

## **SYDNEY**

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For a long time, Sydney was my enemy instead of just a city. She was a coy, sly bitch that seduced my friend away from Adelaide. She used a number of guises. Sometimes she was coquettish and pretty with her small harbours and quiet seaside walking paths. At other times she was all sophistication and charm, all sleek restaurants and wine bars. Sydney would change costumes more often than a showgirl. At its heart, the wide and expansive Martin Place seethed with life, opulent but accessible at the same time. Flower stalls sat well behaved in front of excessively expensive stores. The Pitt Street Mall was crowded with well dressed shoppers striding towards some appointment or other - lunch or some sort of deal, probably both at the same time. The Rocks was different again, crammed with historical pieces of walls, plaques and indications that Sydney had a shady and dubious past. But you somehow felt sympathetic towards her and wanted to admire her for picking up her skirts and carrying on regardless. Then again Sydney didn't even try to hide its dirty laundry - she revelled in it. She never asked you to be sorry, or apologise for her own existence - she stood with her two great feet planted on either side of the harbour and her hands on her hips saying, 'Come on, I dare you'.

For one long afternoon, I walked kilometers of her streets. From the centre of the city, starting in Hyde Park, all the way down Oxford Street, through Darlinghurst and Paddington. I bumped into countless beautiful gay men, preened and glamorous at 10am, charismatic homeless, the stiff-suited, glaring tourists, and careful shoppers. Every path seemed littered with people. It was muggy, the ground still damp and slightly slimy. Someone had left a small posy of purple flowers on a low concrete wall and I wondered why and how. There was a grittiness to her streets, an arrogant crisp sound that said she was experienced - not old and comfortable, experienced. But now she had also stopped leering at me, stopped being so sinister and manipulative. She started, instead, to look familiar and a little bit flawed, a little more vulnerable. Perfection is never endearing, but at the same time you have to be willing to see the faults.

So Sydney and I stopped circling each other warily and she showed me how beautiful she could be. Crossing the bridge for the umpteenth time, we were driving home after another evening out with the hussy Sydney, the one that was game for anything. It was quite cool, the air hummed and you thought it was just the sound that cold air made, a sort of hissing. But Sydney seemed to be whispering in my ear. I strained my neck around to look out the back window of the car, to look at the underside of the bridge. It was like a giant spider squatting protectively over the water. I felt like I was inside something secret, going through a passage or tunnel. Lights winked and sang their silent song, other cars whistled past and eventually we had crossed the bridge and were back on the ordinary highway. Except on this night, the highway seemed different to me. Traffic was thin and suddenly the wide expanse of tarmac was more like a runway and indeed I felt as if I was ready to go anywhere. There was an eerie glow ahead. The industrious North Shore was cushioned with fog and a fine mist of rain but luminous signs lit the way: 'Sanyo', 'AMP' loomed surreal and festive. Sydney seemed to have softened, seemed to be a little insecure and ambiguous. That appealed to me, it didn't seem to be playing any games with me, instead it seemed to be showing me its insides: 'This is what makes me tick', she seemed to be saying.

I forgave her.