

Cuckoos

A gaggle of them took over a tumbledown shack at the end of the road. It was one of those ramshackle weatherboards, outbuildings strewn like children's blocks. If you knew anything about property maintenance, its history was clear: somebody had failed to meet the repainting schedule, and the acids had licked in straight away. Bingo – another Trust House rotting away. The allotment was large, even for city-fringe. Tall weeds camouflaged the carcasses of cars. It was littered with old toys, rusting coils of wire, and bags leaking superphosphate. From the beginning, the house barely seemed to contain them. Of course, I'd read about them, but this was the first time I'd seen them up close.

It was just this kind of thing Eon was nervous of when we'd moved out from the 'burbs.

'There's non-stop action down there', he said, jutting his bottom lip a little. Tiny frown-lines were beginning at his brows, I noticed.

'Sometimes I can't sleep, baby, and you know I need to leave early', he said, puckering his lips. I'd fallen for Eon's Peter-Pan looks and gentle blonde curls straight off. But just then a fussy hint of petulance showed on his face, and I remember feeling annoyed.

We were card-carrying Moderates, and he would never dare say anything against our new neighbours openly. But I should have been more empathetic, and perhaps a little concerned. I'd pushed for the move so we could architect-design and build our own dream without outrageous space-constraints. I'd even joked that out here, the air would be cleaner. I actually imagined it was. But we'd both known we risked building a bit

of a folly that lacked any serious resale – especially if the wrong neighbours moved in. This was Eon’s worst nightmare materialising. For reasons I didn’t understand immediately, I didn’t share his concern. And Eon detested the two-hour commute. But I knew he loved me deliriously, and that everything would be perfect when he worked from home, as well. My lips pressed his cheek, inhaling his soapy scent. ‘It’ll be all right, angel, when your consultancy takes off’. ‘But I won’t be able to concentrate, for *them*’. Again, the hint of a whine.

The shack down the street seemed elastic as their numbers pulsed and morphed. During the day, in a moment of stillness, I’d look down on the crowns of their heads. Dark children dashed around the allotment, making streaky lines in the long grass. They played elaborate games with old soccer balls, corroded sheets of corrugated iron, and giant cardboard boxes. Their energy made me feel joyous. They never strayed far off the block and gave the occasional vehicle a wide berth. The parents had lectured them, I could tell. Some things were standard no matter where you came from, I realised. They had parents who cared about them. The thought made me smile, and I became aware my back was aching, just slightly. Was it possible—? I caught my breath and thought about what could be.

They seemed like us but were not like us. On the surface they were similar, although they had a stamp. Looking back, I was uniquely placed to observe the differences. They were angular and dark, and when you turned your face slightly, you caught their quick, jerking movements; something resembling a cinematic effect. They had darting eyes and jutting elbows. People said, uncharitably, that they made you think about the exact location of your wallet. Their eyes were wide and heavy-

lidded, making them look not innocent but indolent ... as though they kept secrets. It was an unfortunate characteristic they worked hard to overcome.

Still I look back and agonise. Was I really responsible? I didn't know anything then. I was simply striving to be open-minded. Had we known one of the first groups would be settled not only in our state but our street, Eon would never have agreed to the move. But I was grateful to be there, settling in. I did my paid work diligently, but managed it in minimum time. I decorated our new home tastefully, piece by stylish piece. Through manual tasks I felt connected to earlier generations. I wiped and scrubbed surfaces by hand, bypassing the nano-cleaners, and enjoyed my simple, repetitive actions. I even cooked, finding oldtime recipes for apple chutney and nut loaf. I remember it as a time of peace, and possibilities. I felt hopeful. Buoyant.

I answered the door in a dreamy mood, forgetting to wonder who it would be, all the way out here. A little girl stood in the antechamber, staring up at me. She had lustrous black hair. A *juvenile*, the media would have said, *a female*. Up close her almond eyes were enchanting, her lips pursed in the start of a smile. She wore a brightly coloured jumpsuit. She looked the same as any other pretty little girl.

I remember my first cynical thought: What would she ask for? We studied each other a moment. Perhaps she hadn't seen many of *me*. Suddenly her smile dazzled. She drew something from behind her back in delicate dimpled fists, wrapped in a twist of paper, like a sweet bag from the past. She held it up to me.

'My Mama says you try', she said, looking beyond, then squarely up into my eyes, in a way that made my heart ache

with compassion. It was the first time I'd seen the shutter movement, up close. She was the original Shy Barbie.

I peeped into the bag. It held two egg-sized ovals, with an aromatic, almost irresistible smell. They were rich maroon in colour and studded with what I later learned were native nuts. It made them resemble painted potatoes.

'Cakes?' I guessed.

The little girl nodded, and I saw the shutter-effect a second time. It wasn't fully understood. Our scientists said their skins were formed from tiny scales, and that their miniscule cogwheel movements were caused by a more rigid internal structure, a carbon-fibre skeleton. Shuttering was supposed to come from a combination of the way their bodies moved, and how their scales reflected the light. That alone doomed them to be kept at arms' length, I realised. I felt a protective rush that took me by surprise.

