

## The Golden Bracelet

I suspect everyone to be a bag snatcher as I am shuffling down the stairs of Auburn station with a hangover and there is a 24K gold bracelet hidden in the depths of my handbag. My heart is pulsating inside my belly and the *farofa* Tania made for lunch is travelling up and down my oesophagus, leaving a scorched trail behind. I regret having that second latte on the train. Coffee after a night of drinking always gives me heartburn and I can't stop by at a chemist for an anti-acid pill. It's already past three in the afternoon. I have an hour to find the highest bidding jeweller to sell the bracelet to and the main road of Auburn is brimming with stores that exchange money for gold.

I tap my card at the gates and head towards the South Parade Road. The Victorian buildings lining the shopping street are flaunting signs in Chinese, Hindi, Arabic. The array of Asian grocers that once ruled the street are now being dwarfed by their Afghan counterparts. As I cross the road, a man behind me yells in Turkish: '*orospu çocuğu!*'. I don't turn around to look, but my familiarity with the curse reminds me of the bracelet in my bag. I tighten my grip on the strap, thinking that someone who swears at mothers could be a thief too. Behind the Khaybar Bazaar's window, a boy is trying to squeeze the instant noodle packs between the cardamom biscuits and henna hair packs. He looks out the window and our eyes meet. He smiles. I look away. When the swearing man overtakes, I realise that he had been cursing at his dog for pulling the leash. His bald patch gleams under the afternoon sun, like most men in my family.

On the footpath, a schoolgirl catches her reflection in Uncle Minh restaurant's window. She rolls up the waistband of her skirt and evens it out by pulling it from the sides. First, a woman pushing a pram walks past. Then, a gaggle of teenage boys dressed in tracksuit pants. Auburn is a jazz tune. It's riotous rhythms clash and syncopate around me.

Mum told me to shop around carefully when I announced that I was going to sell the bracelet. Taking it to Auburn was her idea too. I was happy to save myself a trip and sell it to the Armenian guy on Market street, but she reckoned that it would be worth way more than \$450. 'It's almost summer and all the Turks are rushing off to marry their kids. They need gold, don't be stupid' she texted in the morning. Mum wears kangaroo fur lined slippers inside the house. She drinks tea from tulip-shaped glasses and watches Turkish soap operas when she isn't controlling my life.

Before Tania moved into my spare room, mum used to drop by uninvited to complain about the shoe prints on the carpet. Then, Tania found out that she was three-month pregnant and introduced the 'no shoes indoors' policy. 'I am the majority in this house now' she said, her fingers rubbing against her belly button. Day by day, she is swelling up as new bullet points are added to the ever-growing list of house rules.

- *Vacuum every day.*
- *No cooking smelly.*
- *No opening door to man.*

The last bullet-point only made sense when her ex-boyfriend Dave left a fist-sized dent on our front door one night after Tania stopped replying to his text messages.

I slow down as I pass the discount store. Silk slippers in the window are placed at the bottom with a sign that says available in size 5. On the middle shelf, golden

beckoning cats with right paws pointing at the sky are staring at me. Being slightly more expensive, the mosque shaped clocks are placed on the top. Next door is Altan's hairdresser. A woman standing at the door is holding a phone with her right hand and a cigarette with the left. She has foil strips hanging off her hair and red dye

smudged on the corners of her forehead. 'Henna night tonight, wedding Saturday. You should come *kız*' she yells at her phone.

I used to love the henna nights as a kid. Mum used to place me on the decorated bride's lap like a good luck charm, who then would hold her henna-covered hands to the sky and pray for a healthy baby.

I didn't have a henna night when I got married. There wasn't a silk red scarf thrown over my head. Nobody sang melancholic songs about the bride leaving her village. I wore the strapless white dress bought at a vintage store in Berlin. We signed the papers at a marriage registry office in Istanbul and shared a joint at *Kara Murat's* house afterwards. Next morning, I called mum to tell her that I was not coming back to Sydney. Nuro's mother visited us the weekend after. It was my first time meeting her. 'You probably won't wear this' she said as she handed me the bracelet. 'It's an investment for the newly married'.

I keep walking. Sayed's Golds' display is lit orange with chunky gold chains laid next to one and other. Behind the counter, a boy looking no older than 12 is playing with his phone. He yells 'mum' and runs for the back of the shop as I push the glass door. The scent of cinnamon permeating the air fill my airways. A young woman appears from the back. The red chiffon scarf wrapped around her head frames her lit-up face. She looks polished like the glass counter between us.

Without greeting her, I take out the bracelet wrapped in a tissue paper and put it on the counter.

'I want to sell this. How much do you offer?'

She holds it up to examine it and scrunches her eyebrows.

'This is Turkish design. You Turkish?' she asks.

'Yes. You?'

