

The Line

I'm dressed and ready to go when I tell Mum that I'm heading into the city to catch up with Jess, and I'm not surprised that she offers me the car.

"Drive to Caulfield Station," she says. "There'll be more trains from there, and it won't be as lonely when you're coming home. It's not safe coming out to Moorabbin at night."

I'm twenty-two years old, and freshly returned to Melbourne after three years living independently in New Zealand; an adult life studying film at university. My parents' insistence on parenting me has been suffocating since my return – but I'm not arrogant enough to pretend that Mum is wrong about the relative safety of Caulfield Station versus Moorabbin.

Like all children, I was introduced to the idea of the 'stranger' from a young age, and, like most girls, this idea was reinforced and pressed into me repeatedly as I got older, more independent and, of course, more leggy. I didn't have a fear of strangers, but my mother had taken care to diligently shame me out of wearing certain clothing and made sure I knew all the rules: don't talk to strangers, don't accept lollies from strangers, don't get in cars with strangers. Later, these lessons extended to kicking in the balls and how to hold my keys so that they protruded sharply between my knuckles, lest I ever need to punch a stranger.

At the bar with Jess I drink as much lemonade as I can handle and try to get into some kind of conversation with her new uni friends. They all seem nice, inclusive enough, but a lot has changed in the time I've been away and our close-knit group from high school has splintered into several new groups, none of which I belong to.

"Oh, do you have to go?" asks Jess, as I start telling people it was nice to meet them.

"Yeah, I've got to go out and get an Australian SIM card first thing, and then I have my trial shift at the Sandbelt Club starting midday. I'd better get a move on."

We hug and I awkwardly accept a few token kisses on the cheek from her friends.

“Message me your new number when you get it tomorrow!” says Jess. It doesn’t occur to either of us how valuable that SIM card could be today.

Tripping lightly down the stairs, happy to escape the repetitive clamour of the bar’s over-worked sound system, I wish the bouncers a good night and head for the corner, breathing in the freedom and energy of the bustling Melbourne street. The looseness of a Saturday night in summer has drawn half the population into town, it seems, and I appreciate the warmth after another year of clammy Auckland evenings.

I look around, momentarily disorientated by the movement of the crowds and tram tracks running in every direction, waiting a moment for the spark of recognition that will tell me which way to turn for Melbourne Central Station.

“Excuse me,” I say, when the spark doesn’t catch, “Could you tell me which way to go for Melbourne Central?”

Ordinary people don’t have smart phones yet and it’s still perfectly acceptable to ask your fellow human beings for directions. I have approached the person closest to me; a man standing a couple of meters away on the corner.

“Yes. Just this way,” he says, with some accent I don’t recognise, indicating with his hand.

“Oh, of course! Thanks a lot!” I say, starting to move away, before –

“I will show you.” He moves towards me.

“Oh no,” I say, “It’s perfectly fine. I recognise it now. Thank you anyway; have a great night.”

I start walking, but instantly feel him follow. A little cavity of doubt forms where confidence was a moment before. Keeping my pace, I turn over my shoulder. “Honestly, I’ll be fine, but thank you. Bye!” I say, and lengthen my stride.

Step by step I feel the pleasure of the warm night dripping away and goose bumps rising on my neck, my bare shoulders and the V-cut of exposed skin on my back. The knot in my gut knows that this man is not walking behind me out of coincidence. I'm being followed and I am beyond self-conscious. The feeling of eyes boring into my wobbling backside increases with every footfall, until I can barely remember how to walk. Asian students at tiny noodle-houses and dessert parlours in the laneway to the station become a blur as I turn and insist again that I can find the station, and thank you, and have a great night.

At the screens displaying the train times I wonder at my bad luck. Nearly forty minutes until my train. How have I managed to choose the worst possible person to ask for directions? And why is he standing behind me right now – this new, unwelcome shadow?

“Ignore him, and he'll go away.” That would have been my prep teacher, Miss Smith. Or was it Miss Hickey, in grade one? It could well have been both of them, and my mother too, so well-worn does this piece of advice seem in my brain.

I step onto the escalator that hums its way down into the cool, choked air of the subway – the subway that is refusing to carry me home for another thirty-six minutes. I can see the stranger's distorted reflection in the brushed stainless-steel walls as he joins me, two steps behind.

“Have a good time,” said Mum from her armchair as I took the car keys from the kitchen drawer. “Come home in one piece.”

That phrase was one of her favourites.

“I will,” I had said, and leaned down for her to plant a kiss on my cheek.

On the platform, the rubbish of the day drifts aimlessly, and a handful of passengers spread out across the platform. The energy of the street has not reached this underground limbo and its tired travellers.

