

## THE FAT BOY

I was half way through my three working weeks in Sydney, and I had set the day aside for making colour sketches of Government House. By ten in the morning I had expected to be somewhere in its verdant grounds, seated on my little canvas chair. But thunderstorms had rumbled through the night, making me dream that I was shut in the basement of my own house, with furniture removers at work upstairs. I was angry with them. They knew that my wife, Xiu Mei, was gone, and they were taking advantage of her absence to remove all her precious things. I woke up tired and agitated, and the morning was grey, sodden, and unappetising. So I decided to stay in my rented apartment and work on my painting of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, which was an ongoing tribulation. Those filigree lines – substantial iron girders in actuality – were not the easiest things to render in the medium of watercolour. I was toying with the idea of fog, to permit me a little leeway. The trouble was that the Harbour Bridge was rarely, if ever, swathed in mists, and I foresaw trouble further down the line with my client.

I was deeply immersed in this specious rendering of unreality when I heard a key being inserted into the lock of my apartment door.

The tenant of another apartment in the building must have made a mistake. After jiggling the key in futility for a few moments, they would realise their error and go away. A roll of thunder boomed low in the distance, a laggard remnant of the night's storm. At the same time, I heard the door open, and then swing shut on its spring.

I called out from my painting corner, a table I had set up in the living room where the light was good.

“Hello?”

There was no reply, but I heard a sigh in the little hall. It sounded as if someone had just put down a heavy weight. I rinsed my brush hurriedly and got up to see what was going on.

In my hallway – filling it with his person and his large suitcase – was a boy, a fat boy, of oriental provenance. Chinese, I thought. He was, I estimated, about nineteen or twenty years old, and he was mopping his brow with a white handkerchief. His eyes took me in, but no expression appeared on his face.

He certainly didn't seem at all surprised, which struck me as odd, as he must have been expecting to find an empty apartment.

"Can I help you?" I said. But without replying, he ambled past me into the living room.

I followed him, protesting.

"I'm sorry..." I said, in that particularly British way that means, "*You* are the one who should be sorry!" "...I'm sorry, but there must be some mistake. You must have been given the wrong key. This is *my* apartment!"

But the fat boy had embarked on a tour of inspection. He walked to the glass doors opening onto the balcony, and took in the view. Then he turned, and surveyed the sitting room, his head swivelling smoothly through ninety degrees, like a gun turret. Next, he walked into the adjoining kitchen. I followed him in.

"Really! I have to insist that you leave!" I said. "There's obviously been a mix-up. This is unit forty four."

He was opening kitchen cupboards. Then he picked up the frying pan and hefted it in his hand, testing its weight. This action caused me some alarm. Perhaps this fat boy was mad. He might use the frying pan as a weapon.

"What's your name?" I said, a little feebly. He seemed impervious to my questions. Could he be deaf? Or perhaps he didn't speak any English. Well, I couldn't say 'boo!' in Mandarin, in spite of Xiu Mei - so I pointed at him and raised my eyebrows as high as they would go in a universally recognisable rendition of the question '*Who the hell are you?*'

He paid no attention. Now he was on his way out of the kitchen. I was on his route, in the doorway. He was about forty years younger than me, taller by a good four inches, and probably about twice my weight. But I stood my ground.

He simply kept going. I found myself shunted backwards into the living room by his stomach, almost stumbling into a sofa. It was done in the gentlest manner, as if he were walking through tall grass, or a bead curtain. He proceeded calmly to the bathroom, where he flicked on the light and looked in without entering. Then he turned the light off again, returned to the hall, picked up his suitcase, and took it with him into the bedroom.

I didn't follow him in. I went straight to the phone and rang the rental company's number.

*"Hello, this is Tanya at Angels' Apartments. What can I do for you?"*

"Hello, it's Richard McDonald here. I'm in your apartment number forty four at the Ludlow Building, Potts Point."

*"Oh yes. Hi Richard, how's your day so far?"*

"It's not gone entirely as I had expected."

*"Oh?"*

"Someone's just arrived in my apartment, a young man. He's brought a suitcase, and he seems to think he's settling in here."

I heard what sounded like a suppressed snort from Tanya. In a slightly strained voice, she said, *"That's no problem for us, Richard. Not even our business. You can have guests."*

"No," I said. "You don't understand. I've never seen him before in my life! He had a key to the apartment. He just walked in, as if he owned the place."

