

“This isn’t a scam?” some surfer boy asks, eyeing the row of jars before him.

The fact that he’s asking means he’s already lost.

“It’s what it says on the tin,” I say, thumbing towards the sign next to the stall: *MICK’S MAGICAL MYSTERIES*. “Sign doesn’t lie. It’s magic.”

A sea breeze sweeps by and flings the sign to the pavement. My 14-year-old niece Madison runs over and stands it back up. Bless her.

“Is that cardboard?” the customer asks.

“Corrugated plastic. Much higher grade.”

He grabs a jar. Goosebumps crawl up his arm. His eyes light up. The wallet in his overly tight swim shorts calls out to me.

“Authentic winter air,” I say. “Collected from the small Russian town of Nikuda. Before sunrise, for potency.”

“Nikuda,” he echoes in amazement, and I thank the steady erosion of the Australian education system for ensuring he’d never suspect it’s Russian for ‘nowhere’. Don’t Google it, sonny.

“These are my favourite,” Madison says, gesturing towards our ‘local range’—or, notably, our cheaper range—of winter air. “From the beautiful shores of Tasmania.”

“I do like to support local,” he says, and while the wallet still calls, it sounds much lighter.

“My mum told me winter makes people remember things,” Madison continues. “It slows the world down—shorter days, less playing outside, cosy times inside. We think more in the quiet, and you never know what’ll come up to the surface. To me, that’s the real magic.”

I’m proud of her ability to sell a story, but to think someone I’m raising would ever downsell a customer. Where’d I go wrong?

Regardless, I gain \$20, and someone walks away with a refrigerated jar that I'd sprinkled with salt, dried seaweed, and Esky shavings this morning. Win's a win.

My stall's wedged between a chippy that imports their fish despite being directly on the coastline and a juice bar that charges \$12 for watery regret in a paper cup. The strip faces the ocean, all sun-bleached signage and plastic menus. It survives entirely on foot traffic and poor decisions. Both locals and tourists alike drift past with pockets full of coins they're determined to turn into memories—shoddy beach towels, snow globes with palm trees trapped inside them, tiny boomerangs made nowhere near here.

It's horrible, it's beautiful, and it's the place for me.

Winter in Queensland, such as it is, means mornings cold enough for people to make passing comments about it and afternoons hot enough to retroactively turn them into liars. An authentic winter—like the kind in films—doesn't exist here, and if something doesn't exist here, that means there's a market for it.

Half the time, I don't think people even believe me, yet even those ones still buy a jar off me. This is what offends me most about the world. You hand somebody nonsense with a cute story and a tidy label, they call it charming.

Still, game's the game. Whether people are paying me for the novelty or out of their own stupidity, money counts the same.

"We need to talk about your sales strategy," I say to Madison once nobody's around. "You just lost us \$5."

She rolls her eyes and starts drawing snowflakes on another label. Ever since school holidays started, my stall's like a secondary school art project. Hard as I've tried, Madison can't be distracted by an iPad. I blame her mum. You've gotta start them early.

Madison's been with me for a year, ever since my sister Tara dropped dead in a supermarket aisle between the discounted Easter eggs and incontinence pads. The state decided that the most suitable guardian was a man whose best business idea to date involved selling 'haunted' pie warmers during Halloween season on Facebook Marketplace—that is, before he was unjustly banned from the platform.

I'd taken Madison in because there wasn't anyone else. I kept waiting to feel more ready than that, but no such luck.

"I admire your style," I tell Madison. "Storytelling goes straight for the heart. But that could've been directed towards our premium range—"

"It's not all about the money," she says, and I must swallow a how-dare-you gasp. "He bought that because he connected with it."

"Mads, I've told you, they're refrigerated preserving jars from China."

"It can still mean something to someone. If there wasn't something special about them, people wouldn't buy them."

Kids say the darndest things. Hopefully I don't have to be the one to break the news about Santa to her. There's an idea—winter air from Santa's workshop. Come on, December!

I glance at my watch. The time for lessons is cut short. Got a shipment to grab.

"Be back in an hour. Man the till," I say, grabbing my keys. As I walk off, I call back with some parental wisdom for the unattended child. "Put your sunscreen on, and don't talk to strangers unless they have money!"

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Ten minutes inland, on a suburban street where every second house looks like it's about to be strangled by nature, the front yard I've pulled the ute into has just accepted its fate. The front's less lawn, more rainforest—ferns, vines, something with leaves the size of dinner plates. I can't tell if I'm smelling cat wee or an exotic plant that will eventually kill me.

I'd found the listing on Madison's Marketplace account: FREE JARS. Cheap as my usual Chinese stock is, it has a habit of getting stuck somewhere between *DISPATCHED* and *GOOD LUCK*. Plus, nothing in this godforsaken world beats free.

A woman stands by the side gate—barefoot, linen everything, round oversized glasses that look like they're from a novelty store, steaming cup of tea in her hand. Maybe that's the smell. I weep for her insides.

"You're here for the jars," she says in such a way that it sounds like she's communicating with the dead.