'Afghan. I must weigh it, but no scale here. My son take it to next door. OK?'

'Alright, I wait'.

She points her right index finger at the child and shakes it up and down, instructing him in Dari. The boy puts the bracelet in his back pocket and runs off. With the sound of the door closing behind him, my stomach sinks. What if he doesn't come back? I bite my lip to fight the urge to run after him. I can't make a scene in Auburn.

'How long you been Australia?' the shopkeeper asks.

'20 years' I reply and turn around to stare out the glass door.

Across the road, an elderly Asian man is pushing a shopping trolley filled with fresh herbs. He stops in front of the ATM and reaches into his pocket. Two decades ago, instead of the bank, there used to be a tiny shop called Hue Fabrics.

It was our first month in Australia when mum and I walked in there to buy linen to make pillowcases. The shopkeeper was a middle-aged Vietnamese woman named Thuy, with thinning salt and pepper hair. She greeted us with '*merhaba arkadaş*'

after realising that we were Turks fresh off the Boeing. She beckoned me to sit on her plastic stool and gave me a peanut candy before haggling with mum in broken Turkish.

I find myself smiling when the child reappears behind the glass door. 'It's \$500' he yells as soon as he walks in. His mother frowns. '500' she repeats as the boy hands me back the bracelet. I wrap it with the tissue paper before stuffing it in my bag. I must visit at least one more shop before selling it. I thank her and leave.

Outside, my eyes search for the old man with the trolley but he has gone already. I wonder what happened to Thuy after her shop was bought by the bank. Mum used to buy sewing materials from her for her tailoring shop and they had become friends. 'Of course, she learnt some Turkish to keep her business going. Most of her customers were Turks' she said when I asked her why a Vietnamese woman living in Sydney would bother to learn Turkish.

Mum seemed unimpressed when I announced that I was going to sell the bracelet to pay for Roanna Goncalves' workshop for emerging writers.

'Don't you earn enough for these things?'

She sighed when I reminded her that she can't ask such questions in Australia.

'Casual teaching only covers my rent. Why do you think I have a flatmate?' I replied, trying to sound calm.

'Writing a book won't buy you a house. I was mother of a teenager at your age.'

I am thirty-five but according mum, one does not become an adult until there is a child in the picture.

‘Good on Tania for keeping the baby despite that scum of an ex. I am going to knit her a sweater’ she said and paused for a second. ‘Freeze your eggs, your time is running out.’

Towards the end of the street, school kids are lined up in front of the bubble-tea shop. It used to be the meeting point for me and the string of boys I dated in high school. I want to have taro milk-tea, but I must sell the bracelet first. ‘Marmara jewellery’ is waiting for me at the next door and I walk in.

The shopkeeper is busy serving a mother and son duo. I stand in the corner to wait for my turn while wondering if I should greet him in Turkish or English. The mother

holds up a choker necklace layered with diamonds and red stones from both ends and studies it. Her son has a neatly trimmed beard and an Aussie accent. Everybody is speaking in Turkish except him. Mother tells the shopkeeper that her son is getting married next month and asks for a discount. The necklace she is holding is humongous compared to my bracelet. The shopkeeper holds his hands up, palms facing the sky. ‘*Abla*, I make no profit if I give you discount.’

‘It looks too heavy anyway’ she says and drops it on the counter.

‘Being married will feel even heavier’ I think to myself. As if she heard my thoughts, the mother turns around and stares at me. I look at my watch to avoid her glare and realise that I must sell the bracelet soon. Today is the last day to enrol in the workshop. Otherwise, I will have to wait for another six months.

If I were an artist, I would paint myself standing in the middle of the Aussie outback with my feet buried deep under the red earth. I would be wearing nothing but the golden bracelet around my wrist and stare at my beholders from inside the canvas, watch them, as they look at me. But, I am no artist. So, I have to write.

‘You sell this’. The mother points at the bracelet and asks to look at it. ‘Yes’, I reply in Turkish. She lifts her eyebrows and asks my name. I regret revealing my Turkishness with the arrival of next question.

‘Are you single?’

‘Married’

‘Where is your husband?’

‘Istanbul.’ I hesitate but continue. ‘He will move here when his visa gets approved’.

I hang my head and scuff my shoes like I do whenever I lie.

‘You should’ve stayed there with him’ she says.

Mum used to hear that a lot. We were still living in Turkey when she left dad for pressuring her to quit her job and become a housewife. After their divorce, mum placed an old pair of male shoes outside our front door every night to pretend that dad still lived with us.

The woman hands me back the bracelet when I pretend not hearing her.

I need fresh air. The phone in my bag pings as soon as I step outside. It’s a text from mum. ‘I will pay for the workshop. Keep the bracelet.’

‘I don’t want to keep it *anne!*’ I write back but don’t press the send button yet.

