

Coffee Fix

No one was selling coffee.

Correction - the whole world was selling coffee but not country towns linked by a back road to the coast on a New Year's Eve Friday morning. Our usual stop, almost ritualistically so, at the blue bakery in Esk was thwarted by an ominously dark interior, a distinct absence of parked cars out front and a solitary sign on the glass door with even smaller black print confirming it was closed. Beside it, The Red Deer was still burnt down and long-since removed, no indication of rebuilding - so that coffee option would take a while. Further along, the Nash Gallery Cafe was inundated with all the travellers displaced by the closed bakery and extinct Deer. Too busy. No spare parking spaces. We drove on, resolving not to wait till Kilcoy but to duck into Toogoolawah proper instead of sticking to the road which offered only a perfunctory service station with greasy fried food and no hint of a decent coffee.

We turned into the township, seeking out a cafe. None to be had. Both closed. We decided to try a hotel. The first had tables and chairs out on the street but was a no-go, the barmaid apologetic hers had little more than a machine dispensing hot water and instant coffee. She was keen to point us towards a place that might be open, a sad looking adjunct to a grain-and-produce store built from corrugated iron, not the in-vogue architectural corrugation but the authentic boil-you-in-summer and freeze-you-in-winter original. Another pub, also from a by-gone era of rambling two-storey wooden establishments, advertised high teas. Sounded promising.

Up a couple of worn steps, we entered an overly spacious world of white tablecloths and varnished dining tables still adorned with Christmas tree centrepieces and larger-than-life sized paintings self-contained in their own heavily gilded frames. A portrait of a woman in a red dress with a red ribbon tidying her brown hair looked almost hang-dog down at us. On a far wall, a palette-knife still-life of white flowers in a vase appeared adequate rather than eye-catching. To our right was the bar, intimate in comparison. At one of the two bench-top tables a woman in her fifties sat intent on an iPad screen. A border collie sprawled near her feet manifesting an air of complete comfort, belonging and indifference to us newcomers. The woman wore her long sandy grey hair up in a clasp and a pair of beads fell on the bosom of a pastel floral print of a dress.

“Hello. Do you work here?” I asked almost redundantly.

“Yes, What would you like?”

“Do you serve coffee, good coffee? It says out the front you serve high teas daily. Is the coffee, like, barista quality?” I kept digging a pretty deep hole.

“It’s Vittoria,” the woman nodded with some assertiveness.

“Most cafes are closed,” I capped off the obvious.

“Yes, not really worth them opening with COVID and all the rules,” she finished the conversation.

“We only have plain milk,” she added as if to cut off at the head any faint hope of alternatives.

“No lite milk then?” I pursued the line in vain, simultaneously deciding not to even venture into almond milk territory.

“No, plain,” as if I had misheard her.

“A skin....a large mocha and a large ... sk...half-strength flat white then thanks. Do you have cakes I can look at? If you serve high teas daily, I guess you have cakes.”

“Yes we have cakes but you can’t look at them.” My look of “Why not?” hit its mark.

“They’re in the fridge. We have New York cheesecake with a layer of raspberries and white chocolate. Also, a caramel cheesecake and a Flake cheesecake. That’s it,” she finished with a flourish. 10.10am and my stomach recoiled in part horror, part rapture. The horror won out.

“Oh no thanks, too early in the morning for cheesecake.” I may as well have said, “too early in the morning for shameless sensuality” she looked at me so contemptuously. Trying my luck once more, I ventured, “Do you mind if we sit in your dining room?”

“Not at all. Here I’ll turn the lights on for you.” Her congenial response surprised me. We chose a table for two near a window looking on to the main street all but so deserted it was barely worthy of the status. A reindeer ornament stood on the sill as if guarding it, looming large and back lit.

As we sat down a young man appeared at the top of a staircase opening on to the dining room. Apart from a towel draped effortlessly around his waist, he was naked with wet hair and gleaming skin. He tiptoed lightly down the stairs. A Hemsworth type, only a little more 'country'. The woman's son, I presumed, as he vanished into a back room, to re-emerge still shirtless but wearing jeans with a wide leather belt and a white top in his hands. His chest muscles seemed accentuated and his manner understated, casual.

He belonged on a cosmopolitan catwalk, I mused, somewhere like Milan or Paris or gracing the cover of a glossy fashion magazine, not in the semidarkness of an old country pub mid-morning without appreciative patrons, except perhaps an admiring ageing audience of one. He smiled briefly with a killer grin as if acknowledging the presence of us strangers but his attention was diverted to a set of car keys beside the woman. The vision of this young Adonis vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

"How's the coffee?" The woman tossed us the question from over behind the bar, breaking my trance.

"Good, very good, thanks." I sounded suitably appreciative, fortuitously, while my mind lingered elsewhere. My appetite was whetted.

"Could I possibly have a piece of the New York cheesecake to take away?" The anticipation of sweet decadence suddenly seemed irresistible.