Against my better judgement, I follow her into a backyard with even more jungle, full of creature calls and, statistically speaking, at least one crime scene. There's also tables full of crates of old glass jars. They're mismatched and cloudy, but they're also free, so I'm already mentally counting profit margins.

"They're not empty," she says.

I pick one up and twist the lid. "Feel pretty empty."

"As stated in the ad, they hold on to things."

"Smells?"

"Sometimes."

"Adds character," I say. "Do they hold lids properly? Kinda important."

There's an awkward silence. "Did you even read the ad?"

There's an even more awkward silence. "I'm more of a read-the-headline-and-form-a-full-opinion kinda guy," I say.

"They've been passed through generations," she says. Explains why they're ugly. "My grandmother believed moments cling to objects. The sound of a particular laugh. The smell of rain before it hits. These jars, she'd leave them open during important moments—births, deaths, and between. She said—"

Nana said too much. "Hold on," I interrupt. "Are you doing that tactic where I drive here for something free, and you're like, 'Oh, they're so important to me, they're this, that,' and since I'm already here, I feel trapped and am practically forced to chuck you a fiver? Because coming from an expert, that's dirty business."

She sighs. "No, dear, I'm just—"

"Excellent," I cut back in. "I'll take the lot."

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"Something's off with it," a woman in activewear and expensive sunnies says as she slides the jar onto the stall counter.

Things had been going as planned—cost-free materials, marked up product prices, maximum profits. Madison argued the aesthetic of the manky jars made them feel *lived in*, and therefore more authentic. Personally, I thought it looked like urine was what had lived in them, but sure.

Nevertheless, this woman's expression tells me she's not pleased with the product she bought an hour ago.

"No refunds," I say.

"I didn't ask for a refund."

Oops. Defence mechanism.

She leans closer, fake lashes hovering over her frames like pikes waiting for heads. "It made a noise," she whispers.

"A noise," I whisper back.

"A *voice*."

Madison squeezes her head between us. "A voice?"

This woman has seemingly never heard of seashell resonance. Put your ear up against a shell, your imagination fills in some blanks and convinces you that you're hearing the ocean. The kind of people who buy into that are the same people who buy bottled weather.

"Mick's is magic, after all," I say. "Glad you're enjoying the product."

"Should come with a disclaimer or something," the lady says. "Y'know, my husband heard it, too."

"Right. It's a family product. All ages. Show the kiddies."

Offended either by how little I'm letting her enjoy this or the lack of refund, she takes the jar and buggers off.

It's not long before more people come in, each with their jar, each with a story.

The camo shirt man accusing me of bugging his house when a staticky voice growled from his jar on his nightstand at midnight.

The backpacker crying at my stall because her jar was swearing at her in Swedish.

By now, I've delivered my *NO REFUNDS UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, INCLUDING PARANORMAL* speech so many times it's starting to sound official.

An older bloke with a face like a dry creek bed walks up, placing his jar down. "I need to show you something," he says.

“Mate, unless it’s exploded, I’ve got a fair idea. No refunds.”

“It’s not that,” he says. “I just came back to thank you.”

“Oh. Uh, righto. Hey, a Google review would be fantastic—”

“Please, listen.”

He unscrews the lid. A small, cold breeze pops out. It’s accompanied by silence. The bloke nods to me, then to the jar. I lean in closer, cool air brushing against my ear.

Then I hear it. Footsteps on packed snow, laughter, a child crying, “Don’t leave me behind!”

The sound so clear, so sudden that my body freezes.

I was seven. In New South Wales on the one family trip south Dad had managed before disappearing for good. Not only can I hear it, but I can see it—Tara and I in second-hand coats, chasing cousins across a field with frost silvering the ground, Mum watching from the car with the heater on.

The lid goes back on. The memory disappears. The stall stays silent beneath nearby crashing waves.

I look up and see the old bloke gawking at me with wet eyes. “That,” he says, “was my late wife singing in the laundry.”

If that was his wife singing, I imagine she never made it big, because she sounds like seven-year-old me whining about getting left behind in the snow.

Madison puts a comforting hand on the old man’s shoulder. He pulls the jar into his chest and weeps. My body finally thaws, straightening up, letting go of a tightly held breath.

“Again, a Google review...” My voice trails off, and I just quietly look on as Madison tells the man that everything’s okay.

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“What did you hear?” Madison asks.

“Nothing.”

“Your face said otherwise.”

I say, “My face says all sorts of things.” Mostly against my will.

We’re on the back porch eating hot chips out of butcher’s paper because I couldn’t be bothered even pretending the kitchen exists after the day I had. Next to the chips, three jars sit. Madison’s eyeing them.

“Well... test them,” she says.

It’s why I brought them. Yet, I can’t bring myself to open one.

I want to tell myself that nothing’s in them, that I would’ve heard something when I was filling them with wintery decorations, but I can’t. Not just because I *did* hear something from the bloke earlier, but because when I was filling them up before that, my John Farnham playlist was blasting. If something was inside those jars, it wouldn’t have got a word in. Only Johnny gets a turn during “You’re the Voice”.

