

Getaway by Laura Hilton

It's early and I can see my breath in the cold morning air. Embarrassed at my eagerness, I'm trying to pass it off as window shopping. Across the street there's a warm glow in the windows of a cafe, as the staff unstack chairs and grind the first coffee beans of the day. In my mind it's *my* cafe.

The minutes tick by on the Main Street clock, building to the chime that will signal opening time and admittance to my safe haven. I flinch at a loud crash that feels obscene in the still morning air, as a familiar barista begins pulling patio furniture out to the footpath. Suddenly I'm afraid he'll recognize me, take pity on the girl so keen she's ready and waiting, and let me in early. Turning my back to him I pretend to study a poster intently, even taking out a small notebook as if to jot down details of the chamber concert listed there. I'd take a picture of it on my phone like a normal person, but I threw mine into a dark river four days ago.

Finally the sign in the window turns from Closed to Open, just before the clock chimes. I'll hang back a minute longer so I don't irritate the staff. I know all too well how it goes in the hospitality industry. Bloody people turning up before you're ready. I want to stay on their good side, or better yet just go unnoticed. Stamping my feet, I wish for the hundredth time I'd brought a warmer jacket with me, but I left in a bit of a hurry.

A delivery man goes through the door with a stack of boxes on his cart. "Come on, come on" I whisper impatiently, eyes fixed on the gauzy wedding dresses draped in a shop window, but seeing none of them. Finally a balding man in a suit hurries inside, and I take that as the cue to start making my way over. Just before reaching the door a group of three old women appear-perfect! I can hold the door for them and slip in behind, now the respectable fifth customer of the morning.

While the old ladies settle themselves in at a table near the window, I keep going to the back room. The front room gets more sun but will also be noisier as the morning picks up. I prefer the warm womblike space up the back, where paintings by local artists adorn the walls and fat squashy chairs beckon invitingly. I can hide myself out in a little corner here and stay out of everyone's way. As I sink into the faded crimson armchair that's becoming so familiar to me, I feel not only relief but delight. Another day in my little oasis by the fireplace, anonymously watching the world go by. I study the menu as if I don't yet know what I'll order.

When the young guy in his apron comes round the corner, he smiles at me in a friendly way that acknowledges recognition. I hope it's from yesterday and not this morning out on the street. Why I should mind what this guy thinks of me I really don't know, and the likelihood that he cares seems very slim. Nevertheless I worry that he's mentally sneering at the girl so anxious to sit all day in a cafe that she's there at the crack of dawn waiting. Not at home in bed, snuggled up to someone she loves. Not rushing off to work for a busy and productive day. I quietly ask for a pot of tea, and he smiles again and walks away.

Determined not to feel sorry for myself, I launch right in to my morning activities. First there's the newspaper to be read cover to cover. Not just the articles-I check out all the ads, and mull over the puzzles without filling them in. Best for last, each and every item in the Classifieds. There are kelpie puppies for sale, and someone is giving away a queen-sized bed frame. One man is looking for love; he's not picky about age but he'd prefer an Asian woman. No one is looking for me.

Before putting the paper aside I open my little notebook to a fresh page. I drag one finger down the Help Wanted column, stopping to write down any jobs in this area that I could do. I skip past positions for doctors and CEOs, but anything from wait staff to realtor traineeships gets marked down in my book. While sipping the last half cup of my now stone cold tea, I imagine myself in every role, and ponder the idea that I could begin again here.

Now that I'm out of my newspaper trance, the noise level in the cafe has gone up significantly. The early morning crowd on its way to work has passed; we're now into the leisurely morning crowd. By raising up and twisting in my chair, I can just see the clock in the kitchen. Yep, time to order again. Toast and scrambled eggs.

With another item ordered I can relax again. I feel I've purchased more time in the faded crimson armchair, and the breakfast will just be a bonus. It's time for the people-watching segment of the morning, one of my favourites. The leisurely morning crowd is the most entertaining, because the people usually come in pairs or groups and chat loudly amongst themselves. No one's in a hurry and some seem to come in every day.

