

THE SATURDAY PAPER

Riding trains with Thelma Plum

By Tony Birch

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Penrith Station was as broken as the shattered heart I carried. The few of us waiting on the train to central Sydney provided each other with more than the required distance. Some of us were sad, others miserable. The coronavirus had beaten us into a state of defeat, even though we'd finally been let out of the house, the chosen few tagged essential workers by the government. It was our job to drip-feed an economy twice fucked, first by iso, then by the elusive *market*. None of us would have chosen early release of our own accord. Not me, for certain, Mr Job-Seeker-Keeper, who'd been lounging at home for three beautiful months in my flannelette pyjamas and house socks, choreographing my TikTok to the Phil Collins hit "Against All Odds".

There was pain on the faces of my fellow commuters, who, like me, had savoured the endless weeks of sleeping in and baked beans on toast for *brunch*, a luxury previously granted only to those above us on the socioeconomic pecking order. As we served no intellectual or cultural purpose in life, we'd avoided the Zooming and Webexing routine of the intelligentsia and had been left to mainline on day-and-night-time commercial TV.

We were a pitiful gathering. Except for the teenage girl in black boots, black jeans and black hoodie, her back emblazoned with the black, red and yellow of the Aboriginal flag. She had strong brown eyes, wore a set of gold headphones and danced in silence; no sound, except for the sharp beat of the heel of a boot slapping concrete and the occasional shout of "Hey!", her fist raised in the air.

The train arrived. I took a seat by the window and sat opposite a decidedly artistic-looking couple dressed similarly in woollen layers over black. Each of them scribbled away in a Moleskine notebook. They looked an earnest pair. I expected they were professional mourners or perhaps poets, down from the Blue Mountains for the day. A trip into the metropolis in search of material.

Our carriage had been pasted with rail network signs ordering us to *spread*, wash our hands regularly, cough in the crook of an arm, preferably one's own, and consider face masks, advice the passenger sitting across the aisle from me should have heeded. The snarl on his face was so stationary I wondered if he'd had a stroke. He was staring at our girl in black, who continued to tap the heel of her boot and occasionally shout "Hey! Hey!" She had one song on repeat.

He was wearing a T-shirt with the words Pussies Lives Matter emblazoned across the chest. Below the slogan was a colour photograph of Queen Elizabeth. The combination made no sense to me. If, as someone once wrote, “the revolution is just a T-shirt away”, we were in trouble. Both he and his peculiar call to arms seemed out of place on a train carriage that otherwise resembled a United Nations touring party. I’d read a week earlier that the number of languages spoken in Sydney exceeded 250, and despite our social distancing I could hear many of them ranging through the carriage. Only the poets and PLM remained silent. The couple had bedded themselves in the private universe of metaphor. But not him. He leaned forward, dialled the snarl up several notches and looked into the eyes of the girl in black. If she was intimidated, it didn’t show. She looked back at him, managed a smile and continued with the heel tapping.

I don’t like conflict. I grew up in a crazy house with a crazy father, who was always angry. His party trick was breaking cheap furniture in half, including three-seater couches. When my mother left us, out of the blue, he set fire to the house and stood on the nature strip with me and my younger brother. We watched the house burn to the ground before he called 000. I was always nervous around him. Thankfully, he’s been dead for a long time. Heart attack. Some men, particularly angry men like my father and Mr Pussy Life across the aisle, appear to forever be on the verge of exploding. Occasionally they do so, and create mayhem.

The train pulled into Parramatta Station and the girl in black stood up. I expected she was about to leave the train, but she wasn’t going too far. She stretched her body and turned around, ensuring that both her back and the Aboriginal flag were more or less in PLM’s face. Noticing the Aboriginal flag, his snarl shifted to a look of disgust. He glanced over at me, and then other commuters, to gauge our reaction. There was none. The girl began to toe-tap like an old-school tap-dancer, along the aisle, hey-hey-ing some more.

A few travellers turned away and concentrated on the flat expanse of the endless west outside the window. Others followed her movements, enjoying the performance. A couple of kids began clapping hands in time to her dance. At that moment, thinking about my dad and seeing his mad eyes in the face of a man who had managed to link the head of the British monarchy, felines, Black Lives Matter and a passionate hatred for a song he couldn’t hear, I feared for the girl’s welfare.

She carried no such fear. She returned to her seat and spread her legs as widely as he’d done. She leaned forward. She looked into his eyes. The face-off lasted barely 30 seconds before PLM blushed and turned away. The conductor announced we were about to arrive at Redfern Station. The girl in black stood,

pointed a finger at PLM, pronounced a final “Hey!” followed with a delightful “Fuck that!” and left the train.

He looked over at me, no doubt seeking an ally. “They think they own the country. Do you know that?” One of the poets, the woman, leaned across the aisle and offered him literary advice. “Or you could say the country owns them. The statement has greater resonance, I feel.”

The poet smiled at me and I smiled back, thinking to myself, “Where were the poets when he designed that fucking shit T-shirt?”

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