



## Shunned

Freya Berenyi

**As they neared** the Downsville pub, Sophie felt the others around her slowing, as though uncertain.

‘Maybe you two should go in first. The white ones.’

She looked around surprised. The group of 15 consisted mainly of Asians, or at least those of Asian origin. She had not realised until then that she and another boy were the only two who were fair skinned. She shrugged, turning to pull the heavy wooden door. Immediately, a wave of warmth, alcohol and cigarettes rushed to meet them. The carpet was a faded royal red and the narrow passage ahead was lined with pinewood. Sophie led the group down the dark corridor, following the sounds of music and voices. She hadn’t been enthusiastic when the others had suggested spending their final night at the local pub. A country pub on a Thursday night didn’t seem a likely place for entertainment, but the noise emanating from the room ahead suggested that it might be more alive than she predicted.

The music ended in a dramatic sweep of chords as the group entered, making the silent stares infinitely more intimidating. Surrounding the bar stood several men, each with a beer in hand. The publican stopped polishing glasses, pausing with cloth in hand to look more closely at the strangers.

Sophie strode confidently forward, breezily pretending not to notice the animosity. She stood waiting to be served, hoping their purchase of alcohol would make their intrusion

less antagonistic. The barman returned to polishing glasses after glancing at her.

She contemplated the football paraphernalia adorning the walls, the signed team photos and guernseys interspersed irregularly with a photograph of a horse captured mid-stride, hoping the moment wouldn't drag on for much longer. The barman, clearly resigning himself to serving non-locals, wandered in her direction.

'Where are youse all from then?' he queried, the group's origins a greater priority than customer service.

'From Melbourne. We're part of a university group,' Sophie offered. He nodded, seeming satisfied to have his assumptions proven correct.

'And what you doin' down 'ere in Downsville?' He turned to the group of men nearby, all dressed in jeans, solid leather boots and the bright reflective tops of tradesman. 'Only us poor dumb country folk aroun' 'ere.'

Sophie ignored the last jibe and replied with false warmth: 'We're here on rural placements. We're all dentistry students and have been staying in Downsville for the past week.'

The man stared back unimpressed, sweeping his eyes past her to survey the other students.

'I was wondering,' Sophie added quickly, not giving him time to turn away, 'if we would be able to get something to eat?'

He raised his eyebrows and sighed. 'What do ya want?'

'I'll just go and ask if the others want anything.' Sophie returned to where they were huddled awkwardly around a jukebox.

'Anyone want food?' They nodded gratefully, relieved at the prospect of having something to do.

The barman looked up as Sophie returned, before ducking his head quickly and continuing to chat to the other men. She waited patiently for him to acknowledge her presence. He finally sauntered back over.

'Kitchen's closed now. Sorry.'

‘What!’ Sophie exclaimed. ‘I just told you I wanted to get food.’

‘Yeah, well, it closed in-between.’

She looked at him incredulously. ‘How about cold chips then?’

Jason watched the back of the blonde-haired girl as she strode away, clutching several packets of chips. *What was a pretty white girl doing with all them Asians?* he pondered. *Probably being from the city and all. It was like ‘spot the Aussie’ up there now. May as well move to China.*

‘Hey Jase,’ Stacey drawled from across the bar, ‘what are them kids doin’ ere? You checkin’ IDs? Not that you’d be able to tell the difference with a fake Asian ID.’

Christina snorted in her drink beside her. ‘Yeah, not like you’d have any trouble findin’ someone that looks the same as ya!’

‘They’re over 18,’ Jason replied. ‘Uni students, from Melbourne.’

‘Oh, uni students.’ Stacey put on what she must have imagined was a toffy British accent, before her voice regained its Australian twang.

‘So, full-time nerds. What are they doin’ in a pub? Mummy and Daddy must want them home soon to study.’

‘Yeah, dunno.’ Jason mumbled, wondering the same thing.

Stacey eyed the group from where she sat waiting for the rest of her girlfriends, sipping her bright pink Cruiser. It had been a long day, listening to each client pour out their life story to her as though she might actually care. Free counselling, her mother called it. ‘You should get paid as much as psychologists. And your clients get a hair cut with their counselling.’

Today, she’d had to plaster on sympathetic smiles and appropriate grimaces while an old lady became teary about her husband’s heart surgery and another confided her suspicions of her husband’s infidelity. Sure it was sad and all, but she didn’t need or want to know.

She glanced down at the new shiny crystal that sparkled in the shadows on her finger. She wasn't going to be like so many of those ladies whose hair she cut; dissatisfied, divorced or lonely. She wondered what Tom's reaction would be at the sight of the pub filled with Asians.

Suhailah Lumpur, called Stephanie by her Australian counterparts, sat twisting the straps on her handbag nervously. She had never been to a pub before, or any other form of drinking establishment. It wasn't that she had anything against them, more that the opportunity had never arisen before. Her studies were more important and she couldn't see the point of being intoxicated. Living in the suburbs of Melbourne, where numerous other Malay families resided, she had never before experienced the racism which she heard others complain about. Now, however, she could feel the disdain radiating from the eyes that burned into her back. She felt torn between hoping the pub would fill rapidly to balance to ratio that was evidently causing so much offence, and hoping that no one else would arrive so that the level of hostility could not increase further.

