

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

Living in the Seventies

Jane Downing

The air conditioning was sluggish, shifting hot air between a few pockets of ice. Jenny stood in a slither of cold and watched her mother's legs disappear up the wide staircase of Sarinah's, Jakarta's only department store. By the time she looked down her father too had gone, lost to the lure of hardware up the back.

Jenny was wearing her favourite brown t-shirt, soft with over-washing, sleeves ironed into sharp points by their conscientious house-girl. She was aware her breasts were getting bigger and that the t-shirt was too old. She walked over to the electronics section, aware that she was the only white girl shopping there on this slow Saturday afternoon.

Living in the 70s hummed through her head as she bent to have a closer look at the portable radios. She didn't get to hear much pop music from home but Kathy was recently back from leave with her parents and had two enviable LPs: Skyhooks and Sherbet.

'We're living in the 70s,' Jenny breathed audibly as she set her glasses back on her sweat-slippery nose. She'd have to save up a lot of pocket money to afford one of these new radios. She dusted the length of the dial on a Japanese model, past the frequency for Radio Australia and on to the Voice of America. Would it be any better than her dad's old thing? Most Sunday nights she had to crouch in the back room, antenna propped against the exposed pipes, if she had any hope of getting Casey Kasem's Top 40.

'We're living in the 70s, la la la da, da, disease.'

'If you don't mind me saying, you are very beautiful.'

Jenny's head jerked up as if she'd been stung by her nemesis, the flying cockroach. In front of her was a tall man, his voice deep and melodic and his accent hard to pin down. Obviously not an Indonesian she could practise her Bahasa on. Before she could say anything in any language, he was speaking again.

'You remind me very much of my German girlfriend, a lovely young woman, when we were both studying at university in Berlin.'

Her mother's standard response to anything unexpected – *that's interesting* – didn't seem to cover this. Jenny cast a wild look across the tables of boxy hi-fi systems and imported whatnots. Where in the hell are you, Dad?, her brain shouted.

And there he was, by a small miracle, coming down the centre aisle, encumbered by an armload of light bulbs.

'That's my father,' Jenny told the stranger.

'Excellent.' He smiled 'You are from which country? Not Germany?'

'Dad!'

Her solid, dependable father in his weekend shorts and batik shirt held out his free hand to shake that of the man in the dark suit, Mr Ali from the Iraqi Embassy. Once they were talking, Jenny felt safe to look at his face: dark hair, dark eyes, a trimmed moustache over fleshy lips. Old. He must be close to thirty. He and her father acted the urbane diplomats they were, all affability on a Saturday afternoon. Jenny wondered if there really was someone in Berlin who looked like her. A plain, freckled, redhead. She blushed at the idea she could be beautiful.

'Living in the Seventies.' Jane Downing
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Jenny saw her little brother's shape move behind the blinds as she got out of the car to close the high gates. The Mercedes sputtered gravel as it took off around to the back of the house. She locked the gate and went into the house through the front door where Peter was lurking.

'They didn't see me, did they?'

Jenny didn't need to smell the whiskey on his breath to know he'd been bent over the liquor cabinet when they drove in.

'No, they were arguing about whether to go to the party at the Swedes tonight.'

Peter did an idiotic gambol.

'But they'll notice if they get anywhere near you.' Jenny wasn't going to dob him in, but she wasn't sure she wanted to protect him either. He took off up the stairs as their parents came in through the kitchen, still discussing dinner. Achid was behind them; he couldn't start cooking until there was a decision.

'And to think you could be having dinner with Jamail Ali,' her dad teased Jenny.

'Who's Jamail Ali?' Peter called from the top of the stairs.

'Jenny's new beau from Iraq.'

'Oooh! Jamail and Jenny sitting in a tree, K. I. S. S. I. N. G.'

Jenny practised disdain and watched her mother straighten the Arthur Streeton print, which Achid would tilt again later so no evil spirits could perch on top of the frame.

'Stop it, Peter,' their mother said after her brother's third rendition of the smoochy refrain.

'Do you want to go to the pool after lunch?' she asked. As if this wasn't something they did every Saturday afternoon.