*"Just a moment please, Richard."*

I heard a few bars of Vivaldi, and then Tanya returned.

*"You have two keys, right?"*

"Yes."

*"I've just checked, and the third key is right here on its hook."*

"Well, somehow this other person has got hold of a key too."

*"Is he saying that he's rented the apartment?"*

"He's not saying anything. I don't think he speaks English."

*"Well, the only other person with a key is the owner. Just a moment."*

More Vivaldi. There's nothing quite like the wintry bits of *The Four Seasons* played down a telephone to wind you up into a state of impotent fury. Tanya returned.

*"The owner is Mrs Moss. I spoke to my manager. She's sure Mrs Moss wouldn't have given anyone a key."*

"Well, what do you suggest I do? He's in the bedroom, probably unpacking his suitcase."

Again I heard a kind of snorting sound, followed by coughing.

*“Sorry, Richard! Well - I think if you talk to this guy and he won’t go, you’re going to have to get the police involved. The emergency number is zero, zero, zero.”*

*“Right. Don’t you think I should speak to Mrs Moss?”*

*“We can’t put tenants directly in touch with the owners. Would you like me to speak to Mrs Moss?”*

*“Yes please.”*

*“Okay. Can we say that if you don’t hear back from me, it means she doesn’t know anything about it?”*

*“I suppose so.”*

*“Okay Richard. Have a good day. ‘Bye!’”*

So that was that.

Ringling the police seemed slightly alarmist, so I thought I’d have one more go at communication. I went through into the bedroom.

The fat boy had his suitcase open on the big double bed. The built-in wardrobe doors had been opened. My own clothes only occupied about half the shelves and hangers, and the fat boy was neatly placing his own things in the vacant spaces. He glanced at me as I stood in the doorway, but again without a change of expression. It was as if I were simply part of the apartment’s furniture.

“You can’t move in here,” I said firmly. “If you don’t pack up right now and leave, I’m calling the police.”

Again – and by now I was expecting it – no response. I watched for a moment longer as the fat boy took a snorkel, mask, and flippers from the bottom of his case and put them on the last free shelf in the wardrobe. Then he closed his suitcase and slid it under the bed.

He headed my way. For a moment, and with the Vivaldi fresh in my mind’s ear, I felt like staying where I was and punching him on the nose. But sense prevailed, and I simply retired ahead of him back into the sitting room. He went into the bathroom. I walked to the telephone, and stood beside it wondering what I could say to the police. As I hesitated, the fat boy emerged from the bathroom, and left the apartment.

It seemed pointless to call the police if the perpetrator was missing from the scene of the crime. I went into the bedroom, and looked in the wardrobe. His

clothes were very neatly folded, and seemed to be of good quality. The snorkel, mask, and flippers were brand new, still with price labels on them. He had even done something rather oddly considerate. On the floor of the built-in wardrobe, where I had been in the habit of throwing my dirty laundry, he had installed a white cotton bag, into which my laundry had been placed.

I pulled out his suitcase from under the bed, and re-packed it, suppressing a ridiculous sense of guilt as I crammed everything in. I emptied my laundry onto the wardrobe floor again, and put the cotton bag into the suitcase. Then I put the suitcase outside the apartment door.

I pondered my next move. I decided I would tough it out. I tried to wedge a chair under the door handle, without success. Why didn't they have one of those chain things? Perhaps I could buy one quickly and fix it to the door! I'd need to buy a screwdriver too. I got out the yellow pages, and discovered that there was a D.I.Y. store at Bondi Junction, a couple of stops away on the train. I set off immediately, hoping I would get back before the fat boy returned. In case I didn't, I took the precaution of carrying with me my passport and valuables.

I had a miserable time at Bondi Junction, traipsing about among designer boutiques in search of the D.I.Y. store, and then discovering that they didn't sell 'door furniture', and being re-directed to an old-fashioned hardware store an expensive taxi ride away. At least an hour and a half had passed before I got back to the apartment. I hadn't had any lunch, and I was in a bad mood.

I observed that the suitcase had gone from the hallway outside my apartment, and entertained a faint hope that the fat boy might have vanished forever from my life. But, on entering the apartment, I found that he was back in residence.

