someone's life, but I reckon only the honest ones do. Clarrie's was like that—uncompromising in its honesty, almost naked in its refusal to hide what life had written there. You could see it in the crow's feet when he smiled and even more so when he frowned. The jutting chin was argumentative by nature, but tempered by his ready grin and open demeanour.

Clarrie was a man who had opinions. That was a given. And he wasn't prepared to change them for anyone. Perhaps that was why I was drawn to him.

Other challengers had left a row of coins on the edge of the table. I dropped two bucks at the end of the queue and waited, content to remain in the shadows while I watched. Clarrie's old flannelette shirt and faded jeans suggested a construction background, but he carried himself with unexpected grace. He toyed with each opponent in turn, never letting anyone get on the black before he potted it.

He always did like to win.

When my turn came, I was lucky enough to sink one off the break. I potted another three in quick succession and snookered him when I couldn't get a clear shot at any of my remaining balls.

"What did you say your name was?" Clarrie asked, peering at me beneath the green lamp suspended over the table.

"Keith," I replied. He concentrated after this exchange, narrowly losing a black-ball game. After I won, he insisted we play again and the other players drifted away beneath his impassive stare.

Clarrie won the next five games in a row and I accepted this with unusually good humour. He bought me a beer afterwards and we spent the rest of the day talking about the way our lives were meant to be, the reasons for our failed marriages, the state of the economy, anything except how we actually felt about these things.

We bumped into each other again at the pub a week later. Clarrie was dressed in the same clothes he'd worn the first time we met, but his eyes were bloodshot and his speech slurred. I offered to buy him a coffee and he accepted, so we went to a cheap cafe near my flat. He was in no condition to walk home and couldn't afford a cab, so I suggested he bunk down at my place.

We talked in that aimless fashion when only one person is drunk, the conversation turning in circles as Clarrie struggled for coherency and I struggled to keep up with his thoughts. Eventually he fell asleep, head slumped on the laminated table in my kitchen. I left him to it, too self-conscious to move him.

The next morning I woke to the sound of the kettle boiling and cupboards banging. I found Clarrie shuffling around my kitchen, white hair sticking up like a pissed off cockatoo's crest. He clutched a chipped blue mug in one hand and gave me a wild, accusatory look.

"You got any decent coffee in this place? Because I could bloody well do with some."

"Of course." I took the ground coffee from the fridge and set about exorcising his hangover. Clarrie watched me, running a knotted hand over the stubble on his chin.

"How do you take it?"

"Black and bitter, like me soul," he replied with no hint of self-deprecation. I smiled and we sat down across the table.

"You don't have anywhere to go, do you?"

Clarrie took a sip from his mug and nodded, whether in approval at the coffee or in agreement, I couldn't tell.

"Do you?" I'm not one to push, but in my experience pride stiffens with age.

"Made me choices," Clarrie said, cradling the cup in his hands. "Have to stick by 'em."

A lesser man would've tried to explain, but not Clarrie. That's when I realised that I needed him to stay, not the other way around. I needed his casual decisiveness, his uncompromising certainty, in my life. Besides, if I was honest, I was lonely as hell.

"You could stay with me for a bit," I offered. "If you want."

"Reckon that'd be all right," he said. And that's how it began.

The letter didn't arrive until much later.

“You seen this?” Clarrie thumped the newspaper on the table, almost knocking over my coffee. His colour was high, cheeks puffed out and white stubble bristling.

“Good morning. I slept well, thank you.”

“Look.” He shoved the paper at me. The front page contained an article on the Pension and Social Service Assessment Act, or PiSSA, as Clarrie dubbed it. He’d highlighted sections of it with a yellow marker.

...dropping ratio of workers to retirees... over-reliance on government pensions... falling superannuation investment returns... continued immigration to bolster the economy unsustainable... withdrawal of welfare inevitable... humane solutions required...

“Well?” he demanded.

“Well what?” I sipped my coffee, not knowing what he expected of me.

“You’re in the government. You should do somethin’ about this!”

“Clarrie, I work for the local council, not the federal government. They’re hardly going to listen to someone so far down the food chain.”

“But they’re talkin’ about old folks like they’re some sort of burden on society. What about the buildin’ sites I worked on? The taxes I paid? OK, so I didn’t fight in the war, but I done me share.” He banged the table with a clenched fist.

“Clarrie,” I began, surprised by the violence.

“I never asked for nothin’, you hear. They kicked me out of me apartment because I couldn’t pay the rent and I copped that. But it’s not right, this ballot system. It’s not bloody humane at all. And you shouldn’t be sittin’ on the fence.” A flush crept down from the white roots of his hairline.

“What ballot system?”

“I’m not a drain on resources,” he said and stormed from the room.

