

Borderlines

By Lyn Dickens

Clean-shaven and green-eyed, Horatio MacGregor was safely exotic. Enscorced in an inoffensive Anglo-Euro-Scottish name, he raised few eyebrows at border crossings, even if his hair and skin were just a few shades too dark. While everyone thought of Hamlet, he'd been named for Nelson. It was his Parsi mother's choice. His Scottish-Indian father had a famous tartan and no great love for English heroes.

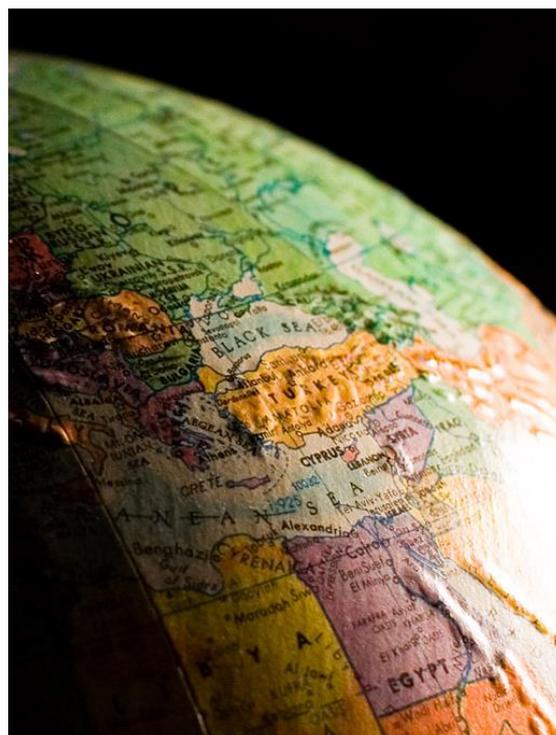
He hadn't stayed Horatio for very long, but he couldn't shake the connotations. At school he became Hal, and he was well known for the stash of liquor he kept hidden in the grounds. At university it was Harry. He even wore round-rimmed glasses. He was a trilogy of English heroes.

Trafalgar Square was his mother's favourite part of London. He couldn't see the attraction. The closest he came to understanding it was when he walked there with his housemate Tuesday in the autumn of 2010. They were wandering past St Martin-in-the-Fields when she stopped, staring upwards with an enraptured expression on her face.

"What is it?" he said.

"It's amazing. Look at that sky."

Horatio turned. The clouds had parted



slightly, at the point where Nelson began to shrink into nothingness, and the watery English sun illuminated the stone square. For a few seconds, the monochrome scene was splintered with light.

It was not the only opinion his housemate shared with his mother. That winter, he decided to grow a beard and they both detested it. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't inspired by pictures of early twentieth century politico-intellectuals, but his face also got cold. Cambridge had icy winds in winter.

At first he kept the beard neatly trimmed. He thought it made him look mature and reliable, like a ship's captain, or a Sikh. At a fancy dress MCR formal, he wore his round glasses and dressed up as Freud. He shaved it off at the end of winter. The second time he grew it, it was late spring. He had no excuse. He chose not to trim it, and after an argument with his PhD advisor, he went to Cairo where he spent his days watching the movement in Tahrir Square.

It was on his return that the distinction between clean-shaven safely exotic Horatio MacGregor, and a suspiciously dark and bearded man with an incongruous European name, became finely delineated. He was stopped at passport control, and taken aside by one of the obligatory ethnic minority customs officers. Their serious diligence had always disturbed him. Close-faced and unsmiling, they held on tight to their uniforms and their rubber stamps, lest they found themselves on the other side.

His particular officer asked him pointed questions about the origin of his name, the purpose of his holiday, why Egypt, why alone. He scrutinised Horatio's face but never looked him in the eye. Eventually, he was joined by a white-haired Englishman, who raised his eyebrows when he heard Horatio speak. Horatio guessed it was not the time for him drop an "innit, bruv" into conversation. He kept his natural accent, fermented at school and cellared at university. The older officer began to smile. He asked him about his college, his thesis topic, which area in

London his parents lived. As they went through his luggage, they shared a joke about *Doctor Who*.

It was after three in the morning by the time he got back to the house in Cambridge. He left his bags in the hallway and set about making tea. There was a familiar clapping of heels on the pavement outside the front door. Tuesday and her shoe-boots, as she called them.

