

The Story Bridge

Yasaman Bagheri

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She looks at the bridge through the window of a hotel, The Oakwood Hotel & Apartments. But how does the bridge look at the hotel?

‘You’re in Australia now. Isn’t that what you’ve always wanted? What are you upset about now?’ The light-blue-uniformed Serco officers are tired of dealing with people like her. Why can’t these people ever appreciate what we provide?

‘You ... don’t ... understand,’ she mumbles. She is tired of explaining it to everyone over and over again, why she can’t be happy.

‘What’s happening, Judy?’ another Serco officer asks the manager as he enters the room. They are restless to finish their twelve-hour shift.

‘Nothing. She’s just not feeling well. Nothing major.’

‘You ... don’t ... understand,’ the girl mumbles again, crying and shaking.

‘Hey, look at me. There’s nothing wrong with you, okay? Come on. Sit up now. You can’t lie down. Come on. I know you’re not that sick.’ The manager pulls her up.

‘You ... don’t ... understand,’ she keeps crying. Her teeth are chattering. Her eyes are closed. Unable to sit up, she tries to lie back on the table.

‘Get someone in, Mike,’ the woman orders.

‘Hey, look at me.’ The Serco manager holds the girl’s shoulders and shakes her. ‘You’ve gotta stop it, okay? There’s nothing wrong with you.’

With every little LED light, the bridge shouts ‘Christmas is coming’. Everyone can hear it, but her. She is tired of hearing. So, she looks at the woman. Through the window frame, beyond the little cars, it stands firm — the Story Bridge. It’s beautiful. It’s calm. Her share of this city is only to watch how she must not be free out there. How it could have been different, but she must be detained in here.

The nineteenth of July 2013 does not mean anything to this city or the people, only to her: it’s more than a date. *Sorry child, you arrived a bit too late.* She takes one last look at the bridge before another uninvited attack. Her body and mind fail each other, and at that moment she can only think of one thing: there is no bridge from her story to this city.

How many people pass by this bridge every day? What stories do they bridge to this city? The city has passed her by. She is invisible inside a seven-storey building that is drained of oxygen.

They sealed the windows, shut all the doors and guarded the elevator. No one gets out and no one gets in. She is an exile in the heart of Brisbane on the top floor. The walls chew her up and spit her out. Days are longer than twenty-four hours; time works differently inside these walls. She doesn’t belong here.

‘Look at it this way’ — the manager drops the last bomb — ‘you were never ever supposed to come here ...’

Six long years of you-will-never-this, you-will-never-that, you-have-no-rights, you-are- nobody, 'you' and always a big NO in front of her. The 'You's' inside a detention centre on a 21-square kilometre island called Nauru all rush into her head. How can they expect her to be happy, to forget? And it always goes back to the nineteenth of July. *If you seek asylum by boat, you will not make Australia home.*

'You are just a little bit away from being free. What's the matter with you?' The Serco woman's words are acid which burn into her bones.

She shouts. *Make it stop please. Make the walls stop. Make their voices stop.* It is numb. It is an overdose on pain itself. The louder she cries the louder the voices get.

'Anxiety attack,' the Serco woman radios.

A week later, one morning, they wake her up. 'Pack up your stuff. You are going to stay at the hospital for a while.' The officers put on their gloves. One pats her down, one searches her stuff, one metal detects her with a wand. Each buzz of the electric wand is like a slap to her face. Lest you ever forget you are worse than a criminal.

'All cleared. Good to go.'

In the vehicle, she is told, 'You are not allowed to sit near the door.' She sits in the middle and fastens her seatbelt. You are at risk of running away.

'Yes, it was such a nice trip. We loved it especially visiting ... ' The officers talk among themselves. Four people in one car; two different worlds fit inside this van. They pass by the Story Bridge, that same bridge that drove her insane. This side of the

city will never reach that side, no matter how many bridges are built.

‘How’d you give up smoking?’ one officer asks another.

‘Hypnotherapy.’

‘Oh really? Does it work though?’

‘Well, it’s been three weeks since we quit and it’s going great so far. So easy.’

‘Don’t you feel like having a smoke?’

‘No. Not at all.’

She is still invisible to all of them. Maybe it’s better this way. She looks at her hands. Her fingernails are broken and bleeding. She peels the nails off her fingers. Half an hour and she won’t have to listen to these people again.

They arrive, and all eyes are on her. Who is this girl with three security guards? What awful crime has she committed? The officers escort her, one on each side and one holds her files as she is led to Reception. You are officially crazy. Welcome to the Pine Rivers Mental Health Private Hospital. Is it on purpose that they send her to the closest hospital to Peter Dutton’s office?

