

A book by any other cover

You can tell a lot about someone by the shoes they wear.

Every morning, the 4:30 city bound train pulls away from Frankston station like a rumbly, fat caterpillar. On board is a handful of sleep deprived passengers, commuting and committed at this ungodly hour.

Give or take one or two ring-ins, the core group was the same each morning. Alice knows them by their preferred footwear. It's not really a shoe fixation, not like the usual thing people get for shoes, the way they can buy two or three pairs in a single outing. This is more observation.

Alice fancies she knows these people intimately; where they are going, what their jobs are, even what they earn. It's one of those things you do on a train when you don't read or listen to music. You daydream and make things up. She knows their names and families and social lives. All because of the shoes they wear.

Take George, for example. She'd named him George after the fat teddy bear she had when she was small. George the teddy had vacant button eyes and a benign grin, just like George the commuter.

She glances at him now. George wears the black leather slip-ons with the non-slip sole. They have little tassels on the tops that have begun to curl with age. He carries a weathered black Gladstone bag filled with Encyclopedias – on compact disk – for sale. He’s never used a computer in his life, but his customers don’t know that. He talks the talk and is fluent in download, ram, disk-space *et al.*

George earns the basic wage but that’s okay by George because his mother died a few years ago and left him the house. He’s always the first into the carriage, and predictably, sits in the same seat, just inside the door, where he maintains a one-sided conversation all the way to his stop, which is Cheltenham.

Marilyn, named for her white-blonde hair, teased and sprayed to within an inch of its life, teeters on four inch patent leathers. Today they’re black to match the black and white hounds-tooth suit she wears. Yesterday they were red, complementing her navy and red suit.

She approaches a seat, examines it carefully, touches any suspicious stains and brushes off dust and crumbs with a tissue from her patent handbag before finally conferring approval by sitting on it.

Marilyn’s an employment consultant, but if you asked her she’d say she was *in HR*. Human Resources, wasn’t that where you go to buy a new foot if your old one was worn out? She’d like you to think she was on a huge salary but reality is, recruitment’s not too hot at the moment and she’s on commission. She checks her lipstick twice, reapplying once, before getting off at Flagstaff Station.

She’ll be heading straight to the office to get a few hours uninterrupted time in, before meeting the girls at Joe’s for a skinny latte.

Jack works in a furniture factory. His battered Blundstones have drips of varnish on them that make them look permanently wet. His wife hates him working in that place because one of Jack's workmates had this accident with a machine last year. But Jack's on good money, better than some of the guys at footy training last night, so he thinks the risk is worth it. He tells the missus he's careful but never gives workplace safety a thought when he alights at Moorabbin.

Brett rides his pushy straight up to the door, hops off and lifts it into the carriage. He hangs it by its handle bars over the railing inside the door, right in front of George. George sniffs and tucks his slip-ons further under his seat even though Brett's bike is nowhere near them.

Brett sits by the window, stretches his chicken legs out before him, and studies his grotty runners. They smell to high heaven from being out in all weathers but when you're a courier, riding the deadly-treadly around the city streets all day, you've gotta be comfy and despite their holes, these runners are his favorites. Their laces hardly tie up anymore, so frayed are they, but Brett never cares about that. He just tucks their scruffy ends out of the way into the tops of the shoes.

Brett's head bobs up and down in time with the dull doof-doof faintly audible from his headphones. He closes his eyes and crosses his legs at the ankles, one sneaker over the other. He's settling in, going all the way to Flinders Street. He's happy with the freedom of his job. It doesn't pay a lot, but then, it would, if he didn't knock off at lunch time. He just couldn't be stuffed with this full-time work thing; as long as he gets enough to pay the rent and chip in for his share of the dope every weekend.

Each morning Jason stands by the open door having a last drag on his smoke before the announcement – *Flinders Street*

train stopping all stations to Flinders Street via the City Loop now departing, stand clear please, stand clear. Jason is a tradey, still doing his apprenticeship for a builder on one of those new housing sites. He gets off the train in Mordialloc and his boss picks him up in the work van on the way through. When the wind is blowing from the wrong direction you can catch a whiff of his smoke inside the train.

