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Laughing at seagulls

Yoshua Selvadurai

The roar of the highway outside our Fitzroy apartment sounds like an ocean I once knew. In the mornings as I walk down the narrow staircase to go to school, I like to pretend that I am about to step onto that same Smithton Beach. I can feel the warm, coarseness of the sand, and hear the frothy crash of the waves. And although I know this is just a silly game, it is always a bit of a shock to crack open the rusty door and confront the metallic rush of the highway. Peeling billboards instead of fluttering seagulls, high-voltage power poles instead of sinuous gums trees, and a chain of nudging cars where the arching surf should be collapsing onto the beach.

Waldy and I used to ride our bikes under the endless skies of Tasmania, laughing at seagulls being blown off course by the Bass Strait winds. Crouched on an isolated promontory in north-western Tasmania, the small fishing village of Smithton faces the brunt of the wild ocean gales. Sometimes, we used to kayak out on the glacial swell beyond the headlands. Sometimes, we'd let down a few crayfish pots and fry our catch on a council barbeque. Waldy and I were no fishermen but we managed. Not sure what we were really.

We had a policy of not doing much. Most of the time, we'd ride around the deserted foreshore, muck around the fossil-veined rocks and etch the polished surface of the water with our skimming stones. Waldy and I were both thirteen, but Waldy

was massive, well over 6 feet, always nattering excitedly about some ref's decision, and wearing the same red flannelette shirt. There was nothing remarkable about me. Eyes the colour of clear plastic, hair the colour of potatoes, average height. At least that's how my sister Laura described me in her journal. I found it under her bed after she went off to study on the Mainland. But Timmy, my old Jack Russell, still hung with us. He couldn't run as fast as he used to, but he still scampered a few metres ahead, pausing every so often to look over his shoulder to check that he had got our trajectory right. I reckon we have a wonderland better than the one shown in those Gold Coast brochures.

All I ever wanted to do was to gaze at the drifting seagulls, until their flight ached in my shoulders and the sun slipped behind the distant dunes. The house was pretty quiet now. I think Dad took up extra shifts at the paper mill just to get away from all that quietness lurking around at home. Even Mr Mendez from next door was not around anymore. But outside was a carefree place where nothing sad could ever happen. The strong voices of the trees in the wind and the crash of the surf made talk unnecessary. Maybe it was the way the trees embraced you with their cool shade or the way evening fell so softly here, gently shifting from pink to mauve to indigo, that it made you feel nature was gentle, even kind.

But Waldy was full of half-baked plans for conquering the place. If we uncovered a cave, he wanted to crawl through its darkest crevice; if we found a dune, he wanted to discover its powdery zenith. So when we found an old tinnie by the side of the Surf Club, Waldy went nuts.

'Let's give it a burl! Beyond 'em breakers. I've heard there're oyster beds out there.'

'But there are rocks.' I ventured. 'And currents.'

'Noah, you're such a wimp mate! Maybe it's because your Mum and old Mendez …' Waldy began in frenzy of flaying hands.

I stopped him right there. 'We'll go.'

I looked again at the tinnie, it did look a bit like a toy boat that I once had, its jaunty orange trim promising escape. Agreeing to meet after our folks went to sleep, we cycled back to our homes to await the night.

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Dad always came home from the mill exactly ten minutes after nine o'clock. Just after the possums started flinging themselves from the tall gums onto the Colourbond and just before the strange sounds under the house really started to bother me. A sour sort of smell hung on Dad's overalls. You'd think making paper would smell clean, but it didn't. It smelled like chemicals, like the yellow slush that slid into the water at end of Cole Bay. But Dad knew it. He'd always make a point of scrubbing up and dousing himself in Old Spice before making us tea. It was a carryover from our old life when Mum used to insist on it, and Laura used to say rude things if he didn't. And Laura knew a lot of clever things, so Dad listened to her.

It was always the same with us. Dad would heat a tin of Campbell's mushroom soup or fry up some sausages over the gas stove and carefully dish it onto plates like Reverend Beardsley doling out wafers on Sunday. I would sponge the stickiness off the plastic tablecloth and set out the tomato sauce. Timmy's paws would grow delicate with anticipation.

Sometimes Dad would pick up some fish or cray from the wharf and we'd be under extra pressure to make something of it. It always tasted the same because we worked with the same bottle of McCormick, but it didn't bother us. What's so good about eating new stuff anyway, it's just confusing.

As we ate, Dad would ask the same questions and I would give the same answers.