There was a very appealing and aromatic smell of food, and the fat boy was seated at the table ladling noodles and vegetables into his mouth. To my surprise, a second place was laid opposite him, with a glass of water and chopsticks. As the door swung closed behind me, the fat boy got up from his place and went into the kitchen. I went to my painting corner and put down my D.I.Y purchases, by which time he had placed a steaming bowl of food on the table opposite him. He sat down and resumed his own meal. He had

looked at me vaguely, but without breaking his silence, or revealing anything in his expression.

I was very hungry. There was something to be said for a temporary truce. The food was exquisite. There were slivers of succulent seared pork and juicy capsicums and cèpes and tiny broccoli florets, all flavoured with coconut milk and lemongrass and coriander and satay sauce and who knows what. The noodles too were perfect. I gobbled it all down, and then pushed my bowl away with a sigh of satisfaction.

“Very nice,” I said. I wasn’t going to say *thank you* in the circumstances, but I could go as far as that.

The fat boy made no acknowledgement of my comment. He stood up, taking the empty bowls back into the kitchen. I could hear him rinsing things and stacking the dishwasher. I thought I heard him making a faint humming sound, which was the first hint that he wasn’t actually dumb.

I went into the bathroom, locking the door. I observed, with a sinking feeling, that his toothbrush, toothpaste, electric razor, and some expensive-looking lotions were neatly ranged on the opposite side of the basin to my own things. The basin and its surrounds appeared to have been wiped scrupulously clean, and my own scatter of stuff had been ordered neatly too.

When I’d finished in the bathroom, I went into the bedroom. As I had anticipated, my uninvited guest had replaced everything as it was before. The suitcase was under the bed, the snorkel, mask and flippers were on their shelf, and my dirty laundry was back in the white cotton bag.

I wandered back into the sitting room, at a loss for a course of action. I supposed I could wait in the apartment until the fat boy went out, and then fit the door chain. However, there was no telling how long he’d stay in – it could be for days – and I had less than two weeks to complete my paintings, which would require me to go out myself.

The fat boy passed me en route to the bedroom. I heard him lower himself onto the bed with a sigh.

At least I had the rest of the apartment to myself. I looked into the kitchen. It was spotless. Evidently he had even taken a mop over the floor, as it was glistening slightly. I sat down at my painting table, and thought about the police again. The fat boy’s presence was so calm and orderly that it would

look as if I had invited him in, whatever I said. I glanced at the Harbour Bridge painting. I might as well try to improve it. I set to work.

When I'm painting, time moves at a different pace, and later I was surprised to find that darkness was spreading into the room. I packed up my painting things. The Bridge was in an acceptable state. It wouldn't be my proudest moment, but it was atmospheric and credible, spanning a harbour criss-crossed by ferries, just slightly obscured by plausible patches of clearing dawn mist.

I settled down in front of the television. I knew that I should really be doing something about the fat boy, but I'd got tired of the whole situation, and just wanted to pretend everything was normal for a little while.

After I'd watched half a documentary about Tasmanian devils, the fat boy wandered in from the bedroom and sat down on the other sofa. For about ten minutes he watched the documentary with me, then he leaned forward, picked up the remote control from the coffee table, and changed channel. It was an episode of *Friends*, which always amuses me. However, there was a matter of principle at stake.

"I was watching that!" I said. I stood up and made a grab for the remote control, but he put it behind his back.

Feeling ridiculous, I attempted to get my hand between his back and the sofa. I shoved and pulled, but to no avail. He was like a stone. I felt a powerful urge to start pummelling him with my fists, but - as before - I was nervous about introducing physical violence into the situation.

I sat down again. He emitted a low chuckle. At first I felt offended, but his attention was entirely on the television, and it seemed likely that it was something in *Friends* that had amused him. So he *did* understand English!

After the episode of *Friends*, there was another, and then another. We seemed to have hit on a *Friends* evening on this channel. At the end of the third episode, the fat boy went into the kitchen. I recaptured the remote control unit, but was quite contented with the gentle escapism of the sitcom, so I didn't change the channel. I heard a crackling sound in the kitchen, and the smell of food. Fifteen minutes later the fat boy returned, placing a plate of snacks on the coffee table – prawns in filo pastry, vegetables in tempura

batter, and some little rounds of toast with intriguing toppings. He brought plates and napkins too, and we ate with our fingers, still watching television. The food, as before, was a delight.

