

Citybound

by Simon Anlezark

Alone Time

Seven Hills Station, 8:00am

The moose standing next to me looks as if he smells. He breathes exclusively through his mouth, but still manages to make a lot of noise. He wears a Sydney 2000 shirt, with those three cartoon animals on it. The Olympics were seven years ago, but the shirt looks older. He has in an earpiece, one of those Bluetooth headsets for his phone. The ones that make yuppie guys seem up themselves, and bogans just tragic.

The train arrives. I sidestep the moose to get on the train before him, even though that runs the risk of him sitting next to me. The train, however, is a freak show anyway. If we had freak shows in this country, I'd direct their owners to this train carriage. It would probably be a better quality of life for these people.

I find a free seat in the bottom half of the carriage next to two black-clad scenester kids with fringes longer than the rest of their hair. Their hairdresser must give group discounts. The one closer to me glances sideways. A smile—his first in a while, probably—flutters across his face. My face tells him, *not today, you little freak*, and his eyes return to their original position, with a quick detour via my chest.

I put in my headphones and try not to hit him.

It's fine until Parramatta station. I look out the window to see that, as always, the escalators are blocked. People here, they don't know that they're still allowed to walk even if the ground is moving for them. Moving along the hundreds of gum stairs and shoes, I see a pair that stands out. These yellow, acrylic heels.

They're Lizzie's.

Lizzie, who insists on spelling her name with an -ie instead of a -y. Lizzie, who is always, *always* happy. Lizzie, too quick to hug. Lizzie, who beat me in English despite not being able to understand basic sarcasm. Lizzie, useless. I hate her. Worse, she doesn't hate me. I bury my head in my *Communications and Information Environment* course book—two hundred pages so dull they stop time—and hope that she doesn't notice me. This is supposed to be my alone time.

"Gloria!"

Never have I so hated my name, and I hate my name on a good day. The headphones will save me—I pretend not to hear. Then, a hand is on my shoulder; there she is, grinning and standing over me. I smile, take the music out of my ears, and pray for death to come quickly. I don't mind whose.

"Hey, Elizabeth."

"Lizzie! I told you that." She elongates that last syllable of her name as much as her vocal cords allow. "Sorry, I'd hug you, it's just a bit awkward standing up."

"I'll live. So what's happening?"

"Oh, you know. The usual. Uni. Seeing this great new guy... Where are you going?"

"UTS."

“Me too! That’s so ironic!”

Maybe, if you’re Alanis Morissette. “Yeah, weird.”

“You go to main campus?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m not there, I go to Ku-ring-gai.”

“Oh, damn.”

“But today I’m going to main campus library! We can hang!”

Harris Park Station, and the two kids get up. Those little fuckers; now she gets to sit. Now she hugs me.

“So, what are you studying?” she asks.

“Journalism.”

“Ooh la la, you want to be on TV, huh?”

“Not rea—”

“I’m doing primary education.” Christ, she’s going to create more just like her.

“Sounds great.”

“Yeah, it is!”

There must be some way to get rid of her. It can’t be like this all the way to Central. I’m considering pretending to see something shiny at Strathfield. If all goes to plan, she’ll get fascinated by it and run out onto the platform.

Chatter continues. “So, are you still working at that bookstore?”

“Record store,” I correct her.

“Oh mad! That must be great.”

“It would be less depressing if people didn’t buy so much shit.”

“Hahaha...” That *laugh*. “Have you heard Good Charlotte’s new one? That’s pretty good.”

If I believed in God, this would be Him testing my will. “I wouldn’t call myself a fan.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. It’s just my taste, though, everyone’s entitled to their own, right?”

“Totally.”

I’m stuck with her, all the way to Central. And then there will be the walk from the station to uni. God help me if she wants to meet up again after class. Blood will spill if she mentions the word “brunch”. I’ll just—

She speaks again. “What?”

“Hmm?”

“You rolled your eyes.”

Shit. “Did I?”

“Uh, yeah. You did.”

“Oh. I was just thinking about this thing I saw on the news last—”

“If you don’t want to talk to me, don’t talk to me. God. You always were so superior in high school. I was just nice to you because everyone called you Grumpy Gloria. Judging everybody.”

And then, she’s eyes front. Folded arms. Next to me, but not talking.