Not knowing what else to do, I finished reading the article. The government’s proposal was leaked by an anonymous official from the Department of Welfare Services. Despite the apparent veracity, I reread the article and still couldn’t believe it.

I went looking for Clarrie to tell him the Bill would never get past the Senate, but he’d left, no doubt in search of a more sympathetic audience. The apartment felt empty with him gone. In the silence, I wondered where my outrage was. Why wasn’t I as passionate about this as Clarrie? Another ten years or so and I’d be part of the target demographic. And the answer, when it came to me, was more shameful still—a man should know his limitations, what he can and can’t achieve, especially at my age.

And it had been a long time since I’d felt young.

Clarrie dragged me along to the demonstrations. It was the first time I’d left the ranks of the silent majority, and while I felt uncomfortable, I was exhilarated as well. People from all walks of life turned out. The media interviewed bawling grandchildren seated on the shoulders of their grandparents. A cavalcade of senior citizens swarmed down Commonwealth Avenue in Canberra, their motorised wheelchairs clogging traffic. It would’ve been hilarious if it wasn’t so tragic.

A small contingent of the protestors argued the economic value of the aged. They pointed out caring for grandchildren allowed parents to work. They talked about the aged care industry and the number of people it employed.

It was enough to force a referendum.

Accountants and economists appeared in commercial breaks, explaining their pension forecasts and warning of economic disasters to come. Senior citizens and their supporters responded, invoking the ANZAC spirit and the sacrifices of earlier generations to keep our

country free. The campaign was bloody and ruthless. It ravaged the face of the nation and divided people like nothing had ever before.

In the end though, a majority of Australians, and four of seven states, voted in favour of PiSSA. The Act was passed six months later to massive public outcry. It was challenged in the High Court, which deemed it constitutional four to three. An appeal was lodged with the International Court of Human Rights, but to no avail.

The first annual pension ballot was held four months later.

I made Clarrie wear a suit. He hated the stiff formality of it, but it made him look presentable. As an employee of the Council, I was required to assist with the local broadcast. I'll never forget that first group of candidates—retirees without independent income, scared and bewildered by how society had turned its back on them. I spent the day on the verge of tears, giving directions, handing out cups of tea, hating myself for being part of this, but wanting to provide comfort where I could.

The speeches were the worst.

A quivering, emaciated lady who could barely stand unassisted: "My name is Celia Leyton and I'm ninety-three. Please don't vote for me to lose my pension because I have seven grandchildren and eleven great-grandchildren."

An Asian gentleman with a thick accent: "I am Henry Ling. I am seventy-nine year of age. You not vote for me because I am still active member of community."

A florid-faced, portly fellow: "I'm Thomas Linton and I've lived in this electorate for the last sixty years. Paying me a pension is just returning some of the taxes I've paid over that time. What's that? Speak up, will you. Oh, I'm eighty-four."

And so it went, a parade of outraged, tearful or terrified senior citizens having to justify themselves to a faceless telecast.

Until it was Clarrie's turn.

He stomped into the broadcasting zone and glared at the camera.

"I'm Clarence Lyndall. I'm seventy-nine years of age and you're all bastards for lettin' this happen." That was it. He had another forty-five seconds to plead his case, but refused to dignify the whole process with another word.

I wanted to scream and cheer at the same time.

The next pensioner took his place, fumbling with the microphone and stuttering. I took Clarrie by the elbow and dragged him to one side.

"What was that?" I asked in a low voice.

"The voice of conscience," Clarrie replied, tilting his chin.

"Jesus, Clarrie, do you know what's at stake?"

"Course I bloody do. A simple thing called human dignity. Reckon you should think about that." He glanced around the makeshift studio with a scornful expression. I let his arm go.

"I'll see you back at the flat when you're done here." Clarrie walked off and all my arguments collapsed into self-loathing. Or perhaps that was just easier than doing something about the choices I hadn't made.

Ballot results were returned a week later. The letter from the Department of Welfare Services arrived three days after that.

"They're coming today, aren't they?"

Clarrie glanced up over the rim of his blue cup. “Yes.” His voice was subdued, his eyes too bright.

“Why couldn’t you just—”

He held his hand up, rebutting anything I might say. “Please. I never asked nothin’ of you until now. Let’s not fight about this.”

I couldn’t let it go. “If you’re trying to make a statement, do you really think the world is listening?” My voice was rising, but I couldn’t help it.

“Yes.” His voice became softer as mine grew louder, refusing to escalate the conflict.

“You’re not that naïve.”

“Reckon someone has to be.”

“Clarrie, there aren’t going to be any cameras. It won’t be glorious, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Then you gotta tell me story. Who else is gonna do it?” He drained his cup and left the room.

I picked up the mug and swirled the dregs, trying to find a way to dissuade him.

