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Fiction and life-writing

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Saloon with View

Michael Armstrong

I used to play with my hair when I was young and the constant curling and twirling made it stick up like a cocky's crest. My family joked about it, and my father warned that he would take me for a 'crew-cut' if I continued the practice. His threats didn't work, so off to the barber we went. It was the '70s and everyone had long hair, but I came out of that barber shop like a spring lamb out of a shearing-shed.

On the return home we had to collect my sister from my grandparents' house, and my crew-cut and I knocked on the door with more than a little trepidation. My sister roared with laughter when she opened the door. 'You look like a monkey!' Five words that followed me around for years.

I thereafter fondled my hair only in private, gave fervent rebuttals each time my father suggested my hair was getting long, and I learned that the phrase 'just a trim' would achieve my dual aim of getting out of the barber's chair quickly and limiting the hair loss. The mid-'80s would come and go before I showed my ears in public again, and I still flinch when I step into the chair and the barber asks how I would like it.

It is a universal truth that hair-cutting is not a strong consideration for Westerners contemplating a move to the Middle East, but I realised soon after arriving that it should be. Barber shops are called 'saloons' in Kuwait and, when you forgive the misspelling and the irony (alcohol is illegal in Kuwait), you realise that 'saloon' is a perfect name: it conjures an image of a dusty, dangerous, male-only environment where one false move can get you killed. Yes, saloons in Kuwait are dangerous places.

Saloon danger comes in several forms. The most noticeable, but perhaps least dangerous, is an apparent lack of hygiene. There are quite glamorous (and expensive) hairdressers in Kuwait who are ultra-hygienic, but my grey thatch does not warrant such expenditure. I admit that a little of the Scottish in me takes over when I have to spend money on my hair, so I frequent the cheap barbers. The blue stuff they use to sterilise the scissors and combs is not always clean. The chairs look a hundred years old. The ledge underneath the mirror is strewn with hair creams, shampoos, conditioners, and other products that look as though they were packaged before the first Gulf war. And some of the hair on the saloon floor first fell, I'm sure, before oil was discovered. The cheap barbers *do* open a sealed antiseptic package and rub it along the cut-throat before they shave the back of my neck, so that gives me some reassurance.

Then there's the *Leave it to Beaver* danger. If you have ever watched an episode of the American television series from the late '50s, you would know that the Cleaver family in the show sport 'straight' haircuts: short-back-and-sides, bowl-cuts; call them what you will. I am not sure how many haircuts I have had in Kuwait, but each one has been of the aforementioned variety. At the saloon near my apartment, there is a big-bellied Pakistani who often cuts my hair, his huge barrel-gut pressing into my arms or shoulders while he does so. He always makes the same comment: 'Very beautiful style. Is how is hair in Karachi.' I have never asked him to give me a haircut that is all the rage in Karachi, but that's what he does. I am sure he thinks I like it that way – I keep coming back – and I am also sure that if I ever went to Karachi, I would see *Leave it to Beaver* on local television.

You cannot discuss saloons in Kuwait without talking about violence. There are Pakistani saloons, Sri Lankan saloons, Egyptian saloons, Moroccan saloons, Indian saloons and more, and at each one you are beaten to within a falafel of your life. My first haircut in Kuwait was at a Sri Lankan saloon where, by coincidence, the television was tuned to an Australia versus Sri Lanka cricket match. All the barbers were watching, and Australia won a close match that was in its final stages as my turn in the chair came. My anxiety was heightened by the Sri Lankan angst that permeated the saloon, but my hair was cut without incident and, after being shown the rear of my head and agreeing that it was good – it wasn't, but I just wanted to get out of there – I tried to stand. The barber pushed me down, messed up my hair violently, and attacked my scalp. It felt like he was pulling the skin from the bridge of my nose to the top of my head. Then he started hitting me; there is no other word for it. My father would call it a 'clip behind the ear' and I received several. Then he started punching me in the back. The sound of his fists thudding into me reverberated around the saloon. I looked up at the television and saw the Australian players celebrating; I was sure that the Sri Lankan was taking out his frustration on me. Then he started to 'wring my neck,' squeezing and pressing the same spot. I don't know if there is such a thing as a passive-aggressive massage but, if there is, that Sri Lankan gave me one. I realised later that my beating had nothing to do with the cricket; you get one at every saloon.

After I arrived in the Middle East my ear-hair began to grow. I have always despised the old guys who let the grey shrubbery spill from their ears. Now I was in danger of being ridiculed for the same thing. I think it was during my third Middle-Eastern haircut that an eagle-eyed Egyptian barber spotted my ear-hair. He pointed at it and gestured to a plastic pot on the ledge below the mirror. There was a moment when we both paused to look at each other. I can't be sure, but it seemed that everyone was watching us. If there had been a pianola in the saloon, it would have stopped playing. I nodded slowly and felt like a gunslinger accepting a challenge: 'Bring on the wax, *Habibi*. I can take it'.

The barber switched on an appliance – it looked like a little coffee pot – and filled it with wax. I could soon smell how hot it was. He took a flat wooden stick and dipped it into the wax, moved close, and twisted my ear-lobe so it faced upwards. He forced some wax in. Burning pain. Hatred towards all Egyptians. More wax flowing down my ear-hole. For some reason I thought of *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. He coated the outside of my ears. I looked in the mirror at the huge monstrous mottled green lumps on each side of my head. My friend took a photograph.

It is perhaps not a surprise that you feel pain when your ears are covered on the inside and outside by hot wax. What *is* a surprise is the level to which the pain increases after a vicious Australian-hating Egyptian tears the wax from your ears. The pain surpasses any you have known: the broken arm; the kidney stone; the girl in grade three who ran off with your best friend; the 1981 Grand Final. And then, when you think you are over the worst of it, the barber takes a cotton bud and dips it into the wax. He comes close again and pushes the cotton bud into your ear canal. Without touching the sides, he thrusts it like a pain-seeking missile until it hits something, perhaps your ear-drum, and it hurts like hell. He puts another cotton bud in the other ear and when the pain has died a little you look in the mirror again. Perhaps a tear wells. People look at you. You look at you. A monkey with a white stick coming out of each raw pink ear. The final insult is when the wax on the cotton bud dries and hardens and the barber pulls it out. It feels as if your ear-drum is coming, too. He shows you the cotton bud; you are face-to-bud with a disgusting green-tipped cluster of grey hair. The expression on his face says: 'Look! This is what I took from your ear, you disgusting man'. The shame of it all.

The first time I had my ears waxed I couldn't believe how smooth they became. They were a little sensitive for half a day, but I could put up with that. I began to monitor my ear-hair closely. Sometimes the barber did not ask if I wanted my ears waxed, so I'd just have a haircut. Then I grew bold; I asked for the wax. I toughed it out. I went the extra mile. The end justified the means. I won't say that I began to enjoy my haircuts, but I could bear them, and I became an active rather than passive participant in the saloon community. I started to say, 'Asalaam a'lykum' when I walked into a saloon. I even talked to some of the barbers as they cut my hair. For perhaps the first time since I was seven-years-old, I was comfortable having my hair cut. The wax seemed to bond me, if the pun can be pardoned, to the saloon community. My hair, although thinning, receding, and greying, was nonetheless neat. My ear-holes were immaculate. I might not have looked forty any more, but my ears looked twenty-five. All was good with the world – until a Moroccan barber bent down in front of me and looked up my nose.

I bought a hair removal device the day after the Moroccan suggested I should wax my nose. I couldn't countenance having my nasal hair waved in front of my face. My new device doesn't work as well as the wax, but it is safer and I can remove the shrubbery in the privacy of my home. I still go to the saloon near my apartment, but I wait until my hair is completely unmanageable before getting it cut; I try to keep the conversation with the barber to a minimum; I abstain from wax; I tell them not to rub my head or shoulders or back any more. I am too old to get beaten up. It is a delicate balance between getting done what needs to be done and having a psychological breakdown.