Jason grinds his cigarette butt out under his mud-caked work boots and hikes his backpack higher onto his shoulder. Marilyn's nose wrinkles distastefully as Jason trails dried mud across the floor to his seat. He likes to have the three in a row all to himself and he sits in the middle, backpack next to him on the window side. He scrambles inside and pulls out a tatty biker magazine.

Alice has watched Jason pore over that magazine for a week now and is almost looking forward to the day he can afford to buy the red Kawasaki as much as he is.

Alice turns to the doors expectantly. Frederik isn't here yet. The one person she catches this crappy train at this ridiculous hour for. Frederik should be royal, hence the name she has bestowed. His shoes are polished, Italian leather from the sole to the upper. His suits are wool, dark conservative colours, sometimes pin-striped, sometimes not. His shirts are crisp and always white, and his ties are silk. His white-gold tie clip matches his cuff-links.

Frederik is a successful lawyer, unmarried because his work keeps him too busy. He's been with a girl for a couple of months but is going to have to let her down gently because he doesn't think it's fair on her given his work commitments.

The station guard blows the whistle and there's a shout. Frederik bursts into the carriage, dragging his laptop computer in its custom-made bag in after him, just as the doors begin to

close. He's uncharacteristically flustered, and self-conscious as all eyes, even Brett's, swivel his way. The doors slide together and he takes the nearest seat – right next to Alice!

He'd never sat next to Alice before. His fragrance drifts to her and it's as warm and spicy as she'd always wanted it to be. Her heart is beating so strongly she can see her blouse moving. She clasps her hands together on her lap to still their agitation.

The train pulls away from Frankston station, rocking and bouncing its passengers in time with each other like some strange, jerky dance.

Alice looks down. Her glance takes in her own shoes. Would someone wearing Italian leathers be interested in someone wearing vinyl courts?

Doubt it.

Jason drools over his magazine, Marilyn flicks through her filofax, George mutters under his breath to himself, and Brett changes the CD in his player. Alice stares out the window, trancelike, but aware of Frederik in every nerve, every cell, in her body.

She focuses on her breathing in an attempt to control her excitement. Frederik. He was sitting right beside her!

Without warning, the train bucks, its breaks screeching their protest. Jason looks up, his brow furrowed while Jack curses softly. Marilyn makes a tutting sound and continues her flicking, George asks himself what the problem is and Brett drops his CD. It frisbees across the gritty lino floor and ends up at Frederik's polished toe.

The train is at a standstill when Brett comes over to claim the CD from Frederik, the distinctive reek of aged sneaker drifts from him.

"I think it's all scratched," Frederik offers.

“Ta,” Brett says, examining it. “Yeah, looks pretty rooted. Was my fave too.”

Frederik smiles politely.

Brett was about to return to his seat when the train had some sort of convulsion. Jolted off his feet, he lands *plop* onto Marilyn’s filofax complete with her up-turned hand.

“Eeugh!” She gasps in horror, her fastidious nose catching his scent.

Brett yelps in surprise, “Geez lady, I don’t even know ya.” Marilyn tries to tug her hand free from where it cups the well worn seat of Brett’s jeans but suddenly the carriage jolts again and he is flung further off balance, his full weight now on her lap, his sweat-stained T-shirt pressed against her spotless suit jacket.

“Get off me!” Marilyn cries indignantly, pushing at him with her free hand. The train continues its jerky bunny-hop, and Marilyn fails to maintain her composure. While her hand is trapped under the bottom of a smelly, unsavory youth, her fellow travelers watch with various degrees of enjoyment.

Alice pinches her lips together to keep from laughing and she can feel Frederik tensing with suppressed mirth beside her.

Jason chuckles out loud and George describes to himself what just happened.

The train seems to settle for a moment. Marilyn’s face is beetroot with outrage and disgust. Taking advantage of the lull in the movement, she musters her strength and gives an almighty shove with her free hand.

