

A Half-Baked Life

Pranesh Prasad

When I arrived in Sydney, some years before the Olympics, I found myself immediately drawn to the Inner West. After a few days of frantic hunting for suitable accommodation, I managed to secure a room in a heritage building built during the Victorian era that was used to house long-term tenants from overseas and inter-state. The owner who answered, John, said in his broad and striking accent that I was very lucky to be in the right place at the right time, for this was late-winter and it was easier to find a vacant room to lease, in this prized and tightly-held part of Australia's most cosmopolitan, global, seductive, energetic and chaotic city.

The rent was set at one hundred twenty dollars per week. I paid for a month and conveyed that I could stay for at least six more, which was met with unexpected and indifferent silence on the part of my host. Upon my signature at the bottom of the last page of the contract, the terms which included among others that I was on a monthly lease, I was handed the key to the room. I was told that the front door shut at 11 pm after which I had to utilize the after-hours access to enter the building. I was enlightened as to the existence of a communal bathroom, laundry and kitchen and provided directions as to their location at the back of the building. The realisation of sharing facilities did not bother me, for ever since I had become a voluntary and permanent refugee of sorts.

I was also made aware of the need to be quiet and to respect other occupants who lived in the heritage building. I understood the representation by John for what it was; that there were rules which I had to obey nonchalantly, but a strange though timely and pertinent thought, in my view, did enter my mind and I almost invariably uttered it, 'What if some of the occupants were unduly sensitive to a particular inference such as noise? Would it then be reasonable for me to establish a defence to the sporadic bursts of music, which I imagined would take place freely on a night filled with emotion, as not amounting to nuisance on my part?' I de-

cidated that my bizarre and alert mind had raced ahead, like it had the habit of doing every now and then. I blinked. I cannot explain why I did that. Was it to bring myself back to reality or was it some unwelcome neurotic response on my behalf, which I had no control over? I wished for the former but feared it was the latter. A smile developed on my face at the realisation, which poor John took as a sign of my tropical and exotic friendliness. He smiled as well for the first time. I played my required part further and thanked him for letting the room to me. He brushed his hair with his fingers then. Once he was done, he pointed down the corridor with his index finger and told me my room was the first one on the left after I had climbed the steep and circular stairs.

As I walked down the corridor with my bags, I was met by a thirty something woman who appeared to be the cleaner. She smiled at me and asked if I was moving in. I replied to the obvious with a nod. She said her name was Celia. I introduced myself and then quickly made my way up the stairs to the room. It wasn't an overly large room. Enough to fit myself and a guest without feeling blatantly crowded. I placed my bags and saw there was a window through which I could see trees in the neighbour's yard. I was not sure what sort of trees they were. I said to myself that it would be good to find out one day.

I looked around the room. The wardrobe was old and small. It was dusty as well. The grey carpet had indelible cigarette stains on it in various places. The bed was solid and did not shake when I sat on it. I was grateful that the cheap linen was clean. I decided it was time to rest. I was sort of tired. I guess I fell asleep for when I woke up, it was dark. I found myself thirsty. There was no water in the room. I had to go to the kitchen. As I made my way to the door, I heard the sound of heavy heels outside my room. I decided to wait for the footsteps to dissipate, for I was not in the mood for introductions.

Assured of safety and with the water bottle in my left hand I made it to the kitchen, which was not very large and disappointingly dated. I saw the cabinet with my room number on it. I took the key out of my pocket and found the appropriate one for the cabinet. I inserted the key into the key hole to ensure that the cabinet door would lock. It did. Thereafter, I filled my water bottle and gulped a mouthful. Then I refilled the bottle. And as I turned to leave the kitchen, I heard the sound of an entirely different set of footsteps proceeding towards the kitchen. Wanting to avoid contact, I turned around and headed straight to what was my designated cabinet in the kitchen and pretended to be occupied. The person who entered the kitchen greeted me by saying 'Hello'. I was trapped. Though I did not want to return the greeting I thought it would be downright rude

to not say anything. So I said, 'Hey, how are you?' The man replied, 'I am bloody good'. I was slightly taken aback by his manner. He was of a rather large stature and looked past his prime. He did not seem like someone who was prone to regular physical activity. He was English. I had no idea which part of England he was from, though I did feel like asking him. But instead he asked me where I was from. I thought it was a natural question, so I told him so. He was elated. He said he always wanted to visit the country of my birth and upbringing but could not find the time in the past. I thought 'really'. He further said, 'It's great to live in those alluring places.' 'Yes,' I said, with reluctance and with a qualification: only if one had money and connections. He agreed. He seemed somewhat knowledgeable to me. He said he was going to boil some potatoes and peas. I decided to leave him to his task. He did tell me his name: Gary. I did the same. When I was returning to my room, I thought it may be possible to be friends with Gary.

Once inside my room, I had nothing to do. It had become very dark now. I turned the light on. I wanted to draw the plain curtains but changed my mind while doing so, as I noticed that the neighbour's bedroom light was on and I could see everything inside. Suddenly, a disturbed and tired looking woman appeared and I am sure she saw me, for she drew the blinds without hesitation. I sighed. I thought, what now? I looked towards the sky. It was going to rain soon. I was right for within minutes it began to rain. I stood by the window and watched the continual out-pouring from the sky. Large buckets of drops belting the window. I began to feel cold. I turned the heater on for a while. I turned it off when I started to become hot. Soon the rain started to recede. When it stopped altogether, I knew I had to go out and buy something to eat. I had no inclination to cook. I wore my coat and locked my door. Racing down the stairs, I walked along the corridor hastily. The sound of my footsteps would have been heard in the other rooms. I thought a tiny bit of disturbance is good as long as it came from me. There was no sign of John: his usual chair was empty.

