Home

by

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THE GOVERNMENT HAS given Ahmed a house to the west of the city, a stone's throw from Rookwood Cemetery. His friend, Bert, brought him here. As Ahmed's official visitor, Bert brought sweets and books to Villawood. He took Ahmed some new black socks once and cigarettes, though neither of them smoked. Bert's eyes are an odd blue and when he laughs lines fan from them. There is a gap between his front teeth. 'Now we are *unofficial*,' Bert said on the day of Ahmed's release. And Ahmed nodded, grateful to have a friend at last.

'Nothing special about this place,' Bert said when he opened the front door. 'Fibro. But it'll do till your papers are ready. And it's very quiet,' he joked, pointing at the house's only neighbours—two monumental stonemasons with work-yards rarely used, two other dingy houses, the dead.

When Bert left, Ahmed inspected the peeling paint, the large garden at the back, the outdoor laundry. Hiding in Baghdad with neighbours he'd read old *National Geographic* magazines. London looked very big, Paris elegant. He didn't like the thrusting New York skyline or Singapore's clipped blandness. He was sorry his house was a long way from the wicked blue of Sydney Harbour, the curve of the Harbour Bridge, painted one end to the next over and over, he'd read, as the great Greek Sisyphus had laboured with his rock.

Now he's been in his house a month, Ahmed goes into the city to look at the harbour, returning on silver trains that carry the desperate scents of a long working day, of someone's dinner of precooked takeaway chicken or fried potatoes, the callers on

mobile phones telling people where they are . . . *nearly* home, they say . . . I'm nearly *home*.

As soon as he gets home he likes to walk slowly into the cemetery, the visits allowing him time to regain something of himself, some sense of a purposeful past from the rows of neglected graves. Gone are his train trip's greasy takeaways, the sweaty underarms, the sweet plastic smell of school children. All is grass and loam, the scent of decay and sun on stone.

He often worries that the silver trains run too close to the cemetery for eternal rest, the clatter of the carriages pulsing deep into the earth. In his country the dead are buried beyond a city's walls where it's quiet and too far away for the spirits to walk back into town. Here they mingle with the living and a few times now he has seen a phosphorescent haze above his street, ghosts straying beyond the cemetery walls, he presumed. This is when he feels his difference most keenly. What could he say to these wraiths? In Rookwood the steaming souls like to see smiling faces, he decides, to gather some happy images of the living world to fortify their darkness. What use are thoughts about rich and poor, migrants and generations long gone, the venerated whose mausoleums are dotted here and there?

Flimsy or not, Ahmed thinks, the house at least offers a quiet space from which to watch the street pass, the trains slowing for Lidcombe station, the Orthodox church on the other side of the tracks. It is the view from the back of the house he prefers, the garden with its shrivelled old lemon and unpruned roses just like those at home. He lost his wife Feroza to cancer in 1996. His son and son-in-law were taken away to be tortured one night four years ago. Ahmed and his friends searched everywhere for the boys while his daughter wept into the hair of her newborn son. Then a neighbour came to say he'd seen the bodies thrown into a trench on the outskirts of town. Ahmed had gone looking for the grave but he never found it.

One day, when his daughter finally comes, they will plant basil and parsley, tomatoes and oranges. They will fill the garden, every inch of it, with grapes and figs and plums. And when all their papers are finally approved, they'll find a beautiful house with brick walls and a red-tiled roof and there they'll live in happiness until they too are dead.

Ahmed turns towards the cemetery gates. Walking alone helps to pass the time while he waits for news of his daughter. There are other places he could go, to the big shopping centre in Parramatta or the cinema, but the films are often cruel, the language coarse and brutal. When he buys his groceries afterwards his eyes are still dazzled by the blood and violence. He offers thanks before each solitary

meal. Waits. This cemetery gate is always open. Ahmed passes through it and looks across the wide vista, the higgledy-piggledy rows of graves, some with family portraits. The barely discernible mounds of long-dead children. The white crosses. Some of the suburb's migrants are buried in this cemetery. Not under this old angel missing one of its wings or an overturned urn, a residue of soil around its lip like ancient coffee grounds. It might yet sprout the pale blue flowers he heard a woman in the Lidcombe fruit shop call 'Easter daisies'.

