

Content warning: non-explicit sexual violence

The Obliteration Rooms

Maria Arena

You have the right to defend yourself!

The words hook your attention; give you pause in a way the image of the gun doesn't. You know you're supposed to be mesmerised by the weapon's sleek look and compact design (*Small enough for an evening purse!*); that you should be taken with its power and potential for annihilation, but you're stuck on the manufacture's slogan.

You have the right to defend yourself!

Do I? you think.

The declaration aggravates you like an ache in a deep place you can't reach. Sure, it sounds reasonable enough, and God knows you understand where the advertising execs are coming from, yet there's something about the sentiment.

You have the right...

'What are you looking at?' he asks, seeming to fill the archway between the kitchen and family room.

Your hand slides onto the mousepad.

He's working on his tie, frowning at the knot.

‘Just finding a recipe.’ Your voice is steady and doesn’t betray the quickening of your heart as the cursor skitters towards the menu.

Open; click History.

‘I thought I’d cook that pasta dish you loved so much when we were first dating.’

Clear Browsing Data.

Never forget.

He tugs the knot into place, checks its position in the mirror at the back of the wine cabinet standing in the corner, gives a satisfied nod at his reflection, and walks towards you.

Keeping your eyes on him and your expression attentive, you close the window and bring up the recipe without moving anything but the tips of your fingers. Then he’s beside you, sliding onto the stool and turning the laptop in one fluid movement. His cologne lifts from his skin, imbuing the air with subtle notes of citrus and sandalwood; the scent is not at all like the brassy concoction you’d brought him for Christmas, which he’d braved the Boxing Day crowds to return.

His glance at the screen is cursory, habitual and obligatory; a duty to perform in the ritual of your relationship. He doesn’t know what you know about how these things work, and you keep it that way by not complaining when he surfs away from the recipe and logs on to the ASX.

You add another sigh to the collection you keep hidden. *He’s really a barbequed meat kind of guy anyway.*

‘Coffee,’ he says, attention on the laptop.

Standing carefully, you move on light feet around the counter to the percolator, pour his coffee, add a Stevia tablet, and ease it over to him, unstirred, the way he likes it. He ignores the cup, glares at the screen, apparently absorbed by the numbers, but you know better. The seconds stretch, and while you wait you notice the particles that float in the beams

of sunshine streaming through the window. They drift over the yellow primroses he bought you, which pretty up the kitchen even though they are beginning to wilt, to the portrait he'd organised for your anniversary; the undeniable proof of your happiness. You gaze at your smiling face. *That girl did such beautiful makeup*, you think, eyes moving on, following the particles. They shimmer and you imagine they're magical. *Perhaps they can mend what is broken*, you muse, taking a quiet, shallow breath. The particles land on your arm and settle on his bunched hand, which sits idle on the counter.

The ache inside you remains.

He reaches for the coffee.

You have the right to defend yourself!

But why should I have to? you wonder, watching the cup rise to his mouth; the day's obliteration will proceed from here.

'Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.'
Genesis 3:16

Mid-shift break. The tearoom is empty, and you give thanks for that small blessing. Your shoes squeak softly as you cross to the cupboard, open it, find your favourite brew, take down a cup, bring the two together, add water, breathe the swirl of peppermint steam, and sigh.

The shift has been arduous: a multiple casualty car crash; two ODs; the little girl with a broken arm, and another woman with a blunt force trauma to the head. You don't think she's going to make it. As the tea steeps, you check your watch and wonder what the rest of the night will bring.

On the table is a late edition broadsheet. The headline blares: Pensioners Lose, Defence Wins in Budget Shakeup. You put your tea on a coaster, sit, get comfortable, take up

the paper, and fall into the story, your mind darting into the future as you read. Tougher times for pensioners mean busier times for you, and you don't relish the idea of seeing more of your community's most vulnerable members, but that's the job.

You don't know he's there until his hand touches your shoulder.

Heat flushes through your body as you catch the scent of him.

His fingers brush your neck, feather light, gathering strands of loose hair.

You grip the newspaper convulsively, tearing half-moons through the print.

The heat of his breath drifts over you.

Your heart is jackhammering.

He massages your shoulders, both hands at work. 'So tense,' he murmurs.

That sick feeling gathers in your stomach.

'You've been doing great work tonight.'

His thumbs press into your muscles, finding and releasing the tension, and you fight to suppress the moan of pleasure that rises, unbidden, to your lips, hating yourself for the feeling.

He takes your shudder of disgust as encouragement. 'But we can't have our nurses stressed out,' he says, one hand sliding down your chest, into your shirt, and over your breast. His breath quickens. 'Stressed nurses have an adverse effect on the well-being and recovery of patients.' He finds your nipple and pinches it between his fingers.

You bite the inside of your mouth.

'Which is something I'd have to report because, as you know, the safety of our patients is paramount to the hospital.'

You will yourself to faint, but the tearoom, the newspaper, the steam from your cup, the sting inside your mouth, remain vivid and all too present. There's nowhere to go, no escape, nothing to do but endure.