The last time I went to the saloon the chubby Pakistani was there. He greeted me warmly and slapped the barber's chair with his towel. I sat down, said 'Just a trim,' and waited for my *Leave it to Beaver* cut. The light reflecting off the mirror seemed different. I looked at the reflection of the building across the road and saw that it was being demolished. The half that had been knocked over was throwing additional light into the saloon, and I could see the Gulf in the distance. I sucked in my chin for the Pakistani and he put tape around my neck. His stomach pressed into me as he wet my hair and I looked at myself and felt old. I'd solved the ear-hole hair problem but what about the hair on my head? Was I going to be one of those guys with three or four strands twirled around on top? I'd once asked the Pakistani to cut my hair short, like a crew-cut, but he wouldn't allow it. 'Kuwait sun hot. Need hair.' I acquiesced, but realised immediately that his point was, well, pointless. I hardly walk anywhere. I think he just likes my hair the way they wear it in Karachi.

When a loud noise came from the building site, he stopped cutting and looked across the road. 'Always work. Noise too much. Dust too much.'

'At least you can see the Gulf now,' I said.

He looked at me in the mirror and smiled. 'Saloon with view.'

Mystery Dinner

Suzanne Kamata

Earlier in the day, the streets of Tokushima had been jammed with cars on their way to, or in avoidance of, the annual marathon. Now, at five o'clock in the evening, there were just a few automobiles and fewer pedestrians. On the way to the entertainment district, I came across a group of young men in running gear, their numbers still pinned to their shirts. They staggered from exertion, perhaps on their way to some private celebration.

My old friend Lance, a Hawaiian in an aloha shirt and long ponytail, had started organising 'mystery dinners' five years ago. Although I'd been intrigued by the idea of joining a group to sample courses at three secret locations in one evening, I'd never signed up. My Japanese husband had to go out drinking often with his colleagues, but he didn't like meeting new people, and we had two children, one of whom was disabled. I mostly stayed home, alone, with a glass of a wine and a good book.

I had known Lance for over 20 years. We worked together at a nearby Board of Education as EFL teachers in the public schools. Now he was a full-time instructor at a local private university, and I had just been demoted due to budget cuts, power plays, or perhaps my own ineptness – who knows? – from full-time contracted lecturer to part-time teacher. I was feeling down and in need of a distraction to take my mind off my fall from grace (and income bracket). This would be my last splurge for a while.

When I arrived at the meeting place, Lance quickly introduced me to the rest of our small group: Colleen, a strawberry blonde from Colorado; Shintaro, a tall, thirty-something Japanese man with a punk-inspired haircut and a sprinkling of white whiskers on his chin; and Rachel from Oklahoma, who taught at a language school run by a former Japanese Scrabble champion. Lance glanced at his watch and told us that two others would be meeting us in front of the first as-yet undisclosed restaurant. 'Ready to go?' he asked. A light rain was falling, so we unfurled our umbrellas and followed him down the street and into a back alley.

'I was a little nervous about going into this restaurant at first,' Lance confessed.

Lance? Nervous? I was surprised. I knew that part of his reason for starting the Mystery Dinner series was to encourage foreign residents to try out new, out-of-the-way eateries. It doesn't take much courage to go into a chain restaurant, or one that has an easily understood array of fake food in the front window, but foreigners new to Tokushima might miss out on the more intimate spaces and original dishes prepared in smaller restaurants. Most menus at these places are only in Japanese, after all. But Lance was always posting photos on Instagram of himself eating exotic treats in unusual places: horse sashimi at a tiny bar in Osaka, absinthe in Tokyo, noodles simmered with the meat of wild boar on a mountainside in Shikoku. I had always thought of him as an intrepid explorer, the Robert F. Scott of restaurants. I didn't think that Lance was ever shy around any kind of people or food.

We met up with the other two participants – Peter, a Chinese-Canadian, who had just finished the marathon, and Jana, a Slovenian researcher – in front of a popular Mexican restaurant. This would not be a night for burritos, however. Lance led us to a small shop with a yellow Mini parked in front. There were no windows from which to peer inside, only a sliding door with slotted wood, meant to resemble a bamboo forest. From outward appearances, it could have been

'Mystery Dinner.' Suzanne Kamata.

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one of those If-you-have-to-ask-the-price-you-can't-afford-it or If-you-aren't-invited-you-won't-be-welcome places, but Lance had checked it out beforehand.

'I read about this place in a magazine,' he told us. 'It's called Mocchan.'

When we entered through the flap of indigo blue cloth, the action behind the counter was boisterous. We were welcomed and led to a small, private tatami room. After shucking our shoes, we crowded around the table, which was already set with pottery platters heaped with what looked like potato salad.

'This is the store's signature dish: potato salad made with daikon pickles,' Lance announced. Wafers, the kind that usually encase ice cream, were stabbed into the sides of the mounds. Interesting, I thought.

We ordered drinks, and grabbed chopsticks. There were no utensils for serving, so I switched my chopsticks around to the ends that I wouldn't be eating from to scoop a few bites onto my plate, and then switched them back, in Japanese fashion. The potato salad had a nice crunch and a smoky flavor from the pickles.

Peter was sitting across from me. I learned that he had been teaching English in Japan for five years, and would soon be returning to Vancouver. He didn't have a job lined up, but he didn't seem scared. He had come to Tokushima on the same government-sponsored scheme that had brought me to Japan almost thirty years ago. During my second year on the program, I'd met the Japanese P.E. teacher whom I would marry. For my first eleven years in Japan, I'd worked full-time, earning almost as much as my husband. But when I gave birth to our twins, fourteen weeks prematurely, I'd had to quit working. Our daughter was multiply disabled, and since we had little support, and there were no short buses or home helpers, my teaching career had been on hold until three years ago, when I'd finally been hired as a full-time lecturer at the public university. Alas, that was about to end. But I didn't want to think about that tonight.

The server brought plates of tempura-fried stuffed lotus root, and lightly sautéed firefly squid, which is only briefly in season, and is so named because the tiny squid flicker in the water. The latter was wrapped in bamboo leaves.

'What is that underlying taste?' Lance asked, savouring the squid. 'Miso? Soy?'

We tried to guess the secret ingredients while talking of Lance's recent walking tour of Kyoto. He'd been with a tree expert, so we got onto the subject of the communication of trees, and then onto pests, and then wasps. As it turned out, Shintaro had a PhD in entomology, though he now worked as a researcher at a major pharmaceutical company.

After an hour, it was time to move on to the next restaurant. On the way out, Lance asked about the squid recipe. The cook said that he'd used only a bit of salt.

We walked down the rain-wet streets to another tucked-away establishment, this time with an Italian flag out front.

'This is Anji,' Lance said.

I liked the mix of nationalities. It was one of the delightful surprises of the evening.

Since it was still relatively early (Lance likes to hold these dinners during off-hours, since we are only sampling from the menu, not ordering full courses, which are more lucrative for the business owners), the restaurant was empty. We settled at a long wooden table. Grunge-like music spewed from the speakers. Along one wall were shelves of olive oil and tomatoes, and handmade wooden coasters for sale. The menu was scrawled on a blackboard in Japanese.

'Ame-ri-can-o piz-za,' I read. This selection was underlined with a red squiggle. It appeared to be pizza topped with French fries. But that wasn't what Lance had ordered for us. The owner, a trim Japanese guy with longish hair and an immaculate white shirt, came over to greet us. A younger server took our drink orders. Peter and I decided to split a small bottle of sparkling rice wine. The others ordered glasses of red.

Lance explained that the restaurant was an off-shoot of a previous Italian restaurant, and that the owner was a veteran restaurateur, who'd put an original spin on his menu. First up, he brought out dishes of tripe in tomato sauce flecked with wasabi leaves.

'I love tripe,' Peter said. He extolled the virtues of stewed tripe *a la chinoise*. I'd never had it before, and I probably wouldn't have ordered it myself, but the tomato sauce was excellent.

The sparkling sake arrived with the richly flavored balsamic chicken and mashed potatoes. Peter poured us each a glass, and the others, curious, asked to smell it. 'Fruity,' Rachel said, after inhaling from the glass. 'Kind of floral,' Lance added. I swirled it in my mouth, tasting its delicate fruity, floral sweetness.