Next to that Gloria girl with the stupid always-frizzy black hair. The too small breasts. The crooked bottom teeth. The lopsided smile. The stubby fingers. The dull, dark eyes, too quick to roll. The shirt I didn’t realise was stained until I stepped onto the platform, that I’ve been trying to hide, completely without grace, by holding my backpack over it, an action of such awkwardness that has only resulted, I’m sure, in my looking like a mentally disabled person.

That girl.

Oh well. I finally figured out how to shut Lizzie up.

Daddy and Maggie

Bondi Junction Station, 8:57am

Bitch. Bitch! I got a job, didn't I? I'm even doing four days a week, when Daddy told me I only had to do three, just because I'm that hard a worker. So here I am, at the station, before nine o'clock, like I am four days a week, and she's a bitch!

"You're going to be late," is the first thing she said when she started *the tone*. That superior voice she loves so much. She's bad in person, but she's even worse on the phone.

"Well, yeah. Only a little bit. It's cool, Paul likes me." Paul's my boss, who's sort of old, but he does. He'll be fine. I have extra cleavage today. The guy manages a lingerie store, clearly he has a fixation.

"But it's not very... responsible, is it?" I'm the older sister, and yet she's the one who gives this lecture. It's backwards.

"Isn't it? I'll work back however late I am, then. Wait, why am I even talking to you?"

"Dad told me about Eric."

"What, about how much of a spunk he is? *I know.*"

"That he's moved in with you."

Jealousy's ugly, I swear to God. "He hasn't moved in. He just stays most nights."

"Lauren." *Lau-ren.*

"*Mag-gie,*" I echo.

"He's a loser! You know he's a loser!"

"Look, I'm sure one day you'll fuck a guy in a band too, and then—"

And then she hangs up! Just in time, because the train has started to move into the tunnel. I wish I'd been able to cut her off.

The point here is: Daddy and Maggie don't like Eric. Mum's too drunk to have a real opinion, but she flirts with him, which is gross, but I guess that means she's sort of on my side. Eric's from Newcastle, but he was living on his guitarist's couch. This guitarist is the guy who came up with their name. Eric told me about it, but got annoyed with me straight after.

"I don't get it."

"Not 'That's What We *Said*', 'That's What *We* Said?'"

"Yeah, duh. But I don't get it."

Boys.

Daddy and Maggie don't like that Eric's living with me because Daddy pays for my place. He has done so for the two years since I moved out when I dropped out of uni at twenty. And, I don't know, I still have to live by his rules, or something. His rules and Maggie's rules, more on more, are looking like matching set.

The Bondi Junction train line, just before Edgecliff, has a quick patch of daylight, where I can get reception. This is where my phone rings again.

"Listen, Lauren," begins Maggie, without even a hello.

"Who is this?"

"You know we just want what's best for you."

"I know. And Eric... sometimes... sometimes he hits me."

This stops her for a second. “Oh my God Lauren, I...”

“Please. You know I’d cut his balls off if he did that.”

This stops her for a second more. “You horrible—”

“Whoops, tunnel!”

Beep. Baby sister has no sense of humour.

Maggie’s calls come from Daddy’s office. Her calls come from there because that is where she works, now. She’s in her final year of some business course at Sydney Uni, but she’s already working. “Being groomed,” Eric calls it. It’s been pretty obvious that this is how things would go since Maggie was about twelve. At high school, she studied business, economics, Cantonese (“Asia’s a booming economic region,” or something). For work experience, she chose Daddy’s office. I did as well, of course, but she actually did work while she was there. When I was living at home, we had the paper delivered. I’d get handed the TV guide while Daddy and Maggie shared the business pages.

This is what’s given her the attitude.

Town hall, and I leave the train, and my phone rings again.

“What? I’m at the station. I’m only, like, fifteen minutes late.”

“Laur, you know I’m just trying to help you.”

“Well, I don’t need it. Thanks. But I don’t.”

“He’s using you. I’ll just leave it at that.”

“Great. You should write a self help book. I’d buy it.”

“Sure. Fine. Will do. Goodbye, Lauren.”

“Toodles!”

She doesn’t understand. And I’m not even talking about Eric here. I’m not talking about being late. Christ, I’m not even talking about her closeness with our father.

It’s her. She’s so *driven*. She knows exactly where she wants to be, and more, she’s *there*. Never mind where I’m going, the point here is: I can’t see where that is. I don’t want to do what she’s doing. I don’t want to act or model or sing or draw or be a mummy or do those things that little girls want to do. The future’s blank, and that’s where I’m sliding.