“Maybe Mum was right,” Madison continues. “Winter makes people remember things.”

Or maybe I was given haunted jars, Mads. “Mum said lots of things.”

“This may not be *magic*, but... people want to believe in something. Like a way back into a moment. Even for a second.” I sink another chip, shaking my head. “Gosh, you think *everything* is a scam.”

“Most things are.”

Tara had always been about stories. She'd make a trip to Woolies sound like a quest, or make burnt toast feel like an adventure gone wrong. She'd absolutely buy into these silly jars. Madison inherited that softness somewhere, despite everything life's thrown at her.

"I'll do it," Madison says. She reaches for a jar.

I snatch it before she can. "I got it."

Letting my nerves get the best of me, I half-expect a storm to brew, a hush to fall over the coast, or the jar to just start levitating. But no, nothing special happens.

I go to pop the lid, but stop when I see Madison rubbernecking. I turn my back to her and open the jar, putting it against my ear. I hear wind, thin and distant, gently swirling. Seconds pass, and just as I feel like a fool for entertaining this, I hear Tara's tired voice saying, "Mick, I need you to take this seriously."

Instantly, I remember the day. I was meant to pick Mads up from school. I'd forgotten. Tara did it on the way back from a doctor's appointment that she'd made after she was done pretending that the weeks-long headaches were nothing.

It was one of a thousand moments that added up to the same thing: Tara carrying weight that should've been shared, me promising to be better later, later, *later*, as if later was a sure thing.

In the corner of my eye, I see Madison grab a jar full of shaved ice with mini pinecones and a little cinnamon stick. I close my jar and grab her arm, stopping her from opening hers.

"What? Let me try. You said it's a scam, anyhow."

I'm afraid of what she'll hear. Judging by what old mate said, these jars seem targeted. Kid doesn't need more trauma.

"I don't want you to get your hopes up or convince yourself that something's there that's not," I say.

She shrugs my arm off and pops the jar open.

We both lean in, a cold breath sliding past our faces. Again, I hear Tara's voice, this time warm and smiling around the words: "Don't let your uncle teach you too many bad habits."

Madison's hand flies to her mouth. Tears pool in her eyes.

For one impossible second, I expect to see Tara walk up the back steps, keys in hand, already halfway through another sentence.

But the voice isn't now. It's then, before she went. I can't even remember what it was about, but that doesn't matter. I look at Madison as our past laughter echoes back at us. In the present, we share a smile. The memory fades into the night.

Madison delicately lowers the jar into her lap, like it might bruise. "That was her," she softly cries.

"I know, kiddo. I heard it, too."

Madison's hands cover her face. Her body shakes with each gentle sob. I put my arm around her to keep her still.

Tara had always known how to keep a moment alive. In stories, in jokes, in the way she made ordinary things feel worth remembering. Madison got that from her. I'd spent so long treating wonder like a weakness that I missed something that could bring her mum back to us, if only for a second.

I don't know what these jars are, but for now, they're an echo of Tara, a reminder that she's still here in the soft parts of life I'd been calling stupid because I didn't know what else to call the things that hurt.

I look at the last jar sitting beside the chips, frosted glass sweating in the night air.

"One more?" I ask.

Madison sniffs and nods. This time, when she reaches for the jar, I let her. We lean in together as the lid begins to turn.

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“My son dropped this one,” this woman says, kid hanging off her shorts. She holds up a cracked jar. The boy looks up at me, solemn and sticky-faced. “We’re heading back south today and I just... I don’t have enough cash for another. I know you said no refunds...”

The old reflex kicks in: make a joke, deflect, protect the till. But instead, I reach under the counter, snag a jar, and hand it over.

“On the house,” I say.

The boy’s eyes fill with wonder. His mum says, “Really?”

Don’t make me say something kind twice. “Yep. G’day.”

On the way out, she thanks me profusely. Madison pops out from the other side of the stall, clearly having heard all of it. She’s cradling a big roll of fabric.

“*You* gave away inventory?” she says. “For *free*?”

“Promotional offer,” I say. “Keeps them coming back.” I can’t have her think I’ve lost all my edge, so I deflect. “What’ve you got there?”

“Something to take advantage of this newfound publicity. You know, marketing!”

With a grin, she unfurls the roll onto the counter. It’s a banner with hand-painted lettering, flecks of white and blue catching the sunlight.

ECHOES OF WINTER, it reads.

I squint at it. “I mean, it’s better than our current sign, but... no alliteration... and it sounds kinda like a Christmas-themed adult store.”

Madison frowns. "What does that even mean?"

"Precisely my concern."

Her arms cross. "It's a good name!"

I look at the banner again, at the row of jars on the shelves behind, at my niece standing there with paint on her hands and stubborn hope on her face. The morning wind moves through the awning. One of the jars rattles softly.

Madison stares at me, still waiting. I look down at the banner and smile.

"Yeah," I say. "It's perfect."