They rang the doorbell at precisely 8:00 PM, just as the letter had promised. Under the cover of darkness, as Clarrie put it.

“Do you wanna get that?” Clarrie called in a breezy voice. I opened the door, my heart pounding. A young, clean-shaven man in a striped suit but no tie stood in the hall with two armed security guards.

“Good evening. My name is Steven and I’m a private contractor working for the Department of Welfare Services.” He checked his clipboard. “Is Mr Clarence Lyndall here?”

“No,” I said, attempting to close the door. One of the guards caught the doorframe and gave me a warning look.

“Present,” Clarrie called from the sofa in the lounge room.

“Show me your ID,” I said, clutching at a breach in protocol.

Steven produced the required documentation, but still I hesitated.

“Sir, it’s a federal offence to obstruct our work,” Steven said. “We can force our way into your home if you prevent access to Mr Lyndall.”

“Nothing would give you more pleasure, would it?”

“I’m just here to do a job,” Steven the contractor replied. “It’s up to you how unpleasant this has to be.” The two guards shouldered past me and Steven followed them down the hallway into the living room.

Steven unplugged the TV at the socket and sat in a chair opposite Clarrie. “Mr Lyndall, do you understand why I’m here?” One of the guards took up position behind Clarrie. The other stood just behind my left elbow.

“Yeah, I know why you’re here. Do you?” Clarrie gave him a wide smile and I could only admire his courage.

“Then you know that I am duly authorised by the government, under the Pension and Social Service Assessment Act, to enforce the pension ballot results,” Steven said. “Do you understand these results?”

“Do you like your job, Steven?” Clarrie’s expression didn’t change, but I heard the subtle shift in his voice.

“That’s not relevant, sir. Do you understand the results?”

“I’ll answer your question if you answer mine first.” The guard standing behind Clarrie shifted on his feet, but Steven shook his head.

“No sir, I don’t particularly like my job. But the economics of our situation are irrefutable. I believe we have no choice but to allocate our resources to the future, not the past.”

“Ah, the children.” Clarrie smiled. “Really shoulda stuck with mine, in hindsight. I coulda watched them grow up to be like you.”

Steven stiffened.

“Yeah, I understand the results,” Clarrie said in a flat voice. “Let’s get on with it.”

“Very well.” Steven opened a case and withdrew a sheet of paper with a table of statistics. “These are the official results from the pension ballot, in descending order of votes. Is that your full name and date of birth?” Steven pointed at a row near the bottom of the page.

“It is.” Clarrie’s mouth had become a thin line and he began to tremble, finally. I bit my lip.

“And you understand the electorate has voted to discontinue your pension benefits effective immediately.”

“Yep.”

“Do you have any material assets to support yourself? Any foreign accounts or unrealised superannuation entitlements? An inheritance, perhaps?” Steven seemed to be reading an invisible script, distancing himself through professionalism.

“Nope.”

I moved forward instinctively, but the guard’s hand closed around my elbow. “Keep out of it,” he said in a low voice.

“Do you have anyone who can meet your financial obligations?” Steven asked.

“Yes,” I said, straining against the guard’s grip.

“No,” Clarrie said at the same time. Steven hesitated, glancing between us.

“You can’t afford it,” Clarrie said in a gruff voice. “Not both of us. And I’ll be buggered if I let you end up in me shoes.”

“We can—”

“No.” He turned back to Steven. “Keep going.”

Steven had the decency to look uncomfortable before continuing.

“Given the strain on the public welfare system and your lack of financial independence, it is government policy to relocate elderly citizens who lose the ballot to specialised care facilities. The nearest one is,” Steven made a show of consulting another sheet of paper, “just outside of Lithgow.”

“You can’t put him in a place like that,” I protested. Being in local government, I knew the facility used to be the Lithgow Correctional Centre, complete with unscaleable walls and spotlights. During winter, it was one of the coldest and wettest places in the state. Hardly an ideal location for the aged and infirm. Other centres had been established around the country, the names synonymous with detention: Woomera, Villawood, Port Hedland.

“This is not America,” Steven replied. “We don’t abandon our people to the streets. Relocating senior citizens to a central facility is the only way the government can continue to support them.”

“And heaven forbid the lucky country should be reminded what happens when you outlive your usefulness,” I snapped.

“The referendum showed the majority of people don’t agree,” Steven said in a quiet voice. “We’ll need your Medicare and Social Security cards,” he said to Clarrie.

“Got ‘em right here.” Clarrie tossed the cards on the coffee table with a dismissive flick of the wrist. Unperturbed, Steven opened his briefcase and withdrew a compact card reader. He fed each card into the machine. It beeped once before spitting them out. The magnetic strips were no doubt erased, just like Clarrie’s future.