After we'd finished, he took charge of all the clearing up. I didn't see why I should help, so I didn't. I continued to watch TV, flicking channels. I heard him make his way into the bathroom, and the sound of running water announced that he was taking a leisurely shower. A programme about the world economy started to make me drowsy, and the next thing I knew I had woken up to discover that midnight had been and gone.

I went through into the darkened bedroom, expecting the worst. Yes, like a great beached whale, the fat boy was asleep on the bed, lying on his side. To be fair, he wasn't sprawled out, and only occupied half of the bed. However, the sight roused my ire once again. I switched on the overhead light, and both bedside lamps. I turned on the bedside radio, and tuned it to a pop music channel. I turned up the volume.

He didn't stir. I wondered if he was deaf, and had been laughing at the sitcom episodes because of an ability to lip-read. I gave him a shove.

His eyes opened a crack, but there was no real sign of sentience. I pulled the sheet back. He was wearing dark green silk pyjamas, and white bed socks with green bobbles on the toes. These infuriated me beyond all measure.

"Get out!" I shouted. "This is *my* bed, in *my* apartment, and I want to sleep now!" I made sure my mouth was visible throughout this statement, so that he could put his lip-reading skills to good use.

He pulled the sheet back over himself, and turned out the bedside lamp nearest to him. Then he lay still again.

Resentfully, I gathered up my pillow and yanked the sheet away, revealing the bobble toes again. He didn't move. I went into the sitting room, leaving the bedroom light on, and settled down as best I could on the sofa. The sound of the radio irritated me, but after a minute or so it was turned off, followed by the sound of two 'clicks' – no doubt the bedroom light switch and the second bedside lamp.

I slept surprisingly soundly, and was awakened by the smell of coffee percolating. My visitor came into the sitting room, drew the curtains and opened the sliding door to the balcony. The room was flooded with sunlight, fresh warm air, and the squawking of lorikeets in the tree outside. He went into the kitchen again, and returned with a cup of steaming coffee, milk in a little jug, and sugar in a bowl. He put all these down on the coffee table beside me and retired soundlessly to the kitchen once more. I was put in mind of P.G. Wodehouse's stories. This fat boy had some of the attributes of the butler Jeeves.

Breakfast was a perfect little omelette with a sliver of smoked salmon inside and a dab of caviar on top, served on buttered, wholemeal toast. There was a choice of fresh orange juice and tomato juice, and more of the excellent coffee.

I went to use the bathroom afterwards, and had a long bath. When I came out, the fat boy had cleared up in the kitchen, tidied the bedroom and living room, and gone out.

This was my chance to install the chain on the door. However, that would leave me cooped up in the apartment, like a guard dog. The day outside was propitious for work, and I needed to go and make sketches of Government House. I gathered my materials and left. Oddly enough, I wasn't so bothered now about the fat boy. As I traversed the Botanical Gardens, I found myself wondering if he had gone to secure provisions for supper that evening. Left to my own devices, I tend to survive on beans on toast and tinned soup. Xiu Mei had always been the cooking partner in our marriage, and it was good to eat home-cooked Chinese food again.

The sketching went well. Government House wasn't going to be as testing a challenge as the Harbour Bridge. I felt quite pleased with the day's work as I made my way home.

The fat boy had returned before me, so once again I had no opportunity to install the chain. But when I saw what he was doing in the kitchen, I had no regrets. There were piles of mussels, oysters, langoustines and miscellaneous fish on the counter. The fat boy was humming quietly to himself, and stirring a steaming pan, which I surmised was a fish stock in preparation.

I said “hello”, but there was no response. I looked in the fridge and found a bottle of wine – a very decent New Zealand Sauvignon Blanc - so I poured myself a glass and took myself off to the balcony to watch the sun setting behind the tall glinting towers of the city skyline.

The supper fully lived up to expectations. This boy was a cook of no mean talents. As before, he cleared away without a word, while I finished off the Sauvignon Blanc. In fact, I don't think he had any of the wine himself.

We sat watching television for a while. Last night's sleeping arrangements came into my head, and I thought I would make an early move to secure the bed this time. I went off to the bathroom. When I emerged, the fat boy was still immersed in television. Moving stealthily, I headed into the bedroom and got into bed, where I soon fell asleep, relaxed by the wine perhaps, and a sense of renewed control over matters. After all, I'd had a productive day's painting, eaten and drunk exceedingly well at no expense, and regained possession of my own bed.

