

STORY 7: “The Face in the Mirror” by Blossom Beeby

Born in Korea in 1984, Blossom was adopted by white Australian parents. She lives in a white neighbourhood and finds that it is “quite easy to forget I was Asian when everyone around me was white”. However, this is not without consequences.

When I was a child, my mother would amuse herself with stories of how I’d come into the world. Perhaps I had arrived on the front lawn in a spaceship, or had been sent to do the cleaning. In the late eighties, people were not accustomed to seeing white parents with a smiley Asian kid in tow.

When I was born on the first of February in 1984, the temperature was thirteen degrees below zero. It was in a city in the south of Korea called ‘Pusan’. For a long time, though I’d pronounced the ‘-san’ part of Pusan in a hard, Australian -sounding way, to rhyme with the word ‘can’. It should have been a softer “sahn”. My parents gave me the middle name ‘See Jeong’, which in Korean means ‘crystal’ and was my first name when I was a baby in Korea.

Parents who acquired ‘Made in Korea’ babies in the 1980s received scant care instructions. Don’t treat delicately. Allow to integrate. Take special care not to acknowledge Asian-ness. My parents heeded the tag, I think. Asian adoptees often talk about their experiences with mirrors. To many of us they have a sad significance. Inside we identified with the Caucasian people who made up our families. If we closed our eyes and imagined ourselves, we would see rosy white kids. When we looked at our faces in the mirror, though, foreigners would appear. I internalised my Asian face, but it didn’t mean that I liked it. I just accepted it (...)

My mother brought a large coffee-table book with beautiful images of Korea inside. ... In one of these, there was an elderly woman, hunched over and gazing at the camera. I was repulsed by her brown wrinkledness. I thought about becoming like this in my old age. I believed that with the progression of time in Australia, I would eventually evolve into a fully-fledged Caucasian and would never have to face the possibility of being a shrivelled-up old Asian woman.

For much of my childhood, my Asian-ness was pushed to a crevice in the back of my mind. My friends were white, my family was white, my world was white (...) In both my primary and high schools, I was the only Asian kid in my year.” (324)

I spent many summers flipping through my grandmother’s trashy weekly gossip magazines. One day I came across an advertisement for pantyhose. The ad featured an Asian woman standing in a boxing ring. She had glistening black hair and was wearing a figure-hugging red dress with a split all the way up her leg. She was wearing a pair of sheer, black pantyhose and impossibly high stilettos. Heavily made up to look smouldering, her facial expression was confident, if a little smug. She was beautiful and she gave me a glimmer of hope.

In the latter years of high school, I began a rebellion of sorts. I started going to nightclubs with my best friend, who was half Ghanian and had grown up mostly with a white English mother. We were both culturally confused and suddenly found places where there were a lot of people who looked like us. There were Asians, Arabs, Africans, Indians and every ethnicity in between; the white kids were the minority. It was a cultural hodgepodge and a comfort zone I’d never known before. I felt at ease asserting my ethnicity among the throngs of other black-haired people who gathered in those dark, smoky venues. It was the first time I’d felt comfortable being an Asian round other Asians. It may have been a very seedy way of achieving it and not one to be advocated in adoptive parenting handbooks, but I was finally kind of glad to be Asian. I had fully acknowledged my asianness and was proud of it. I met more Asians and felt comfortable around them.

STORY 9: The Rugmaker from Mazar-e-Sharif

Najaf Mazari migrates to Australia from Afghanistan in 2001 and, as a persecuted Hazara (a Shiite muslim), seeks asylum. He leaves behind his memories and family members; he grieves the loss of his brother, Gorg Ali, who was a role model. In 1982, Gorg Ali died from a stray bullet during one of the many battles between the Russian army and the Afghan freedom fighters (the mujahedin). (See Texts 12, 46 and 63)

In Afghanistan today, it is possible to listen to a story of heartbreak in the morning, hear a more heartbreaking story in the afternoon and in the evening, hear the worst story of all. It is not that Afghans have chosen a path of suffering out of madness; no, other people have chosen that path for us.

“My brother Gorg Ali who was killed by a bullet one dreadful day was one of those people who make the world possible. What I mean is that he was the sort of human being who holds things together, and the opposite of the sort who wrenches things apart. Without people like Gorg Ali, we would be at each other’s throats all year long, never knowing that anything else was possible. We would think that bravery meant hitting those we hate with an axe; we would not understand that bravery can be building and making and refusing to lift an axe over our enemies’ heads. He was one of those people who shows — not as a teacher, but as a person who shows. He had no faith in fighting, whether the enemy was Pashtun, Russian, communist or mujahedin mattered little to him. He didn’t trust fighting as a way of building, for he’d seen how long fighting can go on, and how reluctant people are to stop once they’ve started, and how that means little if anything is left standing as the years of fighting pass by.” (105-6).

don’t mean to ask those reading this story to believe that Gorg Ali was a god, or not truly a human being. No, he was as human as anyone; he had to eat to stay alive just like other people, and if he dropped something heavy on his toe by accident, he called out in pain, as we all do. What I am trying to say about him was that he was free of much of the madness that drives other people to do bad things, or things that are bad for the soul. Gorg Ali believed in the earth as a peasant does. Things made by sweat and toil were important; things made by lying on a sofa all day long were not. Let me put it this way; raising a field of watermelons provided many people with something delicious to eat; writing a speech providing nothing to eat at all. So I would say that my brother Gorg Ali, that believed man, belonged to the watermelon school of philosophers. I never heard him say so, but I know that if someone had sat with him and spent the whole day explaining what the great philosophers had said about this matter, Gorg Ali’s question would have been:” Yes, but can you use it to grow watermelons?”

And yet, having said that Gorg Ali was as human as anyone else, I must now tell my readers that my brother was also a person of strange powers. I am thinking especially of his power over snakes.

.. Gorg Ali was not born with a power over snakes, just as he was not born with his other powers. The powers came to him. And why Gorg Ali and not another? I think it is because these powers of the past only make their home in a man or a woman who can wield them. The powers do not seek out those who are too weak or too silly or too angry or too boastful. In a weak man, the powers would be dangerous, just as they would in a boastful man. And so they live in the earth until they hear the tread of one they trust, and they know they can trust this person by the sound of his feet on the earth. For people walk in many different ways, and the sound they make on the earth is as distinct as the sound of their voice. I know this even though I don’t have the power of Gorg Ali. ... 107