She peeked into the kitchen as she entered the hall.

"Whoa, what happened to you?"

Horatio had glimpsed his reflection in the window when he turned on the light. He could see signs of the illness he'd picked up in Egypt. His cheeks were flattened, and his eyes were shadowed and bright against skin that was darker than he remembered.

He gave her a condensed version of his experience, and lingered on teasing the customs officer. She didn't smile.

"Harry, you have got to get rid of that beard."

"No."

"Yes you do. I mean it. You have increased your risk of getting shot and/or tasered by about a hundred times."

"But it's well good, blud."

"Oh don't even do that. You know, you may have the luxury of growing that beard and pretending to be Gaddafi Bin Laden because at the end of the day, you just have to open your mouth, and show the world what a posh bastard you are and that you went to Eton, but—"

"I did not go to Eton. And Gaddafi

doesn't—"

"Well, where ev—"

"And you're almost a white woman."

"Not quite, Harry."

"Whiter than me, if we want to quantify it."

"Don't even go there."

They stared at each other for a moment. Tuesday's hands were white and tight on the banister. She was always so much more outraged by all this than he was.

"Not quite/not white?" he said, with a smile.

Tuesday exhaled, her fingers relaxed.

"Homi Bhabha is really past it," she replied.

"Don't insult my people."

Tuesday laughed.

"I mean it though," she said, more kindly, picking up her jacket and starting up the stairs. "It really does increase your chances of getting shot, before anyone has the chance to hear how lovely your vowels are." She paused at the top of the staircase and called back. "And you're much prettier without it."

By December of 2011, the beard, and Tuesday, had departed. Another winter in the wretched town would drive her mad, she said.

In indirect ways, Horatio attempted to persuade her not to leave. He spoke of her academic prospects, her career, the lack of opportunities south of the equator. But the entire town seemed to appear tainted to her. And he didn't outright ask her to stay.

When it was clear beyond doubt that she was really leaving he promised to visit. He stood

empty armed at Heathrow Airport as she moved through the queue and disappeared into security.

He had visited the following year and there had been, he knew, a six-week window of opportunity in the Southern Hemispheric autumn. For a time, it had seemed inevitable that the fragile burgeoning of feeling between them would reach some sort of natural conclusion. What exactly removed that inevitability, at the moment of complacent certainty, Horatio did not know. He had encouraged the matter but not pushed it into glaring evidence. He did not think the obvious needed to be said, so he did not draw back the dark curtain to reveal it to her vision.

But something had gone wrong and the sense of the inevitable crumpled before him like the draft of a discarded essay, its ideas half-formulated and unread. Instead, he was left blinded, guidelessly feeling about in the dark, trying to reach the curtain of revelation that was now no longer there. For a moment, he thought she was in the room with him, in the dark, seeking the same weighty fabric with the same confused desire. But the light of his vision flickered. She was there, and she was not there. When he felt his sight and reason was restored, she, the curtain, and the window, were all gone.

If he mourned for it, he did not admit it. He was an optimist, he was resilient. He was twenty-seven. He quickly stepped into another relationship. But neither that, nor those that came after, could make him forget the window, and at liminal moments, moments of greeting and

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parting, moments after sex and before sleep, he would think of it, behind its heavy curtain, and the view that he could never reach.

By June of his twenty-ninth year, he thought of the window less often. He thought of it so little, in fact, that he felt sure that it played no part in the pull drawing him to Australia. It was his last grab at freedom. A trans-Asia trip culminating in a working holiday, a reward for the inevitably traumatic “write-up” of a doctoral thesis. The Tuesday he would meet in Sydney was the Tuesday he had lived with, dined with, drank with. She was his friend Tuesday, not the woman who flickered with light in his inner vision, on the other side of a curtained window.

Horatio’s father Jack was tolerant of his eldest son’s decisions. He recognised the now familiar pattern of ferocious hard work tempered by periods of scattered, restless wandering and occasional indolence. Horatio’s mother Gulshan fretted. She still had two younger sons to put through the twenty-first century hazing ritual of A-levels and university.