Hoping to be protected by the social conventions of public transport, I sit right in the middle of a vacant bench, but such social norms are evidently of no concern to my shadow; he clears the jumbled newspapers and sits down beside me. Eyes straight ahead, I reluctantly shift left to make room.

“It’s a very nice night,” says my shadow, in his thick accent. “So many people in the city.”

I groan inwardly and acknowledge his comment with a look and a quick, polite smile – a corners-of-the-mouth only, nothing-in-the-eyes kind of smile. No words, of course, no encouragement.

It’s my first proper look at him. I barely registered anything about the man when I approached him for directions and since then I have avoided eye contact, trying to pretend he’s not there; trying to give the silent message that he’s not welcome.

Looking at him now, his age is impossible to judge. He is certainly older than me, but could be anything under forty, and he is dark: dark hair – short, not stylish; dark eyes; and a middle-eastern complexion pockmarked by a mass of deep acne scars. His clothes are unremarkable – dark jeans in a loose, unfashionable cut and a thin navy blue wool sweater, despite the warm night. I imagine myself giving his description to some tired police sketch artist later.

“Where are you going?” the man asks.

A beat.

“Home”, I say.

“Where is that?” he asks.

“Home?” I repeat, stalling. “South-eastern suburbs. How about you?”

I’m pleased with my evasion, as weak as it is; the last thing I want to do is tell him more about myself. If we’re going to talk, it will be about him.

“Ah, well,” he says, in an unhappy tone, “I’m going back to the room at my university.”

“Which uni is that?” I ask.

“Do you know Monash Uni?” he returns.

“Yes, definitely. Which campus?” I ask, and hold my breath.

“Clayton.”

I exhale and thank god that he hasn’t said Caulfield, but tense again when I realise it means he will definitely be catching my train.

“Why are you heading home?” I ask, “It’s still early. The city is pumping tonight.”

I naively hope that he can be convinced to return to the throng, even though I clearly see that he is on his own.

He responds to that effect, and the small talk continues – with undue intensity on his side and increasing discomfort on mine. I search for opportunities to mention ‘my boyfriend’ or ‘my brothers waiting for me’ as I learn that he is an international student from Saudi Arabia, studying a master’s, and has no plans for tomorrow. I watch the clock, try to let the pauses hang, and steer the conversation away from myself, but he is unrelenting. I try to find the words to tell him ‘leave me alone, I don’t want to talk to you’. But my default mode is polite. Nice. The words don’t come.

I don’t have the guts to be the rude one – despite the way he sits too close, stares too intensely, and ignored me over and over when I said I didn’t want to be escorted. I don’t have the courage to be called crazy; I’m terrified he will call me racist.

“You are really good,” he says to me. “Many women do not want to talk with me. It is really hard to practise my English in Australia because nobody wants to talk with me. I really like to talk with you.”

I let the conversation die then, still voiceless to turn him away. Please let this man be done with me, I think. This time he doesn't break the silence, and I take the opportunity to get up and go to the escalator. I'll check the train times again. After all, Caulfield Station is on two lines; I might have missed something about another train.

Standing again in front of the screens, I see the man emerge atop the escalator and I am absolutely thrilled when he veers away to my right. Finally he must have tired of me.

Now that I can breathe easy again I realise how much tension has been locking down every muscle. I glance over my shoulder to watch him go and my breath halts.

My stalker is about fifteen metres away, standing by a vending machine. Is he there to keep an eye on me, I wonder? It's possible, but at the moment his focus seems to be his wallet.

I march back to the escalator and into the subway as quickly as I can, seeking out another part of the platform, out of sight of the escalator. Whether tired of me or keeping an eye on me, this might be my best chance to ditch him.

Alone on the platform – still seven minutes to go – I finally calm down.

I'm just paranoid, crazy, seeing a kidnapper-rapist in every lonely man with no social skills who dares speak to me. My mum's warnings and stories about the Beaumont children, Karmein Chan, Anita Cobby and others have messed with my mind and made me fearful where I should have compassion.

The daydream is suddenly broken by a Kit Kat being shaken in front of me and I look up in disbelief. In my head he was gone. Now I feel small again – a hopeless, easy target. I curse myself.

He shakes the Kit Kat a second time and after a beat I understand.

“Oh, no thank you.” I say. Brief, again.

“Please,” he says.

“No, thank you. Thanks, but you have it.” I say.

“It’s for you. I bought it for you.”

“I don’t like chocolate”, I lie, and I imagine how Mum’s eyes would pop if she saw this scene.

