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I ran away on a Tuesday afternoon in late March. Six pm and I was headed south-west in a train that smelled stale. I had put two hours and however many kilometres behind me. Walking the length of the carriage and back again to stretch my legs, I lurched and pitched with and against the movement of the train. I'd done it now. Right decision. Wrong decision. My decision.

I'd woken up in my room in the boarding house, like normal. But I didn't feel normal. It wasn't a cold, or a headache. I padded down to the kitchen and tried to pinpoint the feeling. It was a bit like a stomach-ache, maybe. I scraped butter and Vegemite onto a piece of toast and felt very strange. Taking myself back to bed, I rested the toast on the pillow.

The school uniform hanging across the back of the chair made the feeling worse. The pile of homework either half-finished or blatantly ignored on the seat of the chair made it very bad indeed.

'You're going to be late, Longley,' Tess, the boarding house prefect, called through the door.

‘Meh,’ I said back, my voice doona-muffled.

‘Year twelve assembly this morning. It’s compulsory.’

Some ‘old girl’ was coming to talk to us, some twenty-eight-year-old success story. I could just imagine how it would go. Clare or Charlotte or Olivia would drone on about how St Thomas’s had set her up for life and how, wow, look at her now. She never would have thought she could win a scholarship to Oxford and get a job in a corporate law firm and buy a pearl necklace and have over-blow-dried hair and an orthodontic smile if it weren’t for her education here.

It was all I could do to lie like a corpse. I couldn’t go to that assembly.

‘Are you sick?’

‘Probably.’

‘Faker.’ I heard her shoes tap. She always jiggled while making her mind up. ‘Well, you’d better go see the nurse.’ Jig, tap. Tap. Tap. ‘Don’t get a detention.’

But I wouldn’t go and see the nurse. I just wished I were somewhere else.

Lulled by the clacking and the whoosh, I was pleased with train travel. It was kind of serious and old-fashioned and made me feel good. Perhaps because the chairs were ancient on this train, much older than me. I imagined that my parents – hells, probably my grandparents too – had sat in these same chairs for the journey from Emyvale to Melbourne and back again.

It hadn’t been a planned escape. I suppose I would say I’d accidentally fled.

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Once Tess had gone, I decided I would take the morning for myself, and spend the day doing something actually enjoyable. After coming to this decision my joints unlocked.

It's easier to get out of bed when you aren't going to school.

It's so much easier to face the day in a pair of jeans than in a uniform.

It's impossibly easy to walk out the boarding house's front door and far away from a pseudo-inspirational assembly.

I trod the footpath to a nearby café, to see if a coffee would help. I messaged Mia. *Screw class! Coffee?* The girls never got me to wag. Now look at me!

I was headed to the bustle of Windsor, a place where posh meets hipster meets junkie. I sat at an outside table and stirred sugar into my latte. It didn't help. Not even a chocolate croissant really helped.

I texted Ben. *Adventure?*

It'd been a couple of weeks, so I wasn't sure I'd hear back from him. He'd set his Facey status to 'in a relationship' after I went with him to the rowing regatta, but then that had disappeared entirely after I'd commented, 'Who's the lucky girl, then?' Maybe I'd been a little harsh.

Mia messaged. *Where u?*

Taking the day.

Lol. Frau Ohmann going to be sehr wütend when you miss test.

I'd forgotten about the test. A quick jerk of panic pulled through my stomach, but not hard enough to make me go back. Not today. *Oh well.*

Bell's gone. Coming or no? Mia sent.

Nah.

Ur crazy lady. Then in a second message: *Hey what did VP want y'day?*

My finger hovered over the screen. *Nothing important.*

I'd been 'invited' to the vice-principal's office. More like a summons. I sat where I was told, in the second-nicest chair I'd ever sat in. I'd been in the principal's office once, for my scholarship interview, and the chairs in there were the nicest chairs in the school and possibly the world, all leather and studded. These ones were almost as nice.