Tom entered the pub from the back entrance, stubbing out his cigarette on the doorstep as he strolled through. He did a double-take, surprised at the number of people in the bar, his astonishment increasing as their features became distinguishable.

'What's this then?' he called to Jason. 'Has Chinatown come to Downsville?'

Jason gave a short bark of laughter, already reaching for the beer tap. 'Dunno, mate. Dentistry students I've been told.'

'Eh, city kids then.'

'Yeah, seems so.'

'Ah, excuse me,' a voice intercepted their exchange. 'Could I get a beer please?'

They both turned to look at the speaker. He was darker than the others, a deep rich mahogany colour.

'A beer,' he repeated, looking at Jason.

Jason glowered back. ‘You got any ID, mate?’

The boy looked surprised, then resentful as he passed a drivers licence across the bar. Jason studied the card, twisting it to see more clearly in the dim light. ‘We’ve had a few of you Indians here before. Caused a bit of trouble.’

The boy raised his eyebrows. ‘Actually, I’m Sri Lankan.’

‘Same diff. Jus’ you watch how you handle yourself.’

The boy glanced at Tom, who was still leaning against the bar. Tom smiled back sympathetically. Despite his earlier comment, he had no problem with a multicultural Australia. Sure there were some duds that came across, but there were plenty of those already here. He’d spent time in the city and had the fortune to know a number of great blokes — Indians, Chinese and Malaysians. Some were a bit different, but still good for a laugh and a beer. This had been before he met Stace. He doubted she’d even seen an Asian up close, much less spoken to any.

Sophie considered the tense faces of the others at the table. They were all wedged into a booth, no one willing to sit away from the comfort of numbers. Nearby stood two pool tables, each with a lowered, rectangular-shaped light illuminating the bright green baize. ‘Who wants to see if they can beat me in a game of pool?’ she challenged.

Sean and Matthew nodded their agreement, the others moving so that they could shuffle out through the narrow space between the benches.

‘Come on,’ Sophie encouraged, ‘we need a fourth. Stephanie?’

Stephanie looked at her passively, before giving a tight smile of acquiescence. Sophie left the others gathering the scattered balls to change the song on the brightly lit jukebox. She scrolled through the charts, picking a recently released song.

‘Jesus,’ Stacey spat, almost choking on her straw as a new song blasted from the speakers. ‘Who chose this?’ she demanded of Jason indignantly.

He nodded his head toward the group in the corner. 'Well, are ya gunna do somethin' about it? It's your pub, Jase. Don't let 'em touch the music.'

'Can't stop 'em if they put the money in,' he answered defensively.

'Fine then,' Stacey snapped, passing her drink to Christina. She walked over to the jukebox and shoved a \$20 note into the slot. After selecting the next song, she paused as she passed the pool table.

'I've just put \$20 in the machine, so it's my choice of music for the rest of the night.'

The blonde girl holding a cue smiled back at her. 'That's fine, I'm sure you have good taste.'

Stacey frowned, unsure how to respond. Was the girl being smart or not? She left without replying, feeling satisfied when she saw some of the kids covering their ears as ACDC's explosive cord progressions boomed through the speakers.

She wasn't sure why their presence irritated her so much. Maybe it was just because they were destroying the familiar, relaxed atmosphere of the pub, or maybe because they were strangers who had nothing of interest to offer. No, it's because they're so young and arrogant, she decided, marching into the pub like they owned the joint, then bragging about being from a university, all the while not even making an effort to be friendly to the locals.

'Come on, Matthew, let's get a drink while Stephanie has her two free shots. Might improve our performance!'

Matthew shook his head. 'Nah, I'm right thanks.'

'Matthew, come on. One drink, mate. I'll shout you.'

Matthew hesitated.

'What do you want? Just a beer?'

Matthew continued to shake his head.

'Well, I'm getting it anyway,' Sean declared, walking towards the bar.

Matthew slid off the stool and hurried after him.

‘Here, I’ll pay,’ he offered.

‘Nah, you’re right mate. Two beers, thanks,’ Sean said, directing his order to the barman.

They waited together as Jason looked for glasses.

‘Where are you from then?’ a man nearby inquired. He was older than the others, well into his seventies, Matthew estimated.

‘Err, we’re from Melbourne.’

‘Yeah, yeah I know that,’ the older man said, waving his hand dismissively. ‘But where are you actually from? Which country?’

‘I was born in Australia, Matthew replied, but understanding the man’s insinuation added, ‘My parents are from Singapore.’

‘Ah. Thought you might ‘ave been from China. I went there once. Very nice country. Good food.’

Matthew nodded silently.

‘Anyway, lad,’ the man said as he leaned closer, placing a hand on Matthew’s shoulder and breathing beer into his face, ‘you speak real good English. Very impressive. Most of them Chinese weren’t real flash when I was there.’

Matthew gave a thin smile in return, trying to hide his indignation and hurt. He was an aspiring novelist alongside his studies. ‘Thanks.’

The old man nodded, returning to his beer.

*Nice lad, Patrick, thought to himself, draining the remnants in his glass. Pity the Asians weren’t all like that. Smart blokes, but no idea how to socialise. Too much studying was their problem. They weren’t all bad; they just needed to accept the Aussie values if they were going to come to the country; like mateship, generosity and supporting the underdog.*



**Freya Berenyi** wrote this as a university undergraduate in 2012.