Two doors down, a Yildiz Tilbe song is blasting through the speakers at the Moon-star kebab.

*'Ben senin var ya,*

*lafınla şekil alamam...'*

I start humming along to the song. My knees shimmy to the rhythm once, then twice. Nuro loathed Yildiz Tilbe. 'It's her kind that make Turkey so unliveable' he would joke every time he heard her songs on the radio.

I met Nuro at a house party in Istanbul. He was sitting in a cloud of blue smoke with a cigarette hanging down from his lips. With eyes shut, his fingers played an invisible trumpet. I watched him for a while. The courage to introduce myself came after the second glass of *raki*. He was a writer whose first novel had gone unnoticed. I was a passer-by visiting *home* that no longer felt like one.

'I'll be the next *Oguz Atay*. Turkey will discover me after I die' he said and laughed. I laughed with him, secretly hoping that he would not die anytime soon.

I stop shimmying when the door behind me opens. It is the mother and son, leaving Marmara jewellery empty handed. It is my turn. 'You have a bracelet to sell' the shopkeeper says and offers coffee while I wait for him to weigh it in the back. I tell him that I am in a hurry and sit down.

The day after we met, Nuro and I wandered down the labyrinth of lanes surrounding Beyoglu to check out the second-hand bookshops. We sat at a cafe overflowing onto

Istiklal street and ordered Turkish coffee. When I finished drinking, he grabbed my *fincan* and flipped it over.

'Let me read your cup' he said before asking when I was returning to Sydney. I looked at my surroundings as if the answer was hidden somewhere. My eyes caught a *Forough* poem scribbled onto the wall with chalk.

*And this is I*

*a woman alone*

*at the threshold of a cold season.*

Around us, young people with fingers wrapped around their teacups spoke in dialects of Turkish and Kurdish. The permanent fog over the Bosphorus strait was descending onto me. 'I'm not sure' I replied.

In Sydney, I felt like a ferry that constantly shuttled between her hyphenated selves. Istanbul was a wharf, offering me a chance to berth and explore my surroundings.

'Aussie girl, your cup says that you'll be very happy here' Nuro said, his eyes squinting at the cup. Three months later we were married.

For the next two years I taught English to businessmen by day and went to sleep at night listening to Nuro typing away his second novel. The month after I started my job, the school's manager called me to his office. 'Students don't want a Turkish

person teaching them English' he said. 'Anglicize your name and tell your students that you are an Aussie.'

'What do you do with the gold you buy' I ask the shopkeeper.

'Melt them to make new products' he replies.

Restless, I stand up and walk over to the counter to look at the evil eye beads pinned to small gold coins that Turks buy for newborn babies.

'Those are \$120. We can carve the baby's name on it' he says.

Nuro was outside the locked bathroom door, forcing his weight against it as I sat on the floor naked, sobbing. I cupped my inflated breasts with my palms. They hurt. My bloated belly was pale against the darkness of the tiles. There was a human being in there, nestled up inside of me, unaware of the continents shifting beneath our feet.

'\$550' the shopkeeper says. The exchange happens even quicker than I thought. I count the money twice before putting it in my wallet. I look at the bracelet one last time before he takes it inside.

'Take the bracelet, it's yours' Nuro said when I returned home from the abortion clinic. He had taken down my green suitcase from the top of the wardrobe and put it against the bedroom door. It was bought at a sale in Myer and still had the barcode stickers from Sydney airport attached to its handle.

'You say you can't live here and expect me to move to Sydney with you?' He grabbed the suitcase and threw it at my feet. 'Go back to *your* Australia'. What surprised me was not his rage but the presumption that Australia was mine. It could be said Australia was Steve Irwin's. Or Ernie Dingo's. But it never was mine.

I filed for divorce at the Turkish consulate upon returning to Sydney and told mum that I was back to become a writer.

'I'll be back for the baby coin later/' I say before leaving the shop.

'I'm 42 and pregnant' Tania said last night as she poured me a cachaca and a lemon iced-tea for herself. 'It was my last chance. He told me to 'take off the baby', I said fuck off!

I look at my watch and hasten my steps towards the bank where *Hue Fabrics* used to be. At the workshop, I will write about a teenage girl having peanut candy for the first time. She will watch her mother haggle with a Vietnamese woman. In Turkish. Broken Turkish. In their new country. Would Roanna like that? What would mum say? I'm running out of breath as I reach the beginning of the South Parade Road. The grey walls of the Auburn station become visible again. I hear a Turkish father calling for his daughter and telling her not to run. I want to stop and watch. I haven't got time. The bakery has Banh-Mi afternoon special. I love it with chili but must resist the temptation. Mum said that she will help me if I become a single mother like Tania. Maybe. Will I have to place male shoes in front of my door to scare off the strangers? I may become a mother one day. Not now. Tonight, I have a story to write.