We ordered bread for sopping up the sauces. 'It's homemade,' the owner told us.

'I carbed so hard last night,' Peter said, helping himself to a slice. No doubt he was in need of more carbohydrates after his 45k run.

We tried to guess what was in the chicken sauce. *Demi-glace*? Soy? We talked about the Cooking Dog on YouTube. Someone mentioned the UFO Table café, a restaurant associated with a local anime studio, which had a manga theme. Then we got onto the subject of anime and manga. Rachel said that she had learned all about figure skating from a manga. I told them my daughter was a manga fan.

'What's her favourite?' Colleen asked me.

'*Naruto*,' I said. It was about a ninja. 'But lately she's into this one with zombies at Versailles.'

'Oh, I know it,' said Peter, and he began to describe the preposterous, convoluted plot.

'Because manga,' Lance said, with a laugh.

'Because manga,' Peter agreed.

When we'd cleared the plates of the last of the spaghetti pepperoncini, which had the interesting addition of cabbage, we donned our coats, slung on our bags and backpacks, and headed for dessert. I walked with Colleen, and learned that she had relocated to Tokushima from Fukushima after the triple disaster – earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown – of 11 March 2011. We talked about Japanese men, and I told her a little about my daughter.

After a five-minute stroll, we arrived at Oz, an old-fashioned ice cream parlour. The front window was filled with brightly coloured fake ice cream sundaes. The interior had a retro feel with faux Tiffany lamps, and little round tables. The proprietor had set up tables for us on the second floor. We climbed the narrow staircase. Peter was wincing, by now the marathon having taken its toll on his legs. Colleen, Lance, and I sat at one table, the others at another.

'We're getting the Strawberry Tower,' Lance told us. It looked huge on the menu: a foot-tall glass mug filled with ice cream, whipped cream, gelatin, and fresh strawberries.

'This place serves a lot fewer cornflakes, and a lot more ice cream,' Lance said, referring to the Japanese custom of using dry cereal as filler in parfaits. 'And it's homemade on site.'

We ordered coffee, which arrived in pottery cups. I lifted mine to check for the stamp of the local Otani Yaki potters, but found an owl face instead. 'Hey, guys, look at the bottoms of your cups,' I said. Lance's had a pig, Shintaro's a rabbit's face, Rachel's a cat.

The owner brought two humongous parfaits, one by one, and set them on our tables. I took a long-handled spoon from a cup on the table. I realised that we would be eating out of the same dish, date-style, and although I thought of my germ-a-phobic family in America, the household in which we never drank out of the same cup, I shrugged and dug in. At this point in the dinner, we had achieved a kind of intimacy. Colleen asked if she could add me as a friend on Facebook. Of course, I agreed.

'The next Mystery Dinner will probably be at the end of April,' Lance said.

If I wanted to participate, I would have to save. Around that time, I would be getting the final instalment of my salary. For the past three years, our family had been able to afford to go out to dinner once or twice a month, but before that, it had been once or twice a year. We would have to return to our austere ways, especially since my son would be off to college soon – a sobering thought. Tonight, however, I had been able to forget about my problems.

After we scraped the last of the ice cream from our dishes, we got ready to leave. The four other North Americans and Jana were going to prolong the dinner with drinks at a bar, but I wanted to make the last train home. A taxi ride would cost ten times more. I walked toward the station with Shintaro, the guy who'd wanted to be an insect specialist, but who'd had to settle for something else. I asked him where he was from originally.

'Kobe.'

'The big city! Do you like Tokushima?'

He said that he did, and that he would go surfing the next day, something that he couldn't do in ultra-cosmopolitan Kobe. I liked living in Tokushima, too, but I wasn't quite sure how I would be able to continue to do so. My husband thought I should find a job in another prefecture, but I wasn't sure that I wanted to live by myself, even after our son had gone off to college.

'Well, I go this way,' I said, veering to the right. 'Good night!'

It occurred to me that beyond the delicious food, the good company, and lively conversation, there was a lesson for me in the Mystery Dinner. With the exception of Lance, I had never met any of these people before. Before this evening, I had never been to the three restaurants we'd visited, never sampled tripe or sparkling sake. Beforehand, I hadn't known exactly what I was getting into, and yet I'd had a great time.

I moved on, towards my train home.

Almost Home

Leyla Savsar

Hawally, Kuwait. 6 September 1997, 10:00 pm

The lights in the hall flicker before going out. Everything is swallowed whole by the soundless dark. I pull the covers, a net of safety, all the way over my head and squeeze my eyes shut in defence against the smothering pitch black that weighs down on my small silhouette. My breath catches in my throat as I cry, 'Mo-oomy!' I don't dare move a muscle until I hear whispers and see feet shuffling under the narrow crack beneath the door. The knob turns. Peering through half-open eyes, I breathe a sigh of relief as Bilal's frame towers over my bed. 'Hey,' he whispers. The bed creaks under his weight as he sits next to my pillow.

'There's nothing to worry about. Just a power shortage. We'll have it fixed in no time.'

The fierce desert wind howls outside.

'I'm scared,' I whine.

'Here, let me show you something cool.'

He extends his arm, pulling me close into a bear hug as he waves his digital Casio watch in front of my face, now illuminated in a reassuring green-blue glow that reflects off his glasses. And just like that, the shadows dancing across his face chase the ones shrouding me, alleviating the darkness. The big, bold numbers read 10:00 pm on a Saturday night.

'Wow!' I exclaim, my fears forgotten.

'Neat, huh? See, there's nothing to be afraid of. I promise you'll get adjusted to your new room and bed in no time. We all will. And it'll probably be easier to do if you can't see anything anyway.' He chuckles at his own joke. 'You know our room is right across the hall, so you can just holler whenever you need me or Selim.'

'Now go to sleep or you'll miss the first day of school tomorrow.' He ruffles my hair, tucking me in.

Talking into the darkness, two people being honest. The power returns and light streams in from the hall just as he shuts the door behind him. I listen to the sound of his footsteps fading, muffled by the carpet.

Izmit, Turkey. 17 August 1999, 4:00 am

Darkness weighs heavily, no matter where you are. It creeps up on you without warning. This time it's not a power outage, and Bill does not respond to my distressed call as he promised he would. I don't need his Casio watch to tell me the time or date. I know because I'm starting the second grade in about a month and Bill is supposed to be going back for his second semester at Penn State University. I don't, however, know that the reason there's no blanket to pull over my head this time is because there's no ceiling above me. The once rock-solid constructs of our home have all been demolished and Izmit, a city 56 miles east of Istanbul, has been reduced to rubble and dust. Buried beneath the remains of what used to be a home, a sanctuary of warmth and safety, a six-year-old comes to realise that there is no such thing as stability, and even rigid landscapes are not so rigid after all. Things move and people depart. All four of us, except Bill, can attest to that. Buried alive, we are phoenixes born out of the ashes, mounds of memories

'Almost Home.' Leyla Savsar.

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excavated from the remains of what used to be home. Even a six-year-old knows that a house, without its pillars, is doomed to implode; that a family is bound to collapse if it loses a member. But this reality is hard to accept. The child desperately wants to believe that there are other walls and pillars, other homes sturdier than this, where other six-year-olds, tucked safe and sound in bed, can simply open their eyes...

American Creativity Academy (ACA), Kuwait. 11 September 2000, 1:30 pm

I blink in confusion as I hear my name being called. 'Leyla, sweetheart, would you like to share with us what happened last summer?'

The teacher gestures to me to come up front. The whispers halt and a growing silence settles on the tables and chairs, into the cubbies like dust, as it invades the fidgeting bodies in Ms Bobby's second grade classroom. I make my way towards the teacher's table where I take a seat on her office chair. It wobbles under my frail frame and I slide to the edge, planting my feet on the ground. I struggle with the question. Too shy to speak up, too timid to remain silent with everybody's eyes on me, I dig deeper into the shafts of my mind, where I choose to uncover the image of darkness as it is chased away by the glow of a Casio watch. I stay in here for a few more seconds. I like it here, where places are clearly charted and home means stability, where there is no room for the flaws of man-made structures, the shortcomings of nature, or the ruthlessness of those second-grade kids who'll cast me out of their stupid games just because I'm different. I finally respond to Ms Bobby's question after what seems like hours but what are only a few minutes.

