

Fitzroy Blues

CHRIS PAPACHRISTOS

When I sit here on the threshold of my single-fronted cottage, dating from the raw beginnings of our suburb - I am transported to the days of my childhood, when the whole street reverberated with the sound of us, doing what children do, when school is out or in the afterglow of long summer sunsets: donning a territorial act of ownership. This small pocket of Moor street belonged to us like the intimate space of a front yard, as the frontage of most houses between George and Gore abutted the footpath, without the luxury of gates and picket fences. Two rectangular stone steps, like monoliths, acted as seats for anyone to sit on and watch the street come alive. Younger girls played hopscotch and chasey, while older ones strolled up and down, telling each other secrets and giggle-whispering about grown up things like love and boyfriends. Boys of all ages claimed the middle of the street, as was their entitlement, turning the length of it into a cat-walk of football and cricket, or games of war and cowboy shootouts.

At first, Yiayia would sit with me and give me running commentaries on this and that, or soliloquize about a faraway country and relatives I would never see. Always dressed in black, she stood out against the lighter shades of the street's makeup and attracted too much unwanted attention. One day she stopped coming out altogether, because a group of boys had made it a habit of running up close, frightening us with wild gestures and loud shrieking that turned into mock-laughter as they ran away. Parents who were privy to such scenes made no attempts to intervene, looking on from a distance, approving of the taunt, as if a wrong was being righted. I quickly began to understand that we had become the street's eyesore oddity: reluctantly tolerated but never accepted.

I spent the better part of my early years in the backyard, where Yiayia tended the garden, busying herself with digging and weeding the vegetable beds and shooing birds out of the fruit trees. Father and mother would leave early in the morning for work at the knitting mills and Yiayia would look after me for the rest of the day. I helped out with the seasonal chores and played games while listening to her singing. The garden was framed by a lemon tree on the left and a tall lemon-scented eucalypt on the right, grown from seed hundreds of years ago, Yiayia said. She would often remind me of how similar the two trees were by crushing a gumleaf in her hand and making me smell it. In the middle of the garden stood a pomegranate tree that yielded an abundance of shiny red fruit in autumn. When the pomegranates were beginning to crack with ripeness, revealing the

seeds inside and ready for harvesting, I would pick one and keep it on my bedside table for weeks on end until it was time to eat it.

One day I took it to the front door, beaming with pride. A group of children came up, curious to know what the funny-looking fruit might be. Chelsea sat on the step right next to me to get a closer look. She had hypnotic chestnut eyes, like marbles, that pulled you in and kept you there. For you, I said, as though I'd been saving it for her. She took it, held it with a caressing gaze and cradled it with both hands, rolling it back and forth in her palm not knowing what it was or what to do with it. I told her that in time it would split open and she could eat its delicious seeds. One of the others called it wog fruit, forced it out of her hands and bowled it down Moor street towards Napier squealing with sardonic delight.

Close to tears, we sped after them, past St. Mark's church all the way to the Town Hall, where we found it in the gutter, bruised and weeping through hairline cracks. Chelsea consoled me with soothing words and touching my shoulder. Walking next to her was like being airborne or sinking in quicksand. She whispered a three-word melody that hugged me tight and put my heart into an erratic change of gears: I like you, she said, making me pine for somewhere far away. She thanked me for the pomegranate and sauntered home, followed by confabulating looks from windows and the street. Since then, she kept her distance, choosing a different way to school, as she was told, doubling her pace at seeing me and stealing sporadic, uneasy glances thrown my way.

We neither spoke nor played together, though we still harboured a secret bond, innocent and forbidden, since it first appeared on our pomegranate day. Then, in our final year of High School we landed the same Form, 6B, and often found ourselves walking side by side to school and back, in monosyllabic silence. One afternoon, we meandered through the Edinburgh gardens and wasted time in the domed rotunda, hidden from the world and its prying eyes. The autumn hush echoed the nearby football oval drills with scissor-sharp clarity. The sun still shone in purples, reds and golds. Chelsea turned to me, close to touch, her eyes casting their magic spell. The drug released by the disarming kiss ambushed me and paralysed me. Everything around me suddenly melted and morphed into something else. The green in every blade of grass was now a fresher green, as yet unknown to me, more vibrant, more intense; the black-blue sky came down so close that I could touch it without effort; and all the sounds were amplified, sweeping me up, afloat, above the trees. And then I knew, somehow, that nothing else mattered.

