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CAROUSEL

BRENDAN RITCHIE



FREMANTLE PRESS

1

It was definitely Taylor and Lizzy. They were sitting on one of those island-type lounges you find in the middle of most shopping centres. The ones filling space between juice bars and mobile phone stores. This one was curved and black and might have worked better in a hotel lobby.

They were looking at their mobiles and talking. Well, Taylor was. Her hair was a bit longer than Lizzy's, and chopped up on the sides. Lizzy's was bobbed like a helmet in some fifties sci-fi movie. Their hair was always awesome.

Taylor was throwing snatches of speech at Lizzy, who was letting most of it fly. Only occasionally chiming in to answer before her sister had finished the question. Both of them were pretty preoccupied with their phones.

What the hell were they doing here?

I knew they were touring. Wedging in some dates in Australia on their way through to Asia and probably Europe. I'd seen them play The Shetland two nights ago. The converted warehouse popping with old fans, faces glowing in the aftermath of their favourite singles, and hipster lesbians drawn magnetically to the gay Canadian

duo and the prospect of a night away from Perth's clichéd and sleazy clubs.

Still, the idea of an in-store seemed pretty insane. Well, maybe not. But I was pretty sure that this was Carousel Shopping Centre. A sprawling mass of big names like Myer and Apple shoved between discount fashion outlets and oversize supermarkets on the eastern fringes of Perth.

What the hell were they doing at Carousel?

What the hell was I doing at Carousel?

Hold on. How did I know this was Carousel?

There was a Bags R Us store next to me. Shelves of cheap suitcases and tacky red-leather handbags. Next along was a salon. Part of a chain maybe. Then a chocolate store selling gift baskets, prepacked and wrapped in cellophane with snips of ribbon. One of these lay open between Taylor and Lizzy.

On the other side was Country Road. Larger than the other stores with classic-cut polos and pencil skirts stuck to beautiful mannequins in the windows. Next door to this was a gaudy looking Cotton On selling imitations at half the price. The place was weird without music. Normally I would be blasted with some crappy dance track standing this close to Cotton On. But not today.

I looked upward for some windows but there were none. This end of the centre was just one level. There was some light at the end of the corridor where the place seemed to open up into a kind of dome. Maybe that's why I thought it was Carousel. It had this ridiculous entrance

where a bunch of doors led into a big round foyer with its roof cut off. In summer this left the sushi bar and café sweltering in forty-degree sunshine. In winter an awning was stretched across, leaving the floor slippery as hell when rain blew under and mixed with car-park dirt to form a greasy brown film on the tiles. Countless teenage dates were ruined by the embarrassment of a fall before the couple had even made it to the cinema.

The light down there seemed blue and artificial. From where I stood next to Bags R Us it was impossible to know if it were day or night.

Taylor and Lizzy were looking at me.

They had glanced my way a couple of times already. But now they were looking right at me and talking. Lizzy seemed to be suggesting something. Maybe Taylor wasn't so sure. Neither of them moved.

Nor did I.

It occurred to me how stupid I must look just standing there at the front of a discount luggage store. Why wasn't I walking somewhere or looking for something? I searched my pockets for my beat-up phone. But I couldn't pull it out now. The Finns were already looking at me. Instead I turned and stepped inside the store.

It was empty.

Not just of customers, which I might have expected, but seemingly of staff too. I browsed through some of the less tacky overnight suitcases and waited for a shop

assistant to surface from the back of the store. Nobody did. I smiled a little at the idea that someone hated their job here so much that they didn't even bother coming out of the lunchroom for customers. I'd dreamed of this kind of behaviour at the stationery store where I worked but never had the guts to carry it out.

The only thing was I kind of wanted to buy something so I wouldn't have to leave empty-handed, looking like a fraud. I walked over to the counter and waited for a few moments. I took out my phone and put it down on the benchtop so that it made a decent noise. Still nobody surfaced to serve me.

This is stupid, I thought. Like Taylor and Lizzy Finn will care if I don't buy a suitcase. They probably weren't even looking at me.

I left the store and headed for the dome. The Finns were still there, focused back on their phones. But for some bizarre reason I didn't walk past. Instead I veered across in a weird curve and stopped awkwardly in front of them.

They looked up for a moment and gave me a couple of pretty friendly smiles. Lizzy returned to what looked like an X feed. Taylor waited for me to say something.

'Hi. I'm Nox,' I said.

'Hi, Nox,' Taylor replied.

I didn't say anything else straight away. Taylor shuffled over slightly on the couch. I lingered for a moment, then sat on the edge. Lizzy showed Taylor her phone.

‘What?’ said Taylor.

‘Look at my network,’ said Lizzy.

