

THE STRANGER (part 3, afternoon)

The van barely made it under the wet-sagging branches lining the driveway. Strange to see a vehicle like that. A noisy red sedan followed the van to the house down the back. The driver was a small woman sitting low in her seat, black hair. I saw children in the back. They were skinny things, pink and purple hoodies, their bodies leaned over the seat back to see ahead. Kids about four or five, maybe.

Plenty happening today. First, the bloke pinching daffodil bulbs from the back garden. He was an odd one, like he had every right. More people than I'd seen in weeks around here. Cool it, I thought. All will be revealed.

It went quiet for a bit. A rainbow faded across the forest canopy while the afternoon sun spread warm gold over lanky grey box stretching above the other trees. A flash of crimson rosellas squawking their way across a fence to resume their olive picking next door. I could never be bothered doing all that palaver with olives and salt and jars, pretending they made nice presents. The birds were welcome to clean them up.

Then, chattering and whispering. A little door knock. Pink and purple, hanging on to each other, looking through the window glass, big dark eyes. I opened the door slowly enough to not scare them away, like the birds that came warily to my veranda rail for breakfast treats—willing enough to visit but always prepared to take wing.

The skinny girls stood there looking, their eyes too big for their faces. Hoods off, their hair was all over the place. They were beautiful.

“Mark can't find the key”, one said.

“Not in the box”, said the other.

“Ok,” I said, making little sense of what was going on. “Let’s go and see if I can help.” A way to find out who these strangers were, and, of course, guard my territory. I’d already seen off the man with a shiny shovel this morning. Though, how it was *my* territory couldn’t be told in a sentence. The house at the end of the driveway was long abandoned, only the gas meter reader came or the emergency people clearing boughs ripped and fallen during a mighty storm last month. But never, as far as I could tell, the owners.

That garden. Once planted with terraces of bulbs and violets. A liquidambar that performed colour changes with the seasons. Fruiting trees of all kinds. The sweet nectarines that I picked before the parrots discovered them and sent out screeches to their mates across the tall eucalypts. A fair thing to do each year, I thought, was to leave the fruit for the birds at the high points of the trees that I couldn’t reach without a ladder. The birds seemed content with that arrangement. For now, those musings could wait. The little girls surrounded me. One took my hand and pulled.

By the time we reached the other house the van was empty. Not much stuff, I decided. Whoever this Mark was seems to have found the key; the heavy front door was wide open. The girls were tugging me toward the house, but I wasn’t at all certain this was a good idea. It was not part of my experience to have complete strangers befriend me so carelessly. The car woman emerged from the house looking intense, but there was a light in her face once she saw the girls. Her girls, I supposed. How did they come to be here, were they the owners? They looked foreign, maybe they ran one of the restaurants in town. The woman smiled, her eyes were deep and searched my face.

“Hello,” she said. She had a sweet, soft voice. “I’m Zarni. This is Wini. And Maya. It’s her birthday today, she is six.” Their names sounded like breathing, like warm breezes.

“Hello. Happy birthday, Maya, I’m Fleur. Like a flower. So, you’re moving in?” Silly question, but polite enough. They stood there just looking at me. There I was in their front yard for no reason

except those little girls had brought me here. The woman, Zarni, simply said, “Yes. We are here until my husband comes. He is still in Bangladesh.” She added, “In a big camp. We came from there. And from Myanmar, three years ago.” She looked weary. Who knows where her journey began or would end or how many times she’d had to explain herself?

She went on, “Mark is helping us with this place. They made us leave the other house. Mark and some people are helping with rent.” Apparently, she thought she could trust me with this detail, and she could. I remembered what I’d read about that part of the world and that disaster in 2017. Appalling abuses. Oh yes, these people needed help.

From the house, a clatter of crockery and glass things splintering on a hard floor was followed by swearing, then shouting. “Don’t let the girls in! Glass!”

The face of the person they called Mark appeared briefly at the door, checked me out, said, “Sorry,” then retreated. Zarni took a rapid breath, looked at me again and headed inside. There we were again, pink and purple girls, both now gripping my hands.

“Hey, let me show you the garden and the pond. Watch your feet, it’s wet and slippery along here. The path is a mess, isn’t it? Should be better looked after. If you look up there, can you see pardalotes?” While I chattered, the girls silently waited to see something in the trees so tiny only a flash of movement would reveal it.

The peep-peeping above us was a pardalote, warning. Unnecessarily so—there was no danger. How curious it was, that these strangers, all of whom had breath-names and hard stories, had become neighbours in a moment, in the place I had thought, for years, was my sole domain.

Life might come back to that garden, after all.