As it were, Horatio was rarely indolent as a volunteer tutor in Kathmandu, assisting Simran with her workshops, although all he could recall of his first day in the city was the glare of the high altitude sun, the grit in his eyes, the honking

horns, and the colours of silk. It didn’t help that he stood out, took up more space, and with his round, thick-rimmed glasses, so *du jour* in London, he felt awkward and foolish. Out of place.

He had no right to feel in place. He told himself that throughout his stay. Simran was an anthropologist—a British-Australian-Indian-Sikh who’d been born in Dubai to the sound of the call to prayer. Her parents had arrived in Australia by way of childhoods spent in Malaysia and Uganda, and adulthoods in London.

She made no claims to being “in place,” but it appeared she was never out of it either. She drank red wine every evening and frequented the New Orleans Café in Thamel alone when she was bored. She did not have Indian citizenship, yet with a surety that surprised him, and with rudimentary Hindi, she bought the cheaper tickets for Indian nationals to tourist sites. Eventually, she stopped buying tickets altogether. Nepalis were allowed free entry, and she took to walking in and out, unchallenged.

Horatio lacked her surety and could not bring himself to try either tactic. He probably lacked other, necessary things too. Enough of a certain body, or blood, or other things his mind only skirted the edges of.

It was different in London. He grew up in a colourless, middle-class neighbourhood and was sent to a floppy-haired school where he learnt a polished RP and had friends named Ivo and Binky. But, to his mother's horror he could, if he wanted, disappear into that blur of "BME" London.

There was no disappearing here. In the early evening the crowds increased. A middle-aged woman pushed passed him, her silk scarf sailing behind her. It was the orange of tangerines, or the marigolds that lined the back streets of Lazimpat. It cut through his left vision and, carried by the wind, whipped against him.

Horatio braced himself for pain, and felt surprised at the softness of the silk.

In Kathmandu, in Phnom Penh, in Calcutta, he thought of staying on. But the pull of the Southern continent was a great one. After Borneo, Bali was his final stop before Sydney. He had expected, upon exiting Denpasar airport, a low-hanging grey cloud, and he'd been surprised by the brightness. It had been a similar clear day when, as an eighteen year old, he'd taken a dinghy out with his father, and dangled his feet in the sea by the submerged cathedral of Pulau Pontianak. It was low tide, and the cross and the head and hand of the Madonna, pointing to heaven, emerged out of the waves.

His own photograph was less reverent. Two thumbs up, arms out, feet in the water. It had taken them days to get there on privately negotiated fishing vessels, and Jack MacGregor

had needed to resurrect his Bahasa Malay. At first, the fishermen thought they misheard him. It was rare that the children of the island ever returned to this forgotten place, so mundanely ruined that not even *Lonely Planet* had touched on it. Horatio had earned his photographic moment.

While in Borneo, he'd been tempted to return. There were rumours that the barnacle-encrusted cathedral might soon get World Heritage status. He wanted to swim there one more time before the inevitable encroachment of either tourism or conservation. His younger brothers had visited two years previously but his mother was strangely disinterested in seeing the remains of her youth's home.

"But you should take Tuesday there," she suggested.

It was a possibility Horatio had considered, but not given voice to. They had travelled together before, in uncomplicated groups of three or four, in Marrakesh, Istanbul and Italy. Tuesday knew the region as well as, or better than, he did. But she had not taken the boat ride that could be done from the coast of Kalimantan, to the pale, marine Virgin of the sunken island, where once her grandfather had been the final *Tuanku*.

She had recommended Bali. Horatio had been sceptical. He had been prepared for dirt and consumerism and chavvy Australians. He had not been prepared for the skyline of temples or for the painted Hanuman, halfway out of a Technicolor fairy tale, monitoring the traffic

intersections.

Upon seeing it, he considered the possibility that it was all a grand elaborate construction for tourists. The numerous stoneware shops selling carven Ganeshas and Sarawatis seemed to confirm his suspicion, until they left the roads of Denpasar, and the broken pavement and urban waste, and pushed forward into greener, emptier roads where the same workshops seemed to proliferate in the countryside. Later, he would realise his instinctual distrust of the island's beauty, so seamlessly intermeshed with the touristic and the ugly, was another form of mental colonialism, a kind of reverse exoticism which saw everything as pandering to a foreign fantasy, not counting on the independence of the islanders' own spirits.

