

Distance

Bricks and tarmac streaked past in a blur of housing and wide empty roads. The cold air contrasted with the sun's warmth felt like a treat, a privilege she wouldn't have back home. For a moment, a pang of homesickness touched her, the fresh aromas of nasi lemak and cendol filling her nose. She held onto the memory for as long as she could, but soon dismissed it. This was her new life now.

She stared absentmindedly out the window, disregarding the monotonous Perth landscape. The bus trundled along the road, emitting a low, soothing hum. It was the same every week – a long, peaceful ride, giving Heather a chance to distance herself from school and to contemplate her life.

Heather's mood brightened as she thought of her friend, Jenny, also on her way to the city – or what Perth considered to be a city. The collection of department stores paled in comparison to Malaysia's street markets, sellers yelling, advertising their wares, brightly coloured (albeit tacky) posters, and hordes of people rushing from work to stalls to homes to bathrooms. In comparison, Perth was perpetually dry and quiet. Stores closed at 5pm instead of 10pm, and even then, crowds were scarce.

Sighing, she imagined what Jenny was doing. Would she already be waiting? They both understood life to be different from the others. From the tender age of 15, Heather had to learn how to grow up without the safety net of her parents to catch her if she fell. Against her will, Heather's mind wandered to things she had yet to do. The clothes wouldn't wash themselves, and she had to make herself dinner once she got home. A bump in the road startled her, throwing her slightly off balance.

Slowly, the suburbs transformed into large buildings and wide streets with the occasional seagull flying high above. The bus screeched to a halt, making an ominous rattling noise as it did so. With a slight skip in her step, Heather exited, heading straight to McDonalds.

Though not tall, Heather instantly spotted Jenny, partly because of her black hair, but mainly because of the empty space around her. Jenny always kept a cool exterior, but Heather knew she hated the hostile glares, the blatant whispers, the bubbles of space people would form around them. Heather had never experienced such blunt vitriol until coming to Australia, a supposedly multicultural country. Nonetheless, she ignored the prejudiced eyes and joined Jenny in the queue.

After ordering their fries, they meandered down the strip, chatting about trivial things, like home, schoolwork, and that one art teacher they both hated. Finding a vacant spot on the stairs in front of the post office, both fell into companionable silence, savouring the peace and quiet which would inevitably break... a seagull perched in front of them, eagerly eyeing their chips. Eyes crinkling in amusement, Heather stuffed as many chips in her mouth as possible, Jenny doing the same next to her. As if reading their intentions, a flock of seagulls swarmed them, a frenzy of wings and squawks. Shrieking in amusement and fright, Heather and Jenny threw handfuls of their chips at the birds in a futile attempt for them to cease their assault. Some left, but in the end, too many remained, their appetite and greed insatiable.

Heather and Jenny conceded defeat, fleeing the scene, laughing as they ran. At first, life's rhythm was an unstable, harsh beat, but now... in that fleeting moment of joy, Heather found the comfort and acceptance that had been so far absent. She was beginning to accept Australia.