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## Magnet City Orbit

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## Magnet City Orbit

The first thing Alice did, when she stepped into the carriage from Woy Woy station was to hand the twins a newspaper cutting. Veronica, folding it into her bag, said she'd read it at work. Irene, in a voice softer than a nun's, continued to talk about the same old topic of asking her boss for a raise. In the crowded compartment you're side-waltzing in the unsteady ebb and surge of speed. On the Hawkesbury River Bridge, a fierce under-carriage howling deadens the senses. As the train relaxes into the station, bodies and bags crush against a new pair of expensive fifteen deniers. You're hoping another laddered pair might just change your friends' minds. You've spent six months trying to convince them to move out, talking about it until your tongue's practically bluer than a goanna's. And just when you think your idea has bottomed somewhere in the Berowra waters, you can't believe your ears.

'I'm so sick of these morons getting their favourite seat every morning,' complained Veronica.

'They think they own the place,' quipped Irene. 'Who says it's reserved for them, I wonder?'

'I knew you'd see the light.' Alice hefted her workbag over her shoulder. 'If we get a flat on the northern line, it'll be close for all of us. Irene can change trains at Hornsby and be in Wahroonga in no time. How many stations is it, again?'

'Two.'

'See. Told you. It'll be better than this sardine tin.'

'Why not North Sydney? The place is full of flats.'

'Too far, Veronica. I reckon Strathfield.' Alice wanted to keep them talking. Already the train was lumbering towards Mount Colah. It always felt like the slow release of a magnet on metal, the platform scramble, getting to work late, Bank Manager raising his salt-and-pepper eyebrows over his horn-rims. She knew if they were in Sydney at this hour their hands would be just wiggling out of a quilt, hitting the alarm clock.

It was worth the wait, cutting out the 'to let' ads from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and now hanging on to the twins' vigorous talk of Manly, North Shore, Asquith, The Rocks, Chatswood. Alice was sick of all the drunks and perverts on the late night

trains. There was one spooky guy on the interchange to Hornsby, who gravitating to a shoulder lean, pointed out all the sexual exploits of Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies in his *Post* magazine. You were scared that these creeps would lunge at you in an empty carriage. You couldn't even get any sympathy from an elderly carpetbag woman, who said in a whiney mosquito voice, 'Oh, he's one of *those*, is he?' And you couldn't say anything to passing guards while their gaze exceeded your hemline. Then you're thinking none of this matters! You're too excited, slinging your body forward while the girls are snatching another newspaper ad. You usher them towards the next double seat, and bend into their talk of borrowing a truck, hiring a television, emptying a shed of vinyl chairs, Formica table, and a maroon lounge. You really don't care if your stilettos are making zodiac symbols into the carriage's lino. The train has you rocking in the Wynyard subway, surfacing at Circular Quay. Above your head, wing-gliding seagulls have come to the party, three of you on the ferry, Harbour Bridge to the left like a silver coathanger stretched between two shoulder pads of land, your red t-shirts contrasting cloud and white ferry-wash. It's a football day. On the Manly Boardwalk you look down at siblings waxing lotion into their English skins. Under Norfolk pines, you're wrapping your hula-girl, beach towel around your waist, remembering the morning's horoscope that says, *just spin out Scorpio and throw yourself into a new challenge*. There it is in front of you, gorgeous, tanned male bodies, so thick, they're crowding the water.

Alice thought she'd have a sickie before moving day. It was a Friday, so she didn't feel like staying late at work for the monthly cash balance. She thought one last train journey amongst mountain slopes, river-courses and bracken fern was a fitting celebration. It was twofold, really; she wanted to get to Paddy's Markets, try on some new red shoes, wander around George Street or watch a film. She saw herself getting back early, packing boxes, bags and emptying drawers, then settling with a good book on her pillow.

In the morning a little tremor made her suddenly feel as fragile as fairy floss. There was an explosion inside her chest at the utter wonder of her latest achievement. From her small town life she was heading south to one of the busiest cities. She could take the wild with her, the bay flashing memories of her graceful body, lithe and lean spearing water like a blue marlin, swimming hours in the channel, hiring a motorboat with her cousins. The precious moments were stomping sandcastles, cracking and

spraying seaweed beads at Heather and Judith. It was a sand and water cradle, and quite unexpectedly tears found a presence in her eyes. Something was driving her out of this town and she knew she had to leave.

Alice packed a string bag of sandwiches and a frozen bottle of cordial. She heard her mother stirring in the bedroom, telling her father to hurry. It was five past seven. Alice carried a glass of milk and a bowl of cornflakes to her room and sat cross-legged in the middle of her bed.

‘That you Alice?’ her mother called. ‘You’re a bit late for work, aren’t you?’

‘Not going.’

Her mother stood at the doorway in her brunch coat and rollers. ‘You all right?’

‘Yep, I’m going shopping in Sydney. I’ll be back for tea. If the Bank rings, mum, just tell them I’m sick.’

‘Oh.’