'My eldest brother, Bilal, died in an earthquake in Istanbul last summer.' I try to ignore the twenty pairs of eyes staring at me.

'We're sorry for your loss, sweetheart.' Ms Bobby touches my shoulder as I make my way back to my seat in silence.

Kuwait International Airport. 1 September 1997, 9:00 am

'Oww, quit pinching me!' I cry out as Dad's friend backs his Chevrolet Corvette from the Arrivals lane.

'Quit squirming and sit still, loser,' taunts my eleven-year-old brother Selim, who is looking for amusement on this short ride from the airport. Some things never change, no matter how far you move or wherever you go.

'Moommy, tell Selim to stop!'

My mother turns around with a scowl on her face. 'Bilal, why don't you sit in the middle, honey, and keep those two in check?' My eldest brother, seventeen years old, switches sides and takes my place without a word.

A short drive later, a hard wave of heat hits us as we spill out of the car. 'Woah, Mommy, look!' I tug at her sleeve, my curiosity and excitement clouded by an iota of disappointment. Instead of pastel-coloured falling leaves, I'm greeted by palm trees, their fronds at once friendly and foreign, like nodes of a life branching out before me; modern buildings propped up on vast, flat, dusty landscapes; wide roads with expensive cars zipping by; locals in black and white robes and foreigners in run-of-the mill western clothes.

'So freakin' hot,' Selim complains, shielding his eyes against the sun.

'What's new?' Bill asks.

'Come on, I'll race you!' I don't let the heat put a dent in my spirit as I race to greet our new apartment, which is situated in a relatively peaceful complex. I come to a halt by the door and

Selim nudges me as we tumble inside the apartment, the place that is to become home for the next sixteen years.

My brothers linger behind as I skip in and out of the rooms, down the long hall, and into the spacious living room with its great tinted windows that both refract and absorb the fierce sun. 'Hello!' I yell, testing the acoustics in the empty space. Selim joins me by the window where we stand in silence, taking it all in. He elbows my side, pointing out at a pastry shop that's still under construction like pretty much everything else in the surrounding vicinity. The purple and white sign that reads 'New York Deli' with the Statue of Liberty is jarringly out of place, but I'm to find out that binaries find home here. Everything feels foreign, yet also oddly familiar. It's like someone was expecting us but forgot to make the beds, or left their clothes in a heap on the floor. I can't wait to explore the rest of Hawally, this sun-bathed, dust-ridden neighbourhood with its funny name.

Sunlight streams into my room as the curtains are pulled apart, illuminating the clutter around my bed. 'Rise and shine! Hadi, hadi,' my mother says in Turkish. I don't need much coaxing because I'm already up, my face twisted in a nervous smile as I both anticipate and dread my first day of kindergarten. 'Hurry up and eat your breakfast. We'll walk together.'

I stuff my face with some menemen, Turkish sauté of eggs and minced vegetables, and wash it all down with OJ, but the food refuses to calm the butterflies in my belly. I'm suddenly overcome with the desire to rush back to bed.

The hot wind blows dust particles in my face as I try to keep my eyes open. 'Mom, Bill told me that camels have three eyelids for extra protection. I think I need three eyelids too.' She chuckles. 'Mommy, so many cars!' We weave around and through whatever empty space we can find amidst the honking bodies of steel: BMWs, Lexus, Mercedes, Landrovers, and other luxurious cars, some with Indian drivers and some with fathers or mothers at the wheels. We reach the blue gates just in time as siblings, mothers and Asian helpers accompany the young students into the building. I cling to my mother's hand as we make our way through the muddle of sounds, in both English and Arabic. My mother is a little flustered but clearly unfazed.

'You be a good girl and have fun now, tamam? Ok? Bilal will pick you up after school.' She kisses the top of my head and exchanges a few words with my teacher, Ms Patricia Toofan.

'Hello, Leyla.' Ms Patricia greets me with a honey-sweet smile and in a velvety, high-pitched voice. I already love her.

'Hi, Ms Patricia.' I smile back shyly. She leads me by the hand as I catch sight of a boy screeching at the top of his lungs as he claws at the door like a terrified cat, refusing to go inside. Maybe it's his first time in a new country, too. I try to picture the butterflies flying out of my belly as I register the cacophony of languages around me. Ms Patricia's hand feels reassuring in mine as we step inside the air-conditioned classroom.

'There you are!' 2:30 pm and he's right on time. I spot his boots first, then his tall, lean frame in jeans and his Lee USA tee-shirt as white and radiant as the smile he's wearing. I jump up, more than ready to leave the chaos behind. Pretending to scout the scene, he swiftly pulls out a chocolate egg, my favourite, from behind him like a magic trick. I reach over, but the egg disappears.

'Mom said to save it for after dinner.' He winks. 'How was your first day?'

The words pour out. 'And then the stupid boys kept messing up our puzzles and annoying us so me and my new best friend played in the corner ...'

'I told you there was nothing to worry about. You've already made friends.' I wonder if he ever worries about living up to the standards of different places and people.

'Where are we going?' I ask, tugging at his hand.

'Sam's place, of course.'

It is the sunset-orange apartment facing our earth-toned one. We climb the steps in unison, his boots kicking up the dust. Sam is Bill's best friend from high school and he often spends the weekends at our place because he loves my mother's cooking. Today is the day I get to spend time with Bill's classmates for the first time. He knocks on the door, which sends the butterflies flying back into my tummy.

Being a four-year-old with an animated giggle, I'm the centre of attention for a while ('Leyla, over here! ... 'Your little sister is adorable!') but Bill doesn't seem to mind at all. I sit back on the couch and resume my habitual silence to watch them interact over Risk, a strategy board game I'm not yet old enough to understand. They sit cross-legged on the floor, surrounded by local and American snacks.

'Imad, you sure you're not playing?' Bill sets up the game.

'Yeah, I'm good with being the referee in case this ... escalates.'

'It's no battle, it's just a game, bro,' Bill laughs as Imad, his classmate from Pakistan, shrugs.

'C'mon, let's get it on. I'm attacking you in, uh, in Red Square,' someone exclaims.

'Dude, I don't have any armies in Russia. You're in Russia!'

'Oh, then I'm attacking myself in Russia.'

I watch the players navigate the board, receiving armies and forming units as they attempt to dominate the world, competing against one another. By the time Bill and I decide to walk back home, it's dark outside.

'Who got to conquer the world, Bill?'

'Nobody.'

'Your friends are nice.'

'I think so too. I sure am going to miss them.' His smile disappears like the setting sun.

The horizon is a thread of crimson, dust intermingled with dusk. I try not to think about Bill returning to his birthplace, Pennsylvania, for college as we walk back home in silence.

Kuwait. 25 December 1998, 2:50 pm

Bilal and Selim are wrestling over tapes and cassettes. The brotherly banter halts as I walk into the room, tripping over Doc Martins. The smell of freshly baked Turkish börek, puffed pastry, wafts from the kitchen. Brushing aside his tousled brown-blond hair, parted down the middle, just as I remember it, Bill pushes his glasses up his nose and beams at me. 'There you are. Look at how tall you've grown! Come see what I brought you.' He beckons me over. I'm surprised to find that I'm overcome with shyness at having to greet a family member after being months apart. I sit on his lap as his hands, dried and cracked by the harsh Pennsylvanian winter, reveal a stuffed animal. 'The Nittany lion!' I exclaim. My very own replica of Penn State University's mascot. Back from his first semester, Bill is here to spend the first Christmas break with us. 'Thanks, Bill. I'll call him ... Penny.' I hug my brother tightly; it's like he never left.

