

The Foreign Land

Cathy Le

Day by day, you felt the pristine walls creep in on you. You felt like it was pushing you down, making you feel like an ant. Australia was said to be a lucky country, in which you will be happier with its easy life, everyone said. A country so big that you barely even get to go past your own garden fence. Instead, past the television through your massive front window, across the street, you unknowingly felt content watching their eyes twinkle, mouths forming a U shape. Upon entering, it was breezy when your birth name, Thao, dramatically changed to Sarah. Your kids would laugh at your pronunciation, their tiny voices mimicking Xe Ra. Every day, you cooked, cleaned, listened to the Vietnamese radio and waited for your husband and children to flock back home, to hear their exciting stories. You on the other hand, kept silent about your day. And it happened again. And again.

The jumble of foreign letters with infrequent gaps intrigued you. You wished to try the so-called famous meat pies and host a barbeque. You wanted to be behind the moving wheel, transporting yourself to a foreign destination. You were surprised when you saw other women controlling the powerful automobile. On a cloudy day, you convinced yourself to go past your garden fence, and approached your friendly looking next-door neighbour. You were curious about their wild grass cutter, only to return puzzled and having understood one word; English. It made you reminisce about the bustling, lively street back in Vietnam, how everyone seemed to know one another. Even here, your husband bluntly said, *women don't need to know stuff, have a bigger head, they just need to be a housewife*. You didn't want to look him in the eyes after that.

Out of the ordinary, your eldest son's school bag smelt like the raw fish being sold at Footscray Market. You dig in to find the thit kho and rice swimming with his leaked bottle. It took you three hours to simmer that meat, occasionally stirring it, pouring your affection into it. You continued to stare blankly at it, not knowing what to do. Outside the window, the trees swayed roughly with the clouds dropping chunks of ice, forcibly against the rich soil. Tears swell up in your eyes, your chest huffs up and down as you attempt to keep it in. You told yourself this was nothing, maybe your son just didn't feel like your food for today. That night, you cut a plate full of fruits, and instead of happily bringing it to your son, you bit your lip as you gently opened his bedroom door, something you didn't even have back in your country. He was engrossed with his Rubik's cube, only giving you a quick glance as you placed the plate down. You mustered up the courage to ask him why he didn't eat his lunch. He complained that his Aussie friends laughed hysterically and said it smelt of muddy pigs. That

night, you didn't watch him finish the fruits. Instead, you sat underneath the hot blast of water with your tears mixing in it, held yourself tightly on the shower floor, as you thumped your chest repeatedly.

You were staring at the rugged not so green garden, its weeds sprouting uncoordinatedly. Birds chirped cheerfully as the sun rose. Your eyes then caught sight of the neighbour opposite of your street, her facial complexion similar to yours. After all, you lived in Sunshine a place that the Vietnamese immigrants like you, now unwillingly call home. She was talking into her blueish cell phone, holding it against her ear while watering her thriving daffodils, something your mum had told you symbolises rebirth. The words flowing out of her heart shaped lips were foreign yet familiar. After a while, you realised the sweetness of her tone was English, whilst the rough tone was your own native language. Your eyes widened, comprehending the thought that someone similar to you was able to learn English. Someone who had threads stuck in their hair, someone who seemed like they didn't go to school, sewing all day to make ends meet.

You noticed that the only similar thing between the two different worlds, was the moon, a white balloon in the starry night sky. You wondered whether your dad was still out fishing, what meal your mum was cooking and if your brother was studying hard enough. You imagined your mum wailing if she knew how you were living. She would yell at the top of her lungs, pitying you, how your first academic place certificates are being put to waste. Your dad on the other hand, would sternly say, you were very lucky to be able to find a husband who gave you a Western roof over your head. You lost yourself upon entering here; you never remembered yourself to be this obedient, bored, and empty. You wanted to kick the pristine walls into a broken state, pouring your fury onto it.

The sunlight shone brightly through your bedroom curtain. It empowered you, telling yourself today was your day. You didn't know when you walked out, as the walk towards the door felt like a dream. You skipped past the garden fence, your face automatically forming a U shape, replicating the one you saw the other day. You headed down the street, towards the milk store, purchasing a local newspaper.

Cathy Le, although born in Melbourne, was born and raised by two Vietnamese immigrants. Growing up at a time where technology wasn't so dominant in the world, she passed her early years reading a lot. Growing up, she wasn't really aware about the sacrifices made by her parents in order to give her a comfortable life. But as she grew older and became more mindful about it, in addition to reading books such as Anh Do's 'The Happiest Refugee', and Alice Pung's 'Unpolished Gem', she came to realise the many challenges faced by people like her parents. She hopes to deepen this understanding and continue to be a good daughter for her parents.