It didn't occur to Jenny that there'd be anything more to tease her about, but that following Monday, her father arrived home with a heavy box of dates.

'So you got your date after all,' he said as he dropped the box beside Jenny. She was lying on her belly on her bed upstairs, school books spread around her and the paper lifting and settling, lifting and settling, on the fan's slow turn.

'What?' She eased herself up from a battered school copy of *Sons and Lovers*.

'These arrived at the Embassy for you,' he said, before clattering back down the stairs.

Everyone knew where the Australian Embassy was, so she wouldn't have been hard to find, though why Jamail would want to, was beyond Jenny. She sat on her bed and carefully opened the brown box decorated with a darker brown camel, a palm tree and beautiful decorative writing. A smell escaped, the scent of the Arabian Nights. She dipped her hand into the inner plastic wrapping and pretended she was Scheherazade. The date she plucked out was fat and firm, its slightly brittle shell cracking against her teeth, releasing a soft, warm, sweet, decadent flavour.

In the following weeks the dates arrived with other presents: a double album of Iraqi music that evoked belly dancers writhing at flame-lit oases, as well as postcards and guidebooks selling the beauties of Jamail Ali's home. Exotic print danced about next to funny photographs: ziggurats and souk and mosque, names like Ur, Nineveh, Babylon, Samarra; the modernity of Baghdad and women smiling in skull hugging swimming caps and one-piece togs while knee deep in placid lakes. Always with requests to see her again, always with a box of dates. She really liked the dates.

At the next film night at the Embassy, while they waited for the second reel of *Picnic at Hanging Rock* to be threaded into the projector, the Ambassador's secretary lent forward and joked, for the benefit of just about everyone in the wide front hall, 'So you'll be joining a harem

soon?’ The woman pronounced ‘harem’ to rhyme with ‘scare ’em’. Jenny blushed between her freckles and demurred. She hated her dad for making this into a hilarious story and wanted the lights to go off so she could disappear into the darkness. But when the film did recommence, in the dark, and the young girls in white wandered off at their fateful picnic and the music surged, she felt a little flutter in her chest. It took a while to identify it. Was the flutter something to do with the flattery of the gifts. And did the flattery seed a little pride in her?

Maybe the flattery of it went to her cheeks. If someone found her attractive, maybe she was.

A Dutch boy asked her to meet him at the basketball finals at school. They sat at the top of the bleachers, silent, and then he invited her to the school play. Torsten was a senior. He shouldn’t have even noticed a sophomore.

He arrived in a chauffeur-driven Honda Civic. Peter followed her out of the house, asking if he could come with them. He had friends in the play too, and of course he didn’t want to be seen with their parents.

‘I’m coming anyway. We’ll be right behind you, as soon as the wrinklies get their faces on. Please, I won’t watch while you kiss.’

Torsten gave him a mock clobber across the head and Peter laughed, but carried on with his *please, please, please*, like a Beatles song. Jenny slipped into the back of the two-door car. She didn’t know what to say, not with the chauffeur in front and that word ‘kiss’ in the back with them. Torsten talked about his last trip to Singapore. She knew he’d been: any boy at school got his hair cut to above his shirt collar and it was obvious where he was going. He’d seen *Saturday Night Fever* while he was there. He loved the Bee Gees.

‘My mum grew up near them outside Brisbane. Went to the same school,’ Jenny said, and felt her stocks rise.

He kissed her as they waited for the car after the play, bending down to her face and edging in slowly until the smell of popcorn warmed her lips and then the sweat on her upper lip met the wetness of his and she had to close her eyes. His lips seemed to harden then, and push, and she imagined it wasn’t some smooth-faced boy trying to ease his tongue into her mouth, but Jamail, experienced Jamail Ali, who had a harem to choose from but still wanted her. Who would know where to put his hands. Whose chest would be solid as he crushed her breasts against him.

Block M wasn’t far to walk to in the afternoons after school. Peter came with her sometimes but mostly Jenny went alone. She was getting used to the old men stroking her white arms as she walked through the markets, and she was good at bargaining for the best price. Her mother, unable to haggle herself, always took Jenny along if she needed something and wanted it at a good price.

