

The Ones Who Stay Still

The girl in mirrored sunglasses tells me she's killed a man.

She says it like she's ordering coffee. Casual. Sunburnt. One boot up on the bakery bench, helmet dangling from two fingers like it's just another accessory.

"He was on a Harley," she says. "Straight road. Midday. I was seventeen."

"He had stickers all over his bike. One said *ride like you're already dead*. Another said *riding's better than living*. I figured I owed him that."

I blink. The almond croissant I'm holding starts to sweat in its paper wrapper.

She reaches over, plucks it from my hand, and takes a bite – like it's owed, too. Then she moans like I've just fed her the heart of God.

"Jesus," she says, still chewing. "That's witchcraft."

I don't answer. I've never been good at talking to women who sound like highway thunder.

She leans her elbow on the counter and follows my gaze out the window. Across the street, the mural's half-faded under the glare – woman on a motorbike, hair wild, one arm raised like a wave or a warning or just balancing in the wind.

"She's been there forever," I say. "I used to think she was leaving."

"Now?"

"I think she's just looping the block."

The girl beside me squints at it like she's reading the cracks. "Not stuck. Just making sure she remembers where she started."

I glance back at her. "You kind of remind me of her."

She grins. "Tired and chipping paint?"

"No. Like you've got places to be, but you don't mind circling the long way."

She turns toward me, softer now. "I'm Keeley. Born here. Mostly blown away since. But I stop in. When I need to feel the ground again."

I take her hand. Warm. Calloused. She holds on like someone who usually lets go too fast.

"Nice to meet you," I say.

Outside, York throbs.

Engines growl down Avon Terrace in chrome and swagger. The historic buildings – stone and tile – throw heat like they’ve been holding it all year. The air smells like petrol, dust, and bacon grease from the B’n’B.

It’s the second day of the York Motorcycle Festival.

Everyone with handlebars and a heartbeat is here.

I’m stuck behind the counter in a flour-dusted apron, twisting dough and watching the wild roll by like a parade I missed the invite for.

Some bikers swagger in cracked leather and boots like hooves. Others walk barefoot into the servo and call it a lifestyle. Then there’s GLOW – Gorgeous Ladies On Wheels – in pink and purple hoodies. One has a sequined skull stitched on the back. They sip iced lattes and pose for selfies like saints of combustion.

I watch them like I’m starving.

Keeley – croissant thief, chaos in a jacket – leans on the counter, sipping chocolate milk.

“You ever ride?” she asks.

I shake my head.

“You look like you should,” she says. “You’ve got that quiet kind of angry.”

“I bake croissants.”

“Exactly.” She winks. “That’s just fury in layers.”

I laugh, a little surprised it’s mine.

The bell wheezes open and shut all day. The pies sweat. The fridge hums like it resents us all.

Narelle – my aunt and reluctant saviour – clangs trays in the back and mutters about overheads.

Keeley doesn't leave. She leans by the window, watching the street like it's about to offer her something.

A girl with a chrome braid buys a lamington and tells me she once dated a guy who carved motorcycle grips from human bone. She might be lying. I hope she's not.

York acts sleepy. But it isn't.

Half the takeaways have signs: *LIMITED MENU – SHORT STAFFED*. The other half grumble about bikers until they sell out, and then they don't.

Still, they stay open. Still, they come back.

Because something here sticks.

Maybe it's the way the river curves around town like it's holding something in. Maybe it's the way the light hits the bakery window at 4:48 p.m. sharp and makes everything look like part of a memory.

York wins you over slow. Like dough. Like regret. Like home.

By three, the sun's gone syrupy. A guy in a mesh singlet revs tight circles beside a roped-off lot. A busker belts out Johnny Cash in a Welsh accent.

Keeley nods toward a bike two shops down. Candy apple red. Low-slung. Gleaming. A sticker on the tank reads:

I BRAKE FOR NO ONE EXCEPT DOGS AND WITCHES.

"Come on," she says.

"What?"

"You. Me. Ride."

"My aunt – "

"She's on the roof, finishing a cig. Been watching us for ten minutes."

"I don't have a helmet."

One of the GLOW girls – the one with the skull – tosses Keeley a spare. Keeley spins it once and crams it over my head. It smells like eucalyptus and sugar.

She knots her hair, swings a leg over the bike, and pats the seat.

"Get on, bakery girl."

I do, before I can talk myself out of it.

The engine snarls. Keeley twists the throttle and the road jumps to meet us.

The wind smacks the breath from my chest. The world smears – gum trees, rusted mailboxes, sandstone walls. A GLOW girl raises her coffee. Another films us.

We leave York in a blur of dust and motion. Past wheatfields and sheds, past paddocks and windbreaks. The horizon unspools like a dare.

Keeley lifts one hand and screams. Not fear. Joy.

That sound people make when they know they got out.

I don't scream.

But something in me answers.

We pull over at the lookout, where the road spills into sky.

York lies below like a biscuit tin turned inside out. The river curls around it like ribbon. The bakery's a blur. The mural is a freckle.

Keeley kills the engine. The silence buzzes.

She lights a cigarette but doesn't smoke it. Just holds it burning between her fingers like punctuation.

"Still breathing?"

"Barely."

"You staying?"

I follow her gaze – rooftops, the war memorial, kids on bikes, the mural I've stared at all my life. I think of Narelle. The bakery. The slow, stubborn ways people love each other here.

"Yeah," I say. "I think I am."

Keeley nods like she already knew.

People think towns like York are small because they don't have skyscrapers or rideshare or three kinds of Thai.

But small isn't the word.

There's the postie who knows every dog by name. The couple who sweep the library steps like they're sacred. Bev leaves silverbeet on her fence with a note that says *Help Yourself*. A guy once fixed my flat tyre and only asked for a story.

And Narelle – freckled, sun-cracked, quietly fierce – who gave me a whisk and told me to earn my place.

No one here is loud about love.

But it's in the lamington trays. In the glances. In the second chances.

In people who stay still – not because they're stuck, but because they *choose* to. Because they remember. Because they're still moving. Just slower. Closer. In circles that mean something.

Keeley sees it. That's why she comes back.

Even if she says it's just for the croissants.

Before we ride again, she presses a folded note into my hand.

“Don't read it yet.”

Back in town, motocross riders flip through the sky like punctuation marks. One lands sideways. The crowd roars. A man with a beard like a quilt helps an old woman cross the street. Traffic waits.

Keeley pulls in, drops me off, raises two fingers, and vanishes into the light like a rumour.

She doesn't leave me the helmet.

Just the paper.

Back inside, Narelle doesn't ask.

She nods, slides lamingtons into the cabinet, and hums something I don't recognise.

That night, I sit on the roof with the note in my lap.

The stars are absurd. The wind smells like sugar, dust, and the edge of something new.

I unfold the paper.

Nothing wrong with standing still – just don't pretend you forgot how to move. –

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Below it: a tiny skull with a pink bow.

Across the street, the mural glows in the streetlight.

I used to think she was leaving.

Now I think she's just looping the block.

Not because she's stuck.

But because she remembers where she began.

And how far she can still go.