Beside your ear, he whispers, 'I can help relieve you of that stress.'

He grips your elbow and urges you to your feet, pushing the chair out of his way.

You feel the fullness of him and want to vomit.

He bends you over the table and lifts your skirt.

You catch a sentence in the newspaper article: 'We have the right to defend the integrity of our borders from this incursion,' it reads, and you want to cry.

When he's done, he lowers your skirt and pats your back. 'All better now,' he says, the sound of his zipper closing underscoring his words. 'See you back on shift.'

You don't hear him leave but you understand that you're alone. His fluids drip down your thigh and you cross the tearoom to the sink. Your hands shake, your stomach heaves, your legs are weak but you clean-up, straighten-up, and fix your hair because the shift is only half over and you have a job to do.

Leaving the tearoom, with your favourite brew gone cold and the paper unread, you know you will never step foot in there again. Not that it will matter; the hospital has many rooms where you can be obliterated.

"The problem is that every woman in her entire life has that one moment when you think,

'Oh! Here's my rape!'"

Ever Mainard, Chicago Underground Comedy, Jan. 3, 2012

The chime is unobtrusive, yet it might as well be as loud as the clanging of cymbals for the clamour of anxiety it creates in you. A moment later, Sia is singing about swinging from chandeliers, making your heart pump in a nauseating kind of way, but you can't bring yourself to touch the phone, not even to reject the call. You wish you could be that party girl in the song, drinking to forget, but it's one in the afternoon and you're not that far gone— not

yet anyway. The phone rings out; tweets fly in; messages crawl down the screen. Facebook demands attention with another gentle chime.

Turn it off, you tell yourself, but what good would that do? Instead, you search YouTube, knowing it's only a matter of time since he's already infected Instagram and Snapchat, and uploaded a video to Vine; an endless loop of your humiliation. Not the worst stuff, of course; he's smarter than that.

Still, it's enough to get the world involved; every John and Jane Doe inviting themselves into your life, into your home, to lay their self-righteous opinions upon you: a second assault; obliteration in the third degree. Some say you should've known better. Some say you got what you deserved, and some say you should've gotten worse. You try not to listen to them, but their poison is already seeping under your skin, as if the bruising isn't deep enough.

Maybe you deserve their crucifixion. After all, you made the decision to go with your 'friend' when he offered to introduce you to the band. You'd also been drinking, and you were wearing those tight little shorts that make your legs look almost as good as Beyoncé's. What did you expect to happen?

In my defence, you think, your spirit rallying, *it was a public place and he did seem like a really nice guy, who apparently had a good grasp of simple English.*

Your defiance lasts only until the next post on his Facebook page: 'Nice work, bro. I woulda hit that too.'

The nausea is back.

Sia sings again, and your mother's image appears on your phone. How your fingers itch to take her call; how your heart craves to hear her voice, but you don't answer. Your mother loves you, but she doesn't drink, doesn't wear short shorts, and doesn't approve of the way you walk through the world, demanding that it respects you as a human being; as a

woman. She thinks your presumption to the right to be safe is naïve, that you've been asking for trouble, and now some 'nice guy' has proven her correct. In some ways, this is more crushing than the pressure of his hands on your body.

Sia cuts out mid-note and you stifle the urge to vent your pain. Instinct tells you that you're going to need it; that it will be a shield, however fragile, against the haters, the victim-blamers and misogynist-excusers who are fond of telling you that you are too haughty, too full of belief in your womanhood; that this is still a man's world no matter how many SlutWalks you attend.

'Steubenville footballers found guilty. Too bad the girl can't also be sentenced for being so stupid and putting herself in danger.'
Rae Rae, via Twitter

The windowpane fogs and clears in time with your breathing. Your knees sink into the cushions under the sill as you wait for her to appear on the footpath below. The sounds of goodbye come to you through the floorboards: the opening of the front door, the murmur of voices, the door closing, footsteps; hers on the pathway to the gate, his moving towards the stairs. The gate squeals and, though you can't see her face, you know she will be frowning. She's been asking him to oil the hinges for months, but he never seems to find the time to get it done. You lean closer to the window, willing her to look up and see you, and when she does, your heart flutters with love. She is so beautiful. Her hand comes to her mouth and she blows you a kiss, which you pretend to catch before sending her back a dozen kisses of your own, your heart full of yearning. *Take me with you.* She laughs, snatching kisses from the air and putting them in the pockets of her jacket. When the last one is safely tucked away, she waves and walks on.

His footsteps have reached the top of the stairs and are coming down the hallway. You turn and sit, watching the gap beneath the door. Maybe today, he'll pass on; maybe today, he'll have something better to do, like fix the gate. He reaches your door. His shoes, reflected in the polished wood, pause. Breathing fills your head. The shoes move on, clumping along the hallway to their bedroom.

Okay.

You smooth down your pinafore and adjust your socks, touch your hair, which your mother has lovingly braided.

