

RUN

CAM DANG

WHEN THE POLICE came, I nearly tripped over myself trying to gather the goods and run. I wondered why I did that. It wasn't the 1980s, it wasn't Vietnam, and nobody was going to charge towards me with their baton raised above their head. Also, I had just turned 74. Running? Me? What was I planning to do? Worry the law to death?

A young policewoman emerged from the car. Her hair was silvery-blonde. Her eyes were as blue as the Melbourne sky that afternoon, and when she looked at me, they hinted at nothing. It was probably an occupational thing for the police to appear neutral, to hide their emotion, even towards a woman older than the dinosaurs.

I couldn't remember being that young or that beautiful, because I'd spent the first twenty-odd years of my life being my mum and my dad to my brothers. And the beauty I possessed, if any at all, had cracked and flaked away with all the years of pushing a drink cart under the blazing sun. I read that street food fascinated the Western tourists these days, that five-star restaurants in Saigon set up their dining rooms with bamboo carrying poles, charcoal burners and clay pots for an authentic atmosphere—a rich cultural experience. I had laughed so much at that article that if I still had teeth, they would have all fallen out. It was like sticking inflatable kangaroos and stuffed

koalas around a room and calling it the Australian Outback, like me donning a blonde wig and blue contacts to feel like this young lady.

‘What are you selling here, Ma’am?’ she asked.

I appreciated the way she spoke slowly, as well as her unthreatening tone. This old brain had been wired to understand Vietnamese for so long that whenever someone spoke English to it, it went into self-defence mode. Brace. Block. Run. Just like old times. My own occupational hazard.

‘Glutinous rice cakes, Ma’am,’ I said, lifting the flap of my trolley. ‘See? Different fillings: banana, mung bean, black bean and shredded coconut. I make a new batch every three days. I washed my hands and my kitchen’s spotless. These weren’t made by machines. They’re not sitting on the shelf at the supermarkets for months, doused in chemicals that keeps them alive. If my food goes bad, you’ll smell it straight away. Guaranteed.’

I also appreciated her patience as she listened to me talk. In Vietnamese.

‘Ma’am, street vendors are not allowed here,’ she said once I’d finished stating my case.

Precisely. Why else did I try to run from her in the first place?

‘I’m going to have to ask you to pack up,’ she continued. ‘I’ll let it go this time with a warning.’

I nodded, not forgetting to say thank you and smile as if she had just done me a favour. She stood aside and watched the disorderly citizen pack up, making sure every glutinous rice cake was put away for good. The girl was only doing her job, I knew, and I’d bet she wasn’t feeling great about doing it, either.

A year ago, two dinosaurs came up with a brilliant idea of selling chilli and herbs out of a shopping trolley next to a popular bakery in Springvale. Local law decided to turn a blind eye because it added to the Asian culture there. It was not a bad thing—not yet. I followed suit and sold my cakes at a spot nearby, making a few extra bucks. A grandmother could never have too much money. But then another dinosaur came along and got greedy. She brought with her benches and a car load of meat and veggies and fruits, turning a corner of

Springvale into her own little Victoria Market. Of course the police had no choice but to step in. And of course if they started with her, they'd have to end with us. There went a corner of Asia. There went a gleam of hope for contributing to the household; miniscule but, something to prove that we were still able, that we were not dead.

You should have seen me when I first migrated to Australia. I picked berries, sliced onions, plucked chickens. I waited tables, cleaned toilets, scrubbed floors. I was up from 4 am and did not hit the pillow until midnight. I did anything I could as long as it put food in my children's mouths, clothes on their bodies, books in their schoolbags. I worked till my bones ached and worked some more. And I never complained. I was happy to be here, grateful to have been given freedom for free. Every man on the street was my brother and every woman my sister.

My brothers thought I ought to check in with my overwhelmed emotions—it wasn't right for anyone who had crossed the ocean and lost her husband there to be as joyful as I was.

I told them my husband would not want to see me moping around and forgetting how lucky we were. How many boats did not make it to land? How many men and women were sent back home? And how many more were slaughtered by pirates? So, laugh, brothers, laugh and rejoice in the fact that we made it here, safe and sound, and that we are not constantly running away from anyone or anything anymore.

'Is someone picking you up?' the policewoman asked.

'No, I go to train.' I said this in English and watched her eyes soften. My cakes packed, I waved her goodbye as if parting with a granddaughter at the school gate. Then I pushed my trolley in the direction of Springvale train station.

My daughter, my son, and his wife, were at work, and even though they'd come for me straight away, I didn't want to hear them say *I told you so*. They would savour, relish, this story so much that I could already hear them tell it to their children. Grandma got a warning from the police. Grandma was a rebel. Grandma was a badass.

I used to fantasise about telling others that with their respectable jobs, my children were serving our second homeland, the place that had taken us in with open arms. But the reality was that neither of

them turned out to be a doctor saving lives or an accountant saving money. They quit year 12 and had been working all kinds of jobs. Like mother, like kids. So, I took comfort in telling myself that at least they made it to year 12—still much better than their uneducated mother—and that although their jobs weren't glamorous, at least my children were paying taxes. At least they didn't have to be ready to flee. The running stopped with me.

It was 2 pm by the time I got home. At 3.30 pm my grandchildren would be back from school and at 5 pm my children would return from work. I began my afternoon routine, starting with cleaning the sardines and peeling the gourds. I put on a pot of rice and flicked the switch—so different to the charcoal days. By the time the rice was cooked, the sardines were fried and the gourds made a lovely pot of clear soup. Then I put a load into the washing machine and pressed the green button. The house was dirty so I took the vacuum cleaner out, but by then my grandchildren had walked in. My sixteen-year-old granddaughter took over vacuuming. Her younger brother pulled the bins out and helped me set up the table for later—they would always wait for their parents and aunt to come home and have dinner together. Always.

While the kids did their homework and snacked on sweet papaya, I made myself a cup of warm milk tea—five o'clock was still a long time away—and sat on the couch watching them. They told each other something in English and slapped the desk and laughed. Truth be told, I didn't mind them speaking in English more than they did in Vietnamese. This was their world now. This was where they belonged.

'How did you go at the market today, Grandma?'

'We're having glutinous rice cakes for dessert tonight.'

They groaned in unison and I laughed.

Wait till they knew that they'd be having my cakes every night for the whole week.

I thought of the policewoman and wondered if she would be home by now. I hoped she only worked during the day; nightshift was unkind on women. I imagined her sitting at the table and waiting

for her mother to serve dinner. Her hair would be let down, cascading over her shoulders like a diamond waterfall. Her eyes would be allowed emotion and her lips free to smile. Her mother would ask how her day was and if she had to chase after bad men, if she had to resort to using her gun. I imagined the daughter would tell the mother stories about her saving the good people from the bad. And the mother would be proud, so proud.

And I imagined the daughter would end her stories with something about me, insignificant me. She would say, giggling like a little girl: 'And there was this old lady selling street food. Would you believe it? She tried to run when we pulled over . . .'