The migrant dead are in their allotted spaces—the Chinese and Vietnamese, the Jews, the Muslims, the Christians—each group burying its dead in its own way, aligned as their religions decree. A sheet, thin as filo pastry, might lie between the corpse and the earth. Their ashes might have been scattered to the four winds. They are the lost generations of his new city, some long-dead like the doctor from whom this angel perpetually tries to fly on just one wing, and this woman whose children numbered fourteen, each one of them dead before her. Distant reds and yellows mark the graves of the Chinese. He has walked over to that area a few times now, drawn at first by the bright flowers, red silk carnations mostly, some silk roses. They looked like a child's storybook garden in which the flowers always bloom and the sun always shines, round, its beams radiating from a face as smiling as Bert's.

In one *National Geographic* he'd seen pictures of European cemeteries that looked like ancient cities full of houses, temples, cobbled streets down which the living came with guide books and cameras searching for the famous. This cemetery is nothing like those but it holds something true about death: the dead must be held in stone. Cats, like the skinny shadow walking slowly towards the old western gate, must sun themselves on the slabs. The wind must eradicate the names from the tombstones and subsidence must consume the burial mounds. The dead must slowly disappear.

He knows he cuts an odd figure amid the sandstone ruins of century-old graves, stooping to read an epitaph or to pull out some weeds.

I was a professor in my old country. My son and my son-in-law died fighting our oppressors. I no longer believe in inherent goodness. I still pray though I no longer believe in God.

His clothes are crumpled because he has neither the desire nor the energy to iron. Who is to see him other than the anonymous passengers on a passing silver train? But he dresses up when Bert visits with his pink iced sponges and date scones and they listen to music on Bert's old record player, songs from musicals and country and western, Bert singing along and tapping his feet against Ahmed's second-hand lounge. Bert sometimes asks him questions about his old life in

Baghdad but Ahmed prefers his memories silent. When Bert goes home, he walks alone in the graveyard, practising his English on the gravestones.

As Ahmed returns to his house a silver train rushes past. He likes the noise the trains make, the way the tracks curve away from Central Station as though someone has taken particular care with their aesthetic. Sleekly silver, they disappear towards Redfern, blending with the grey stones sprinkled between the sleepers. Monotone: the soot-stained walls of the tunnels, the university tower, the slate roofs of the terrace houses, the unforgiving gunmetal of the roads.

The weather was perfect on his last trip into the city, the sky an opalescent blue, then during the night he heard a southerly wind come rattling in, the leaves of the neighbour's gum trees spiralling down and the twigs hitting the roof tiles, then rain, sheets and sheets of it slicing hard against the window. He likes the rain, its Australian intensity always surprising, just as he likes his trips west through Sydney's layers. Two cities—the wealthy one with its million-dollar flats and shining department stores and botanical gardens and all the water, vast oceans of it. It laps at the stone harbour walls of Circular Quay and rustles after the green and yellow ferries, is neon-stained at night when people in their finery walk to the opera or sit under the stars drinking champagne and laughing loudly. But when the lines that divide all great cities are crossed, the roads develop potholes, the trees thin out, leaving only bare streets and littered parks and tired amenities.

In this part of Sydney many migrants have gathered, and the shops offer bread and rice and lentils and oil and dried fish from some faraway sea. Then the shops give way to dilapidated houses, to his house, the monumental masons and the business of burial.

Ahmed's gate is hanging on one hinge like a child's milk tooth held only by a filament of skin. The flyscreen on the front window seems to curl in greeting. He runs his hands along a wall. Fibro. That was what Bert called it. What a flimsy house it is too, brittle and thin. It certainly wasn't built to last centuries, not like the houses in his old town where the walls spoke of birth and death through layers of whitewash and dust. A palm tree in his childhood front garden dropped a dried frond from time to time onto rose bushes planted so long ago and so close together they formed a soft melange of red and pink and yellow, each bush weaving into the other, the old limbs thick and thorny and bent.

The postman is walking slowly up the street, past the stonemasons' yards, past the blue house with the rotting verandah post and the stripped car in the driveway.

The postman's bag is light, not a trolley today, and he has stopped riding his little motorbike. Brown envelopes and a white one for those people, nothing for him. The postman went into the cemetery one day to eat his lunch under a tree, not sitting on the gravestones but on the grass, looking at the graves as he ate, his head moving slowly left to right as he chewed, his bag on the grass beside him.

