

Nice to Meet You

At first, I think of it as somewhat of a childish thing, this marketplace I had so clumsily happened upon. It sits impatiently next to an incomplete office building, like the brightly stained son of a uniformed father. Behind it, Paddington's Uniting Church looms maternally, ready to reprimand the antics of its neighbour. But the market is uninterested in its surroundings. There's something intoxicating about this place; it brims with warm immediacy. It bursts at the seams; spilling over itself and splattering on the feet of passersby. It welcomes you into its chaotic orbit, and you graciously accept.

Sounds grow more prominent as I approach the markets' entry. Babbling babies on lycra-clad hips and chattering youngsters with half finished smoothies. Nearby, the stringy twangs of a busker echo past his empty fedora and into the shuffling crowd. They stack on top of one another, these sounds, until the market squeals with all the verve of a giggling toddler. I'm reminded yet again of the unashamed childishness of this place. It fidgets, too, like a restless baby, and in one corner, it's dressed from top to toe in the mismatched hand-me-downs of a teenage stall owner.

The stalls themselves are curious things, rickety and barely shaded, but proud of their products. In the trinket section, the word 'eclectic' dances on my tongue. There's opal brooches and tattered figurines, rusted pinsticks and Christmas baubles. I smile at my reflection in a pearl rimmed hand mirror. It's a seemingly endless collection; one which looks more like the incomplete findings of a wandering schoolboy than the catalogue of a more *serious* establishment.

I take a seat on a sun drenched bench at the markets' periphery. There's an inclination to exhale, to relieve myself of the stimulant of this place. But I hold my breathe, and wonder for a

moment whether I've entered the right market, whether I've overstepped and arrived in some place other than south-east Paddington. Of course, I'd frequented these markets as a child, forever drawn to their allure. But I'd always thought they'd grow with me, that the wondrous lense through which I viewed them would fade. But I return today to find the markets babbling in the same cadence I remember as a child. I find myself grateful that they've remained untouched, grateful that they behave unlike every other forgettable attraction in the suburb.

And so as I stare at the tangled mess of cobblestoned aisles, I see the market as a kind of revolution. Nestled between angular terraces and ordered streetscapes, this bustling bazaar subverts the *very* Victorian aesthetic upon which Paddington was built. Teeming with colour, it sits like a paint spillage on the off-white canvas of Paddington. I settle on the fact that physical spaces can be nonconformist. I picture it blowing raspberries at the pompous retail district, just a two minute walk away, and I imagine the local councillors who first erected these markets in 1973. These municipal renegades sit in council board rooms in my mind, sketching colourful blueprints of what Paddington *could* be. Their first mission? A heaving marketplace squashed at the end of Newcombe street, hollering indecorously at its neighbours.

I order a latte from a makeshift coffee cart near the markets' entry. The froth is warm and the heat of my breathe wisps eagerly into the afternoon air. I wonder if Paddington even *needs* a revolution, whether it really wants one. So esteemed a suburb, is it not improper to suggest that some youthful disruption is needed? Some burst of vitality? Of course, Paddington's list of cultural and historic amenities suggests so. In 1974, it was the first Australian suburb to be classified as an area of Urban Conservation, and ten years earlier, it birthed the nation's first resident action group. In 1812, the Sydney Gazette heralded Paddington "a beautiful avenue of recreation;" praise of which I'm sure the suburb is accustomed. Just a stone's throw to my right, those lofty terraces stand proudly above their subjects; sneering. There's a palpable affluence to

this place, an air of confidence that's difficult to inhale. It's a thin, vacuous air, one that brings bitterness to my half-finished beverage.

Paddington is a Sydneysiders' dream on paper; crisp and clean and close to the city. But that's *on paper*. And so as I look past the markets' mellow border, toward a cluster of willfully gaudy mannequins, I think of Paddington more like that boastful Aunt, whose apparent wealth is a bore; whose seeming perfection renders every interaction tiring, forgettable, inaccessible. But in these markets, her snobbery is disarmed. In these markets she recoils.

The voice of a young boy gesturing toward some green yoyo's interrupts my daytime muse. He shouts into the crowd, "Buy these! Buy these!" and behind the stall, his mother smirks as she flicks through a wad of cash. I approach eagerly and scan his wares. A littering of hand crafted toys sprawls across the tabletop; each one intricately detailed with gold rims and Aztec carvings.

"I didn't make these," the boy tells me as he swings around the pillars of the gazebo, "I just play with them."

This chatty frankness continues as I fiddle with a light-up spintop. He lists the price of the items, and tells me, without knowing such details, that my younger brothers' would enjoy them very much. He's no older than seven or eight, but there's a electric quality to his voice that keeps me watching; an accent buzzing with speed and imprecision. He rarely pauses between sentences, instead clamouring for the next word. He says that he's been busy and that he's excited and that he isn't tired and that he likes these toys and that I will too.

"Mum says I get three dollars everytime I sell a toy," he adds, almost out of breath, "and I've sold five, so I'll get..."

He trails off, seemingly uninterested in the numbers. I ask what else he plans to do with the rest of his weekend and the chattiness dwindles. He tells me there's nothing really *to do* around here. The words sink in his stomach, and mine too. There's a new formality in his voice now. I imagine what a young boy could possibly get up to when his backyard is the size of a postage stamp. Smiling sympathetically, I look him up and down; a colourful bib in a suburb of pinstripe suits.

He reassures me, though, that he doesn't let himself get too bored. Instead, he imagines some place more exciting, and morphs it onto where he is now. A pirate ship sailing uncharted waters, or an active volcano ready to erupt. When foot traffic is slow, he tells me that the markets are a travelling circus, with tightrope walkers and magicians in tow.

