

Pani Z Autobusu

The brief and seemingly innocuous exchange of words, that changed the trajectory of Jarrod Eldridge's life, almost never happened.

On the second morning that Jarrod saw Daiyu, dawn stars were still lingering as he pulled shut his wooden door, descended the chipped concrete steps, and crossed the patchy lawn to the footpath on Mulberry Street. A pale morning light clambered up from behind the blonde brick houses along the east side of the street. It emanated from behind the city, on the horizon's fringe, where a slither of yellow sky stretched between the land and the clouds.

It was a drizzly July Tuesday, and more gloomy than most because Rebecca was still asleep, and would not have said goodbye to him even if she was awake. Five months pregnant, meant it would be easy to blame things on hormones, but this wasn't why they'd argued. Their fight was a testament to the incompatibility puzzle that they'd sought countless times to solve, only to fail, and then bury it again. He told himself though that their differences were their strengths. Wasn't that the depiction of every ideal union? A ying, and a yang?

Essentially, he thought, as he brushed past the yellow flowering weeds that breached the boundaries of a vacant block, it came down to her idealism, and his pragmatism. But it was more than that. They needed to buy a home, preferably before the baby was born. He had a fair deal of knowledge about finance, economics, and the housing market. Whereas Rebecca was in sales. Her whole profession leant itself to fostering desire. And she was good at it, wanting. But despite her almost impermeable optimism, she'd seen through his attempts to be diplomatic, as he tried to gently shut down her ideas about low deposit loans and big houses in new developments. She'd torn up the glossy brochures that she'd keenly presented to him only minutes earlier.

'Fine,' she'd said, with feigned humility, 'we'll continue to live wherever you decide.'

The glossy manila home-fronts had become flecks of confetti as they fell around him in her passive retreat.

Jarrood craned his neck upward as he reached the corner, the clouds above him had thickened. Rain began to rush down. As he approached the slanted shelter on the intersection of White and Mulberry Street, the rain intensified. Billowing curtains of silver water blurred the outline of skeletal jacarandas across the way, branches teetering in the wind's wake. He pulled tighter on the hood of his raincoat, his icy hands pressing it against his neck. Under the sheet metal, as he lowered his hood and embraced the familiar percussion of July rain, he flinched as he registered the presence of her hunched figure. Equal parts shock and irritation. *Not again.*

'Jak she mass,' Daiyu echoed. This was the same indeterminable phrase the woman had repeated yesterday. Mandarin or Cantonese, Jarrod guessed. Yesterday she had rambled at him for what seemed like an eternity. When he brushed her off, muttering that he couldn't understand, in response, she talked at him even more. He was annoyed firstly because the journey to work was a time of solace, and secondly because it irked him that this woman, old that she was, knew little English. Surely she'd been in Australia long enough? Today, to Jarrod's dismay, she bore the same dopey exuberance. Her eyes turned gleeful as they met his, oblivious to her own unwelcome strangeness.

She was, as far as Jarrod could deduce, Chinese and old. With grey roots on the black ringlets that unfurled outward, she looked at least in her seventies. One side of her face sloped away from the other, as if from stroke. She wore a violet sweater over chequered pants, the kind Jarrod thought a chef might wear. They were over-sized, and scrunched into the top of thick lace-up boots. In her hand today, wrapped up and bejewelled with beads of rain, a garishly pink umbrella bore the squished smiling faces of clouds and rainbows. It was, to Jarrod, as ridiculous for her age as the chequered pants.

'Jen dobry. Jak she mass?' she repeated, then, 'I Day-u,' and pointed to herself.

'Yes, I know,' Jarrod murmured, she'd told him yesterday. He was still hoping she would desist, but unable to bring himself to defy social convention replied, 'I'm Jarrod.'

'Jah-ed,' Daiyu repeated, rolling the word around on her tongue several times.

'Err, no, Jarrod,' he corrected, almost inaudibly.

'Your mum,' Daiyu declared, her gaze intently upon him. He thought he'd misheard her but she repeated, more clearly this time, 'your mum miss you.'

He froze confounded, and was about to reply, but Daiyu's greyish eyes looked past him; the bus was approaching.

She mumbled something else as the bus drew near, but he regained his sense of reason and remembered the futility in engaging. The roar of the rain and the wind drowned out her voice, and he took the opportunity to pretend he hadn't heard her. She smiled politely as he waved her on ahead of him. She prattled on to the driver as he tagged on and hurried past, up to the back of the empty bus where he knew her ailing legs would not take her. Relieved to be alone again, he smiled as he nestled into his seat, finally safe and dry on the warm bus, and relaunched the *Back to Business* podcast he'd been half listening to these last few weeks.

