



BIRTHDAY BEHIND LOCKED DOORS



AS DEALS ARE BEING DONE WITH MALAYSIA, AND CHRISTMAS ISLAND IS ON EDGE, GREG FOYSTER VISITS AN ASYLUM-SEEKER DETENTION CENTRE, WHERE A CELEBRATION TEMPORARILY CUTS THROUGH THE BOREDOM, FEAR AND UNCERTAINTY.

“MAJNUN,” THEY CALL. “Majnun! Majnun! Majnun!” The word, meaning ‘crazy’ in Arabic, comes from *The Story of Layla and Majnun*, an Islamic folktale about a young man sent mad with love. If ‘crazy’ is another way of saying ‘unusual’, then Maile fits the description. For the young Australian is standing in a car park wearing a bright red dress and holding a tray of baklava swaddled in wrapping paper. Today is her 22nd birthday: to celebrate, she’s hosting a party in an immigration detention centre. Majnun Maile, indeed.

This detention centre, euphemistically called Melbourne Immigration Transit Accommodation, is in the Melbourne suburb of Broadmeadows. Maile visits regularly to support detainees, and invites friends along to help out. On our drive to meet her at the facility, we huddle in a clattering white van and listen to a radio report about the ‘boat people’ debate. When I hear the term ‘asylum seekers’, I immediately picture castaways waving for help, rags hanging off their thin bodies. But this was to be in stark contrast with conditions inside detention.

Our van arrives at what looks like an ordinary apartment block: red brick and concrete exterior; clean white-walled interior. Maile greets us and we head into Reception, meet the other guests, sign a form, place our wallets and phones in lockers, then step into the asylum seekers’ inner sanctum.

My first impression is of a conference facility. Bland blue carpet, white walls, greyish doors. In the lounge room, young men sit on leather couches watching TV or in front of computers, browsing Facebook. They wear surf-brand T-shirts and tracksuit pants. This centre houses asylum seekers under 18, but while some detainees look like boys, others have the facial hair and defined jawlines of post-adolescence.



The party is held in a corporate meeting room with a whiteboard at one end, a wooden table in the middle and chairs scattered around it. The atmosphere is awkward at first. The detainees shuffle about, not talking much. Guests make fleeting eye contact and smile sheepishly at one another. I start to wonder what we’re doing here. Did we come to cheer them up, or to make ourselves feel better?

But Maile lifts the mood. She bounces around in her red dress, pinballing from person to person, giggling and hugging everyone she meets. Soon a goblet-shaped Persian drum is produced and we’re nodding along to the rhythm, passing round the baklava.

A skinny boy in a blue tracksuit holds up a *daf*, which looks like a large tambourine, and beats it above his head. Other boys take up the riff while Maile dances towards the table to cut the birthday cake, swaying her hips and tapping her Blundstone boots. As she slices through coffee-coloured icing, a stocky Iraqi boy wraps a green Persian sash around her neck.

The tempo increases and more boys start clapping and dancing. They raise their arms aloft and spin nimbly on their toes, jiggling their buttocks. It’s a showy dance, and one boy in a faded pink Nike T-shirt is the showiest of all: he jumps on a chair and undulates his torso like a belly dancer. Everyone crowds around to cheer him on.

During the commotion, a ghetto blaster is placed on the far table. A mix of Persian, Iranian and Kurdish pop blares from the speakers. About 30 boys are dancing now and a crowd of other asylum seekers has gathered by the door to watch. One young man starts a shimmying competition. He holds his arms by his sides with his elbows crooked