'Thank you, sweetheart', I said. 'Please tell your Mama thank you.'

My heart thumped and I desperately wanted to say something friendlier, but everyone I knew had warned against it. The little girl turned to leave, then hesitated and looked back. I waved. She froze for an instant, then copied me. I didn't even think to ask her name.

I would have kept the visit a secret from Eon, but the cakes were astounding, and in the end, I had to share. You took a bite, and somehow felt ... *transported*.

'What?' he said, looking up sharply. 'A Lizard came *here*'?

'Eon', I said, feeling peeved. 'Azidlians. Stop calling them Lizards. A little girl. She was beautiful. If we have a child, a child half as gorgeous, I'll be over the moon.'

He gave me his best sulky-boy look, but when he tasted the cake ... his face transformed.

‘Should you be eating that ... ?’ he said, eyeing the rest of mine.

‘You know, when you might be ... ?’

‘Sly bastard!’ I said, smacking his hand. ‘Don’t bother with *your* cake, then!’

‘Not a chance’, he said, grinning and gulping.

‘Idiot!’ I said. ‘I’m going to savour every bite. Right in front of you.’

Quite soon, Eon stopped going on about them. We met the Mama, Aril. *Sapphire*, they’d named the lovely little messenger-girl. Not a traditional name. Hoping it would help her integrate.

It was time for us to be tolerant, I told myself, and I could lead the way. We had things all wrong – we mustn’t encourage enclaves. So I made them into my project. Around that time I felt the first flutter in my stomach. Sapphire’s striking pixie-face clung in my mind. I decided to give that little girl a future. Damn it, the rest of the planet could follow. My own child would enter a world made better by my efforts.

So I made it my mission to educate them. We started off simply, with coffee and cake. Perhaps I was patronising. Easy recipes, and where to find the ingredients. Buying the right brands, from pastries to heels to people-movers. I had cravings for *eluto*, their special cake. *Eluto*: meaning arms-wide. I had a passion for those cakes. Yet I never even asked Aril how to make them. I suppose my biggest mistake was my lack of reciprocal interest.

Step two: I invited the Azidlians to dinner. At first, it was just a traditional barbeque, served outdoors at our long marble table. I steeled myself, shushed Eon, and mixed them with the neighbours. Aril came to help me set up and became my willing

student. Her husband Rato arrived later, bringing along the tribe. He was diffident, but had a questing curiosity that never flagged. They were intelligent and would learn things quickly, I realised. Our food was strange to them, but they studied it avidly. Aril learnt soufflés and canapés. Serving decent and appropriate wines and choosing dishes that everybody would eat. She and her sisters and aunts quickly mastered the art of entertaining in the way I most enjoyed, with the illusion of being effortless. That summer was the hottest I could remember, but we made fruit daiquiris and delicious non-alcoholic punches. My belly swelled a little, and instead of worrying at putting on the weight, I adjusted to my new centre of gravity with pride.

Aril approached me shyly, to issue a return invitation.

Nostrils flared, she announced: ‘I want us to eat the neighbours’.

I snorted and corrected her grammar. We laughed until we were dizzy.

Clutching a soft drink and some red, Eon and I made our way into the old house a little nervously, unsure what to expect. I wore a flowing top, disguising our little secret. In the heat I felt I glowed. I gasped – the Azidlians had soaked up my lessons, and built on them – as though they’d reinvented rustic chic. Their long table was a mirror of mine, but spread with gauzy red cloth. It was laden with breads and salads and meats, aromatic with tantalising smells. Inside and outside, the shack was swathed in subtle winking lights, resembling a cluster of fireflies. Arriving on dusk, you actually forgot the place was close to being condemned. Rato welcomed us, beaming. Venturing inside was like walking into fairyland. I swear, at that very moment, I felt a tiny kick. I whispered it to Eon and his face beamed back into mine.

As the mercury crept higher, the Azidlians absorbed our culture through the pores of their darkening skins. They had a rich exotic scent that spiralled in the heat, which they had to learn to temper. They imitated us so diligently my circle saw their curiosity value. I felt a minor sense of triumph as my own people began to draw them in; my oldest friends and newest neighbours. We put things into words we didn't normally discuss, and it warmed our bellies and lit our eyes. The Azidlians soaked up our subtleties and preferences like sponges. Which schools to aim for, and which to avoid. Music lessons and special tuition and sporting events. Fund raising for a new gymnasium, and the regional irrigation system. I even encouraged them to believe that here, their children could aspire to Government, if that was what they wanted. Helped groom them and their families until you couldn't tell us from them.