The VP's face was stony, but there was something about her mouth that I think was trying to be kind. 'Hello, Adelaide. How are you?'

'Good?' I was nervous. I didn't know what I was supposed to have done, but was feeling a very strong urge to apologise for whatever it was.

Then, after a pathetic knock at the door, the school counsellor came in and sat on the chair beside mine.

I smelled a trap. *Fight or flight*, I wondered. I bit the insides of my cheeks. I felt my face turn all harsh and mean. Mia called it my cat's bum face.

The VP looked into my eyes, her mouth frog-line straight. 'Do you know why I've asked you to come in here today?'

I wanted to shrug and scowl. I shook my head.

'Your teachers have noticed a decline in the quality of your work ...' My ears unfocused and a ringing started up, pinging through me like panic. Her words breached the ringing in snippets: 'Must be serious, this is year twelve ... always been such a pleasure until ... as a scholarship student ... reconsider our support.'

I turned to stone right there on her fancy chair. I'd worked really hard. For years. Been on my best behaviour for five years. Done my homework. Acted like a role model. Smiled through a toothache to debate. Been called a nerd while trying to fit in. I was stone with an aching, flaming centre. This education cost too much.

After my coffee, I caught a tram into the city to get lost in the crowd. I accidentally bumped knees with a girl as I sat down, but she just smiled and shifted a little to make room. Her boyfriend sat next to her, holding a ratty backpack, and she put a hand on his knee, and when she spoke it was in German. In fast German that I couldn't quite follow, but that featured the words 'Flinders Street' and 'Federation Square'. They both wore jeans all faded and fraying, giving off an effortless cool.

I leaned forward and interrupted. 'I'm getting off there. At Fed Square, Federation Square. I can tell you when it is.' I had never wanted to be so helpful.

They smiled at me. 'Cool. Thanks.'

'*Bitte schön.*' It just popped out.

They both smiled bigger. '*Sprechen sie Deutsch?*'

'*Ein bisschen,*' I said, demonstrating 'a little bit' with my thumb and finger.

'*Wir sind aus Berlin.*'

'Cool,' I said. My German had deserted me. '*Ich bin von ... here ...*' I pointed to the ground. 'But I'd like to go to Berlin someday,' I added, mostly to be friendly.

They smiled some more and nodded. When we reached Fed Square and got off the tram, the girl waved and said,

‘Good luck for your travels!’

Not far from Flinders Street, I spotted a travel agent selling flights to Europe for \$1149, student fare. For a moment, as I was standing there, it was an actual possibility. Just go into the shop, buy a ticket, go. Live life!

But I only had \$150 in my bank account. That was all. And it wasn’t even mine, really. I didn’t earn it. It was pocket money, child’s money. Given to me to keep me out of trouble. And it was working. There I was, looking for trouble, and unable to purchase it.

Instead, I wandered, people-watched and window-shopped. The tourists poured off buses. Uni students loped along Swanston Street with their backpacks. All the suits trudged along like a grey army. Everyone had a purpose, except me.

At 3.37, Ben replied to my text. I was sitting on a step at Fed Square without a ticket to Berlin but with a sense of doom and gloom. And a hot chocolate.

Hey, he wrote.

Hey. By that point I didn’t really want to talk to him anymore. I’d just hoped he’d have been a willing accomplice for a day of fun.

What’s the adventure?

Nah, nothing.

Serious?

Yeah, don’t worry about it. I was all out of adventure anyway.

U mad?

People asking ‘are you mad’ makes me so mad. *No.*

K. Pause. Let me know if u want to do something soon.

We could hitchhike to Sydney. If he said yes, I would go.

Lol. See you on the wkend.

See ya. It would've never worked out, us two.

I wouldn't be brave enough to hitchhike anyway. But how far could I get with my \$150? Nowhere far. Even I knew that was loose change – for coffee and train tickets.

What I knew for sure was that I definitely wasn't going back to school.

It was this determination that took me to the station.

It was exhaustion that bought my ticket home.