In fact the living cliché of this stranger offering me sweets is so absurd that I am suddenly amused. My fear abruptly dissipates: I feel sorry for this man. He hasn’t grown up like me with suburban Australian fears and stories of legendary disappearances.

“Maybe the reason you find it hard to get people to practise English with you is because, in Australia, we are always warned not to speak to strangers,” I offer.

“Stranger?” he asks. “What is stranger?”

“You’re a stranger”, I say, “to me. A stranger is someone you don’t know. Someone you don’t know in the street. It’s funny actually; it’s also common for parents to tell their children not to accept chocolates from strangers.”

“But we have been talking,” the man says. “I am not stranger. I am Fazil.”

“I’m Rose,” I say.

“Please, I got it for you,” says Fazil, and holds out the Kit Kat again.

“No, thank you,” I say, but feel bad this time. “Have you thought about getting a part-time job?” I ask, “So that you have more opportunity to practise your English?”

“I tried to get some jobs in business. Everyone say I don’t have good English.”

“What about a simple job?” I ask, “Like working in a kitchen or something? You can meet people to talk to, but they don’t expect top English.”

A dark look crosses his face. I think I have offended him.

“No,” he says, “I won’t work in a kitchen.”

I look at this pockmarked man – ugly but proud, awkward but insistent – and wonder about his background. I try to picture his upbringing in Saudi Arabia. I can’t tell whether I have offended his class sensibilities or his gender biases. Maybe both.

A rush of air and a distant hum finally announce the arrival of the train and I look to the clock. I hadn’t even noticed that the train is a couple of minutes late.

A few tipsy pleasure-seekers spill onto the platform and Fazil and I board the crowded train, finding standing room by the opposite doors. I fully expect the conversation to continue, but as we rocket through the Melbourne underground, Fazil says nothing.

Perplexed but pleased, I turn away too and contemplate the strangeness of this stranger. His unrelenting appetite to speak to me had made me so fearful, yet now that have I grown used to him he has abruptly lost interest. The train is near packed with satisfied party-goers, young people on a night out with their friends, and I am alone again.

We pull into Richmond Station; all eyes are drawn to a skirmish on the platform as a crowd of police try to tame some hot-blooded men. One guy is on the ground, arms pinned; another continues to lash out with fists and elbows past the officer who holds him back, and a cluster of cops form a wall as they try to talk a group of other blokes down. Passengers head for other doors of the carriage to avoid the fray, and everyone cranes for a look.

Everyone except Fazil.

He obstinately faces the opposite direction to every other passenger: away from the police, away from the security cameras, away from me and all of the potential witnesses that surround us. The chocolate uneaten in his hand.

Suddenly, I see it all clearly. He’s as close as ever but less conspicuous; less memorable to the people who might see my photo on tomorrow’s evening news. I make my decision and

step towards the melee of police and men but instantly the beeping doors slide closed and seal me in. The too-cold air-conditioning of the carriage chills my clammy skin, the train moves on, and the police and their charges slip out of sight.

I look up at the cameras above me and at Fazil looking out of the window. I've been warned about this stranger my whole life, and yet here, under the lights and the cameras and surrounded by people, I don't know what to do. I am terrified of this man, and yet my fear of being wrong – making a scene and acting crazy – is equally powerful. It holds my jaw shut, even though I should scream. I clutch my bag close and the one security I am grateful for is that I never told this man my stop. If he follows me, all doubt will be gone, but what then?

We coast into Caulfield Station and every sense strains over the pounding drum of my heart. Where everything was so slow before, now it all moves too quickly. This is the turning point; the time to speak up and not be the girl on the news. I search for the strong woman I am supposed to be but all I find is a terrified girl trying to light a fire with wet matches.

All too fast, the train pulls to a halt. My leaden feet step onto the platform and without looking, I know he is right behind me.

Finally, I find my saviour. I spin.

“Get the fuck back on that train,” I say.

Keys splayed between my knuckles, I press Mum's long car key to his throat and lock his eyes with mine. My fist, my bicep, my voice and my gaze are strong as I hold him silhouetted in that doorway. No inch of my body betrays me.

No inch of Fazil betrays him either. His eyes are no softer than the steel key threatening his gullet as he returns my look, unflinching. Unreadable.

Until he steps back.

The sliding doors seal him in, and I find my breath again in the wake of the rushing train.

Behind me, a few travellers file towards the exit, oblivious to the brand new woman burning on the edge of the platform, fist outstretched – a handful of keys showing the place where the line was drawn.

I put the keys back in my bag, exchange them for my ticket, and join the group at the gate.

I don't tell my mum.