It's okay.

Bouncing off the window seat, you scramble around the bed and sprawl on the floor in front of the TV, happy to fill the hour before school with cartoons. There is a commercial for a home security system playing and you wait, fingers drumming, for it to finish. Another commercial, this one for pool fencing, comes on. Your legs, bent at the knee, cross and re-cross at the ankles; your chin rests in the cup of your palm. A third commercial, something about a new children's wing at the hospital brings a yawn; a nurse smiles from the screen.

There is a noise at your door and you stiffen.

It's not okay after all.

"It is only natural that a legacy of parental deprivation would leave some former residents bitter and resentful."

Unpublished press release drafted by Sister Berneice Loch of the Sisters of Mercy, presented in evidence at the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2015.

Hurrying through the early morning radiance, on your way to work, tired from the party that ended only hours ago, but buzzing with the anticipation of his call. The world is glorious and

you feel your place within it, snug and perfect, like a tailored glove. You grin at the flowers beside the path, nodding in the soft sunshine, and try to keep the skip out of your step.

Stop it, you idiot. You laugh at yourself and glance around to see who's watching your antics. The park is empty, except for a group of Aikido practitioners, focused on their art.

As fifth dates go, inviting him to your sister's monthly soiree was a risk, but you're glad you trusted your instincts because the date was a spectacular success. Your sister loved him and your friends, even the married ones, fluttered around him, plying him with flirty questions, which he answered with a gentle graciousness, smiling at you all the while.

You hum a snippet of song, something old and daggy (*You're just too good to be true. Can't take my eyes off of you*), and begin to imagine a future together. It's a simple vision: a home, travel, maybe children, shared hobbies and conversations woven together with love and respect. The idea fills you with a sort of happy delirium that makes you giggle like a child spinning.

Ahead, leafy fig trees with impressive girths form a shady green tunnel flecked with golden light. A sandy path meanders through the centre and you envisage a mighty cathedral, where vows of eternal love and devotion are pledged.

Whoa, girl, slow down, you caution, trying to reign in the giddiness. *You haven't even kissed him yet.*

He appears from between two trees, half way up the corridor. The appraisal you make is quick and almost unconscious: jeans, pullover, sneakers, back pack; neat but not trendy. Thin, maybe taller than you; hard to tell because his shoulders are hunched and his head is lowered. *Probably okay though.* There are earbuds pressed into his ears. He's hurrying and you figure he's late for work, or an important appointment. He doesn't seem to see you, but

you veer to the edge of the path anyway, unwilling to surrender your romantic mood to an avoidable interaction.

When you are almost level, he attacks.

One moment you are pondering cooking lemon linguine for your sixth date, the next, he has barrelled into you, shoving you off the path, between the trees and into a dark recess of shrubbery, down on to the damp, earthy ground. Fireworks of panic explode through your mind: *get up, get up, Jesus, fight, hit him, run, no, no*. You draw a breath to vocalise the protest and his fist crunches into your face. *Breathe, oh God, breathe*, except you can't. What you can do is feel him drag you; feel every stick and rock and blade of grass, feel the very earth trying to hold you, to keep you— safe.

Part of you is hysterical: *Not happening. Not happening.*

Part of you is clinical: *Of course it is; they told you he would get you.*

Part of you is crying for the future you're about to lose: *I should have kissed him.*

But he has your full, undivided attention when he raises the knife. 'Fucking bitch,' he says.

No, no, I'm not, you think, and reach for him but the obliteration comes anyway.

"I always have encouraged women not to walk alone, to have someone with them at all times, because that in itself is an invitation for someone to take advantage of you."

Albury Mayor, Kevin Mack, 2015.

The headache throbs. You massage the base of your skull, feeling the new and peculiar concavity; his last gift. The sheet beneath your body is rough; the blanket covering you is thin. Lucky it is summer. Sighing, you close your eyes, and search for release.

You have always liked to sleep in deep darkness.

No chance of that here.

You have always liked to sleep in deep silence.

No chance of that here.

You have forfeited your right to these things, which is something the advertising execs forgot to mention in their exuberant advocacy of your right to defend yourself. Still, isn't being in this place better than the hell you endured with him for twelve years? Opening your eyes, you gaze at the mesh-covered light on the ceiling, and consider the idea. What, in all truth, has changed?

He was a man of strict routine.

Routine defines your days here.

He was a man who felt his duty was to correct your behaviour.

Discipline defines your days here.

He was a man ruled by suspicion.

Trust doesn't exist inside these walls either.

He was a man who guarded you like a junkyard dog.

How different the surveillance of the guards?

Inside his house, no room was safe for you.

Here—

The soft jangle of a key chain and low squelch of booted feet on the painted cement breaks apart your line of thought. Under the blanket, you draw your knees to your chest and imagine yourself as a rock; impenetrable, immovable. Silence in the hallway. You wait in an agony of hope: *walk on, walk on, walk on*. The lock slides into the cavity in the door.

You have swapped one obliteration room for another.
