**….. but a boy can dream**

When I am older I will leave this village. I will go in the summer, on foot, over the ridge and down the chain of valleys. Down; down to the coast and there, sprawling, will be the city. The city where everything is just to hand: The buzzing city; the blooming city. The city of my dreams.

I will work nights at the Central Bus depot, cleaning the insides of bright yellow buses, washing away the last traces of the day’s passengers. I will work hard under harsh fluorescents until every bus smells fresh and clean, ready for the first timetabled journey of the morning. Queues of people will already be waiting at bus stops, anticipating, and they will not be disappointed.

During the day I will sleep wherever I can find a bit of respite from the sun and the noise. I will wander the fruit markets to see what stray mango or orphaned banana falls into my hands. There will be fresh bread from the bakery and water at a small shop where I stop off to stack boxes before heading over to restart my shift at the bus depot. I guess there are toilets there and a place to shower. I will get free drinks of tea, with biscuits, on my break.

Sometimes at the crisp early morning end of my shift, I might brave the ill-lit alleyway down the side of the depot with its dank pools of what the imagination may see as blood. I will climb the spiral metal steps up the back of the building and onto its flat roof with a view over the traffic already streaming into the city. Headlights will cut swathes through the darkness like streams of molten metal. Office blocks in the middle distance will already be waking up in geometries of light. It will all be very poetic. It might even move me to writing.

My life will be all sorted out. I will make enough money to buy a small building with rooms that I can rent out to others. I will call it Dream Villa. It will have a small courtyard with trees. There will be outdoor lamps and tables to sit at on warm summer evenings.

I will be a good landlord. There will be muslin cloths that people can use to keep insects away at night. There will be a boy sitting just outside the gate, ready to run errands for a few coins. He will recently have arrived from a village somewhere and I will make sure he has a place to sleep in some small outbuilding at my Dream Villa Hotel. Local traders will call selling fresh melons. Many people will want to stay there so I will buy another hotel that I will call ‘Paradise Lodge’.

I will talk to the boy about his dreams and he will tell me that he has come to the city to get money to buy a huge rusting hulk of a ship of the kind that you sometimes see in a magazine, stranded up on a shore and being taken apart by thousands of tiny workers. In his dream he has come to rescue the ship and give it a new life: ‘Why let a good ship go to waste like that? Why let it rust away until all it is good for is being cut into pieces? I will take care of it. I will paint it and put beds in it and turn it into a floating hotel.’

That is what life will be like for me when I have left this village and moved to the city. It won’t be easy. I know that. I have seen others go down there: to the coast, to the city. After a couple of years I have seen them come back to the village with their tales and their fantasies.

They come back with their heads full of city things. They think of nothing else. They go over and over the same things. It is as if the city has taken over their minds. They are the slaves of the city. They are its robots. They are city-zombies.

A group arrived back a few weeks ago. Not to our village but to the town just down the road. Only one of the group is from there – the one who acts as leader; the one with a red shirt. He stands at the front of his little gang, hands on hips, daring people to look into his face. I know that if I look directly into his eyes I will see disappointment. There will be traces of all the city things he has seen, all the scrapes he has got himself into, all the people he has taken up with. I wouldn’t like what I saw.

It is the same with the others: His two main men looking at people menacingly or disdainfully; the small group who bring up the rear, loitering, ready to be called forward when needed; the rest hanging over to one side, as if looking for a way out. None of them are from round here. I would know them if they were. They only stay here because of the shame if they returned home to villages that would look on them with pity. They would have left boasting of returning with gold and fancy clothes; yet here they are, penniless and ragged.

The group cause trouble in the town. I am glad they passed through our village without stopping. I see them when I take things to the town’s marketplace. I see them hanging around outside the bar. I see them occasionally roaring through on mopeds. I see them swaggering past shops, the owners moving further inside into the shadow. The men in the group seem sad. They seem defeated.

It doesn’t have to be like that. When I go to the city I will succeed. I have no doubts about that. There will be no need for me to depart in a flurry of boastings and braggings about how well I am going to do. It will happen and people will get to know about it soon enough.

I guess that the city is what you make of it. For some it becomes fearful, dangerous and dark but for others it is playful, friendly and airy. It reflects back how you look at it. I will be happy there.

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That was my dream and that is how things have turned out in reality. I did leave the village and walk for weeks. I did turn up at the main city bus depot and offer to work for a week unpaid. I was given the buses that no-one else wanted to clean: the buses where a person had vomited, the bus where a young woman had given birth, the bus with the unexplained spatters of blood. After the week I was taken on temporarily on a low wage. I was happy.

I found a hidden-away store cupboard at the back of the depot and tucked myself to sleep behind a stack of chairs. I wandered the market and existed on handouts and leftovers.

