

Thwarted by a Gobstopper

A canopy of stars materialized as the once salmon and purple sky began to fade with the dying light. The stark contrast of luminous stars against the dark expanse of the night sky reflected the racial conduct of the small town of Broome that lay below. Morton Twobucket glared knowingly at the sky as he slowly weaved his way through the throng of people clogging John Chi Lane, narrowly avoiding one of the master pearlers. It was that time of year again when the town stayed up just a bit longer than usual to entertain the rowdy crowd of pearlers that were laid-off for the cyclone season. With their boats dragged right up to the foreshore camps and their pockets bulging with money, pubs like the Roebuck, the Star and the Dampier would only close when the last drunk fell out their back doors in the early hours of the morning. Morton often wondered what it must be like to be as rich as the white bosses, his mind a blur with possibilities, each one more fanciful than the next, with a shaky sigh, he let his head drop and glanced around at the various stalls that lined the street, his gaze lingering on one of the satay stalls where a skinny Malay in a white singlet was fanning the charcoal grills lined with sizzling strips of chicken and beef. The smell was electrifying, and Morton's stomach growled in agreement. He couldn't remember the last time he had enough money to buy one, or the last time he'd had enough money anyway. What little money his family did have was used to pay for their house, though compared to the boss's house, it was nothing more than a ragged shack.

Morton began to dazedly walk towards the stall as his thoughts warred, the smell drawing him in like a hooked fish. Standing in front of the stall, he was startled back to reality by the foreign feeling of warm cardboard in his hands. It was one of the numerous satay boxes that lined the counter of the stall.

'Ya gonna pay for that,' said the Malay, pointing at the satay box.

'I was just-', Morton began, but paused when the Malay turned to face his mate.

With the satay box still in his hands, and the Malay caught up in conversation, a wicked thought passed through Morton's head. Taking a few cautious steps back, Morton turned and swiftly made his way through the throng, hoping that the enclosing wall of people would cover his retreat.

'Wait, get back 'ere!' yelled enraged Malay, as he clambered over the stall counter and gave chase.

The shouting Malay only spurred Morton to go faster, and he broke into an all-out sprint down the rough dirt road as the throng parted before him. He glanced back over his shoulder at the Malay trying to shove people out of his way, but he relaxed knowing the skinny Malay wouldn't catch him. By the time the Malay would make it through the crowd, he would be long gone.

Morton didn't dare stop running, even when his legs began to protest from running on the uneven ground. Not until he arrived at the edge of Chinatown did he allow himself to stop and catch his breath. Looking back down John Chi Lane, he could see the faint outline of his pursuer struggling to run the stretch. Morton knew that he would have to find a hiding place if he was to enjoy his satay in peace, so with a quick glance around at his surroundings, he decided to head left for the Sun Picture Stadium. As he approached the doors, Morton could already hear the piano playing a gentle melody. He knew that with a film playing, no one would notice him slip into the back with the other binghis. So with a gentle push, he made his way into the stadium.

It was dark, stuffy, and the air was filled with tobacco smoke, drifting through the projector rays like fog. Just about everyone had cigarettes, the Europeans with their Woodbines or their Golden

Virginia tobacco tins, the crews with their long-handled pipes. It was packed that night, not a seat spare in the stadium. The binghis crowded onto the benches at the back of the stadium and their kids squat on the ground between the front row of deck chairs and the pearlers, bankers and government people. The other deck chairs were allocated for the Japs and the Chinese. The lugger crews- the Malays and the Manilamen- had to sit on hard wooden benches, with low lattice rail between them and everyone else.

Morton made his way to the back of the stadium, where he noticed a young boss standing behind the last row of cane chairs. With no space left on the benches, Morton decided to lean against the wall behind the boss and eat his satay away from the other binghis; they'd try to steal a bite. He didn't pay much attention to the film as he tore into his satay like a starving dingo, focused entirely on the heavenly flavours melting in his mouth. If only his luck was always this good.

He looked up from his meal as a shadow fell upon his face. It was the young boss, standing there with his arm reeled back and a gobstopper clenched tightly in his fist above his head. With pinpoint accuracy, the boss lobbed the gobstopper. Morton watched in stunned silence as it arced over the obvious audience before knocking off an elderly boss's hat with a dull thud. She screamed loud enough to wake the dead, as she stood up and started jumping up and down on the spot like a little kid.

'What's going on?' demanded a man who stormed out of the bio box, pausing the film and switching the lights back on in the process.

Morton paled as the elderly boss pointed one of her fat little fingers in his direction, 'He threw a rock at me!'

'Is that true?' the man said as he made his way towards Morton.

Morton began to protest but it didn't do him any good. He had a reputation for being a stuff-up kid, even among the other binghis, and there was no way he would ever be believed over a white boss.

It was over in a matter of moments. The male boss simply grabbed his arm and hauled him out of the stadium without another word, before shoving Morton out the door and slamming it shut behind him. Morton just kneeled there in the dirt, trying to process what had happened. What happened to his good luck?

As if answering his question, a hand landed on his shoulder as the smell of garlic, ginger and star anise invaded his senses.

'Plannin on pay'n me, kid?' demanded a skinny Malay in a white singlet.