

Melancholy

By Amal de Chickera

Melancholy.

May-lan-kho-lee

It's a big word isn't it? It means 'a feeling of sadness'. This is the word I thought of when I first met the boy. He was crumpled on the floor in the corridor near the library. Looking melancholic. Staring into nothing. Deep in distant thought.

I had to stop and ask him why he was sad. He looked up. I noticed the stain of recently dried tears. I sat down next to him and instinctively took his hand.

'I missed it' he said.

I looked quizzically at him and he knew I wanted to hear more.

'I was too late. The library was closed. I was going to register so I could borrow books'.

I told him to meet me there the next day, half an hour earlier.

We filled out all of the forms. I learnt his name. he even got his library card at once.

'There, that wasn't so difficult was it?' I asked. 'All that sadness yesterday, wasted... you could have saved it up for something really sad'.

This brought a half smile to his face. 'I thought I missed my chance. I thought if I couldn't register, I would never be able to borrow a book. Ever!'

What a strange little boy I thought.

We laughed.

We became good friends. Best friends even.

One day, I remembered what he had said about the library and decided to tease him about it.

'you were very dramatic about your library card weren't you?'

He grunted embarrassed.

'I guess'.

'but that's what happened to my great grandad'.

'he couldn't join the library?' (I asked)

‘where do you think I’m from?’ he asked me in return.

‘why here. Just two streets down’. (I didn’t say ‘in the dirty part of town’.)

‘which country do you think is mine?’

‘why this one! Same as me! What does this have to do with your great grandad’s library card?’
I was struggling to follow and increasingly perplexed (which is another big word for puzzled).

It was then that he told me his story.

Just like him, his great grandad too had missed a simple registration. Unlike him though, it wasn’t because his great grandad was late. He simply didn’t know. You see, he lived out in the countryside and he travelled a lot. They hadn’t bothered to announce the registration there. Only the city folk knew.

It wasn’t a registration for a library card though. It was a registration to say you belonged to this country. And everyone who missed it, all of a sudden didn’t. Their children didn’t either. Or their children’s children. All for missing a registration they never knew about. And so my friend, who lived in and loved this country as I do, did not belong to it as I do. He never would. Perhaps this is why he lived in the dirty part of town. Maybe the nice part was only for the ones who had registered.

I now understood my friend’s melancholy the day we first met.

This made me very sad and angry.

I’m sorry. I asked one of the questions I promised myself never to ask.



© Laura Bingham