But no, the postman has turned back. A mistake. A letter now in Ahmed's rusty letterbox, not government-brown but a flimsy, crackling rice-paper, one all the way from Indonesia. He waits until the postman is out of sight before walking down to the letterbox, taking the letter out, opening it. A letter in his daughter's hand, careful as she has been in every endeavour, each word measured, he knows, to allay his fears. He can no longer say the words 'wait', 'take small steps'. They have travelled now for three months, on donkey carts and in the boots of cars, by ship and aeroplane. She is closer, she writes. The boatman is paid. *My father. My dear, dear father. We will soon be with you again.*

The flowering trees in the garden next door are bent low with the burden of their damp flowers. Bees buzz around them and the air seems mobile as Ahmed watches from his vantage point behind the venetian blinds. The wind makes snow of the petals and he takes a deep breath. It is honey he smells, strong and thick.

May the sea be smooth. May it be the perfect blue of a freshly planed lapis lazuli. May it be perfumed, as the air is all blossom now in this square, dry house. He knows his family will smell only salt and the fuel of the ship. But this is the olfactory surprise of it—as soon as land is near perfumes will set out to meet their boat. May the little ones know this: land smells of clay and coffee and oil. Flowers, please, yes, flowers for the girls. And for his little grandson? The loamy promise of acres on which to grow tall and strong and proud of what is new and what he has left behind.

Before dinner Ahmed walks again to the cemetery gates. The rain has made the paths treacherous—puddles, the ground slippery with the ruts of neglect—but he is happy now his daughter and grandchildren are coming and there is so little time to wait. He finds a quiet grave in the sun and sits down carefully on the illegible name of its occupant. He closes his eyes and lets the sun turn his eyelids red and translucent. Far brighter than the red flowers in the Chinese cemetery, the red of his granddaughters' lips, the red balloon he will buy at Paddy's Market for his grandson. There will be red flowers on the table when they make their first feast, vermilion pomegranates, blood-red cherries and wine-dark figs.

A shadow flits by him and he opens his eyes so quickly he is momentarily blinded by the sun's intensity. The postman has come back, he thinks.

'Good afternoon.'

He lifts his arm to shade his eyes. A young woman walking alone, her hair as long and dark as his daughter's when he last saw her. 'Good afternoon.'

She is gone.

An hour later when it is again threatening rain he sees the girl kneeling before the rotting doors of a mausoleum, sketching the timber with the tips of her fingers. He watches for a moment from a distance. She is older than he thought. Her long hair gave her the look of a teenager but he suspects she is closer to his daughter's age, twenty-four, almost twenty-five. Does she also have children? She seems too engrossed in her touching to notice the return of the rain, but he feels the drops and turns towards home. A drenching might lead to a cold, a cold to pneumonia, silly hypochondria, he knows, now his life has a waiting purpose. Soon he will take control of his family's new life.

By the time he is back in his house the rain is pelting down. He leaves the front door open so he can watch the way the rain forces the overburdened branches of the flowering tree lower and lower, the flowers a sodden carpet beneath it. And there is the young woman running along the street a cap on her head, an umbrella held high above it. She pauses for a moment as though deciding whether to seek shelter in the second stonemason's office. No, she has made a bolt for it and disappears down the street.

Now, Ahmed thinks, I am ready to eat—some bread, some olives and fruit. I will read my book and practise ways to speak English slowly, flatly, as the people speak when he walks up to Lidcombe, squinting at him, taking money delicately from him as though his hands are dirty. He must stop thinking like this. He spends too much time alone, the television his only company. He watches the Special Broadcasting Service at night and if he's lucky he sees a film in a language he knows. And each morning he watches the same news in many languages, the same footage, the same bombs.

As he closes the front door he looks back towards the cemetery gates. The sky has darkened, before too long the sun will set. I must pray, he thinks. Thanks for the living, meditations for the dead. Prayers to take my mind from the images that will descend with the night: sea monsters and pirates and giant waves and unscrupulous brokers and rusty, overcrowded little boats. I am old, he thinks, and the old lose the elasticity of their optimism. Two new generations are coming and my life is good.