



Sydney Hope

Georgia Monaghan

She wouldn't have been surprised if she had never seen Sydney again, but here she was walking down George Street two hours before her first class in fifteen years at the University of Sydney. She stood at the intersection of Park and George Street near Town Hall Station and felt a train rumble under her feet. The reverberations travelled through the soles of her feet, up her ankles, through her legs and into her spine. It reminded her of the earthquake in her own life that had brought her back to Sydney, from a small town in Connecticut that had felt more like home than any Australian location ever had.

She stood at the corner, Queen Victoria sitting on a throne at her right, a homeless man sitting on a blanket at her left, and readied herself. When the green man flashed she stepped off the curb and walked diagonally across the road, dodging hundreds of office workers and shoppers and commuters coming towards her as well as across her path. Just crossing the road she saw more people than she encountered in a month walking through her New England town.

She had grown up in Sydney and George Street had been her playground. But today the city clamour assaulted her senses like a surprise attack. The relentless roar of peak-hour buses – the shrill squeal of brakes – the honking of horns – the keening of sirens – the incessant beeping of crosswalk buttons – the ranting of demonstrators, street-corner evangelists and socialists selling newspapers. The unabating commotion combined to harass her overstrained brain.

She looked across the road at St Andrew's Cathedral in all its sandstone solidity, unchanged since it was consecrated in 1868. She remembered attending choral services there at Christmas and Easter as a child. Churches don't change, she thought. At least churches stay the same.

Continuing down towards Railway Square she had the sense of having time travelled, but she couldn't work out if it was to the past or the future. The familiar and the strange blurred in front of

her. She averted her eyes to the pavement but even the road at her feet exhorted her to ⇐ LOOK ⇒.

Sydney had become a pastiche of the old and the new that alternated mischievously: the Capitol Theatre and Yogurberry – City of Sydney RSL club and a *Cheers* bar – the Mountbatten Hotel and Sumo Salad – Carlton Draught and Boost Juice – Paddy's Markets and karaoke bars – Winchester Rifles and Buddhist Crafts – tobacconists and EzyMarts – the Great Southern Hotel and wood-fired pizza – army surplus stores and noodle bars.

Near Central she passed Christ Church St Laurence with its gothic arches, red doors and 1840 dedication plaque. Heading into Broadway she noticed late 1800s buildings with original signage possessed by newer occupants. Sutton Forest Meat Company, established 1875, housed Yummy Chinese BBQ – Central's post office was inhabited by Adina Apartment Hotel – the Bank of Australasia and the Commercial Banking Company were occupied by bars displaying neon Budweiser and Heineken signs in their windows. From behind the antique facades, high-rise residential apartment towers clawed towards the heavens – some made attempts to blend with the heritage architecture; others flaunted their contrasting modernity. The new UTS and Central Park buildings belonged to the latter category. The UTS building resembled a space-age cheese grater while Central Park was a postmodern take on the Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

As she walked further along Broadway towards the university, the sun dropped to the horizon and Sydney's crystal clear winter's day was covered up with a pastel streaked sky. *This is my city where I was born and bred. I cannot be lost here.** She must be near the historic St Barnabus Church and the Broadway Hotel, she thought, and looked forward to seeing the famous dueling signboards and what they had to say to each other. She crossed Mountain Street and halted, crestfallen, before an ultra-modern white rectangular building with a giant cross built into it as its only decoration. Opposite, the Broadway Hotel was now the Broadway

Lounge and Café with no signboard to be seen. She had no idea what could have happened to the old timeworn church, but pulled her jacket tightly around her and kept heading down Broadway.

The missing duelling signboards hit her hard. The good-natured war of words that had made the church famous was one of her favourite things about Sydney. It signified a culture where a publican and a priest could get along, where wordplay was valued and where no-one took themselves too seriously. Cruelly, as she continued down Broadway she was bombarded by an overabundance of signage everywhere else: Thai Massage – No Alcohol after 1.30 AM – Jesus More Than Likes You – Free Internet – Instant Glamification – Real Australians Say Welcome – Sydney Anarchist Book Fair – All You Need for a Beautiful Life – Appetite for Adventure – My Sweet Memory.

Victoria Park, bordering the university, provided a welcome relief from the endless barrage of commercial signage. She still had an hour before her class so she sat on a park bench by the pond, in the golden glow of the last minutes of the magic hour. She realised that sitting on a park bench in only a light jacket in the middle of winter would be impossible in Connecticut. She watched the ducks swimming in their unfrozen pond, making endless patterns in the water. They reminded her of Holden Caulfield's ducks in Central Park. If only Holden had lived in Sydney, she thought, he wouldn't have had to worry about where the ducks go in winter.

She stood to make her way up the steps to the university when one last sign caught her eye. It was the name of a makeshift church painted in big white letters on a semicircular window, on the corner of Glebe Point Road facing University Hall. The sign read: *Sydney Hope*.

* Quote from *Seven Poor Men of Sydney* by Christina Stead.

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