Steven put the reader back in his case and snapped the locks. “Mr Lyndall, we’re ready to transport you to the facility now. Do you have any belongings you can carry with you?” Clarrie gave him a level stare.

“Mr Lyndall?”

“Got one bag in me room,” Clarrie said with a nod in the direction of the second bedroom.

“Franks, get the bag,” Steven said to the guard standing behind Clarrie.

“Christ, I can carry me own bloody bag.” Clarrie stood and waved the guard off. “It’s not like I got much as you pointed out.” Steven nodded at Franks, who followed Clarrie towards the bedroom.

Clarrie stopped in the doorway. “We can’t help getting old, you know.” Strangely, his gaze was fixed on me, not Steven.

I turned to Steven, assessing options for a last minute reprieve—bribes, threats, an appeal to compassion—but he avoided my gaze. Clearly it had all been tried before.

Suddenly the lights flickered and went out. Someone cried out in the darkness, followed by a heavy thud. Steven and the guards shouted at each other. I rushed towards Clarrie’s room, avoiding the furniture and flailing men. The smell of burning plastic filled my small apartment. Sparks arced into the darkness from the far wall of the bedroom.

A beam of light swept across the floor. Steven was at my shoulder, pushing me aside. His torch probed the bedroom. I saw the knife first. One of my good butter knives, silver-plated, jutting from the power socket in the wall. Clarrie lay face-down on the floor, one hand twitching beneath the knife. Franks was swearing in a monotone voice that could’ve been mistaken for prayer, but made no move to help.

Steven knelt next to Clarrie and checked his pulse. A minute later he stood, made a short call on his mobile and then ordered the guards out. “I’m sorry,” was the most he could muster before he left.

Much later, after the ghastly circus of paramedics, counsellors and legal representatives had left with Clarrie’s body, I collapsed on the couch.

I felt exhausted and abandoned, and then ashamed at being so selfish.

Time to go to work. Some stubborn, repetitive part of me knows this.

The funeral was held yesterday. Nobody came except me, the Reverend, and a government official, although he didn’t stay very long. During the ceremony, I imagined composing a dozen different letters to the newspapers. I orchestrated a guerrilla campaign via the Internet. A letter drop in my electorate, vilifying them for killing the most honest man I’ve ever known.

None of these plans will be realised, of course. With Clarrie gone, it was past time for me to return to my place in the queue, to return to the silent, accepting masses. He’d made his protest and was met with a wall of indifference. Nothing had changed.

Clarrie’s cup of cold coffee is still sitting on my kitchen table. I focus on it, channelling all the emotion I’m feeling, all the memories I hold.

C’mon, Clarrie. Give me a sign. Anything.

I don’t know how long I sit that way, waiting for something to happen. My head is aching and I feel hollow.

Next week is my 57th birthday. The council’s mandatory retirement age is sixty, but that policy might change once the older civil servants realised what “specialised care facilities” really means. I imagine my contemporaries planning their ballot speeches, wheedling their way into charities and philanthropic causes, justifying their existence.

The images make me nauseous.

The letter is waiting for me on the windowsill. Time to take it down, to let go of what's happened before it hurts too much. Too many of my protective fictions have already been stripped away.

I lurch to my feet and clutch the envelope. On the back of the letter is unfamiliar handwriting — large, rough letters that say *Look inside*. I've never seen Clarrie's handwriting, but it must be his.

The letter from the government advising that Clarrie's pension had been terminated is gone. In its place is a handwritten letter and Clarrie's Will.

Keith,

I wanna say thanks for taking me in. You didn't ask for nothing in return, and that's been a rare thing in me life, so I'm grateful.

I'm sorry to have put you through this. But I did tell you early on I stick by me choices. Thanks for respecting that.

I have some land owing and no one but you to give it to. All the details are in me Will. I want you to sell it and set yourself up. Stop working for those bastards. And if there's any money left over, I want you to fight for other people like me. Do you reckon you can do that?

You're probably wondering why I didn't do that meself. It's hard to explain. You never had kids, but I did. I can't tell you how bad it feels, seeing what they become and knowing you're responsible. And you can't take it back, can you? You can't change nothing. That's a hard thing, Keith.

Maybe that's what you should tell 'em. What it's like when you look back and it's too late to fix your mistakes.

Clarence.

I'm shaking as I read this. It's like he's standing next to me, hand on my shoulder, telling me to do the right thing. Asking me to find courage where he couldn't. Clarrie has brought me to the edge of my tolerance. And suddenly I'm so angry there's no room for doubt or fear, only a consuming need to extract some meaning from his death. In that moment, I finally understand who his protests were really for—not the son he'd failed, or the politicians who'd fed a culture of indifference with their diet of economic rationalism, but people who knew better and did nothing.

People like me.

I make another coffee, this one black and bitter, and start planning my campaign.