'How was your day then?' Dad would start.

'Good.'

'School ok?'

'Yep.'

'Waldy and you, didn't get into any trouble did you?'

'No Dad.'

The last question was new, it was added after I busted my arm skateboarding the dunes.

We never attempted those 'I love you son' and 'I love you too Dad' lines they did on television. People only ever skim the surface of things with words. If you really wanted to say all the things that need to be said, you would never stop talking. So I reckon it's better not to say much, and just know that there is a whole lot more underneath. Anyway Mum was the talker in the house. Maybe that's why she left, because Dad and I didn't have much to say. But maybe she'd get tired of all that talking up on the Gold Coast and come back. For a moment I pictured it happening, and it made the kitchen shine a bit brighter. But this was a puny dream, papery and weak, even the sight of the saucepans piled up in the sink blew it to smithereens.

I never asked Dad about his day, but I knew if he spoke without looking at me, sort of focusing on a spot above my left ear, it had not been a good one. When he was happy, he'd look straight into my eyes and shove the sauce towards me, telling me I need to fatten up. Through it all, Timmy kept his gaze fixed on my face until I slipped him a sausage under the table.

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Waldy was already there. We waited until the chalky moon emerged from behind the clouds, then pushed the toy boat into the water. I scanned for rocks. Drowned daggers. Shards of

basalt. I knew they lurked below. Unfazed, Waldy sliced the tinnie through the waves, guffawing as we flew past the cliff's sharp crevasse. Below us, submerged rocks glistened like cursed relics from an ancient civilisation. I wanted to tell him to be careful but I reckon I'd have sounded like my Dad. Waldy cut the engine, and we slid up to the silent swaying oyster beds.

I climbed onto the ledge to pull us closer but as I stood on the tinnie's narrow lip, I slid on its dewy steel and lost my balance, stumbling head first into the water. For a moment, it was quiet, real quiet under there. Still. Peaceful even. Soft ribbons of seaweed threaded my hair. Cool fingers of currents curled around my body. Above me, the moon lay dissolved, gently floating on the shifting surface of the water.

That serenity did not last for long, it was replaced by a dull lead in my lungs that made me want to scream and shout for air. I clawed towards that pale orb, but even as I flayed, I sank back, deeper into the darkness where the moon could not follow. Instinctively, I reached for the arms that would come and hold me from beneath. This was the moment, when the buoyancy drained from my body, when I thought I was going down, when the arms would come and lift me above the waters.

I felt my body grow limp, reliving again the shock of that loss, a tremor so deep that it never quite made it to the surface. I once heard one of the Smithton lifeguards once say that swimmers in distress are different to drowning people. Swimmers in distress flay and shout and carry on, but drowning people can go unnoticed. In that moment, I guess I was a drowning person, slipping unnoticed towards the ocean floor. But even as I gave up, I felt my body start to slowly drift up. The dissolved moon grew larger and larger until I shattered the mercury ceiling and emerged gasping for air. Watching out for me, Waldy reached over and grabbed my arm, hauling me over

the side of the tinnie and sending me crashing onto its metal floor. As I lay heaving on the cold steel, I could see the dim silhouette of petrels drifting peacefully on the night air.

Quiet for once, Waldy cranked up the engine and muscled the tinnie home. Waiting on the wharf, my dad and Mr and Mrs Waldhauser willed us to land with the silent intensity of their gazes. That night as Dad drove me home, he shook his head and muttered, 'It's no good you gadding about this place, getting into trouble because there's nothing to do.' Then throwing an accusatory glance at the dark ocean, he continued with more conviction, 'Mate, I know you are loyal to Smithton, but this place is a dump.' I followed his gaze to the shimmering stillness of the sleeping ocean and breathed in its soft deep calm. 'Yes Dad,' I murmured.

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Fitzroy is waking up now. Threading through the traffic, I arrive at the school with its wire-fenced playground of cracked concrete. The guys in grey trousers and impossibly white shirts are being strangled by their own ties. Not a red flannelette shirt in sight.

A truck rumbles past, making the spindly plants on the side of the road tremble. Back in Smithton, the trees are free. Here, the plants look like they are struggling to breathe, struggling to matter to someone. Pausing, I lift my head up to the sky and drink deeply of its strong, cobalt warmth. But even as I lower my eyes and walk through the gates of the school, I can feel the warm gaze of the endless sky above me, and some small part of me rises up and soars with the seagulls on the wild thermals of Tasmania.