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CULTURE REVIEW

Quotidian: Just Another Casual Saturday

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7 April 2019, Melbourne

The last poignant day of summer before the winds blow in from Antarctica. The last before daylight savings kicks in. I step out in the last of my summery cotton dresses I will wear for a while. Melbourne seems to be celebrating with public events everywhere. I am going to the Fair@Square Ethical Lifestyle Festival in Federation Square: a dear friend from Sydney is running the Palestine Fair Trade Australia stall there and I am looking forward to lunch and catching up by the rippling Yarra.

But before that I mean to go to the little strip of shops near me where I saw a garage sale being advertised earlier in the week. There was a pretty lamp shade in the window I wouldn't mind taking a closer look at. Walking towards it, I can see pink and white balloons with ribbons festooned on the door and two little wooden tables with succulents nodding their fleshy heads. Two women in their late forties or early fifties sit on a bench outside the shop, with a young girl of about nine or ten. Must be the ones running the garage sale.

I enter and can immediately smell the sad history of the shop that once might have been cheery, but now has been shut for at least the three years I have been in this neighbourhood. Empty steel and glass cabinets with cords trailing from them, a few old videos and books, a wooden storage box, a faux leather maroon two-seater in quite good condition, worn out shoes that no one would want to step in, a few kitchen things from the '70s. My eyes alight upon a vintage daisy yellow Japanese 'Irish coffee' set. I make up my mind to ask the price, as most things are not marked.

There are a few old prints and paintings on the wall, including one clearly etched by a child (the nine-year old out on the pavement sitting with her mothers?) and framed: I think it is so touching and evocative, and a shame that they have put it up for sale. The far wall advertises a hand-written 'More Stuff' on an A4 size paper and I walk towards the back of the shop which leads me to a shed set up with easels and finished sketches. Clearly one of the women is using it as her studio. The only thing I like is a Japanese Noren door curtain hanging on a string, not so much to divide the room, but more as a thing of beauty to be enjoyed by the artist I imagine.

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I turn back to the front shop area and it is then that I notice a little room on the right, with a half glass timber door. Through the glass, I can see a lovely vintage shelf stacked with books and bric-a-brac and a couple of settees facing each other. A table lamp lit to dispel the grey confines of the tiny space invites me in with its warm glow. I turn the door knob and walk in and instantly love the couch: its cushions match the burgundy of a three-seater I have at home. Breathing in the musty aroma, my mind tries to conjure up the person who would have sat in this room, perhaps during the lull hours of shopkeeping, having a coffee or a cigarette, blowing the smoke out through the tiny window into the side lane.

I must have been in that room for five minutes and know I have to leave for the city soon. As I step out, I see one of the women nudging the girl, who runs in from their pavement seat to the front area. Seeing me emerge from the room, she veers off towards the bay window of the shop, casually enough, but there is a sharpness and a sheepishness to her gait. I catch all this from the corner of my eye. I walk back towards the Japanese coffee set and in those few steps and immeasurable seconds, my heart does that odd drop into my stomach. It is a familiar sensation, but I am always caught unawares, each time.

The two women come in to the front area. I can now feel the prickle in my pores, certain that the woman sent her girl in to keep an eye on me. Just in case. After all, I bristle, I am dressed nicely enough and am carrying a nice bag, I have fuchsia lipstick on, my eyes are done up. I smell nice. But just in case... No, my middle-class patina will not be enough. They are all smiles. I want the lamp with the pretty shade I had spied earlier in the week: it is only for \$3. As I fish around for my coin purse, I ask how much the Japanese coffee set and Noren curtain are for.

Oh no, that is not for sale, you were not supposed to go into the studio, says the taller older woman.

Oh yea, I remember that coffee set. I'd want \$20 for it, this from the petite younger one.

Did this shop belong to someone close? I ask. Making chit chat.

Yes.

I'll have the lamp please. Oh sorry: I've forgotten my coin purse at home. Could you change a \$50?

Yes, sure.

I'm going to the city: could you hold the lamp for me till 4:00 please?

Will you pay for it now?

Of course.

We go through the motions. They take down my phone number in case I do not return by 4.

I walk out of the shop.

My feet are heavy. Fingers numb. My head buzzy with the onrush of blood that causes fair-skinned people to blush and me to mottle. But... did the girl run into the shop to keep an eye on me? *Did she?*

I walk across the zebra crossing and take the soon-arrived tram to the city.

We come to a stop at the next intersection. There's been an accident. We can cross over and take the waiting tram from the other side.

As I take my seat with fellow passengers on the tram, we see a woman, white hair, all bones, hollowed out, sitting on the tram tracks. No shoes. Shoulders angled slats of wood, defining her sharp shrunk shape through the blinding-white lycra tank top and tights. Two hulks in their blue uniforms stand at either side, speaking with what seems like utmost gentleness to her. They do not touch her. Or try to persuade her to go with them. Almost ten minutes pass, while she has been shaking her head, talking, ... crying? The men listen with rapt attention. Finally, as though to some silent signal, they synchronise themselves and lift up the woman as if she were made of glass and deposit her like cotton wool on the verge.

Our tram departs.

A large Eastern European woman in her seventies, who'd been sympathetically providing a running commentary all this while, says to a young Indian girl in her twenties sitting next to her, "That was a cry for help. Sooo skinny..."

Federation Square seems strangely quiet. Track works have slowed everything down. The sky is overcast all of a sudden.

I greet Barbie at her stall. It feels good to be hugged by her so tight.

We go and have a vegan Thai bowl and soup with mock duck and mushroom meat. I tell her about the study tours I have been conducting in Bombay; she tells me about her Berlin trip. We are meeting after almost a year and a half. We speak of our partners, life, the works.

Time for me to catch the tram back. On the way in to the city, I've decided not to go back to the shop. I've called Sunny in Sydney and told her what happened. I've cried in despair: why did I keep on talking to the women, why did I not confront them, ask them outright if they'd sent the girl to keep an eye on me? Why did I continue to make all that small talk with the two women; women who could have been my friends or neighbours?

She is wise. Says, maybe you really wanted that lamp. They would have denied it all. It's not worth the effort and damage to the self. She tells me how she overcompensates in situations like this, by being extra-friendly; all too familiar, and shocking every time.

I don't get off at my usual stop but the next one. My legs are taking me to the shop. All three are at the front. The taller one looks askance, then remembers, *oh, you're here for the lamp.*

The shorter one points to her daughter and smiles, *she was getting really worried about you not coming back for the lamp.*

The girl looks embarrassed, and shoots a look at her mother.

I smile and say, *what's your name?*

Frances.

Frances, I am Mridula.

I walk away with the lamp heavy and draggy in my hand, running over the sequence of events from mid-morning and now into the late afternoon light, wondering if I will always remember both the scenes each time I look at the lamp. If I will think of the woman on the tracks every time I light it. I wonder if this is what my migrant be-ing is and will always be. Wondering, wandering, watching, never sure about the slight in the smile, the suspicion in the glance, the sting in the bargain, never sure if the confidence with which I walk into a space is what I will exit with... Or maybe, may be, I'll just continue to sit in my compromise with the life-messiness of it all, in between the *did she?* and *she didn't!?*