The thing with money, Jarrod considered, as the bus navigated rain and suburban streets, was that Rebecca just didn't get it. She thought you could just make anything work if you wanted it enough. They had both been rash with money when they were young, and now here they were, she was five months pregnant and they were still renting a run down home in a questionable suburb. After walking out on his boss three years ago, he had started his own interior design business and had slowly built up a network of corporate clients. It was low end stuff; shop fit-outs, workshops, training academies. But in the first eighteen months he had reeled in enough regular work that he'd had to hire a receptionist, Sonya, to manage appointments and help balance the books.

Things were going well, but he'd borrowed significantly to get this far. Overheads

were high and his profit margin was currently thin. It would be a while before they could say they were comfortable. Mind you, landing the contract for this Italian food chain would help move things along. Tremendously. He had a meeting with them tomorrow. He'd been preparing for it for weeks. If he landed this job, it would mean guaranteed income for at least the next twelve months, as the company set up a chain of stores across Western Australia. Not only that, it was the kind of job that could propel the reputation of his infant business. It could be life changing. For all of them; him, the baby...Rebecca.

His forearms raised with goosebumps then, as the visions of Rebecca's broken expression came back to him, the glossy cream confetti raining down around him, her defeated voice. He shuddered, pushing the vision away. They would be much closer to one of those model homes Rebecca so desperately wanted, if he landed this contract.

It was just after eight when Jarrod arrived at the business park, where on the first level of the shale-blue building, at the end of a lacquered white corridor, his office sat behind a door of frosted glass. Sonya didn't work Tuesdays, so alone, he spent the morning finishing off plans for a college on Perth's northern fringes. The fluorescent light that hummed through the vacant white office was a stark contrast to the bleak world outside; lashings of rain under stagnant black clouds continued to drum against the window panes.

But by the afternoon the wind had settled, and sunlight was slipping through the storm's cracks. He spent the afternoon preparing for the meeting the next day. The meeting with Italian food chain *Cibo Bellissimo*. They seemed very interested in his work, but he knew there was one other strong contender in their budget. He had done plenty of small food retailers in the last two years. But so had his competitor. He needed something to give him an edge, a way to connect. Anxiously he re-shuffled the work in his portfolio, spent several fretful hours re-reading the research Sonya had compiled

about the chain, and then called it a day.

Jarrold felt a brief pang of heartache as he unlocked his front door, and felt his voice echo through the cold brick house. But he quickly remembered Rebecca mentioned visiting her sister after work. She would be home late.

He microwaved the half-eaten packet lasagna of two nights ago, and sat in the dark on the faded leather lounge, in the shifting glow of television light. The panelists on a current affairs program vigorously debated something he knew nothing about; a problem somewhere foreign. He yawned nonchalant. It didn't concern him.

The pain of their argument still lingered when Rebecca eventually came home. As they moved around and prepared for bed, they were equally taciturn.

Later, as she lay in bed beside him, her auburn hair still damp and smelling of sweet summer apples, he longed desperately for her to embrace him. She lay scrunched on her side, facing the wall. He moved himself up against her. He knew she could feel it. She said nothing. She didn't move. He interpreted this as a signal of acquiescence, but no sooner had his fingers rested upon her warm shoulder, did she wrench the blanket tighter, and force his hand away.

Jarrold rolled onto his back, and stared at the ceiling. His eyes adjusted. Moments rolled tensely by. His awareness drifted to the dips in the ceiling, where the paint cracked and curled away.

'Your mum messaged me,' Rebecca said, 'she wants to see us on the weekend.'

Her voice threw him, and he was slow to respond. 'Oh, right. Yeah. Yeah okay.'

A relief began to fill the air above them. The tundra was thawing.

'You have that meeting tomorrow? The Italian thing?'

'Yeah...I do. Cibo Bellissimo.'

She drew breath. 'Good luck,' she said softly, and then added a second later, 'they're idiots if they don't pick you.'

Jarrood set off just before eight the next morning. The meeting wasn't until ten, but he wanted to go over his notes, and warm the office before the representatives from Cibo Bellissimo arrived. He was expecting two people from the company, a Marcus and an Emma.

As he neared the bus-shelter, a heavy malaise fell over him. Despite being nearly an hour later than yesterday, there was Daiyu again, seemingly waiting for him under the shiny corrugated roof.