I remember expounding over drinks that the Azidlians had repaid us in full. They flattered us by wanting to copy us, exactly. Yet there were differences, which we also found endearing. Their creative use of the language disarmed us, made us laugh. The rhythms of their voices, their amusing hint of drama. They were svelte and dark and the women in particular wore colourful clothing whose aesthetic we enjoyed. The men were more graceful and charming than our own. When I said that, Eon spluttered his drink, and our neighbours laughed out loud.

They embraced our aspirations in the blink of an eye. Their kids were attending our best schools. We were hearing their gentle pride as their offspring reached house captain, university, company graduate programs, even CEO. They sucked up the heat, seemed to grow in it. As the sun beat down

my belly expanded. Trying to cultivate calmness, I felt inexplicably agitated. The heat coming off the pavements was crippling, and I could only bear short walks outside. My garden withered and our planting programs failed. As our vague uneasiness grew, they drank in the dryness and flourished. Like an exotic drought-resistant species.

So when I began to get a glimmer, there was nobody I could tell. It happened at the time of my first miscarriage. The confidante I chose was Aril: not Eon, or even my oldest friend, Mae. I had been crying, and my eyes in the mirror were red, my face wretched and unattractive. I thought to fone, but didn't trust my voice. I messaged and Aril came at once.

I spilled the news in the same way my uterus had expelled the dark-red slime on my cloud-coloured carpet.

I saw myself as Aril must see me, shoulders shaking and sobbing quietly. I waited for her arms to wrap my shoulders, longing for comfort. Nothing happened. I looked up, sniffing. Aril was *studying* me. Her black eyes glittered, impenetrable as ants. If I expected empathy, there seemed no hint of understanding. Was she wondering what to do? In that instant she could have been a cyber-creature. I had the chilling idea I had caught out one species examining another.

She made a gentle humming noise and took my hand. She looked into my eyes. 'We say, one fails, others follow'. I put my head in my hands and abandoned all attempts to cry quietly. I suppose she left the house sometime later. I sobbed and gulped until I was sick. The vomit was bitter and viscous. All I could taste was *eluto*.

I watched them then, til my eyeballs ached, with an inexorable suspicion that bubbled and spat. My friends had become their allies and mentors, even their guarantors. I wondered at what I had done; the scope and extent of my complicity.

I tried to tell Eon and he slammed his study door.

‘*You* wanted to be their best friends! And now you’re paranoid!’ he yelled.

I wiped my eyes and crept away. I was coming to believe it was all my fault. I needed to understand more. I could never stomach *eluto* again.

Their origins were sketchy, and they kept their recollections vague; a slight shudder, a dismissive wave of a bronzed, jewelled wrist, a flash of eyes, and an intriguing conversational leap. They rebuilt that old shack many times over. It metamorphosed as they had done, into condos and apartments. Their children moved upmarket. Reshaped to inhabit a new world that offered them no reference points, the meaning seemed to trickle out of their rituals. Their once-earnest little cultural celebrations, which we were invited to attend and implored to enjoy, gave way to parties. Their parties got bigger. They adored our booze and experimented with our drugs, blending them with their own enthusiastically. There were couplings and scandals and stand-offs. Until we found we weren’t invited any more. And still their celebrations grew louder, trumpeting mergers, take-overs, senate seats.

I remember the exact moment I got another firm inkling of the ugly truth. The day was sweltering, yet a cold sweat chilled my skin. Eon and I had been arguing. I was in the garden, digging desperately. My big rampant creeper had died. I was down in the dirt on my hands and knees. Perhaps I seemed like the neighbourhood madwoman. Just then Aril drove past in their

brand-new vehicle. I raised my hand hesitantly, a schoolkid unsure of the answer. I looked up and saw the shutter movement, distinctly. *She had turned her head away.*

What had I done? I kept watch as strenuously as I'd once schooled the original family, the thread that continued to spool like drool from a large-jowled dog. Was I delusional? Eon kept throwing new labels at me. Did I imagine myself some puppeteer whose toys had climbed their strings and refused to follow the script? Was the problem all in my mind? If I'd helped, surely I'd simply helped some poor displaced families find a way to a better life. Could I really be blamed for this morass?

The heat gained intensity, as though we were billions of ants being burned by a child with a magnifying glass. But instead of being frenzied, we grew languid. We seemed unable to think or to act. Yet our swarthy neighbours revelled in the stifling atmosphere.

And now, God help me, I know. Now we've lost the will to salvage our own planet and we've voted to settle some new ones. Now there's no question – I know. The ballot took in the whole planet and some were shocked by the split. But now it's been enacted in law – the humans will go, the Azidlians will stay. People who resist will be kept behind in camps.

Those aliens infiltrated us seamlessly. Would this have happened, if not for me? Surely there were other unwitting allies. *Eluto* rises rancid in my throat. When the human birthrate dived, everybody blamed the heat. Those of us still here are too old and weary to fight. *One fails, others follow.* Now I understand – there *will* be nowhere better to go. Our world became their host organism, and they are the

consummate colonisers. We can't be sure until we get there, but somehow I know what we'll find. Wherever we go in the universe, I know they will have called there first.