‘Raha?’ a nurse asks, holding some papers in her hand.

‘Yes.’ She is about to burst into tears. *Please take me away from these people, please, please.*

‘Come with me.’ The nurse reads the plea in her eyes. The officers hand her over.

Past this point, those Sercos are the invisible ones. She doesn’t look back at them; the nurses don’t look back either. *Go back to where you came from, you heartless robots.*

‘This way.’ The nurse points to a room. ‘So, Raha, we have been told by IHMS to take you in as an inpatient.’ She clicks her pen, ready to fill out the forms. ‘Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? What’s hurting you?’

Her tears come out before the words can. She wants to shout, but feels voiceless, like drowning under all the water that exists in this world. Two words: ‘The guards.’ *And that man in his office nearby, he is hurting me, make him stop.*

‘Trauma,’ the nurse writes down.

Elderly patients, nurses, visitors sit in the hall. The TV is on some news channel.

... On Monday a nine-month-old was found dead on a Gold Coast beach. On Tuesday residents said they had tried to get help for the baby months earlier. At least two locals said they had contacted police and other authorities about the family, who had been sleeping rough near the beach.

She rushes outside of the hall into the small yard of the hospital. An officer still follows her, but in the hospital they have been ordered by the doctors to keep a few metres away from the patients. She chooses the last bench to sit on, as far away as possible from the guard. Her loud tears can’t be stopped. She cries to the wind that brings the smell of the city from outside these walls. Walls are everywhere; she is trapped in a miniature box. The Minister for Home Affairs moves the dolls in that box. Sometimes he puts them behind fences, sometimes he sends them to the hospital, sometimes he buries them when he kills the dolls.

'Are you all right?' A nurse approaches her. She shakes her head.

'What's the matter, sweetheart?' The nurse sits beside the girl.

'Did you see that baby on the news?'

'Are you crying for her?'

'Her family was homeless.'

'That's sad.' The nurse pats her back.

'They could have been living in a house. Do you know how much it has cost for me to be in Nauru for six years?'

The nurse shakes her head.

'500,000 dollars a year,' she cries. 'How many houses can be built with that much money?'

'Oh, darling, I'm sorry.'

'I just don't understand. Why are billions of dollars spent to make someone like me end up in a mental health hospital while some people don't even have a house to sleep in?'

'I don't know, dear. It doesn't make sense.' The nurse is about to cry too, but she has to hold back her tears while at work.

'I was happy, you know. I was perfectly healthy six years ago. I was once very much alive.'

The nurse holds the patient's hand. She doesn't have anything to say to her. She couldn't, even if she wanted to. The lines are pretty clear here: she is a detainee.

'It's like cutting someone's legs and then buying them a bicycle made of gold.'

You will have to learn how to carry all these broken pieces together with you, walking on the streets of a city you don't

measure up to. Do us all a favour and end yourself, dear. Many like you have sat on this bench before, and many like you will sit on this bench after you. That man will still be in his office. This city will still reject you.

At night, it comes back again, an uninvited guest. She can't breathe. She crawls outside of the room, drags herself to the hallway. Those good-for-nothing-good guards don't even bother to call a nurse.

'Help,' she whispers.

'What's happened?'

'Pan ... ic ... at ...'

'Okay, okay. Let me help you.' The nurse places her on the couch. 'Open your mouth.' She puts a tablet on her tongue and helps her drink some water. It takes the longest half an hour to calm down. The pain is crucifying. *This is how it feels like to relive six years of your life in a few minutes, to feel everything so strongly until all your cells stop feeling anything at all. Starting from fingers, all the way up to the arms, straight to your heart. You are not in your body; you are the pain. Tell me now, how will you ever describe it to these people? Who will ever understand?*

'I can't breathe.' Once again, there is not enough oxygen for her in this city.

'You are safe, darling.'

Safe? Safe like strip searches, like guards everywhere, like the day they beat you and no human rights, no women's rights, no children's rights, no refugees' rights could stop them.

'You are safe. Close your eyes.'

A guard standing in front of her, writing down some notes, radioing someone is the last image she sees. She closes her eyes.

In her dreams the narrative is changed. She is in control. She is bigger than the guards and that man. They become tiny miniature dolls. She can put them away in a box. These are the perks of the medication: you will lose your mind for the ease of yourself.

If they can't grow a heart, it's best you lose your mind.

Some months later. She watches news program *A Current Affair* about child detainees who have been brought to Australia from Nauru under new legislation.

... illegals housed in five-star hotels with private securities paid by taxpayers' money. Luxury detention hotels ...