I'm impressed by the ingenuity of it all. His mother smiles at me as I purchase the spintop, tell him my brother will love it. I turn into the adjacent aisle as the boys' voice thunders from behind. This time, he tries a new tact.

"Step right up! Step right up!"

Kenopsia

n. the eerie, forlorn atmosphere of a place that's usually bustling with people but is now abandoned and quiet...with a total population in the negative, who are so conspicuously absent they glow like neon signs.

- John Koenig

It's twilight in Paddington and a dim blue sky cloaks the marketplace. A faint buzz wafts from Oxford Street as the bustle of night approaches. There's a lightness to the air now; a nighttime haze which softens the harshness of Paddington's many angles. I watch as the vendors deconstruct their facades, collect their trinkets, pocket their profits. The caffeine wanes, and I'm

coaxed by the calming choreography of it all. *Calmness*; a quality I hadn't expected of the messy markets at the end of Newcombe street.

Nearby, the remaining shopkeeper is stuffing her tarpaulin in a bag. I recognise her immediately. *The jewelry girl*. That's what I called her when I frequented these markets all those years ago. And although she's not a girl any longer, time has treated her well. Her wide-open eyes are still piercingly blue, her deep smile lines only a fraction more pronounced. I approach her as giddiness plumes in my stomach. *That's her! That's the jewelry girl!*

Unsurprisingly, she does not remember me, but she smiles with a familiar warmth as I help tidy-up the stall. She thanks me graciously, and tells me she has to rush home to feed the dog and watch the news with her husband. *Prince Harry is in town!*

Home? Dog? Husband? But, *she's* the jewelry girl. I'm confused for a moment. She sells jewelry. She exists every Saturday. From ten a.m to four p.m, and only within the confines of this very marketplace. She sells Mum bracelets and winks as she slides me another free jellybean. I quickly accept that of course she's more than the stall owner I knew; more than the facade which she erects every other weekend. She's a wife and a dog owner and a royal spectator and so many very different things. And so as she scurries off in the direction of Oxford Street, my childish image of the jewelry girl follows quickly behind her. She waves at me, and I wave back.

I stand in what now remains of Paddington markets; vacant cobblestoned aisles and the faint scuffle of invisible feet. The dismantling left a common area no bigger than a soccer field, but the newfound openness is striking; the boundaries seemingly endless in the dusk. A sense of hyper-emptiness envelopes me. There's a strangeness to it all; a warm, beautiful strangeness found only in a place once peopled but now unearthed, bare, open. It once sheltered the business of bartering vendors and toddling children, but now it sits free; poised to be its own

self, tell its own story. And I realise now that it's a story I hadn't expected of the messy markets at the end of Newcombe street.

I picture the other empty crevices of life. A school hallway at four p.m, a dimly lit office on Saturday night, a vacant fairground on its closing run. These settings flicker across my mind, and between blinks I catch the afterimage of the markets, their childish presence still lingering behind my eyelids.

But with open eyes the visage fades; dissolving into something new. I fumble with my spintop from the boy salesman as Paddington markets morph into something else. Not a pirate ship or a circus. Something quieter, something calmer. I trace the intricate carvings and in the shadows I see not the giddy markets I knew growing up, but a simple passerby; casually dressed and comfortably seated. I introduce myself as I take a seat on a moonlit bench at the markets' border.

Nice to meet you.

I think about how strange it is that a place is only really a *place* when its occupied, how the people inform the character of a space just through their existence within it. I think about how a place can mean different things to different people. A childish companion, a would-be volcano, a pit stop on the way home to your dog. The jewelry girl dances into frame, and I think about how she too was more than I'd first assumed, more than any one given thing; a chameleon.

There's more people here now, dotted sporadically between trees or near bike racks. I watch as they walk unknowingly among the haze of an evaporated place. And as I watch, I wonder what this setting is to them. For the woman to my right, it's a place of morning coffees and midday smoke breaks, and for the youngster to my left, it's a distraction from homework, an

escape from parents. More people stream into view, and the uses spring rapidly to my mind. This is a place of first kisses and diary entries, business meetings and secret rendezvous. In this small patch of communal land, lives revolve and stories reside.

I watch as the sun vanishes behind a shadow-cloaked cityscape. I imagine for a moment what will happen once I leave here, once this place is no longer a *place*. The sun will continue its descent, and while the world sleeps, this setting will remain. It'll harbour the boozy thoughts of a nightclub reject, and the early musings of a morning jogger. Then, as sunlight dribbles on the streets of Paddington, Sunday will begin. Mothers will gossip around steaming mugs and teenagers will awake to throbbing heads and empty stomachs. All the while, this place will remain. And as the bustle returns, it brings with it something else. Something familiar, something chaotic, something calm; the messy markets at the end of Newcombe street.

And it's in the darkness that I see Paddington in a new light, too. I think about how perfectly moonlight suits this place; the soft-edged shadows creating new contours, new empty nooks for wandering residents. I'm reminded of that T.S Eliot poem, *Preludes*, where he speaks of the city with equal parts fondness and disdain. Paddington is, in some form, the setting of which Eliot speaks; a place of newspapers and street lamps and broken blinds and other masquerades. It's the last line of the poem which strikes me as I traipse back to my car.

"The worlds revolve like ancient women, gathering fuel in vacant lots."

I picture the jewelry girl for the last time. She's cooking dinner for her husband, drinking Merlot as she watches Prince Harry land at Sydney airport. Next week, she'll return to Paddington to erect her facade, and so too will the markets in which she operates; childish and squealing. Perhaps I'll return too. I wonder for a moment what I might see, and it's then that I realise. It really could be anything.