On this long afternoon, with both parents at work, Peter gluing Airfix planes and being obnoxious, and Achid shooing her out of the kitchen because he wanted to get on with his special coconut pie, Jenny walked down and searched the racks of pirated Perina brand cassettes full of her Casey Kasem’s favourites: Queen, Barry Manilow, Elton John, Boney M. She walked in a cocoon of music, suddenly hearing the sex in the lyrics and aware of the way her hips moved as she negotiated the dirt aisles between the cubbyhole shops. She felt the tide of her sea-shell necklace across the rise of her breasts as she walked and bent in and straightened again.

She was on the lookout for a particular song: *Run to Me*. Perina put together eclectic compilation tapes; it would just take time to search through each list of contents. She’d heard the song at a barbecue the weekend before. She’d been the shy, awkward girl amongst the drinking adults, drifting to the back fence under the shadow of a frangipani tree and watching spaghetti straps fall off the shoulders of married women, and married men’s faces go beetroot with grog,

and other teenagers sneaking Bir Bintang out of the tubs of ice. The soundtrack of the party crooned across the grass. More Bee Gees. *Run to Me*.

Jenny did feel lonely, as the lyrics in this song said. Not alone, lonely. Yearning for something. She wanted to run to someone and lean on them. That shoulder in the song. *Now and then you need someone older*. The older shoulder. She'd had glimpses of understanding when her English teacher blathered on about D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot.

Block M seethed with people as she searched in the second and then the third stall without finding what she wanted. It was hot back on the road. The light was sharp and heavy. The hairs on her arms collected grit and dirt on the walk home. Dinner was already on the table. Australian lamb, imported, and frozen vegetables, barely warmed.

'Dinner will be a damn sight better at the Mandarin,' her dad announced through a mouth full of dimpled peas and wooden carrot.

Jenny tuned out of her mother's enthusiasm. The five star hotel was new and expensive so no doubt she and Peter would be at home with chips and Fanta as compensation. The sound of his name jerked her back into the dinner table conversation.

'You're going to dinner with Jamail Ali?'

'We are going.'

'Me too?' She blushed. Would they notice the trace of his imagined hands on her?

'So you're finally selling her to the harem,' Peter crowed.

Jenny dressed carefully. At Sarinah's she'd been wearing jeans and a thin brown t-shirt and had still caught his eye, but she had to be five-star smarter now. She held up wraparound skirts and bright batik dresses and wished she was old enough for a black dress; only a funeral would get her mother to buy her one of those. In the end she went for a belted apple green dress with full sleeves – not mutton chop, she didn't like the sound of those words. She regretted plucking her eyebrows and hoped the lighting would be subdued. It certainly wasn't in the elevator up to the top of the Mandarin Oriental.

Her mum, in earrings and raw silk which whispered with each step, and her dad, in cufflinks and tie, looked smart, even if she didn't. Jenny felt her fear and excitement rising with each ping of the lift as it passed each floor, but her parents appeared oblivious to her suffering. She could see herself from all sides in the mirror-lined walls. A cruel start: was her head really so flat at the back, and why hadn't she conditioned her hair more after the harshness of the Embassy pool?

She closed her eyes. This was what it was like to stand on a threshold. The future was so huge and alarming and thrilling. All things were possible and something, anything, would come to pass.

Ping. The lift doors were not yet entirely open when Jenny realised Jamail Ali was not the man of her dreams. More precisely, Jamail Ali was the man of her dreams only in her dreams. It was something in the way he got up from the large leather armchair in the reception area: Jamail Ali had short legs and a wide neck. He shook her father's hand, and kissed her mother's, and then took hers and she thought this is how it would feel to have a slug slithering across her skin. She could not look into his eyes and instead joined her mother in gasps of appreciation over the views.

Jakarta was laid out at their feet. The roads were strings of light leading off into the distance. She could make out the Embassy and the Welcome Monument in the middle of the roundabout on Jalan Thamrin, and imagined the slight shimmer was the two statues on top with their arms raised. The kampongs were patches of black, as was the horizon where the land met the Java Sea. It was unreal and beautiful from so far above. She watched the lights of the cars escaping.