In the morning, light filtering through a crack in the curtains fell onto my face. I yawned and stretched, and my arm encountered an unexpected obstacle to my side. I turned my head on my pillow. The fat boy's podgy features, eyes closed in angelic sleep, faced me from about a foot away.

I got out of bed quickly. When had he come in? He must have been very quiet. At least he was well within his own half of the bed, and I was once again struck by his strange considerateness.

I showered and dressed. The fat boy remained deep in sleep. I went into the kitchen and found everything laid out ready for the preparation of coffee. On the counter there was also a little bag with two fresh croissants inside. I got the percolator going, and heated up the croissants in the oven. When the coffee was ready, on impulse, I set a cup, milk and sugar on a tray, and put one of the warmed croissants on a plate. Then I took the tray into the bedroom and set it down on the bedside table, next to the fat boy. He stirred slightly and when I drew the curtains back and sunlight fell on his face, he sat up and looked at the tray. Then he looked at me, and with a barely perceptible nod of the head – I might have imagined it – it seemed that he acknowledged my efforts.

While the fat boy took his breakfast in bed, I gathered my sketching things together and left. It was another fine sunny day, and I caught a bus out to Vaucluse, where Vaucluse House was my next assignment.

On my return that evening, I was slightly surprised to find that the fat boy was out. I sat at my painting table and reviewed the sketches I'd made. I thought that over the next couple of days I would stay in the apartment and work on making my finished paintings of Government House and Vaucluse House.

The phone rang, startling me. I picked it up, ridiculously expecting to hear the fat boy's voice for the first time. But it was my old friend Bella. She's been very kind, since Xiu Mei died, keeping tabs on me.

How was my work going? What was the weather like? Was I eating properly? I was far too thin, and I needed to build myself up! I reassured her on all fronts. I didn't mention the fat boy. It seemed too difficult to explain. Maybe when I was back home we could have a good laugh together about it.

"Such a pity you and Xiu Mei didn't have children!" Bella said, not for the first time. "One or two sons and daughters looking out for you, that's what you need."

Bella was a widow, and liked to joke about how, when she became too frail to live alone, she would call herself Queen Lear, and divide her money and her time between her daughters' houses.

When our conversation was over, I put the phone down and stood still for a moment. Prompted by Bella's comments about children, I thought, as I did occasionally, of my little son, who had died after two days. His heart was too small. He had Xiu Mei's Chinese features. He would have been about the age of the fat boy now, if he had lived. Perhaps he would have been a fine cook too.

While Bella and I had been speaking, darkness had bled gently into the room from outside. I went to the balcony and watched the flying foxes scattering across the sky on their nightly exodus from the Botanical Gardens. Beyond their dark fluttering shapes, the lights of the city centre's towers shone out like beacons. I imagined weary office workers shutting down their computers inside those buildings, and plummeting down in lifts to resume

their other lives, with their husbands or wives, children, dogs and cats, friends and even mothers in law.

Where was the fat boy?

I left the balcony and returned to the sitting room, switching on the light. The emptiness of the apartment felt unnatural. On a sudden hunch, I went into the bedroom and looked under the bed. The suitcase was missing! I opened the sliding doors of the fitted wardrobe. All of the fat boy's possessions had gone.

In a sudden panic, I checked my own things. I had become complacent about the fat boy's presence, and left my passport, credit cards, and even some cash in a drawer in the sitting room. But nothing was missing. Whatever else he had been – silent, obdurate, culinary – he had not been a thief.

I wondered if he had left me anything to eat, and went into the kitchen. The cupboards and fridge were devoid of any sign of his presence. Whatever sauces, spices and herbs he had bought, they were gone. There were two cans of soup, a can of beans, and half a loaf of bread, all purchased before the fat boy's arrival. I made myself beans on toast, and sat staring glumly at the blank television screen, unable to rouse myself to switch it on. The missing items made it clear that the fat boy had no intention of returning, but I couldn't help listening out for his heavy tread in the corridor outside.

Later, much later, I went to my painting table, and sharpened a fresh pencil. I sat until the early hours of the morning, making sketch after sketch of the fat boy. I'd done the same when my son had gone. Like him, the fat boy had only been with me for two days, but I suspected that he had taken up lodgings in my memory for as long as I would live.