Jealousy’s ugly, I swear to God.

The Cusp

Manly Wharf, 7:30am

I stopped myself upon realising I was staring, but they hadn’t noticed. They were young, barely in their twenties, if even that. They held hands. She leaned against him. His look was one of sheer contentment. They looked a little too young and free from stress to own a house together. Their dress was casual, so they weren’t going to work. Maybe university students, although they still seemed too happy to be awake so early.

My appraisal of the two of them was stopped by the raising of the ferry’s gate. Everyone rushed on as if they wouldn’t get to the same place at the same time. I found my place, disheartened to discover myself seated opposite the couple.

On the cusp of divorce number three is the exact wrong time to become envious of young love.

The cusp was a large part of the reason for my being on the ferry. My broken down BMW was the other. I couldn’t very well borrow my wife Sherry’s car: she

considered it saintly on her part to let me stay in the guest room on the opposite side of the house. So, on this day, I was forced to float to the city.

The girl took a CD out of her bag to show to the boy: *Capture Me* by Geomancy. This happened to be my label's latest cash cow. Their music was horrid, but they sold. The lead kid, aged all of eighteen, he couldn't sing, but he could look. The right producer could make an album by my cat releasable, but that look could never be faked, and this kid had it. I met them before the album's release. Arrogant little shits, all four of them. Dressed in costumes and entering a world that would have scared the daylights out of me when I was their age; but then again, none of them were virginal business students. Instead of handshakes they offered casual nods as they looked around the modern, sterile office thinking, probably, *this is not music*, like they really knew about music, like they wouldn't be forgotten in two years, if they were lucky enough to be remembered even for that long.

And yet, there was this nagging envy. Job security, wisdom—or at least a better understanding of the world—I had that. Those kids in the band, and the couple opposite me, they had youth. More than that: *life*. All that belonged to my name was a nice, broken down car and a well-appointed guest room.

My phone shook in my pocket. It was my eldest daughter. One from each marriage; I'm nothing if not consistent. My life the *passacaglia*.

"Elizabeth."

"Hi dad! What's up?"

I love Elizabeth, but more and more she had been having the same effect on me as the couple and the band. "Just on my way to the office."

"You don't sound like you're in the car."

"I'm on the ferry; it's in the shop. What did you call for?"

"It's just about Thursday. You know how you were going to come and take me to practice? Ian's just got a new car, so he's going to take me."

The ferry neared Circular Quay, the couple's displays not ceasing. They were not even lewd in any way, the whole affair just reeked of affection.

It made me want to call Sherry.

We hadn't so much as kissed in a year. We'd even fucked two weeks ago, a last ditch effort I knew was a waste of sweat before it even began. The encounter didn't begin with our lips touching. At no stage did either of us utter any words of fondness, or lust, or even a name. It did not end with me falling asleep in my former bed.

I decided to do the stupid thing. I took out my phone once more. I would call Sherry, like a hungover teenager calling his girlfriend with apologies about the night before.

This plan was halted by the phone ringing in my hand.

Sherry.

"Sherry."

"You can have my car, William. I'm going to my mother's for the rest of the week. She will pick me up."

"Oh. I thought—"

"Don't break it like you broke yours."

"Said the joker to the thief."

"What?"

"Nothing. And my car broke down, I didn't... Look, I think we should—"

"Annie's staying with us as well. She already knows to go there straight from school."

“Could—”

“Mum will be here shortly, William.”

“How is she?”

“And don’t sleep in my bed.”

The line was cut off before I could say goodbye. Defeated, I returned the phone to my pocket.

A man in a business suit was looking at me, reading my face. He sees my defeat, by how far my last shot had missed. His own face is one of perhaps unintentional smugness, his own life on the rails.

“Wife?”

“Not anymore.”

“See?” he said. “This is why I sleep with my secretary.”

A Third Option

Miranda Station, 8:42am

The run from her house to the station, a run not made easier by the guitar strapped to my back, gave me time to think about what she said.

We were in her bed. I’d woken up with her head on my chest. She was fingering the scar just beneath my ribcage.

“I hope I never get stabbed.”

I wasn’t with her for her intellect. “Then you should stop getting into bar fights.”

She moved up to kiss me, smiling.

Catherine, she was nice. We got along well. She was undemanding, or so I thought. This was nothing to write songs about, but it worked.

“I hope nothing like this ever happens to you again, too,” she said.