West Housing Area, Pennsylvania State University, USA. 30 May 2000

Bilal, always anticipating the year 2000, won't be here to greet it. Jet-lagged and exhausted, we pack his belongings in this cramped, dishevelled dorm room. My eyes search for his Casio watch, but it's nowhere to be found. His roommates are at a loss for words as we gather the stuff

and leave. The Nittany lion glistens in the sun, beaming with pride. I look down at the grass beneath my feet 6,000 miles away from home. The grass is always greener on the other side; I've heard this phrase from my teachers so many times, but I don't find the grass comparable. It just is. We're due back in Kuwait tomorrow night. And so we continue to leave behind the people and places laced with bittersweet memories.

Hawally, Kuwait. 9 June 2000. 2:52 pm

A few weeks later Dad receives an email titled 'thoughts on Bilal.' He prints it and reads it out loud to us:

Dear Mr. Savsar and family,

It's Todd from Penn State...I must say I was shocked, but glad that you and your family came to visit ... I just wanted to write today to tell you what an absolute joy it was to know and to share a room with Bilal ... He was always there when I needed a friend. He truly was and always will be a credit to you and your family ... Everything was easy-going with Bilal. Everyone on the surrounding floors gravitated to Bilal given the chance to meet him. Kurt still talks about the adventures they had playing around with his flight stimulator game ... He came here well acquainted with, but not knowing much about, American satire and comedy as expressed in shows like 'Seinfeld,' or 'The Simpsons,' but by the time second semester rolled around, Bilal was the funniest guy around. He was not a hermit ... I remember Nick and I waiting on move-in day for him to come off the elevator, turn the corner with his jeans on in 85 degree weather (shorts for us) shouting something sarcastic with a big smile behind it. That's an image of Bilal I'll always remember. I will close by only repeating what I said earlier: Bilal was one of our dearest friends up at school and he will be in our hearts and thoughts forever.

In loving memory,

Sincerely,

Todd

My father puts the letter down. I'm not sure what a hermit is, but I hope I won't turn into one.

Kuwait International Airport. 25 March 2003, 12:00 pm. Destination: Turkey

School isn't out yet, but everybody is en route to safety. Nobody's willing to stick around and witness the second Gulf War break out. Mrs Nancy is sending us home with our assignment packets. War or no war, we have to pass the fourth grade. Dad thinks we're lucky we have a place in which to seek refuge. I trip over suitcases and makeshift beds before finding a spot for all of us. It feels cosy here with everybody in this port of passage with passports in hand. Almost like home.

American Academy, Kuwait. Senior Year. 10 March 2010, 1:00 pm

High school remains unchanged, oblivious to my comings and going, my dislocation. The shrill sound of the whistle resonates through the gym, followed by the squeak of sneakers on the linoleum floor. 'Over here, pass here!' yells a member of the other team. She runs over to the hoop where I block her. I catch the ball mid-air and pass it over to a teammate. I expect to receive the pass from her but she ignores me. 'Dribble before step there!' Mrs Megan steps in

with her ear-piercing whistle. Gym sucks when your teammates aren't exactly cooperating. The rest of the game goes on in a similar manner, with most of my teammates blatantly ignoring my attempts to receive. I continue to go through the motions, slipping on a mask of indifference.

Now the ball is being dribbled by a promising senior with glasses, whose brown-blond hair is parted down the middle. It's received by a Pakistani boy who likes to play referee, and is thrown into the hoop by an American who savours Turkish dishes. I imagine the players dispersed across a board game playing against one another. I imagine winning the game and signing an imaginary peace treaty. But my hands are tired and they sting from all the dribbling. So I imagine I'm the ball bouncing back in any direction I choose.

The bell rings for the final time at 2:30. Ms Meredith stops me on my way out to return my writing workshop portfolio with the final assignment, a six-word autobiography: Packing and unpacking, suitcases worn out. 'Great work here and throughout the semester, Leyla. You should pursue writing one way or another.'

It occurs to me that this might really be all I need to fit in.

Hawally, Kuwait. 30 July 2014, 10:00 am

Immigration forms and student documents: check. Books: check. Heavy winter coat: check. The remaining weeks of this summer are spent packing as I prepare to leave for graduate studies at Boston University. I zip my bag closed and look around the half-empty room. Philip Larkin was right, I think to myself, as I recall the lines:

Home is so sad. It stays as it was left,
Shaped to the comfort of the last to go
As if to win them back.

The final unopened box that Mom recovered from the storage sits on my unmade bed, which almost appears to be telling me that I won't be gone long. Unboxing the contents, I find my Nittany lion, Bill's senior yearbook, and his Casio watch, which I thought was long lost. Unbelieving, I open the yearbook to the introductory page:

Kuwait is a country which has survived against apparently overwhelming odds. Despite these setbacks, the people have proved again and again that they are both adaptable and tenacious. Kuwait has never failed to provide the population with a diverse community. From the United States to Australia, people of all ethnic, national, and religious backgrounds come together ... Senior Bilal Savsar from Turkey commented: 'I like the fact that there is such a diverse population in such a small country.'

Dazed, I flip through until I come across a personal piece with his name and the date 1996 typed in the top corner:

'I have finally made up my mind, we are moving next year,' said my father one dark, rainy afternoon. Just as it seemed that I was adjusting to my surroundings, change came once again. This time, we would be moving to Kuwait. What really affected me was the fact that I would be leaving Saudi Arabia: my residence of the past 13 years ...

The word residence leaps out of the page. I can't help but notice that he has chosen it over home. But then again, what difference does it make?

During my last night in Saudi Arabia, I spoke to my close friend Mustafa. His words really stirred something within: 'You take everything too seriously. It's not good for you. Take everything easy ... and if people don't accept you for who you are, let it be their loss.' It was as

if my whole outlook on life changed. Things that had always pressured me before didn't do so as much. Perhaps these words really affected me because no one ever directly addressed them to me. Perhaps it was because they came from a good friend on a last night together.

A car revs outside and feet shuffle in the hall, jolting me back to the present. This is the moment that finds me almost home, and the best thing about it is that I haven't moved an inch. I didn't need to. I place everything back inside the box and reseal it, all the while holding on to the Casio watch.

Mumbai in Focus: Two Stories

Murzban. F. Shroff

1. Mental about Mumbai

It was an angry woman, Kitayun Dinshaw, who stepped onto Marine Drive, seeking relief from an issue that had whipped at her mind and made her heart ache with despair. Her city, her beloved Mumbai, was threatened by an underground metro which would strip it clean of five thousand trees. Yes, 5000, imagine! From flowering gulmohars to sturdy banyans, some over a hundred years old, and as much a part of the city's heritage as its Gothic and Art Deco structures. By cutting the trees, the underground water table would be affected; the risk of floods would increase. Had the city planners gone mad? Had they forgotten that terrible flood of 2005, when the city had received, over two days, 94 centimetres of hard rain? Then, the highways had been flooded, the airports had been closed, railway platforms and railway tracks had disappeared underwater. In certain parts of the city, the water level had risen up to four and a half metres. Trees had been uprooted, walls and fences had come crashing down, cars had turned turtle, and a landslide had swept away a hundred lives belonging to the poor. They should know: when it came to floods, Mumbai had a history, or rather a propensity. The drains would choke easily, and sometimes it was days before the floods would recede.

Thinking about this, she had seethed all day. It had happened before and could happen again. Who was that great poet who had said, the great tragedy of human existence is not that we suffer but that we forget? Truly! Truly! The amputations were there for all to see. Along Princess Street, P.M. Road, Churchgate ... all the way up to Cuffe Parade.

She had hurried past the gaping spaces and the stumps, aware of a growing lump in her throat, aware of a rising bilious rage. Heart pounding, she stepped onto Marine Drive, hoping the sea breeze would assuage her anger. It never failed her, this sea-swept expanse that gave the city its fortuitous beauty. It was here that Kitayun walked every evening, in track pants and colour-coordinated sport shoes that capped her feet like stockings. Daily, Kitayun would clock a full three kilometres, from Churchgate to Chowpatty, noting the different walking styles of people and trying to figure out the kind of people they were by their manner of stride. This was only one of the games she played with herself, a game of recreation, of secret impish delight. Then, of course, there was the joy of listening in on conversations: agitated vents about the stock market or the state of the economy, or – in the case of women – about boyfriend troubles, mother-in-law hassles, an absconding servant, and rising food prices. Farther up, past the gymkhanas, she'd get a kick out of seeing lovers snuggle up and steal a kiss and a promise.

