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TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA



■ Polo

Alberto and Kolini and the Lion of Africa

Oregon autumn is over. Night takes afternoon's place at about 4:30. I'm sitting on a north Portland curb. Alberto's out here too. I'm smoking a krotjong kretek, he's looking long at his ivory 1967 BMW motorcycle. Jah tentu, he loves his bike, and just as surely she loves him. A lot. There's a certain symmetry in all that. Probably in good human relationships too.

And it's not what you think — the reason why he and me, his bike and our Northwest chill, are all sharing this crumbly St. Johns curbside. No, this is not a scene out of some honky-tonk hit single. It's not about a good woman walking out or about bad love ending. Tidak-tidak, none of that.

It's the exact same thing that's stalling Kolini and me, Thursday afternoon at George Middle School, long after all those lovely Tongan aunties and their bright daughters have packed up their traditional quilting and left their sewing circle. A traditional talking circle. Where family and community stuff gets sorted. Where longing and joy get shared.

Kolini Fusitu'a and me are kind of the opposite of that, silence straightens out our stuff. Silence restores balance. So we're gazing out his classroom windows, out to where Portland's Pacific islander pillars are piling into Voyagers and Navigators. Smacking doors and backing out.

He and me are slouching here and now, because we're beat. Tired as carabao, we say back home. I'll bet his classroom chair's tubular steel is trembling, probably bending, because Kolini's a giant — heart chambers big as George's gym, shoulders broad as this blessed continent. After this breather, he'll coach rugby. Rugby is WWF Dwayne Johnson-style football. Except no helmets, no shoulder or kidney pads.

Regular guapos like Kolini and Alberto don't let ladies they love, good or bad, mothers or daughters, see them weary like this. This moment is just us. This gaze is for a minute — maybe a little longer on account of this exceptionally awful year. We're pausing like this, every community mechanic will tell you, because it's the exhausted end of a year of national political theater. And because we're staring into the mouth of another epic American mood swing. A recurring cycle, sure as Cascadia quakes, Oregon rain, Chinook salmon.

We're pausing like this ... because it's the exhausted end of a year of national political theater. And because we're staring into the mouth of another epic American mood swing.

Jimmy Dogo hides his tiredness too. Sure he does. Sure he must. He is Singa Afrika. That's how grand he is, back home and right here.

I'm leaning on Jimmy's back wall, it's a little after six. Most IRCO staff have clocked out, many are already into their evenings of fixing broken parts and broken hearts at all those disastrous street corners where River City's 70 or so vigorous ethnic streams intersect with a mainstream not ready for our scale of shameless ambition. The "port" part of Portland needs improving. Upgrading, if Native, settled, and New American families are going to integrate, rather than disintegrate, into our global economy.

A river of rain drums determinedly on Jimmy's dark eastside office windows. Community uncles like these, like this African Lion, like Special K, like A+, work overtime to mitigate against an even gloomier darkness settling on the folks we love. A problem we're actually responsible for.

Let me explain. During this last decade, our new-comer communities' aunties and uncles have urged and urged our familias to engage government. To practice democracy. Our kids and grandkids, we said, will be healthy and happy only if we engage their schools; if we direct our community cops; if we connect with our community rec centers and our urban planners. Alberto's persistence, his patience, with governors and legislators are legend.

Good governance, these guys told and told our familias, depends on the governed. On us. Classical Jeffersonian stuff. All over our achy little earth, people dream about democracy. Here we dream and do it. And for what we give our democracy, we expect reciprocity. It's that o-o-old familial interdependency thing. It's the communal sharing thing, that's kept us tight for millennia, angry waves and invading armies notwithstanding. It's what will make America sustainable in our increasingly wobbly

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