

My birdcage, your classroom

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Click. Click.

Click. Click.

Click.

With every lethal gesture of my retractable pen, I itchyly anticipated the catastrophic click that would propel one of my precious classmates to their breaking point. My only amusement in an otherwise shitty hour. Run-of-the-mill whiffs of expired Aqium hand sanitiser, synthesised with the whispered brush strokes of liquid white-out. Cardinal-shaded walls crammed with words of wisdom and questionable epiphanies. My blank page taunted me. Outside of this seemingly eternal birdcage, Sydney's skies mumbled a dull grey as the red gums yawned.

In the whole entire universe, the last thing that I wanted to do today was write a Shakespearean-inspired soliloquy.

Snoozing above, the clouds dribbled treacly saliva on my head, making me bounce with their jittery, train-like wheezes. I dared the wicked-hearted wind to envelop my inert mind and scrape my idle brain cells, but it fearfully refused the challenge. As my blue pen twirled and twirled, I grew green-eyed at its disappearing act.

Sir's gravelly voice booming, 'Are you paying attention?', jarred me, sounding bizarrely like my Mama's most used

phrase on our first and last night stroll through the Dharavi Slums. Absorbing an incomparable, soupy humidity, that starless night cuddled me safe among the dim, suddenly unknown streets. Dying screams of glass bottles and buzzy, ear-numbing honks. My eyes shivered, fastened on the azure rooftops being regurgitated out of the darkness that had swallowed them.

I ravenously breathed in the fumes of a youthful fire, with hopes to capture it in my stomach and hold its soul hostage forever. Eyeballing the curious strangers, moving as if they were one person, I pondered what my Mama wanted me to be paying attention to. My Mama, registering the obvious hint of my darting bumblebee eyes, yelled over the crowds and into my ear, 'You're not listening hard enough'.

That was years ago though. Geez; I wish I could be back there now. Instead I was here.

Click. Click.

Click. Click.

Click.

Sir glared at me, his scorching pupils burning a hole straight through my pen and onto my raw skin. I wanted to write but I just couldn't! How was a girl possibly meant to work like this?

The gossipy ceiling fan cackled obnoxiously, mocking me, as Sir droned on and on and on and on. A never-ending yearning to escape the schedules and studying, compiled with a fatal inability to do so, left a sharp, spiteful flavour in my mouth.

In the whole entire universe, the last place I wanted to be was here.

I scrutinised the repetitive rises and falls of robotic shoulders forming a pattern I so chronically wanted to crack. Slugs. They

were all slugs. Enriching my already inflated misery with the sickly sniffing of their stuffy noses. Like the enunciation of my bored, retractable pen, my double-jointed elbows popped at every lengthy, deadbeat stretch. Rubbing the squeaky, moist soles of my shoes against the muscly legs of the chair, I felt the urge to throw my page out of the window.

Click. Click.

Click. Click.

Click.

Feeling a familiar hypnosis, my mind skipped playfully back to myself and my Mama, standing at the very crucifix of the Dharavi Slums. My Mama gestured at me to pay attention. Suddenly I could hear it.

Click. Click.

Click. Click.

Click.

Then the shaky sound of scribbling. My ears tried to hunt the sound. Strategically shadowing the prey, I pursued the hushed reverberation among the chaotic conversations happening around me. And there it was.

The most teensy boy I had ever seen. Vest-pocket sized compared to the chock-a-block dwellings sitting cross-legged over each other. His ashen body covered with nothing but a grey, baggy shirt with more holes than actual fabric. Blind to the waterfalls of sweat on his knees and the flickering lamp post above his head. Deaf to his stomach's desperate screeches.

In his fist: a blue pen.

He possessed a purposeful grip on his dancing pen and a sincere, unwavered stare on his almost blue paper. Perching on a weak-kneed crate, with mountainous blisters plastering his

ankles; he wrote with the daytime colours of the Dharavi Slums. A classroom unlike one I'd ever seen. Motorcycles hissing millimetres away from his face. Families of mosquitoes eating his tender cheeks and guzzling his sugary sweat. An elderly man swearing. A drunk woman blubbering a snotty river. No red walls. Not even a ceiling fan. Distractions slapped that little boy, black and blue, yet he and his pen seemed to be floating in a bubble of bliss.

And I hated it.

My ability to rationalise crept to an uncomfortable halt. It was one of those rare nanoseconds in life when your surroundings consume you whole and barf you right back up, as vigorously as they took you in. My brain attempted to race reality to the finish line, but it was losing. Trying to make sense of the nonsensical; the feeling that dawned on my make-believe world was not one of profound gratefulness, but one of confusion. I only realised that now.

The little boy and his blue pen.

Living in the same sphere as me, how could our truths be so different? This was an alien extension of the wholesome world I thought I knew.

He had popped my sheltered bubble with a single click.

And I hated it.

Sitting back in the lifeless classroom, my vacant attention has remained unchanged. The ceiling fan was still a chatterbox. The wind was still effervescently mischievous. The red gums were still bored out of their skulls. And the robots surrounding me were all still slugs. But the clouds were now awake.

Click. I began to write.