This was, perhaps, the only place in Mumbai where life ceased to be agitated, where you were reminded that nature could still prevail over concrete: it could silence man's cravings and greed. Walking here had been her routine for years; it was non-negotiable and worked like meditation, like therapy. Sometimes, Kitayan would pause and watch the sunset. And just the sight of that

bright flaming orb taking its leave of the city was enough to calm her, to inspire within her the awe that was reserved for poets and philosophers.

She could do with that today, she thought; she was in time for the sunset. And turning onto the drive she saw the ball of fire in the sky. And, then, before her, she saw the sadhu, a skeleton of a man lying naked on his back, yes, brazenly naked, his nu-nu hidden in a fuzz of grey. This insolent man, lying on the parapet, stood between her and the sunset.

She looked around quickly to see if anyone else shared her outrage. Then, in the same line of vision, she saw two cops, a man and a woman, both very young, seated on the parapet, laughing and chatting happily. And farther down, standing on the parapet, backs to the sea, were groups of young boys and girls with their arms around one another, posing ecstatically for selfies.

What was this selfie culture? she wondered. People were taking pictures all the time, posting them on social media, and counting the 'likes' and 'shares'. She had been seeing this for months now. Friends hugging like lost-and-found siblings. Families posing like tourists. Lovers sitting side by side, each immersed in their cell phones. She was glad she hadn't been born into this generation, that she had missed it by thirty odd years. But right now what she felt was the black, heaving anger of youth, anger that drove her to the cops to say, 'Hello, don't you see that naked man? Don't you see how he exposes himself? Don't you think there are laws about that? Which you should be enforcing.'

The male cop looked at her and smiled. 'Madam, he is a sanyasi. He has renounced the world. How is he affecting you by lying there? If you don't like what you see, don't look, no. See those youngsters? Are they bothered?' He pointed to the selfie gang.

The lady cop said, 'I too am a woman, I know how bad you feel. But he is not misbehaving. If he did or said something, we will act at once. That we will not tolerate. You can be assured.' The male cop said, 'You just take your walk, no, madam. Enjoy the sea breeze and this beautiful view. Why you bother your head with this madman? See, you have to be a little mad, no, to be like this in public. But why we should bother ourselves with mad people? We should not give them any countenance. We should just ignore them.' He smiled at her again. Kitayun licked her lips.

'Yes,' she said, 'we should just ignore them. But, sometimes, the real mad people are not the ones we see, and yet they do us great harm. They cut our trees senselessly. And we are asked to ignore them. To turn our heads and walk away.'

'What are you saying, madam? We have not cut any trees. All that is decided by people in the municipality and in the government. We have no authority.' The male cop looked at her incredulously. His fingers tightened around the stick he was holding. He felt uncomfortable in the presence of this fair, middle-aged woman with unflinching eyes and high cheekbones.

'No, but you only have the authority to stop us when we try and protect our trees. You don't stop politicians when they hold morchas or when they put up illegal hoardings. But when we try and save our trees, you arrest us and treat us like common criminals.'

'See, madam, we don't know anything about that. We are here on duty only in the evenings. But if you like, we will go and speak to the sadhu. We will request him to go elsewhere.'

'The only place he should go to is prison. Such a man should not be allowed to roam free. He is a menace to decent society. That is the problem with our society. In the name of religion, anything goes. Nudity-fudity, building of illegal temples, shouting and dancing on the streets, and putting up mandaps and hoardings all over. Now are you going to do something about this

pervert, havaladar, or should I?’ Reluctantly, the male cop got to his feet and set off at a lethargic stride. The lady cop followed him. Approaching the sadhu, the male cop banged his stick against the wall of the parapet.

‘Kai re, baba, people are getting upset with you. Don’t you at least have a cloth to cover yourself? Why are you sleeping like this? As though you are in some forest.’

The sadhu turned his head away in the manner of an affronted child. ‘What is wrong with how I am?’ he said. ‘How does it concern you? Go away, you are disturbing my meditation.’ Seeing the cops, some of the walkers stopped and stood at a distance, watching.

Now Kitayan pushed herself forward and stood glowering over the sadhu. ‘Why, you scoundrel! You think we have come here only to look at your private parts? This is a public road, not your father’s house. Are you going to be on your way or not? Or should I ...?’ Grabbing the stick from the male cop, she started prodding the sadhu in the ribs and was surprised to find how soft and spongy his flesh was. The sadhu simply closed his eyes and began to mumble some mantra. The sun filled the sky till it was almost eye-level with the walkers. It glowed and dispatched its last rays of the day, and the ocean shimmered and sparkled, and more lovers and more friends leapt onto the parapet and took more pictures.

Suddenly, the sadhu sat up, and Kitayun lurched back. She averted her eyes from his nudity but was startled to see how young his face was and how large and clear his eyes were. His body, she noticed, had a famished look and his chest and stomach were full of shrubs of grey, scraggly hair.

‘Look, madam,’ the sadhu said. ‘I understand that you women like to dress up and look elegant. But to me, a man of God, all this makes no difference. And if you think this is vulgar, this natural state of mine, then it is you who have an impure mind, you who cannot digest creation. At this point, I am not a human being, madam, or a slave of society, but a creature of God. In as much as the sun and the sky are His.’

He raised his body and from under his buttocks whisked out an orange cloth folded into squares. Rising, he flicked open the cloth and wrapped it around himself with remarkable speed. ‘Now that I am decent enough for you and your society, madam, tell me something,’ he said. ‘It is the face that wears a thousand masks and lips that spout a thousand lies and yet, yet, it is the body we must cover up. What logic is that? What sense does that make?’ He paused, then said, ‘I am sorry, madam, sorry to have ruined your evening. That was not my intention. I am not a harsh man, nor an unkind one. I was only being one with nature. Looking at the sky, when all others are busy looking at themselves.’ With that, he began to walk away, so quickly that his legs barely seemed to touch the ground. The onlookers indicated their bewilderment to one another; then resumed their walk and forgot about him.

The male cop turned to Kitayun and said angrily, ‘See, I told you. He is a holy man, a sanyasi. See, how decent he was. And it is not good to disturb a sadhu, madam. Not good to upset him. He might have blessed us. Now I am sure he has cursed me. He has said something in his mind that will make me suffer.’ The lady cop placed a kindly hand on his shoulder and Kitayun noticed she had small fingers and blunt, unvarnished nails.

‘Arrey, forget him, no,’ she said. ‘If your faith is strong, then nothing can happen to you. No curse will work. Just say the name of God, a few dozen times, and all your troubles will vanish. Just like that!’ She clicked her fingers and smiled at him with warm, reassuring eyes.

Now Kitayun who was thinking of the sadhu's words – the face that wears a thousand masks – remembered how many letters she had written to the state government. To its various departments, officials, and ministers. Dear Sir, trees are the veins and arteries of Mumbai. They allow us to live, allow us to breathe ... it becomes our God-given duty to protect them.

And then some reassurances had followed: Oh, yes, yes, madam. Surely! Surely! We too know the importance of trees. In nature there is God. We see that. Feel for that. Respect that. But none of that was observed, none of that had been honoured. What had followed, instead, was this indiscriminate felling, even where it was not required, where there were no tracks to be laid. She had a name for that. The 'hacksaw murders,' she called them.

She tapped the lady cop on the shoulder. 'Which God is that? Which God will take away your troubles by simply uttering his name? Tell me, too, so I can ask him to save our city.' Without waiting for an answer, she began to walk away. She walked for about ten minutes, and soon the sky was filled with an orange-grey light. The sun went down, peeping like a schoolboy ordered to bed. Vendors came out and proffered their wares, children were gathered by their parents and ordered not to wander, and, at the side of the road, the traffic slowed and thickened.