'Jen dobry Jah-ed,' she called as he approached, waving excitedly, followed by her usual, 'jak she mass?' as he neared.

'Hello,' Jarrood responded, pensively.

It was sunny today, but she still had the gaudy pink umbrella with her.

'No raining,' she gestured, rather delightedly, 'nice.'

'Yeah,' Jarrood agreed, as the bus rolled mercifully toward them.

Jarrood recalled as he got on, that the seven-fifty-nine bus, was always filled with high-school students. He was forced to take a seat at the front. He grit his teeth tightly and shut his eyes as Daiyu sat beside him. He reached into his pockets for his headphones, and cursed silently as he realised he'd left them at home.

Daiyu hummed a little as she settled, redolent of rosemary and jojoba.

'Jen dobry! Jak she mass?' she cooed to the infant climbing over his mother in the seat in front of them.

She nudged Jarrood, and pointed at the child, now babbling, 'nice,' she said.

He nodded. Feigned a smile.

'Jak she mass!' she said to the baby again.

'Is that Mandarin or something?' Jarrod muttered.

Daiyu laughed. 'No, not Chinese. Polish.'

Jarrod frowned. Daiyu went to explain, but stopped abruptly as she sparkled with an idea. She pulled out her phone and began to speak into it. She showed him the screen.

'I speak Chinese, Russian and Polish,' the words on the screen told him. Daiyu spoke again and it added, 'but Polish most.'

Jarrod laughed, 'but you don't speak English?'

Daiyu stared back, blinking, before he fished out his own phone and translated his words to Mandarin.

Daiyu shook her head. 'No, but I am trying to learn since I came here,' her screen told him.

'When was that?' Jarrod's screen asked her.

'Two months ago. I came to look after my son. He's very sick. Cancer.'

'Oh,' Jarrod said aloud, swallowing hard. He realised that in all the preconceived notions he'd had about her, this one had never occurred to him.

'But before that I was living in Poland,' Daiyu's screen told him.

'Why Poland?' Jarrod asked, newly intrigued.

'I married a Polish man,' Daiyu's screen said, and she threw her arms out in front of her as if to say, *you know how it is*.

Jarrod laughed, 'did you like it there?' his phone asked her.

'It was okay. Very cold. I liked it better with my husband. He died. Many castles. Biggest castle in the world in Poland. Malbork.'

She then went to show him a picture, which progressed into the showing of other Polish castles. Jarrod took in the images of these looming gothic structures, often in photos where their reflections stretched across rivers in gilded light, and felt a world away from his suburban problems.

'So what is it you've been saying to me every morning, is that Polish?' his screen asked her.

Daiyu nodded, and her phone said, 'sorry. It's a habit. Jane dobry is Polish for good morning.'

'And the other thing? Yuck she?' he asked.

'Jak się masz,' her screen said, followed by, 'it means, how are you?'

As his stop neared Jarrod asked her, 'how do you say thanks in Polish?'

'Jenki,' she said to him with single nod, and grinned, warmly.

'Jenki,' he said back to her, nodding in turn.

When Jarrod arrived at the office, just after eight-thirty, Sonya came out into the lacquered white hall to meet him, her rosy cheeks puffed out in an anxious cringe.

'She's *already here*,' Sonya's panicked voice whispered quietly, ushering him away from the door, 'I've put her in the meeting room. She said she knows she's early, but she had the meeting down for nine.'

'Who is?' Jarrod blinked, confused.

'Emma. From Bellissimo. Who do you think?' Sonya whispered looking back over her shoulder.

'What...but the meeting isn't...' Jarrod fretted.

'I know. I know. Look, it's okay, I've made her a coffee. She said to tell you to take your time. But mind you...I don't know if she meant it. She said something about

Australians being late. Or lazy. I can't remember. One or the other.'

Jarrold let out an exasperated sigh and ran his hands through his hair, defeated. This was the biggest chance his business had had, and instead of a competitive edge, he felt pitifully disadvantaged.

'Oh and another thing,' Sonya stopped him, 'her English isn't the best. It's okay. We chatted a bit before you got here, but her accent's a bit strong, and she said finds Australians difficult to understand. She said not to take it personally, she's just not used to *Australian* English.'

Jarrold sighed again, 'yeah well my Italian isn't great either.'

'Oh she's not Italian,' Sonya said, 'not that it makes a difference. She said she lived in Bologna for years, but she's actually from Poland.'

Sonya laughed at Jarrold's startled expression, and nodded toward the door, 'you don't happen to know any Polish do you?'