‘You don’t have one,’ said Taylor.

‘That’s what I’m saying,’ said Lizzy.

Taylor turned to me. ‘Do you have a phone?’

‘Yeah. But my network is shit in here.’

‘All the time?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know.’

Lizzy was listening too. She looked at me.

‘This place is called Carousel, right?’ said Lizzy.

‘Yeah,’ I replied.

‘When is it normally open?’ asked Taylor.

‘I don’t know. Most times I guess. There’s a cinema and some bars down there.’

They turned in the direction of the dome. ‘So it stays open pretty late,’ I said.

Taylor and Lizzy glanced at each other.

‘Are you guys doing an in-store?’ I asked.

‘We don’t really do those anymore,’ said Taylor.

‘We did one last year,’ said Lizzy.

‘Not in Australia,’ said Taylor.

‘Or Perth.’ I added.

They both looked at me.

‘Not all bands do the west coast when they tour,’ I said.

‘We do,’ said Taylor.

‘I know,’ I said. ‘I’ve seen you guys play a few times.’

‘Whereabouts?’ asked Taylor.

‘Saturday at The Shetland. But also Fremantle. And down south.’

‘Where is down south?’ asked Taylor.

‘Just south of the city. People here drive down there on weekends.’

They nodded.

‘What’s your favourite song?’ asked Lizzy.

‘Lizzy. What the fuck?’ said Taylor.

‘What?’ said Lizzy.

‘There are probably some other things we could ask him,’ said Taylor.

‘Like what?’ said Lizzy.

‘Gee, I don’t know,’ said Taylor.

‘I like “Josephine”. But I don’t really have a favourite,’ I said.

They looked at me a little sceptically and nodded. Taylor dialled a number on her phone and waited for an answer.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Lizzy.

‘Trying to call Patrick,’ said Taylor.

‘Why? I tried already.’

Taylor ignored this. Lizzy looked across at the Pure ’n’ Natural kiosk ahead of us.

‘What is Pure ’n’ Natural? Like juices and stuff?’ she asked.

‘I think so,’ I replied.

‘Coffee?’ she asked.

‘I don’t know. Maybe.’

'We need coffee,' said Taylor.

'There's a Coffee Club near the cinema, I think,' I replied.

'Is that like Starbucks?' asked Lizzy.

'Kind of.'

'So they'll have a machine yeah?' asked Lizzy.

'Yeah.'

Taylor laughed and gave up on her phone. I must have sounded sarcastic. Lizzy shook her head, stood up and stretched. Taylor watched her.

'Are you coming?' Lizzy asked Taylor.

Taylor looked across at me and didn't answer.

'Taylor?' she asked again.

'Hold on,' said Taylor. 'You don't work here or anything, right?' Taylor asked me.

I shook my head. Taylor nodded, then rose to head off in the direction of the dome. I stayed seated.

'Come on,' said Lizzy. 'We'll get a latte or something.'

I stood and shuffled forward to catch up to them. Ahead of us the centre lay completely empty.

2

Lizzy and I stood looking at the sky through the open dome while Taylor pushed on the doors at the front of the centre. None of them opened. The sky was crisp and blue. It was daytime and the centre was closed.

Lizzy left me and wandered over to the Coffee Club island. She opened a gate in the counter and walked inside. Taylor turned from the doors and watched as Lizzy took some milk from a fridge and studied the shiny espresso machine running along the counter. I trailed over and sat on a stool. A moment later Taylor joined me. Lizzy pressed some buttons on the machine. Steam shot out over the floor.

‘Do you really want to do that?’ asked Taylor.

‘What?’ asked Lizzy.

‘Screw around with their stuff,’ said Taylor.

Lizzy brushed this off. ‘We’re stuck in here, Taylor. What else are we going to do?’

‘We’re probably all over the security video by now,’ said Taylor.

Lizzy ignored her. She had worked out how to grind the coffee beans and was filling up a handle.

‘What are you having?’ she asked me.

‘Oh. A latte, I guess,’ I said.

‘Awesome,’ she said.

Taylor rolled her eyes and toggled the airplane mode on her phone. Lizzy filled a jug with milk, turned on the steamer and spilled some foam across the counter. I smiled and Lizzy joined me. She poured the bubbly milk into three small glasses a quarter full with coffee. Mocking pride, she slid two over to me and Taylor.

‘Thanks,’ I said.

‘Skim?’ asked Taylor.

Lizzy shook her head. I watched the two of them look at each other. They seemed to do this a lot. It was hard to tell what was passing between them.

Lizzy looked around the open, circular foyer. ‘So why are all of the shops open?’ she asked.

