

Safety Pin

Amy McDonald, 2007

Fuck it's a long way to Traralgon. A long, bogan-infested, tinned bourbon way to Traralgon.

You find four unoccupied seats. Lap top on one, back pack on another, ass on the third. You set your boundaries. The velcro of your computer bag releases, your lap top opens like a giant clam. Ten minutes until the train is scheduled to leave Spencer Street. Southern Cross. Whatever.

Four emancipated youths collapse into the cluster of seats to your left. Each wears a variation on a black theme. Each has hair draped carefully across their eyes. Faux-righteousness oozes out with foot odour and grease.

Goths.

No, emos.

You snort a breath out through your nose and focus on the screen. The train pulls out.

Dandenong arrives. More people get on. Young mothers pour out of tight jeans. Two elderly Chinese women share a shopping jeep. Men in overalls and chapped boots carry faded bags. The snack bar opens. Packets rustle. Cans crack exhalations of carbonated air.

The emos are quiet. The two facing forward watch the snack bar. Their eyes are bright. They swallow saliva. They're maybe fourteen. One sees you watching. She has a safety pin through her lip which becomes erect when she smiles. 'You like?' she says. If she's trying for Nabokov, it's not working.

You think of your boundaries. 'Yeah. Great.' Show humanity but not interest. Back to the monitor.

'We did them ourselves,' Lolita persists.

The kid next to her smiles as well and pushes his tongue against the back of his lip, jiggling a corresponding pin.

'And, see.' The girl draws a long, thin cord out of a grubby pocket. One end loops, the other has a silver clasp. It's a cat leash. Silver. She presses down on the clip to open it and connects it to her safety pin. Her eyes stay on you but her hand passes the end of the leash to her boyfriend.

He takes it and leans forward to gauge your interest.

You smile at him as well.

'Hey, man,' the boyfriend says, tucking his hair curtain behind a white ear. 'Could we get some change for the snack bar?'

Four pairs of mascaraed eyes wait for you. Remember the boundaries. 'No. Sorry.' You open a new file, type nonsense on a blank screen and wait for the abuse.

From the reflection in the window you see one of the emos elbow another. They blush through their make up.

You keep typing.

The one that asked you for money asks the others for food. They shake hollow faces.

‘Should have pinched more,’ says Lolita’s boyfriend.

‘And a drink. I’m thirsty, hey?’ The group nods at Lol. ‘Could have pinched heaps more.’

‘I’d never steal from people, though. Only shops.’ The boyfriend offers this discreetly across the aisle.

You watch with your ears only.

‘Yeah,’ Lol is agreeing. ‘And only big shops. Not milk bars and that.’

‘I’d steal from Mackas,’ says the quiet emo, his legs draped into the aisle.

‘Fuck Mackas.’ This from Boyfriend. ‘That’s not even food, Des.’

Des? Your lips twitter at the corners.

‘My mum is going to go insane when we get home,’ says the other backwards-facing emo quietly. He’s fatter than the others.

‘Yeah. Do you reckon I’ll be able to crash at yours anyway?’ Des pulls threads from the cuff of his jumper.

Fatty nods then says, ‘I’m so broke.’

Group laughter.

Lol kicks at an arm rest with a black spaceman’s boot. ‘Get a job then, you lazy fucker.’ Hysterics. It’s infectious. You purse your lips in refusal.

‘Tickets please.’ The man is greying, his short-sleeved shirt shows faded yellow rings at the arm pits.

The emos look to each other like falling dominoes. They say nothing.

‘Do you want me to get the cops on here at Drouin?’ the ticket inspector asks.

You watch the four kids shrink into their chairs.

You are holding your ticket between sweaty fingers. The heel of a spaceman boot thumps against a seat in time with your pulse.

The inspector pushes sour air through clenched teeth. He snatches your ticket, clicks a hole in it and moves further down the carriage.

‘I’m fucked.’ Des’s jaw pumps in time with the boot. ‘My social worker is going to kill me.’

The others are quiet. Fatty sniffs discreetly, watching his lap. Lolita unclips the leash from her lip.

Pakenham passes.

Boyfriend folds the leash in half, pulls it and releases it. It snaps, flexes, snaps.

You stand and lurch down the aisle.

A sweat-stained shirt sleeve raises and lowers rhythmically on the small platform between the carriages. You approach the ticket inspector who turns and throws the extinguished butt out on to the passing gravel.

‘They’ve got no money. Those ...’ You tip your head back towards your seat.

‘Punks.’ Smoke trails from his nostrils.

‘Emos,’ you whisper.

He squints one eye. ‘What?’

‘Look, could I buy their tickets? I mean, they’re just kids, and, well, if we could avoid getting the police involved ...’

You watch him watch you. His mouth splits open showing nicotine-stained teeth. He removes a soft pack from his shirt pocket and taps out another cigarette. He holds it tightly between thin lips, lights it and draws deeply. The inspector looks through the glass in the door to your cabin. ‘I’m not gonna fine em.’ Smoke blows out. ‘Just scare em a bit.’

Your grip on the rail loosens. You feel the armpits of your shirt stain a complimentary navy.

The inspector takes another hard drag. He looks out across the rows of back fences. ‘It’s just not the same anymore,’ he says. You’re not sure if he means kids or the landscape.

Back in your seat you press your hands against the outside of your backpack. Your fingers identify the outlines of phone, wallet, keys. Nothing missing.

Drouin station approaches. Clothing rustles across the aisle.

You relinquish your boundaries. ‘Do you guys really have no money?’ You address Lolita but they all shake their heads in response.

‘What did you tell that guy?’ Boyfriend asks you.

‘Nothing.’

‘Nah, I saw you talking to him.’ Des bites a finger nail.

‘He’s a good guy. Don’t worry.’

Fatty and Lolita smile. Boyfriend looks out the window. You see his reflection superimposed on tiled rooves and dusk.

You doze.

A stained shirt sleeve rouses you. ‘Traralgon’s next,’ the inspector says, tapping your arm. You collect your laptop and backpack. The four seats across the aisle are empty. A chip

packet and a bourbon and cola can have been rammed in between the arm rests. You check for your wallet. Phone. Keys. Still there.

The train slows and you stand, collect your bags and turn to exit.

On the last check to make sure you have everything you see it. A safety pin, shining, sits on the seat next to yours. The train has emptied. You smile as you bend, pick up the pin and put it in your pocket.

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