I made a few friends. People liked to talk to me, to tell me what was worrying them. An old cleaner was in tears one day. Her son had died the day before, burnt in a terrible road accident. He was involved in running petrol over the border from the place where it was siphoned out of a pipeline, partly refined in a local still then put into jerry cans. A fortune could be made smuggling it over to the city to sell at inflated prices. The more one could bring across the more money was to be made. Her son had strung cans of petrol all along a steel rod, with others balanced on rods above and below in a huge A-frame with him on his motorbike in the middle of it all. Unstable; inviting a wobble at the first pothole taken at speed. He crashed over, spilling raw petrol over himself and the road – all to go up in a roar from a small spark. I did what I could to comfort her but it seemed inadequate.

One of the women cleaners was called Priscilla. Her parents, like mine, had died a long time ago. When I was young being an orphan was hard. I saw it as a curse, a misfortune for something I had done. Priscilla was the only one who understood when I spoke of such things. Now, for both of us, being alone in the city, being on our own was fine. There were no ageing parents to rush home to care for every time they got sick. There were no brothers and sisters endlessly needing school fees to be paid. There was just me. There was just her.

I moved in with her. We got along well. She told me about all the little dodges and shortcuts that other cleaners took and said that she always admired the way I did the job properly. She was intelligent but mostly she was determined. When a supervisor job came along she pushed me to go for it.

I saved money. I bought a small hotel. I called it Dream Villa. There were trees in the garden. There was no boy outside but, despite that, the dream had come true.

That was almost twenty years ago. I am still Cleaning Supervisor and Priscilla now runs the hotel. She also has a shop on the roadside. It is run by an old school friend of hers but she calls in most days just to check that everything is as it should be. She knows what sells. She orders just the right amount of stock. There is no waste.

Sometimes, of a cool evening, we stroll together past the shops. We amble along greeting people, passing the time of day. She checks out each shop as she goes along. She takes in the folds of hanging cloth, the dresses hanging from branches of trees, the piles of old radios and jumbles of sunglasses. She assesses the local volumes of things: The oversupply of coils of bright nylon rope, the nets and nets of large footballs, the tray after tray of watches, the endless lines of shoes and scarves. I see her silently note the scarcity of cigarettes, the undersupply of fresh green apples, the opening for more necklaces.

We love the place. We love the fading murals, the twisted trees offering too little shade and the higgledy-piggledy tin roofs. Where else do you get women flipflopping along with loads well-balanced? Where else do you get the towering street carts of hopeful traders? Where else do you get people sitting, chatting whilst potential customers rifle amongst old paperbacks, phones, computer monitors piled item-on-item with garish plastic ponies, counterfeit football shirts, assorted pans and a single large copper funnel? We love the randomness of its commerce.

Will I ever go home, back to that small village up beyond the ridge? I don’t think so. There is little to pull me back there. There are no relatives that I would recognise. There is no family homestead to draw me in. If I did appear I would be ‘The guy from the city’. I would be the rich one, the famous one, the one who might be useful. I don’t want that kind of attention. I don’t want the obligations it may entail. If anyone, on some future summer’s day, should decide to head over the ridge and down to the coast it is better that they do this unencumbered by any expectations of me.

In any case, if I did try to describe the glory of the city to some young boy in the village, some young soul struggling to sort out his own dreams, he would not understand. How could he? What I know of the city is way beyond his understanding. If he has enough faith to take the leap without real understanding then that is a different matter altogether. If he has sufficient faith he can believe that the incomprehensible might be real. He may believe that somewhere over the ridge, way down through many valleys, way down on the coast, there is a city that one day will take him in, never to release him again.

No, I will stay rooted here forever. I am thoroughly urbanised. The city’s randomness and eccentricities run right through me. The city’s lifeblood runs through my veins.

The other thing pinning me here is the fact that we have a son, Thomas. He has grown up well and we approve of most of his friends. There is only one that might be a bad influence. He is a few years older than Thomas and is, let’s say, a little unpredictable. He works in a repair shop and, last week, was given the job of clearing out all the old TV sets that were no longer needed because they had had all their parts used for repairing other sets. Instead of breaking them up and disposing of them quietly he stacked them up in a heap on the gravel of the nearby children’s playground and started to kick in each screen in turn. A crowd gathered and the boy’s two uncles arrived, hit him around the head and took him off somewhere. Thomas hasn’t seen him around since then and we are a bit relieved about that.

Maybe we worry too much about Thomas but he is our son. What is his future? What are his dreams? When I ask he simply shrugs and doesn’t say.

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.. but a boy can dream … was written with reference to the following works in the Metropolis exhibition:

* Mohamed Bourouissa ‘The Reflection’ (2007)
* Romuald Hazoume ‘ARTicle 14: When all else fails, do what you need to, because no-one else is looking out for you’ (date?)
* Matias Faldbakken ‘Untitled: Jerry Can Rod’ (2011)
* Dayanita Singh ‘Dream Villa’ (2008)