

The Refugees

It's funny how life seems to come in circles. Martin and I grew up in Sunshine; a working class town in the West, formerly known as Sunshine Junction, the home of the massive HV McKay foundry. In the fifties and sixties the old Anglo families, newer first generation families and those who had fled post war Europe to settle in Australia, rubbed shoulders. Sunshine was a grand old dame, by then prospering from the huge Massey-Fergusson plant that expanded the HV McKay site. Land was cheap and blue - collar work was plentiful so, we never knew we were growing up supposedly on 'the wrong side of the tracks'. In Compton Parade where my family lived, my father would boast that we were the only Australian-born family on our side of the street; our neighbours were Polish, German, Russian, Italian, Ukrainian and Maltese. In fact Sunshine became known as little Malta and as I spent so much time with a Maltese family down the street, I could speak some Maltese and follow directions in Maltese. From a farming family in the Western District, Dad loved this world. We regularly took our pots to 'Poons' in Footscray to get what was then exotic Chinese food. I remember standing waiting, mesmerised by the huddle of old Chinese men, rolling up Dim Sims. Dad prided himself on being the 'go to person' for our neighbours, helping with the filling out of official documents, tax forms and the like. In turn, he was forever being given exotic spirits (cherry brandy, slivovitz and vodka) or 'kuchen' with poppy seeds or rye bread with caraway or home grown veggies. In our street, veggies grew in the front gardens as well as the back gardens.

Sunshine was a melting pot of aspiration. Martin and I both went to Sunshine High School, which was an excellent school, and our mates came from all the countries of Europe. Their families had sacrificed everything to leave war torn Europe, to settle in this young country, hoping for opportunities for a better life and a golden future for their children. These parents had expectations of their children; education was everything. Many of our friends were striving to get to university; a huge ambition given that they battled their non-English speaking, factory worker backgrounds. There were no English as a Second Language classes then; they were just thrown in. But this critical mass of aspiration really lifted all our ambitions. Martin and I have always said that we were privileged growing up with friends whose families enriched our horizons. We learnt to eat different food, hear different tongues and we got to go to parties for different traditions. We learnt to accept difference as something incredibly valuable. Beyond school, this was an education in embracing difference that has served us throughout our adult lives.

So our youngest daughter Georgia went to Victoria University in the west and met Daniel who came from Melton. Daniel's Mum came from an Anglo

background, his Dad, Maltese. When, G and D finally bought their first house, they chose Ardeer, a little enclave between Sunshine and Deer Park. When we were kids, it was mostly a Ukrainian stronghold; the community building it's own church and hall. By the time Georgia and Daniel moved in, it was very much in transition. The big blocks with old homes, hand built by their Eastern European owners, were being sold off and knocked down for flashy townhouses. There was a gentrification happening and again, there was a new melting pot of aspiration. From Footscray to Sunshine to St Albans and fanning outwards in the west, it was becoming Asian and African but in Sunshine mostly Vietnamese.

Knowing we love Asian food, Georgia had sourced some good local Vietnamese restaurants and wanted us to come over to share a Vietnamese lunch of Pho. We knew Sunshine now bore very little resemblance to the Sunshine we grew up in where Massey -Fergusson had dominated the landscape and provided for a huge workforce. It was all long gone. Our school was long gone. Even the pool where we learnt to swim and got our Herald certificates and where we spent our summers chiacking, was drained and cracked; no longer in use. We were long gone too and our parents had moved on. Only a few recognisable landmarks still remained. But going back was like going home except now Sunshine was Vietnamese. Indeed, long after Martin was a conscript in Vietnam, we had travelled in Vietnam together and we were well acquainted with Vietnamese food and culture. In returning to Sunshine, we could almost close our eyes and imagine we were in Saigon.

So we were going to Sunshine for lunch and then on to see Georgia and Daniel's new home. It was a celebration of their achievement. The little house that they had managed to buy was half way between Daniel's parents in Melton and us in Rosanna. Nannie was invited and we just told her that we were going to lunch in Sunshine and after our visit to Georgia and Daniel's, we would take her passed our old house. I am sure she had mixed emotions about that as she had fled her marriage and left Sunshine well and truly behind. But it was lunch first so we drove into Anderson Road, the main street, and were lucky to pull up right in front of the restaurant where Georgia and Daniel were waiting for us. Mum sitting in the front seat, loudly exclaimed, "Where have you brought me to? What country are we in? What is this place?" We looked around to see what she was seeing. She had no idea where she was even though we had told her we were going to Sunshine. We burst out laughing as we looked up at Vietnamese signs; at shopfronts with Peking Ducks hanging in the windows and lots of Asian faces. "Come on Mum, you love Chinese food and you've had Vietnamese food before. You'll love it! ".

We got her out of the car trying to ignore her sour tut- tut - tutting and her making some unrepeatable racist remarks. I turned on her, telling her to behave herself and that we were going to have a nice lunch and she was not to spoil Daniel and Georgia's day. Loudly she said, look at all these funny looking people. I grabbed her firmly by the arm and frog-marched her into the restaurant. We were greeted, enthusiastically and graciously by the staff and when I looked around, I gauged that we were the only Anglo family. The food would definitely be authentic. The café specialised in Pho so we began discussing what we'd have and Mum, completely out of sorts, said she wasn't eating raw meat in soup. The kids explained that the broth would be so hot that that alone would cook the shaved meat. No! She was having none of that! We managed to order some spring rolls for her and set about talking around her, trying to ignore her sulking.

After lunch we emerged fortified and the grocery shop next door beckoned. "Come on Mum, you haven't been in an Asian grocery before; take a walk on the wild side." We began drifting around the shop, collecting bits and pieces to take home but clearly, mum was totally out of her comfort zone. "There's nothing for me to buy! Take me back to the car." We paid and hustled her out. I want to buy some cakes for afternoon tea at Georgia's and tried to tempt her as my Mum loved a bakery. "Mum come up to the bakery with me; you can get some bread. The Vietnamese are wonderful bakers. Come on." No she wasn't coming. She only wanted to beat a retreat to the car. So patiently, Martin took her back and sat with her.

Georgia and Daniel had gone home to get things ready for our arrival. I walked up the street towards the bakery, alone. Out the front, there I saw two very elderly Anglos; old Sunshine girls, sitting on plastic chairs, at a plastic table. And there they were eating eating , meat pies! Of all the things, meat pies, in a city awash in Asian delicacies. Pies! The scene wasn't lost on me and I just laughed to myself, marvelling in the irony. In a sea of Asian faces, their town now a defacto Saigon, they looked as if they were in fact, a pair of refugees. But as much as they were clinging on to their culinary delights, it was the Vietnamese bakery that had definitely delivered on local tucker. The old and the new. What a juxtaposition!

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