

THE LONG AND GRINDING ROAD

Bus rides across states provide many hours for pondering and people-watching, as **Liana Skrzypczak** knows all too well.

FOR THE PAST year, I've been travelling aboard the Firefly overnight express bus from Adelaide to Melbourne while navigating the uncertainties of an interstate relationship. Sometimes the bus is near empty, leaving me in the company of my thoughts, worries and Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*. At other times, passengers are so rowdy, I take comfort in a quality pair of noise-cancelling headphones.

The maths behind travelling by bus works out. It drops you centrally at both ends and, provided you can sleep upright in a moving vehicle, you can optimise your daylight hours – perfect for the Type A creative like me. And after the year I'd had – family drama, work stress, money problems – my emotional baggage was heavy and my bank account, a little light. Thank God for the Firefly.

Last night, the service was packed and the passengers were agitated – as though the summer pollens had gotten up everyone's nostrils. A man with a phlegmy cough spat into a handkerchief every few minutes and somewhere near the front there was a child with a sneeze so ferocious I suspected it could blow a person's hat off.

"I wouldn't get too comfortable if I

were you, love," a voice boomed in my ear. "I got big knees and I snore. Move over."

I looked up. The six-foot-five grandmother we'd all seen loading oversized baggage into the undercarriage of the bus while booming down her mobile phone to her daughter Vonnie, stood over me. We all now knew how to get rid of scale from a lemon tree and about the pesky ex-husband who "should've had more to do with the rat-pack grandchildren".

Quickly, I manoeuvred myself over to the window seat. It seemed Big Knees was going to be my bus buddy for the next 10 hours. I spared a wistful thought for the polite French student I'd sat next to last time, whose biggest worry was whether the tomato in her pre-packed sandwich would breach fruit quarantine regulations at the border.

As the bus wobbled through the Franklin Street Terminal carpark and into the non-existent traffic of Adelaide, the British backpacker in front of Big Knees reclined his seat.

"Don't even think about it." Big Knees thumped his headrest and leaned into his headphones. "Can you hear me? Are you dumb?" When he refused to acknowledge her presence, she looked around the

carriage. "How rude!"

It was then that I wondered, wistfully, what Simon would be doing right now. Showering and getting into bed to watch an episode of *The Simpsons* probably. I pulled out my phone and typed: *You're lucky to have a girlfriend who'll travel across the country to see you.*

His reply was immediate: 🙄😏❤️
Whatcha doooooing? I wrote.

Watching The Simpsons. How's the bus trip going?

I tilted my phone away from Big Knees: *The woman next to me is gonna start a fight with the British guy in front for putting his seat back.*

Simon: 🙄

Me: *It's going to be a very long drive.*

I was giddy at the thought of seeing Simon. It had been three weeks since his last visit and the scent of his cologne was wearing off the T-shirt I "borrowed" from him.

At 10.05pm, we reached our first stop at the Tintinara United Roadhouse where the toilets were practical, the hot chips hot, and the dining area roomy enough that nobody need sit next to anyone.

Someone slid onto the chair next to me. "You got the time?"

I looked up.

The man must've been a decade older than me, though it was hard to tell through his shaggy brown hair. When he tucked his hair behind his ears, I noticed his eyes were a husky blue.

"Ten past 10."

"Steve," he said.

"Hi." I realised he was waiting for something further and added, "We seem to be making good time."

Steve's gaze was a fly settling on the spot between my eyes. "So, how come you're heading to Melbourne?"

I glanced at my phone. It was late. I wasn't in the mood to talk. "I'm visiting my partner," I said. "He lives there." "Oh, cool cool. So what do you do in Melbourne?"

I'd had experiences with chatty people on the Firefly before. On a previous trip, the driver told me about how working on the Firefly earned him *really* good money, but also meant he had to spend half the

I hope they're not full. Try to get a job and then... I used to be a chef so... Should be able to find work in a kitchen but...

Do you know if there's much going on in Melbourne?"

"I'm sure there is," I said. "But I'm not from Melbourne, so I don't really know."

"What do you do in Adelaide?"

"I'm in childcare."

"Oh, cool cool."

All around, passengers began finishing their snacks. A yawn collected at the back of my throat. I stood up. "I'm just going to stretch my legs."

Steve stood too. "Good idea." And accompanied me out the door. "So, what's it like working in childcare?"

Outside, the bus driver gulped down an extra-large coffee under the verandah light. Big Knees paced up and down, stopping occasionally to rock her hips back and forth.

Steve went on to tell me there was no

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week away from his kids. He told me how the nights were tough, the hours long, but the support from his management amazing. And besides, had he mentioned the pay?

Steve seemed eager to share his story, too. And it wasn't like I had any other place to be. I sighed and asked, "How come you're heading to Melbourne?"

"I'm looking for something..."

Everything about Adelaide is just..." He motioned with his hands in a way that was impossible to interpret. I wondered if he had a habit of starting sentences but not finishing them.

"So, I'm gonna find a backpackers.

work in Adelaide and that he was hoping to find something in Melbourne.

"I've got a chance to, you know, start over. I'm straight outta recovery so I wanna change..."

I waited for him to finish this thought, but it seemed the ground had become particularly interesting. I was about to make some vague comment about how "change was good" when Big Knees shouted, "Driver's opening the bus, love. You'd better get on first or we'll be dancing."

That'd be a sight. I excused myself and made my way to the bus.

Back in our seats, I wondered what

Steve had been about to say, or had been trying to say, but couldn't. Eventually, the whirl of the wheels lulled me to sleep.

I slept all the way to Southern Cross Station, where I woke with a start just as we were pulling into the coach terminal. Big Knees and British Backpacker were arguing again, but this time they were competing for my support.

"How is this woman not doing your head in?" British Backpacker said.

"She's got nothing to worry about," Big Knees responded, looking me up and down.

"Can she honestly not get around my chair?" British Backpacker fumed, turning to me.

I rubbed my face. "She does have big knees. But there's probably enough room for her to get out."

Big Knees' oversized suitcase turned out to be full of presents for Vonnie and the "rat pack". British Backpacker made his girlfriend carry their shared trekking bag while he held the map. Our driver rushed to the nearest toilet still holding his briefcase and clipboard. Simon hugged me tightly and took my bag. "How was the trip?"

I glanced around for Steve and spotted him at the top of the escalators, weaving between early morning commuters towards the street. He was the only one without baggage.

» Liana Skrzypczak is a South Australian writer, adopted from Korea into an Australian family with a Polish background. She writes about ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

ILLUSTRATION BY SARAH BEETSON