I closed the front door and immediately felt the chill in the breeze outside. But as I walked along, the suffocation which I felt in my room gave way to a sense of welcome refreshment. I became enchanted when I reached Norton Rd. Shops: I stopped in front of each to have a look. There were eateries and cafes in abundance; culturally diverse, busy and inviting. I could hear the various and boisterous conversations. Full of noise and colour. People zoomed in and out. The dressing: fine, scrappy

and alternative, in full view and mid-week, too. I could see dogs wagging their tails and tongues hanging out revealing their pleasure as they paced their legs on the pavement with their owners, as well. So this was Leichhardt: Little Italy to some and Dyke-heart to others. However, it was the source of capital growth for the owners of property and proximity to the CBD, for commuters. As they said all that mattered was 'Location, Location and Location'. And Leichhardt had it all.

I made a take-away order for stir fried green pepper and dry bean curd with chilli bean sauce and large boiled rice at a restaurant which purported to specialise in Chinese and Malaysian cuisine. I asked the smiling girl at the reception to ensure that the meal was spicy by asking for extra chillies. She nodded her head. I saw a billboard with the words 'No Added MSG'. I had to take the sign for what it was. In any case, there was no way I would know whether my meal had MSG or not. When the smiling girl brought out my meal in a plastic bag, I reiterated 'spicy'. 'Very much,' she replied. I wanted to ask for some chillies in soy sauce to take away, but saw another billboard that stated, 'The management reserves the right to refuse service to anyone'. This somehow stopped me from asking. I do not know exactly why. Perhaps I wished to develop a relationship with the restaurant if the meal turned out right and did not want to be seen as greedy, which may be used to refuse service to me in the future. Or perhaps, it was the way we were brought up in the old country. Do not ask for more than you need. How interesting it is then that we move countries seeking a new life, and yet are conditioned by our past in another place.

I took the walk back to the heritage building. Once inside, I found the food had turned cold. After microwaving in the kitchen, I returned to my room and sitting on the bed, ate and enjoyed the meal. It was the middle of the night now. I could feel the darkness; so whole and enveloping. It was as if the denseness was touching me. The sound of cars on the road was dying. I started to feel miserable, alone and stranded. The room had so quickly and unexpectedly turned into a prison. I wanted to escape, but had nowhere to run to, no one to turn to. So I decided to stand by the window. I could see the light was on in the neighbour's bedroom. The curtains were drawn. I looked towards the sky. There were no stars to see for it was cloudy. Then I heard conversation between a man and woman from the same bedroom which progressively turned into a heated argument. I decided to open the window. There was now the sound of plates breaking and coarse words to accompany the exchange. One of the partners had been cheating on the other and had been caught. That's all that I could make out. Not sure who it was though. The commotion turned my

night into one of pleasure; I could be so self-centred, rejoicing at others' misery as long as it provided entertainment to me. Then I heard the door being slammed. I waited for more. The participants had nothing to offer me now. I guessed exhaustion must have overtaken them. I decided to sleep, so closed the window and dozed off quickly.

In the morning, when I had finished my shower, I bumped into a smiling Celia who said, 'It's a beautiful day, isn't it?' 'Yes,' I said without knowing.

Once I had dressed, finished breakfast and was proceeding to make my way out of the heritage building, I saw a neatly dressed, tall and distinguished looking man nodding at me. He was Dr. Tiwari, a visitor from Dehradun to the nearby university on some workshop. He even showed me his name tag and gave me his card. His eyes were darting all over my face in a squint like manner, as he talked to me; he needed directions to places of interest and entertainment. I wasn't really interested in hanging out with him, for I felt uncomfortable when he asked my 'good' name. So I said I am new here as well and I hate sightseeing. He took a step back and gradually withdrew with skill and politeness and walked towards the main door. I felt atrocious. Maybe I should have been more hospitable; that was the impulse that overcame me instantly. He too was a lonely man; away from his familiar home and people. I wanted to apologise. I started to move forward towards him. Then I stopped just like that. I thought I didn't need to do an act of charity. He is an adult and should be capable of reaching his destination on his own.

It was a defining moment for me; to be so cruel, in such a small matter. It set in stone what I was to become later, for I had not achieved much previously by being kind, forgiving and generous and decided to take matters into my own hands. So I preserved the moment and relied on it whenever I was confronted by circumstances which required me to go out of my way to do things for others. I had thought it was so valuable to have become such a person without much heart so early in my adulthood that often it was a quality that I wished others to have and even encouraged its development by willing them on when they were faced with cold-hearted disregard and consequent dismissal of their selves in the thick of battle. Ah! As it is said 'what one sows, one reaps.' That has been my fate. But in those early, uneventful days of life in new surroundings, I did not know that I was laying the poisonous seeds of moral decadence, humiliation and eventual destruction so willingly and ignorantly. Dull: that is the

appropriate word to attribute to my beginning. It was to be that way throughout my journey. Now I sit, having wasted so much, hurting so many and making others think that I have made it to the summit—alone, in my terrace, hoping that the end at least will not be dull.