It didn't take long for snitching rumour to rise like a tempest and find its way to both our parents, whose duty it was to put a stop to such unruly friendships. Every time I stood at her door, waiting for her to come out, her father would launch into loud arguments laced with confronting words like greasy dago and all the rest. Now and again the door would fly open and I'd be told to go. Get outa here. Git. Go home, go back to where you came from. Mother and father followed suit and threatened me with unspeakable consequences, if I didn't regain my appetite for schoolwork, this being the most important year. I caved in and made swotting for HSC the analgesic they were

looking for. After Christmas, that summer, Chelsea moved away from home and vanished, as if the earth had opened up beneath her feet and swallowed her, whole.

The year after my graduation, sitting in Mario's watching the Brunswick street parade, I thought I'd recognised her on a float, garlanded like Spring and smiling. Dumbstruck, I rushed out and ran beside her float, willing her to spot me in the crowd. I waved like a lunatic - my heart pounding, riddled with ectopic beats. She finally saw me, locked eyes with me, until a bearded man behind her tapped her on the shoulder. She turned to the man, then back to me, looking confused, while the float moved on and faded out of my field of vision.

Nursing the idea of seeing her again, I reserved a window seat at Mario's every year and waited. And when the parade was scratched for good, I turned the corner into Johnstone street and sat in the Provincial, sifting through faces in the Spanish Festa pandemonium but in vain.

After Yiayia's death, Mother's matchmaking attempts became frequent and more desperate, advertising me as the bachelor with a degree and a well-paid job to boot. My marital status had become her project and obsession. She was bent on finding me a wife, no matter what, dismissing my angry protestations and endlessly reminding me of the galloping years or the shameful gossip I was inciting. Being an only child was embarrassing enough but being unmarried was an aberration.

I finally weakened my stance and said yes to the next best candidate, Angela; she was ten years younger but we made a good match. The dowry she came with was a brick Edwardian house in Westgarth street. Mother and father basked in the hope of becoming grandparents and flaunted their pride like a pair of squawking peacocks. But their dreams turned sour when, after four years of marriage, there was no grandchild to show for it. One day, the priest came knocking on our door with mother, father and both in-laws in tow. They marched straight past me, blind to the ensuing ridicule. An incense-filled exorcism and a blessing of the conjugal bed were to invigorate our natural drives, they said, and the expected bundle would soon be on its way. But the bundle failed to arrive and the break-up and divorce followed at lightning speed, hurried along by unforgiving tongues wagging and wreaking havoc with tainting words like unholy impotence and barrenness.

The dowry was quickly taken back and I reclaimed my old room in Moor street, where I looked after mother and father to the end.

Their bitter words of advice in their last few years took on a tone of painful warnings and regrets, cursing the necessity of leaving and uprooting. We did it for you, they said, all this distance, to give you a grounding for a better life, so that you can stay put, wherever it is that you belong.

The long walks keep me on my toes these days, distracting me from the nagging aggravations of old age. Roaming most of the suburb's grid, I cannot help but wonder how many times this neighbourhood has shed its skin in favour of the new and for the better, or how I belong in these familiar streets, this Babel hub, and nowhere else, where nobody asks you anymore who you are or what you are.

When I reach the tiny Town Hall green, I rest for a few minutes to admire the lion sculpture there: a man becomes mayor, as he discards the cloak of fear and doubt, facing the Napier Pub with thrusting chest laid bare and open arms. He does not roar; instead, he tilts his sunlit face towards the sky with pride, makes his Achilles heel his strength. Such open display of courage was denied to us, outsiders, in another time, when I was young.

Like an automaton and without fail, I make her door my last stop, before I turn in for the night. An ageing well-to-do couple lives here now, private and hermetic. When they first moved in, ten years ago, I introduced myself but made the woman feel on edge with my invasive, searching stare. The husband cleared his throat and smiled a question mark at me. I apologised and said I meant no disrespect; I'm just a foolish old man, I said, waiting for someone to return.

The winter walks are getting shorter now and difficult to manage. Only two enforced outings take me away from home: the supermarket and chemist warehouse, and a monthly tram ride, like yesterday's, to Clifton Hill to see my long time doctor, Dr. Taylor. He said walking can only be good for me, but he advised against all things that tax and put at risk the murmur in my heart. There are new cracks starting to show, he said and waited for my response. I nodded an indifferent yes I know. He looked at his notes. The old ones have been there for donkey's years, he added, his voice a velvet pillow. I nodded again and told him, more and more, I find myself pottering around in the backyard, digging up memories of my Yiayia singing under the pomegranate tree, and stirring up thoughts of Spring's promises and hope.

It was his turn to nod. He understood.