Approaching the gymkhanas, Kitayun heard the sound of a bugle, a long-drawn-out wail that ripped through the silence of the evening. This was followed by another wail and another. She turned. She looked. And what she saw filled her heart with wonder. Coming up the road, in the midst of the traffic, was a procession of Victorias. There might have been twenty to thirty of them, all in a row: the silver carriages gleaming, the horses crowned with a crest of feathers, and in each carriage a uniformed trumpeter blowing a bugle, and a horseman – with the reins in his hand – turning and bowing to the onlookers with folded hands. Oh, what a sight this was! What a pleasure! thought Kitayun. And what pain, too! For this was the Victorias' last ride. The carriages had been banned after being a part of the city for almost three hundred years. They had been banned by the Mumbai High Court on grounds of animal cruelty and would never ply again.

It was almost like the city was saying goodbye to its history, thought Kitayun. To its trees, its traditions, its birds, its heritage. And how long before I too am part of the city's history? she wondered wryly. But this was not a moment to miss. It was a proud moment, a historic moment, and it needed to be captured and shared. Removing her cellphone from her pocket, Kitayun moved to the kerb and pushed her way through the groups of youngsters who were ready with their cellphones.

'Come on, guys,' she said. 'Make way for a lady! Learn to show some respect for age.'

2. The Gypsies of Grant Road¹

There are over 300,000 homeless people in Mumbai. They have left their villages and come to the city in search of work. Their lot is far worse than slum-dwellers, for they cannot afford to pay any rent. They survive entirely on daily wage work, and the pavement is their home. This makes them vulnerable to rats, disease, accidents, and displacement during the monsoons. As per a survey, the state government was expected to build 125 permanent shelters. The centre had allocated 1500-million rupees toward this project. But, to date, there are only seven shelters, most of them in a decrepit condition. This essay is a reminder of how Mumbai is constantly being called on to sacrifice its public spaces in order to accommodate its homeless.

The gypsies had been there ever since I could remember. There were men, women, and children. The men were dark, surly, and unwashed. They looked older than the women, who seemed too young to be mothers. And yet they were mothers, with babies at their breasts and runny-nosed infants to chase and berate for daring to venture beyond permissible limits. That venturing out could kill them, for this was outside Grant Road Station, on the main road.

The area occupied by the gypsies was a large quadrangle separated from the main road by an old rusted railing. The gypsies had made this their home, their camping ground. Where did they come from? From somewhere in North Gujarat, said the cops who were positioned outside the station, inside the quadrangle, cheek by jowl with the encroachers.

The cops had their office inside a chowky no larger than a tent. The chowky had a desk, two chairs, a wall calendar, and a small bench. The cops rarely sat inside. Only when the afternoon sun came up, you could see them sheltering inside, or when they had their ears picked by the ear-cleaners and did not want to be seen by passersby. Besides, the cops needed to be outdoors, where the action was.

Opposite the station, facing the gypsies' enclosure, were two bars: one, a ladies' bar, the other a country liquor bar. There was no door at the entrance of the country liquor bar, just a mouldy curtain on which people wiped their hands as they came in. The ladies' bar had a thick silver-plated door that gleamed like a dance backdrop in a Bollywood film. Its entrance was guarded by two bouncers, who were dressed alike, in black safari suits, and looked like twins.

Come seven in the evening and young sexily-clad women would draw up in cabs and step out into the bazaar, which was, again, exactly opposite the gypsies' enclosure. They would shop for fruit and vegetables, paying the vendors the prices they demanded. The vendors' delight knew no bounds. These women were the real memsahibs, they would think, as they watched them disappear into the ladies' bar. The cops would not interfere in the running of the bars. They were never seen crossing the road to check whether the women in the ladies' bar were actual waitresses or pick-ups and whether the male customers behaved appropriately with them.

The cops were well-mannered, self-contained, and polite. They had been positioned here after the bomb blasts. They didn't have much to do. Crime in this area was negligible, which was why the cops could, sometimes, step outside their line of duty and perform small acts of kindness. Such as when a senior citizen would call and request them to bring some medicines or ask them

¹ 'The Gypsies of Grant Road' first appeared in *Panorama: The Journal of Intelligent Travel*, in a slightly different form.

to hail a cab. These seniors were bereft of support, their children having moved to the suburbs or out of the country, leaving them alone in large, crumbling apartments.

The gypsies would fight like starving animals. It was always the men versus the women. The men would snarl, abuse, and rush at the women. It was almost always over money. The men were luses, wastrels, and wife-beaters. They lived off the women, who made garlands and baskets or traded in old clothes or hopped onto trains, selling combs, trinkets, and hair clips. The women had to bring in the mullah. For that, they even did a bit of ragpicking from the garbage dump outside the station. There was enough waste in the city to feed its poor. And the gypsies and the dump were old neighbours.

When the gypsy men would beat them, the gypsy women would scream abuses at them. They had louder voices than the men, and more anger. After that, they would slip under their blankets, pull up their saris, and wait. Wait for the unspoken truce.

The gypsies were great breeders. Over time their population grew, a whole colony sprang up. Noise levels increased, as did fights, dissensions, and quarrels. Yet the cops did nothing. Then, one day, while entering the station, I saw an eviction in progress. The gypsies were being removed. Cops, wielding sticks, threatened them, while their belongings were dumped into the back of a truck. The gypsy women were hysterical: they shrieked curses onto the cops, onto the government. The men look stunned and defeated. The children were crying. I asked a cop what was happening. He said: 'These people make too much noise. The residents in the opposite building have complained. Besides, these people have now been allotted flats outside the city. They each have a home of their own. There is no reason for them to live on the road anymore. It is public property, after all.'

A squint-eyed gypsy woman rushed up to me. 'They are lying, sahib,' she screeched. 'Look! We have got official documents: ration cards and voting cards from here. Why should we go elsewhere? How does it bother those buildingwallas if we are here? Their building will come down one day. And they will get a new flat in the new building. But it will be in the same area, no? They won't be forced to go where they don't want to. To a place where there are no trains, no life, no work, no garbage to pick.' Her voice was anguished, her face stained with tears.

After the eviction it felt strange, seeing the quadrangle empty. A sense of foreboding pervaded the area. It was as though the gypsy women's curses hung in the air. The cops kept a close watch on the quadrangle. They patrolled regularly. Then, after a few days, the old railing that separated the quadrangle from the main road was dismantled and a new line of demarcation comprising round metal poles was erected. Immediately, a team of dabbawallas swept in and set up a hub in the quadrangle, a collection point for their tiffins. The gypsies had no hope now. They might as well begin to enjoy their new home, which, by the looks of it, was the overhead skywalk. Yes, they had resisted the move to a place outside the city and occupied, instead, the skywalk that emanated from the station and emerged on the main road. There was enough walking space, sleeping space, cooking space, and room to play on the skywalk.

There the gypsies waited and watched, safe in the realisation that it was outside the jurisdiction of the cops. And the cops knew, too, that there was no point getting involved in things that did not concern them. Things like the ladies' bar and the country liquor bar and the mounting garbage dump outside the station.

From the skywalk, the gypsies enjoyed a fine view of the city. They could stop passersby and peddle their wares, while keeping an eye on their infants, who would be fascinated with the

view. And the street dogs had joined them, too, in this vast dormitory of space. And, once in a while, the gypsy women could stand up and rail curses at those buildingwallas, with whom they now stood eye to eye. Ha, ha, let them see, let them know – those sahibs and memsahibs! – that they had not gotten away with their evil designs. The city had found the gypsies a home. At least for a while.

Cherry Blossom Cycling

Meredith Stephens

It all began when my partner Roland and I were offered contracts teaching English at a university on the island of Shikoku, the smallest of the four main islands in the Japanese archipelago. When I examined the map of Shikoku, I noticed that it bore a faint resemblance to the shape of Australia. The scale, of course, was in contrast, but the fact that Australia is nearly twenty times longer from west to east wasn't apparent when I looked at the map. I simply found the faint similarity in shape reassuring. We planned to stay for two years to work while refining our Japanese language skills, and then to return to Adelaide. Before long we became a family of four, with the arrival of first Heloise, and then Hannah. It never occurred to me that in twenty years I would be alone on the island of Shikoku. And I would not have believed that, alone in Shikoku, I would have a brush with the law.