“It won’t. I have faster reflexes now.”

“I’m serious.”

There was something in her tone that I’d never heard before. “Yeah, sure. You know I’m good now.”

She rested her head back on my chest. For a moment, silence, and then she spoke again.

“I’m looking after Ellen’s kid today.” Her sister. “She’s such a cutie.”

I was non committal. “Uh huh.”

“I love kids.”

“I know.”

“I still reckon you’d make a good dad.”

“So you’ve said.”

“Sean.” She looked up at me, beaming. “It’ll be sooner than you think.”

The train arrived. It wasn’t too crowded, with room for me and the guitar case. I would now be at uni more than an hour early, but I had to leave that house. Sitting near the door, head buried in a book, was this weedy blonde kid. He looked up at me, just for a second, and straight back down. He was the kind of kid I’d beat up without hesitation in the past, and I could hit something right now. Instead, I took the stairs to the top of the carriage.

Thoughts chased their tails through my head. The carriage filled up. At Sutherland station I was forced to move my guitar. A woman. Early seventies, at least. I met her eyes for a second before resuming my vigil of staring out the window.

“Someone has had a bad morning.”

Please. Not today. “Yeah.” I didn’t turn to her.

And that was all, for a few minutes. Then it began again.

“So, where are you going to today?”

“Uni.”

“Ah, very good.” I didn’t respond. “I am going to presume you don’t have your Introduction to Chatting tutorial today. If you do, you clearly have not been studying.”

A tiny smile forced its way onto my face.

“I saw that smile.”

“I study music.”

“Oh, lovely. There is not nearly enough of that in the world.”

“Yeah.”

“There should be more young people doing that sort of thing.”

I turned to her. “I’m not that young. Twenty-six.”

“That is still significantly younger than me.” There was a friendliness in her eyes. A youthfulness that didn’t quite fit with the rest of her face.

“That’s true. So, where are you going?”

“St George. St George Hospital.”

“Oh...”

“Don’t worry. I am not going for me. My dear friend Angela is there visiting her grandson. I am visiting her.”

“He’s sick?”

“He’s a fool. He goes to those clubs, do you know them? He wants to meet girls, where it’s too loud to talk to them. Granted, this does make sense for him, since he’s not going to make any friends with his conversation skills. Not much to offer, to say the least. Won’t work, won’t study. And, course, he argues with... what do you call those doormen?”

“Bouncers.”

“Bouncers! They weigh twice as much as him and he thinks... I’m sorry, I’m giving you quite an earbashing.”

“No, it’s okay.” I meant this.

“So, now, the young man in hospital.”

I paused. I wasn’t sure whether to tell her this or not.

“I’ve done that. Not bouncers, but I used to, as you say, um, be a ‘fool’. I’d fight with people. I started the fights, more often than not.”

“Hmm. And now?”

“And now I’ve stopped. Now,” I gestured to the guitar, “I’ve found this.”

“You know what? People my age, and even people younger than me, they aren’t offering any hope. The most positive person I know who is near my age is my eldest daughter, and that’s only because she’s drunk most of the time. There is so much negativity, and so much refusal to understand... The world is going to need you people, and the rest of us just don’t realise this. We’re soon going to have a country full of Angela’s grandsons and people too old and weak to do anything about them.”

“I’m only studying music,” I told her. She had more attitude than I first thought. “And, to be honest, I don’t think my lot are going to be that much more useful.”

“I suppose that’s it then. The cycle will continue. And don’t put yourself down. We need creativity as well. More than just cogs in the wheel.”

“Yeah.”

“But it’s good. It’s good that you’re not getting yourself into trouble.”

“I can’t, now.” I let it slip. “I got a girl pregnant.”

“I see.” Why was I telling a complete stranger these things?

“She’s, um, pretty much my girlfriend. She told me this morning.”

“I imagine that you’ll be leaving off the ‘pretty much’ soon.”

“My dad’s an electrician. After I... got into trouble, he said I could work for him.

I said I would, but I wanted to study, too. But he said to work with him, I’d have to work full time or not at all. I guess now, I’ll go full time.” The woman looked out the window. Her stop was nearing. “I’m not going to get into trouble now, but I’m not going to be what I want to be, either.”

“A third option.”

“I wouldn’t call it an option.”

The woman stood. She looked at me one last time as she left the train. “You’ll figure it out.”

I already had.

Just like everybody else.