As the car wound its way higher through the rice fields in the evening light, Horatio wondered at the lives of those around him. He knew little of Balinese culture. His driver had smilingly tolerated his basic Bahasa, but made it clear that Balinese was a different language, spoken by different people. For a moment, Horatio imagined he felt that difference. Here, on the road before twilight, he felt like he was floating in a sort of paradise tempered by rubbish tips.

But of course, there was no twilight, and nowhere with poverty could be paradise. As Horatio pondered on the nature of the locals' hopes and aspirations, his driver's mobile phone rang, and broke the silence.

I want to be a millionaire, so fricking bad . . .

Had it been like that for his parents? Could he even make the comparison? For his father, the child of a well-born, if eccentric, Scotsman, and a Sikh, perhaps not. As for his mother, her parents were Parsis in genteel poverty, fleeing from Calcutta to Pulau Pontianak.

The car slowed down, and the driver called out to a woman on the side of a narrow road. Horatio blinked and looked around him. They had been climbing steadily through the rice fields for some time.

"I just ordered my dinner," the driver said. "Welcome to Ubud."

Six days in Bali passed with the speed of a child's advent calendar in the week before Christmas. There was a day of travel. A day of sleeping. A day of settling in. And then he called her, and she answered—"Harry!"—with what he thought was joy.

They had arranged to meet in Newtown—Sydney's Shoreditch—and Horatio stood on the main street, the winter sun glinting across the shopfront windows and the roofs of the cars as they trundled down the well-worn road. The light had a fireside warmth, and he smiled to see the local population coated and booted, in all of nineteen degrees.

Tuesday was similarly dressed. He saw her approaching, and she looked taller, and somehow softer, than he remembered. She smiled and reached for him.

"Harry!"

“Tuesday.”

The cheek-kiss was perfunctory. Arms shifted and there was an awkward embrace, after a pause that seemed to consider if it were warranted.

“It’s good to see you.” “How have you been?”

Spoken at once, tumbling over each other.

“Yes, you t—” “I’m well—”

Silence. A laugh.

She moved her hand, and for a moment Horatio thought she would link her arm through his. They had done that from time to time in Cambridge. But she did not.

“How was Bali, then?”

“Bali? Yeah, great. Better than I expected.”

“Ok, good.”

Horatio rubbed his jaw. The beard was long gone, and he was told it made him look younger. More like the young man who had met Tuesday in Freshers’ Week 2010. But now, after years of knowing each other, they lacked the same easy familiarity they’d had on the moment of meeting.

Tuesday looked different.

“Your hair,” Horatio said.

Her hand lifted to where the curled ends rested across her shoulders.

“Yes. I’ve stopped straightening it.”

He smiled.

“I like it,” he said.

“Thanks. I might even grow out the colour next.”

In Cambridge, it had been Horatio’s then girlfriend, Jess, who first brought to his attention

that Tuesday coloured her hair. He knew she straightened it. During the wet autumn mists and in the humid pubs she complained that her hard work with the GHD was coming undone. He noticed the ends would start to curl into fluffy loops.

But it did not occur to him that she coloured it. It was a glossy raven brown. Unremarkable. But she had lighter roots, Jess said. A tell-tale sign. It was usual for hair to lighten at the ends, whether coloured or natural. Light roots could only mean dye. Even then the difference was subtle. A medium brown, darkening to almost black. Subtle, but strange.

It was out of character for him to be curious about such things. But that Tuesday’s hair, so evenly ordinary, was in fact the construct of an expensive straightener and regular dye, perplexed him. Its averageness seemed to mask something special.

A few months later, Tuesday showed him a photograph of herself as a teenager. Her hair was still brown, but light brown that graduated into curled blond ends.

It was so unnatural as to be natural. As a child, she said, a teacher had commented on the strangeness of seeing the light hair frame an almost-Asian face. Whether in Australia or Singapore or Malaysia, strangers would touch her hair. They doubted it could possibly be natural. It matched her skin, but did not match her eyes. She was a walking freak-show.

When she was twenty, she dyed it dark brown,

and discovered the beauty of being almost ordinary.

Horatio had understood half her story. They shared the bodily strangeness of borderless heritage. They did not share gender, and he did not understand the weightiness of gazes.

Now, as they stood on King Street, he said:

“Yeah, grow the colour out. Who wants to be almost ordinary?”

His reward was great and dazzling. She looked him in the eye, and she smiled.

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