

Cafe on the Road to St Peters

by Nicky Bryson

She gleans from the thrilling gay paper that is sometimes in stock at Doonside newsagency that Newtown is the place to go. To look for lesbians, anyway.

But that paper is hard to trust. It's always months old, somehow damp and costs \$5 even though it says it's free on the cover. *Just how long does it take to make its way from Darlinghurst to Doonside?* she thinks, whenever she manages to hook a limp copy from the pile of strange papers at the farthest end of the shelf. Foreign newspapers and anarchy ones too. You have to go down through them one by one, like a deep-sea diver, to get to your own particular perversion.

The point is that she skips school and takes the train to Strathfield (better than Redfern, her cousin advises because anything could happen to you at Redfern), then changes for one headed to Newtown, tingling with anticipation... all based on some possibilities from an out-of-date fag rag.

She rolls the words "fag rag" around again in her mind, savouring the sound. Fag is a pretty shit word, she thinks but one of the impossibly cool gay writers used it in an article. He flung fag rag out with the kind of cool queerness she hopes to emulate on her fact-finding mission to lesbian central today.

She has no idea where to look once she gets there. There's a club called Top Gun but that's only on Fridays and only at night. She has to be home by 5pm or the parentals will start freaking out and calling the cops. Anita Cobby happened just yesterday for them. They'd probably be more upset to find that she'd been on the train by herself than they would by the reason.

She thinks she just needs to find somewhere to sit and calm her galloping heart. She doesn't see any lesbians yet on the street. Not any that look like the ones in the club pictures. Short hair, t-shirts and jeans. Work boots. Leather jackets. She is on the lookout for the uniform and spots it finally, proudly worn by a grey-templed beauty wiping down the counter in a shabby café.

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She's never been inside in a café, only read about them in books. This one looks like it could have been lifted from the pages of any quirky story. 'Café on the Road to St Peters', it's called. She wonders why. Isn't this King St? She hopes she isn't in the wrong place. How will she ever know if she's a lesbian unless she can find some and see how it feels? The café looks welcoming, with big couches, wonky tables, mismatched chairs and piles of books everywhere.

Her feet carry her across the road without much input from her body. A good thing, since her skin is tingling, her stomach is dropping and she can barely hear the traffic over the buzzing inside her head.

As she steps across the threshold, she sees a trusty pile of gay papers by the front door (these ones crisp and newly minted) and thuds back into reality. This is the place, she knows it. The place where she can find out what lesbian feels like.

That surety doesn't help her immediate problem of what to do in a café. Sit down and wait like a restaurant, or approach the counter like it's the local fish and chips?

The woman, her first lesbian, solves the problem.

Would you like a coffee?

Yes please.

Latte?

Fuck. What's a latte? She says the only coffee she's ever heard of characters ordering in a book.

Espresso.

A real coffee, huh? Well, take a seat and I'll bring it over. Or did you want a takeaway?

No, no, I want to stay.

You can stay all day, honey. There's no rush.

She takes in the woman's smile, her invitation, the thick heavy rings weighing down her fingers as her hands fly across the machine, and decides she will stay all day.

The coffee, when it comes, is something of a shock. A thick little puddle of mud at the bottom of a cup sized for a dollhouse. The electric jolt she feels when her fingers brush against those belonging to the lesbian from the counter is a shock as well. But certainly not a surprise.