

Unpolished Gem

PROLOGUE

This story does not begin on a boat.

We begin our story in a suburb of Melbourne, Australia, in a market swarming with fat pigs and thin people. The fat pigs are hanging from hooks, waiting to be hacked into segments, and the thin people are waiting to buy these segments wrapped in newspaper over a glass counter. When they haggle over the price of trotters, there is much hand-gesticulating and frowning of brow because the parties do not spick da Ingish velly good. “Like a chicken trying to talk to a duck,” my mother calls these conversations. But she is not here today to quack over quality pigs’ paws because she is lying in a white hospital room waiting for me to arrive.

So it’s just my father, standing smack-bang in the middle of this market, and his shoes are getting wet because of the blood diluted in the water that comes from the huge hoses used to wash away the mess at the end of the day. He looks down at the grates and thinks about pig’s blood jelly and whether he’ll ever buy it again. He likes the taste, but Ah Ung told him that he worked in the abattoir when he first came here and the carcasses were hung from hooks with buckets beneath to collect the pigs’ blood. Because they were not washed properly, they would sometimes leak with piss and other filthy drips. My father does not think back to Phnom Penh, where he would be eating brains in broth made by street vendors stationed across the road from the homeless leper coughing out half a lung in the doorway of some derelict shopfront, but looks up and points at the pink and red appendages

behind the glass. With his other hand, he holds up two fingers.

This is the suburb where words like *and*, *at* and *of* are redundant, where full sentences are not necessary. “Two kilo dis. Give me seven dat.” If you were to ask politely, “Would you please be so kind as to give me a half-kilo of the Lady Fingers?” the shop-owner might not understand you. “You wanna dis one? Dis banana? How many you want hah?” To communicate, my father realises, does not merely mean the strumming and humming of vocal cords, but much movement of hands and contortion of face. The loudest pokers always win, and the loudest pokers are usually women. My father’s moment is lost when a middle-aged woman with Maggi-noodle curls points at the man behind the counter with a flailing forefinger and almost jabs out an eye as she accuses the other Non-English-Speaking Person of selling her furry trotters. “Why yu gib me dis one? Dis one no good! Hairy here, here and dere! Hairy everywhere! Dat nother one over dere better. Who you save da nother one for hah?” Bang on the counter goes the bag of bloodied body parts, and my father knows that now is the time to scoot away to the stall opposite if he wants hairless ham.

This suburb, Footscray, has possibly the loudest and grottiest market in the Western world, although that term doesn’t mean much when you’re surrounded by brown faces. Footscray Market is the only market where you can peel and eat a whole mandarin before deciding whether to buy a kilo;

where you can poke and prod holes in a mango to check its sweetness. My father does not even bat an eye at the kid who is covering her face with one hand, holding out a wet peeled lychee with the other, and wailing “Aaarghhh! My eyeball!” to her little brother. He watches as the baby in the pram starts howling and the mother pulls off some grapes from a stand to shut him up while she goes on with her poking and prodding and justified pilfering. Parsimonious women aren’t going to spend four dollars on sour strawberries simply because they were too stupid to taste-test them first. “Cause you more trouble coming back the second time!” declares my mother. “Ayyah, no good to be tormented by four dollars! Try and avoid it if you can.” But there is no way to taste-test these trotters, my father thinks as he looks through the clear plastic bag, so he has to take the word of the shouting woman in the opposite stall. He will bring these trotters home for his sister to boil into a broth, and then he will take the broth to the hospital for his wife.

He steps out onto the footpath, away from the damp smells of the market. This is the suburb of madcap Franco Cozzo and his polished furniture, the suburb that made Russell Crowe rich and famous for shaving his head and beating up ethnic minorities, so it doesn’t really matter that these footpaths are not lined with gold but dotted with coruscating black circles where people spat out gum eons ago. “Don’t swallow the rubber candy,” mothers say to their kids. “Spit it out. Spit it out *now* – that’s right, onto the ground there.” Ah, this wondrous new country where children are scared of dying because they have swallowed some Spearmint Wrigley’s, not because they stepped on a condensed-milk tin filled with ammunition!

So in the beginning it doesn’t matter to my father that there may be pee in the pig’s blood jelly served in the steaming bowls of *Pho* rice noodles, or that you can’t spick da English very well, or that there are certain vegetables you can’t get in Tatsing grocery that you could get in Vietnam. No, it doesn’t matter at all, because in this suburb he watches grandmas with faces as blunt and brown as earthed potatoes hobble along in their padded jackets. As the wheels of their cloth-covered trolleys roll by, they tell the jabbering children to spit out the gum. My father looks, and smiles, wondering whether his firstborn will be a girl or a boy. He presses the black rubber button on the traffic lights and remembers when they first encountered these ticking poles.

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