Just as she pushes all her weight into the middle of Brett’s back, the train jerks the opposite way and Brett falls forward onto the floor, Marilyn’s momentum takes her with him.

The two fall to the floor and that’s when Alice can restrain

herself no longer. Thankfully her laughter is drowned by Marilyn's furious cries and Brett's protests of virtue.

Frederik leaps over to offer Marilyn his hand but though she grasps it, he is weakened by hilarity and can't do much to help. The backwards joggling of the carriage continues to throw them all off balance, and Frederik can do no more than hang onto the support pole with one hand and Marilyn's hand with the other.

Static hisses and a voice announces over the intercom that the train is faulty and will be returning to Frankston Station.

"No shit," responds Jack and George explains the announcement to himself.

Brett manages to scramble out from under Marilyn. He tries to assist Frederik in helping Marilyn to her feet but she slaps his hand away.

Frederik's and Brett's eyes meet, glassy with tears, over Marilyn's coiffure. Frederik helps her back to her seat, the height of her heels hindering her progress as the train continues limping into Frankston.

Now, Brett makes his way back to his seat, after all that, the CD is still triumphantly in his hand.

Frederik returns to his seat, and catches Alice watching him. He smiles sharing the moment. "Well, that kicks the day off nicely."

She smiles in return. "I wonder how long we'll be delayed."

"No idea." He really looked at her then and she felt very self-conscious under his green gaze. "You catch this train every morning don't you?"

She nods, flushing and tongue-tied.

"Will you be late to work?"

“No, not really.” She searches her mind for something amusing, something interesting, something ... anything to say that will hold his interest.

Marilyn sits opposite dusting her suit and checking her hair and make-up in her compact. As soon as the train arrives at Frankston and the electronic doors release, she is out of her seat and clip-clopping resentfully down the platform.

Jack figures he can still make the bus, his Blundstones squelch past her.

“Will you be late?” Alice asks. *Boy that was clever.* They get to their feet and stand back to let Brett unhook his bike from the hand rail.

Frederik sighs. “No. That’s one of the benefits of being your own boss.”

His own boss? Of a law firm?

“What do you do?” She asks bravely.

“I’m a software salesman,” he replies. He pats his computer bag affectionately. “It’s all in here. Remember encyclopedias? Well this is new, it’s all online and does a lot more than your old conventional book type of thing. All you need’s a computer and away you go.”

Alice’s mouth forms an O and she unwittingly shoots a glance at George as he pushes past Brett and steps out onto the platform.

“Anyway,” Frederik is saying, “I’m not *that* into it that I’ll hassle people on the train. But I do like to catch the early one to get into the office and do a bit of paperwork before chasing down new business.”

They step out into the morning half-light. It’s hard to believe that only 10 minutes has passed. Alice feels as though half a day has gone by already.

“So what about you?” He asks. “What do you do?”

"I'm a veterinary assistant," she replies shyly.

"Oh?" They walk side by side toward the ticket office.
"So how come you get in so early?"

Here's the good bit, she thinks. Do I tell him I have no life or what?

"I don't have to, it's just that I like to get in early so I can check on the overnight patients and clean their cages out and everything."

"It's still an early train for that isn't it?"

"Oh, I'm an early riser," she says breezily, leaving out the bit about being early to bed too.

They arrive at the ticket counter just as Jason finishes talking to the man in the booth.

"Train's gonna be delayed a while," he says. "Fifteen minutes or so."

"Thanks," Frederik says.

Jason shrugs. "Better go ring the hospital, tell 'em I'll be late." He disappears down the ramp to the public phones.

Frederik turns to Alice. "Wouldn't pick him for a nurse, would you?"

"A nurse? What about the workboots?"

"Lives on a farm. I sat next to him the other day and he was telling me. He gets changed when he gets to work." Frederik shakes his head. "Everyone's got a story to tell haven't they?" he observes cheerfully. Suddenly he turns to her and smiles, "Hey, how about a coffee, and you can tell me yours." He holds out his hand, "I'm Sam, by the way."