And while she watched her fantasies plummeted the ten storeys, were run over by a *becak* and a construction truck and drowned in the Java Sea. She could feel her heart breaking. Then she had to sit next to Jamail Ali at the table.

'Come and have a cold drink out here,' her mother called when Jenny got home from school the next Friday. The porch was late afternoon cool in the shade, and pleasant before the dusk mosquitoes got too bad. The corner of Peter's lips were already sticky with a mixture of coke and Fanta. Her mother's feet were up on the glass-topped table, her feet carrying the imprint of her sandals in the flesh.

Jenny collapsed onto the last cane chair and let her school bag tip onto the slate floor.

'Good day?' her dad asked.

They didn't really want to know details, surely, of her boring life. 'Fine.'

Ice clinked in the bottom of glasses.

'Not so good for your friend Jamail,' he sighed.

'We're almost finished *Macbeth*,' she interrupted, to avoid another discussion of the dinner at the Mandarin and how gallant Jamail had been in following her menu selections.

She'd studied the menu with inordinate interest as conversation, surprisingly, failed to falter without any contribution from her. Her parents and her suitor seemed to have got on. They only stopped talking when the waiter came over. At Jamail's turn, he'd ordered exactly what Jenny had, minutes before: frogs' legs in garlic and Chicken Kiev. Jenny hoped she hadn't actually looked up in consternation. The repetition of her words was too intimate, and intimidating, and such a weight of responsibility. What if the dishes she'd chosen wasn't as good as it sounded?

As it turned out, the food was the highlight of the evening. Which didn't say much; there was too much looking at that white tablecloth. Now she didn't want to be told again how her awkward shyness – which looked so like modesty – must have driven him wild. She'd washed her hands thoroughly on getting home, especially the spot on the inside of her wrist. He'd turned her hand over and planted the kiss right there. It was her mother's habit to pat her Chanel No. 5 on that exact spot, and there was something too sexy about perfume. She'd stopped eating dates after dinner every night. Losing weight for the prom was her excuse, though she hadn't decided yet whether to say yes to Torsten.

Her father swatted a mosquito on his ankle, undistracted by *Macbeth*.

'He won't be going to Canberra after all,' he continued.

That had been the low point of the dinner. The two men had talked about embassy things. Australia had opened its first embassy in Baghdad only a couple of years before, and Iraq was planning to open one in Canberra soon.

'Canberra is a small city, obviously, but it has a lot to offer.' Her dad had sounded like the tourism board.

Then her mum had chopped in. 'The autumns are particularly beautiful...in fact, all four seasons, being so distinct...'

Parents were too embarrassing. And his shoulder had been too close to hers. Under the table, she'd felt the heat radiating off his knee. Whenever she turned her head and looked up, his eyes were on her.

Now, on the porch in the Jakarta dusk, Jenny brightened. This had to be good news. She could be generous now Jamail wasn't going to Australia: she decided it wasn't the man's fault that he wasn't something out of the Arabian Nights. Not Sinbad – such a provocative alignment of English words: sin and bad. She knew she was a bad person for being relieved that she wasn't going to be haunted by his attentions in her home town, but she didn't care.

'Are they all going to be recalled?' her mother asked.

'Not sure. The situation with Iran doesn't look good. He's needed in Baghdad.'

'War?'

'The region is more and more volatile.'

An image leaked into Jenny's mind, then flowed. The cascade of red wine into Jamail's glass, the drops that fell on the tablecloth. The red stain. She suddenly realised the dinner might not have been all about her. Her father had not succumbed to the courtship. But there was to be no new embassy after all.

Her parents knew a lot more about Iraq than Jenny did. They'd listened to Jamail. Jenny could only picture the photographs in the guidebook he'd sent. Ziggurats, souks, mosques, names from the Bible and the ancient past.

Achid appeared and clicked the doorframe with his long fingernail to indicate dinner was on the table. Jenny slid the fly screen shut behind her.

After dinner she went up to her room and put on the LP of Iraqi music. Peter came in and shook his hips in a provocative mock belly dance. She didn't rise to the bait. There were no lyrics to get caught in her head, but the music stayed with her for a long time after.

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