She heard her mother whispering in the kitchen, ‘She’s acting funny this morning.’

Alice called from her room. ‘Mum, I’m not acting funny. There’s something I have to do.’

‘Oh, leave her alone, Ed,’ came the response from her father. ‘She knows what’s she’s doing.’

Alice hurried over the platform steps, clapping her heels over the quartz stones at the southern end of the station. She thought that if she sat up the front she would avoid peering eyes. The carriage was nearly empty. It felt oddly assertive to stretch herself and her bags across the double seat. The train sputtered and slipped out of Woy Woy. A ticket inspector motioned at her shoulder to take her sandals off the seat, clipped her ticket and disappeared through the rattling doorway. She waited until he was out of sight, put her feet back up and crunched into the icy cordial.

The passing mountains shimmered in patches of light. Amongst pillows of rock, green spikes in flowering spears plumped out their foliage. Rows of wire-fenced cottages, mangroves and a swampy inlet receded to the right. On the other hillside, a lone horse grazed, its black coat glistening in the sun. For Alice, it seemed as if the hay stack and horse stable flew into the mountain with her, the train powering into the dark belly of rock-face. There was always that rush of blood when the train switched from day to night. I’m tunneling my way out, she thought.

Growing up on the Central Coast had a fresh quaintness about it. It was fun to dig in the sand, go rock-climbing, fish for bream and sand whiting. She remembered making little houses with shells and cuttlefish, bombing and yelling down steep dunes, going home with sand in her pockets and hair. The centre of her earth was water, diving every day from the moored boats. In this town, she knew there were two kinds of men; those who were hard and coarse, and the other kind, like her father and brothers, respecters of women.

She looked out of the window on rows and rows of oyster leases. When the train slowed down at the sandstone quarry, she wanted to cry. Why did he have to speak to me like that? Crazy man. Waving his fists. Why couldn't she dive off his stupid boat? She wasn't hurting it! Then the fisherman's words motored through her memory, over and over, his loose tongue seeping into her lost harbour, the beautiful bay suddenly turning into a saga, like the action pages of a sinister comic book. She remembered the globe of his belly bobbing through seaweed, his navy singlet, red corpuscle face sweaty and pocked. She remembered the need to take flight, like Daisy, sending out an adrenalin of colour, the way waterfowl do, and then she stopped flailing her arms wildly in the current, her body aching for a dumb need to rest. He was nosing the dinghy towards her, the outboard motor flooding the countryside with its sputtering cough. She heard his foul tongue slurring obscenities. He was coming after her with dirt on his mind. He closed in beside her on the sandbank, cut the engine, pushed the boat ashore and grabbed her arms. Alice pulled away and climbed meekly in the boat.

'Are you going to call the Police?'

'I'm going to do more than that.'

'Where are you taking me?'

'Nowhere.'

'Leave me alone. I...I won't dive off your boat anymore.'

'You little slut, ripping my tarpaulin.'

'That wasn't me. It was rotted.'

He's trying now to hold her captive as he scuds the boat from the sandbar and across the chop of deeper water. Alice feels her face burning. She feels like she's inside the menacing frames of a Phantom comic. She knows he's the scum of mutineers on a pirate ship, anchored around the point from Box Head. Diana has vanished somewhere into the tall grid of trees, captured or tied to a rock. Phantom's

too busy, wielding a sword against muggers, off the coast of Martinique. Her only chance is to run, although escape is by water. Alice notices a fishing boat entering the deep harbour, passing the first channel marker. She jumps and finds her body being pulled towards the cruiser. 'Watch out, there's a little girl in the water,' they yell. The fisherman is almost alongside. He's outnumbered, four against one. He hesitates, and in a mad fever churns the rudder in the opposite direction, navigating himself out of sight.

Having been hauled up by one man and another in the water, Alice is water logged and shivery. Back on shore, they wrap a towel over her shoulders. 'She's all right,' they say. 'We'll be off then, as long as you're okay. I bet you just want to get home. Two streets away, is it? What'd she say, Harry? She says, the mutineer's gone. Oh, my word, he's given her a nasty fright.'

Alice knew, 'it was a dog of a day'.

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With all her shopping strewn on the bed amongst pink tissue paper, Alice felt she had bought the whole of Sydney. She changed into her pyjamas and bunched sets of clothes on wire hangers at the end of her bed.

'That you, love?'

'Yeah, mum. Come and have a look at what I bought.' Alice held up some strappy, red high-heels, matching bag, and cream stockings. She hugged a seersucker dress into her waist and wheeled out a tube of lipstick. At the bottom of the paper, she pulled out a hinged book, the size of a postcard.

'It's a little book of thank-you's. Read the one by me.'

In the silence Alice watched her mother move a finger across the thin line of her eyelid. 'Oh, that's lovely. You okay?'

'Yep. Just a little tired.'

'Did what you wanted to do, then?'

'I reckon I have.'

'I won't be around in the morning, love. It's the important match, so good luck with everything. You'll be back before you know it.'

'I will, mum, just for weekends.'