Teaching English was all-consuming, and I needed to find refuge in a traditional Japanese world where English was irrelevant. I was able to escape from my role as purveyor of western culture through my discovery of traditional Japanese crafts such as porcelain, pottery, laquerware and kimono. In particular, I found myself captivated by the beautiful fabric to be found in the *obi*, the wide exquisitely woven belt that is used to hold kimonos in place. *Obi* are treasured by their owners, and they are worn on special occasions such as Coming-of-Age-Day at age twenty, weddings, or in the new year. They are often a gift from mother to daughter, so are considered to be prized possessions. They are difficult to clean oneself, and this must be left to a specialist kimono cleaner. Nor can the wearer don an *obi* by herself; without a series of training classes she must be assisted by a specialist kimono fitter on the day of the occasion. For most of the year when they are not in use, *obi* are stored flat in special wooden chests with narrowly spaced drawers.



Nevertheless, not everyone has the space to store these family heirlooms, and rather than selling their treasured kimonos and *obi* to a secondhand shop and receiving a pittance for their treasures, their owners consider it more dignified to donate them. Since I'd already been entranced by them for years and had learned about the craftsmanship of these exquisite pieces of fabric, I started to collect them. I took them back with me on my regular visits to Australia. At four metres long they were quite heavy, and I would use them to line the suitcase to protect more delicate items that were sandwiched in between. Over the years more and more of my friends asked me to bring them an *obi*. Eventually I even managed to establish a side business selling

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obi to Australian quilt makers. They were able to insert these wide panels of fabric into their quilts, and produce originals of an unparalleled quality.

Years of residence on the island of Shikoku in Japan enabled me to feel extremely comfortable in such a foreign culture, and our planned stint of two years gradually turned into one and then two decades. My daughters were educated in local schools on the island, and years later they made the transition back to Australia with Roland to finish their education. I planned to follow them, but I had become so tightly ensconced in Shikoku, that I couldn't tear myself away. My *obi* business was prospering, and I decided to maintain my base in Japan and return to Australia every holiday. I had come to Japan in my youth, and one day woke up to realise I had grown old in Japan.

One of the pleasures of living on the island was being able to use my bicycle instead of having to drive. The distances that I had to cover every day were much less than in Australia, and I could keep fit without even trying. I always chose to ride a *mamachari*, a mum's bicycle, with baskets for doing the daily shopping. I even managed to transport both of my daughters on my bike when they were small. I could fit one-year-old Hannah into the baby seat in between the handlebars, and four-year-old Heloise would clamber onto the backseat as I held the bicycle steady. I would take Heloise to kindergarten every day, and sometimes she would fall asleep on my back as I gingerly cycled along the narrow, unevenly paved backstreets.

I also used the bicycle as a business vehicle. I would cycle to the NPO store, acquire some *obi*, and carry them home on the child seat on the rear of the bike, which could be flipped over to form a basket. I would pack the *obi* into boxes, and cycle to the post office to send them to the quilt-making association in Australia.

In time Heloise and Hannah learnt to ride their own bicycles. They were not allowed to cycle to primary school, for safety reasons, but they were allowed to cycle to middle and high school. After they returned to Australia I kept their bicycles for them so they could use them when they visited me in Japan. Our carpark had turned into a bicycle park.

Rumour has it that the only items that Japanese will steal are umbrellas and bicycles. It is the inconvenience of lacking either of these in the moment of need that prompts the impulse to steal, rather than the need to make an acquisition. Being naturally forgetful, I stubbornly persisted in not locking my bicycle, because I considered the likelihood of losing my key when I was in a hurry to be greater than having my bicycle stolen. I ignored the pamphlets that were placed in my basket by the police warning me to lock my bicycle. One day I parked it in an inviting position outside the NPO store, and to my great consternation became a victim of bicycle theft. However, I didn't mind too much because I still had Heloise and Hannah's bikes at home. Heloise's was a luminescent pink and Hannah's a bright orange, which are common colours for schoolgirls' bicycles.

Because bicycle theft is so common, policemen and women often randomly stop cyclists as they go about their daily business. They will confirm that the registration number of the bicycle corresponds to the registered owner, ask you a few personal questions such as what country you are from (if you happen to look somewhat foreign), and what you do for a living. Once they have confirmed that you are the registered owner, they send you on your way.

I consider myself a law-abiding citizen – except when it comes to riding a bicycle while holding an umbrella. I know that this is illegal in Japan, and that you should instead wear a raincoat. However, I think it's much easier to grab an umbrella when leaving the house in the rain than to struggle into a confining raincoat, so I always choose the former option. I hope that as a foreigner I can feign ignorance or linguistic incompetence if a police officer accosts me, but the police do have a point. There are obvious risks involved in cycling with an umbrella, such as

braking with the left hand while holding the umbrella with the right, all the while riding along slippery footpaths. Sometimes, unable to brake with my left hand, I hurl my feet to the ground to slow myself.

Expatriates on the island naturally tend to gather together, often with their Japanese spouses. We gather for western occasions such as Christmas and Thanksgiving, and Japanese occasions such as cherry-blossom viewing afternoon picnic and drinking parties. Joel from New York traditionally hosted the annual cherry-blossom party, but because of the rain on this occasion, he decided to host it in his apartment. That was how I came to be cycling one Saturday afternoon on Heloise's battered pink school bicycle. It was early April, and the rain had deposited the cherry blossoms onto the ground, turning the grey footpaths into a pink spectacle. Peddling along the narrow petal-strewn footpath along the banks of the river, umbrella in hand, I heard a resounding *konnichiwa* behind me. A young policeman on his motorbike was trying not to scare me with his friendly greeting. He accelerated towards me, maintaining eye contact, and addressed me confidently. I was jolted at the realisation that I was the object of his attention.

'Why are you riding a high-schooler's bicycle?' he enquired politely, having noted the sticker identifying the high school on the rear bumper.

'This is my daughter's bicycle,' I explained. 'She went to high school here five years ago. My own bicycle was stolen, so now I am using hers.'

Was he suspecting me of having stolen an unfortunate local teenager's bicycle? The truth is, I really love riding comfortable Japanese bicycles. I love the generous saddle and the silence and ease of peddling. Nevertheless, I had not come all the way to Japan to steal bicycles. My passion for collecting *obi* was far greater than that for riding *mamachari*.

Apologising for keeping me waiting in the rain, he made the obligatory check of the bicycle registration number and we waited for confirmation to be sent through to his phone. My mind was whirling. How much would be the fine? Was it true that they served brown rice not white in prison? Was this going to be the first entry on my criminal record? How would it affect my *obi* export business?

'Where are you from?' he enquired. I've been asked this question thousands of times, but I assumed that his intentions were polite and that this was not yet an interrogation. Besides, I didn't want to be fined.

'Australia,' I answered.

'Oh, Australia! Australia has a great rugby team.'

Flattered that he held my country in such high esteem, I decided to continue with the friendly banter in the hope of getting favourable treatment. Not knowing much about rugby, because Australian Rules football is the preferred game in South Australia, I cast about for something intelligent to say, when thankfully he changed the topic. 'If your daughter was at high school five years ago, she must be close in age to me. How old is she?'

He was trying to build a connection with me, I realised. 'She's 21,' I told him.

'I'm 25.'

'Perhaps you were at the same school. Did you attend Joto High School too?'

'No, I'm from Naruto.'

We had little in common after all. Rain continued to pour down on us. I reflected on the embarrassment of having a record for the offence of cycling with an umbrella. Coming from a state where it hardly ever rained and where cycling was not really an established mode of transport for middle-aged people, I certainly had never seen anyone cycling while holding an umbrella but once I had learned it was possible to combine these activities, and how convenient it was, it had become a regular habit.

‘Sorry to keep you waiting,’ he apologized again. Finally he received confirmation on his phone and addressed me with a relieved smile. ‘You are indeed the owner of this bicycle. You may be on your way.’

‘Don’t you mind that I am cycling while holding an umbrella?’ I asked.

‘We don’t want you to get wet,’ he assured me. ‘But next time, please wear a raincoat.’

And with that, I cycled off in the rain to my cherry-blossom viewing party, umbrella aloft.