Taylor and I followed her gaze. A giant Live clothing store dominated the space. Black and edgy and normally the loudest fucker of them all. But not today. The doors opened up to an abandoned counter tucked behind a silent array of leather, dark denim and leggings.

There were other stores, of course. Rebel Sport. JB Hi-Fi. Smiggle. An Apple Store. You could totally look at a Mac without talking to somebody in a blue shirt. I wondered whether the staff would suddenly appear if I walked in and applaud me as their only customer for the day.

Lizzy was right, though. The whole place was open for

business, bar the front doors. Seemingly all the doors. Yet we were inside.

I turned back to them. Lizzy was looking at some jars of giant cookies on the counter. She took one out and showed it to Taylor. It was pretty huge.

Taylor looked at me. 'How long have you been here for?' she asked.

'Not long. I stopped at Dymocks to look at some books, then came down the corridor and saw you guys,' I trailed off.

'Right,' said Taylor and sipped on her coffee.

'What about you?' I asked.

Taylor and Lizzy shared another look.

'Maybe twenty minutes before you. We were in the chocolate store looking at gift baskets. Picked one out but there was nobody at the counter. So we sat out on the couch and waited for them to come back,' said Taylor.

'Then we saw you looking for luggage,' said Lizzy.

I smiled a little and so did Lizzy. Taylor shook her head and looked around.

Something was bothering me.

'Why Carousel?' I asked.

'What do you mean?' asked Taylor.

'For the chocolates? Why did you come here?' I asked.

'We're still jetlagged. Woke up early looking for something to do. This weird cab driver dropped us here and said there would be good shopping,' answered Lizzy.

'You believed him?' I asked.

'He was oddly convincing,' said Lizzy.

She and Taylor glanced at each other as if to confirm this.

'Weird,' I said, to myself.

'What?' asked Taylor.

'I came by taxi too,' I said.

They kind of shrugged as if that were no big deal.

'I was heading into the city for the early shift at work but my car wouldn't start so I walked to the bus stop. While I was waiting this taxi pulled up and beeped at me. I figured *what the hell* and got in,' I said. 'The driver seemed kind of stressed. He was driving fast, taking a bunch of back streets. Next thing I know he pulls up at this big building that turns out to be the back of Carousel.'

The Finns sipped on their coffees and listened.

'Anyway, he didn't charge me anything. Just said he couldn't take me any further. Told me to go inside,' I added.

Lizzy nodded and thought this over.

'Surely some security guy must have seen us screwing around by now,' said Taylor.

'Do you want to check out the other exits?' I asked.

'Yeah,' said Taylor, and hopped down from her stool.

I led them through the complex, trying to remember how it was laid out. I'm not really good with shopping centres and at least twice I led us back through the same corridor. It's hard to tell if Taylor and Lizzy noticed. They

seemed pretty curious about the shops we were passing. I heard them laughing a few times and turned back to smile like I was in on the joke. Or like I knew how hilarious this whole scenario was. Really, I just felt normal. Like this was something that was always going to happen. I've always felt underwhelmed in dramatic scenarios. People say I'm calm in a crisis, or hard to faze. Truth is I just go numb as hell.

Carousel had exits all over the place. Aside from the front, we found a series of side exits, and a large glass exit to a car park at the back. All of these were locked. The back entrance offered a pretty big view but mostly just of the car park, and a small patch of hills east of the city. Taylor and Lizzy stayed there for a little while, looking out at the view as you do in a new place, even when it's like stuff you've seen before.

The strangest thing we found was that all of the emergency fire doors were locked as well. Those doors with a small lever on the face that you just push to open. I didn't think they were ever locked from the inside. The significance of this didn't really dawn on Taylor and Lizzy. Actually, they both seemed a little tired.

I pushed on another fire door, without success, and turned to find them sitting on a corridor lounge, back on their phones. I went over there and took a seat. I looked at my own phone for a while, then just sat there looking at the light reflecting off the floor. Taylor was lying back with her knees drawn up. Lizzy was cross-legged, still glancing

through her static X feed as if her flight was delayed, or her doctor was running late.

It felt comfortable. The three of us just sitting there, waiting for the inevitable opening. The snap of a door somewhere as a cleaner or security guard came on shift. Our voices echoing through the corridors to help them find us. Some paperwork to fill out. A few questions. Then the swish of a door as the morning breeze hit our faces. Taylor and Lizzy would want to go back to their hotel and get ready for their flight. Maybe we could share a taxi. I turned to ask them about this but Taylor's eyes were closed, and Lizzy's leg had fallen to rest, just slightly, against my own.

Instead I kept quiet and silently wished that the security guards wouldn't come. And that the cleaners didn't have to start a shift. That we wouldn't hear the snap of a door or feel the breeze on our faces.