The Aha! Moment

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from “1997” by Mai Nardone

My British international school was a luxury we maintained. At the time I was in love with a boy who had ears like cymbals. It was all I could do not to clap my hands on either side of his face and kiss him. His name was Sam Bell, but the other girls, who knew him well, called him Sammy Bell. Sam called me Sarah, like a wholly white girl, when actually it’s Sara like Sahara, the desert. I never corrected him. “Hallo, Sarah,” he’d say, and I’d nod mutely because we all knew what I thought of his attention, his Irish brogue. We all knew too much about another one: who had touched whom in the music rooms last week; what the note slipped into Shrutika Singh’s locker said (carry on); and why Kevin Ong walked around with both hands in his front pockets. We knew that Bow Watanakorn’s father shot himself in his Mercedes before the debt collectors took it away. On her last day at school, we signed Bow’s white polo: “See you soon,” “Sad to see you go,” and, from one idiot boy, “Get well!”

“A lot of your foreign friends must be headed home,” Dad, an American himself, said to me.

We were in the living room, which was still unfurnished. Dad held his sledgehammer. He was midway through striking down another wall. The chalky air got caught in my mouth and dusted his gray hair.

“There’s white paste running into your eyes,” I said.

Two months without a job and only this hammer to handle had added to his bulk. But his were an old man’s ragged muscles, his shoulders like worn tires.

“We were meant to be by our hands,” he said.

“You mean hand-to-mouth?”

“Don’t give me that cheek,” he laughed. “A person should know their way around a toolbox. Come the apocalypse, it’ll be the laborers who’ll inherit the earth.” My dad, by contrast, had worked in finance.

“This is Thailand,” I said. “Ninety-nine percent working class. We’ll be fine.”

“They teach you too much at school.” He swung the hammer like a golf club at a stray piece of plaster. “You know, no one warns you that your kids are less fun when they grow up.”

Ma came in to see the mess. To oppose Dad’s newfound broadness, she had adopted the manners of a bird of prey, hunched, stalking Dad’s efforts, her censure biting into him like a hooked beak.

1. The first line of the passage gives us a lot of information about the speaker and conveys a sense of tension. We know there are some luxuries that aren’t being maintained, so it provokes a question in my mind, “Why maintain this luxury?” What luxuries have fallen by the wayside and what does that mean?”

2. “The image here is vivid and striking and unusual. We don’t always imagine the object of affection having a funny feature. It’s unexpected. It’s not the cliché. It’s not ‘dark brooding eyes.’ I love that the narrator loves this about him, and that she wants to clap her hands on either side of his face and kiss him. We get some of the author’s sense of humor, which is so much of the appeal here, and his eye for the surprising but apt detail.”

3. “We learn so much about Bow and about the other kids in the school in just two lines. We even get a little moment of theme. We have this tragedy occurring in Bow’s life, but also a reminder of what’s going on in the larger world—the financial collapse—and a suggestion of how it’s affecting both the adults and the children.”

4. “When we begin this scene, there’s a real sense of movement and economy of language. We find out who’s speaking and a little bit of context to ground us, but the author doesn’t waste any time setting this up. He just drops right into the father’s voice. Coming from the exposition we’ve just had, the movement makes a lot of sense. We already know foreigners are moving away because that’s happening at her school, and now the father is observing what this means. And there’s this wonderful irony that, in a way, her father is like one of her foreign friends.”

5. “The retrospective narrator is set up so nicely here, giving us the sense of an older woman looking back on what it was like to be thirteen, bringing the things she knows now and that wonderful sense of irony to bear.”

6. “In a single line, we learn so much about Ma. She’s a bird, but she’s a bird of prey. She’s small, but she’s stalking him. She’s on the hunt. She’s fierce. Their dynamic is captured here, between the father and the mother.”

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