There's the group of oldies who reserve the round table in the front room and order coffees all around, but no food except for the occasional muffin or cake. They are loud enough/deaf enough that I can hear them from the back room, crowing with laughter and having a lovely time. They seem to adore the man I've taken to be the owner of the cafe, and always have questions for him about the menu, his little dog, if the winter hours will change, when he's

going on holiday...

Other than the odd patron with a particularly loud voice or laugh, most of my people watching is contained to the back room. Everything is in vibrant colours or warm wood back here. There is one couch and a few other armchairs like mine, plus a handful of small green tables. These comfortably fit two, but I've seen groups of up to five make it work. With plates jostling for position, the sugar bowl and shakers of pepper and salt lined up along the window sill to make room.

My toast and eggs come out quite quickly, and I am grateful to have a prop to hold while gazing round the room. You don't have to be as sneaky about watching the room's entertainment when you're eating breakfast at the same time. There's a pair in the corner who are probably meeting for a job interview or business discussion. I didn't notice whether they came in together or not, but based on their body language and polite manner of speaking, I'm guessing they've never met in person before. There is paperwork on the table and something on a laptop screen to be consulted.

Sitting at a table directly opposite me, on the far wall by the window, are two women and a baby. The women look to be in their late twenties or early thirties, and the baby is at that age where it can eat real food but not very well. I decide that the women are probably old friends who've hit that turning point in their friendship where one is having babies and the other isn't, or isn't yet. The mother is trying to concentrate on her friend's story while also keeping chubby little baby hands from upending everything on the table. The friend reaches across occasionally to touch the baby's hand or foot and say something doting, but makes no move to hold the little creature with avocado mashed in its hair.

On the couch beside me is a middle aged couple. Her voice has been a near constant sound beside me that I took to be background noise, like the clatter of cups or whoosh of the steam wand. Now that my ear is on her I realise she's barely drawing breath as she speaks about everything from the recent cold weather to Joanne's kids to the contestants of *Dancing With The Stars*, seemingly changing subject mid sentence. I assume she's addressing her husband, but he is reading a magazine and gives no indication that he hears her.

The scrambled eggs were delicious, I want another round. Got to conserve money for an afternoon order though, so I can stick around. Of course, the staff here are so friendly they probably wouldn't say anything if I didn't. It would be too embarrassing though, to take up a seat all day without at least a slow and steady influx of rental income for my armchair. I

figure I've got about half an hour before I should really order another beverage. That will see me through until lunch, and then I'll be home free until their afternoon closing time. Picking up a magazine, I pretend to catch up on celebrity gossip while actually watching the baby's subtle mission to tip water into its mother's lap.

A loud familiar voice then, from the front room: "Just a small flat white to take away. Ta." A thrill of fear runs through me and I'm frozen, waiting to hear the voice again. "Get out of here!" my brain shrieks, "Go hide in the bathroom! What if she comes back here?!" The voice laughs then: an unfamiliar laugh. I'm only being paranoid, I don't know anyone here. And nobody knows me.

In the bathroom I splash my face with water but avoid the mirror. I'm afraid I'll find a sensible voice of reason there, reminding me that running away is for children, and not how normal adults deal with problems. I don't want to be reminded of anything realistic just yet though, I want to go back to my seat by the fireplace.

After ordering a latte, I turn to a fresh page of my notebook and begin writing lists. I make a list of all the grade school teachers whose names I can remember. I list other cafes I've known well for one reason or another. Next I list all the places I'd like to visit, with separate categories for warm places, cold, adventure destinations, romantic ones. I try to make a list of my favourite movies, but it's too difficult to pick *favourites* so it gets changed to a list of movies that are important to me.

When I can't think of any more topics, I flip through the notebook looking at all the other lists I've made over the last few days, and wonder what brought this on. A psychologist would probably say I'm trying to organise my life, or order my thoughts or something, but I don't know. I just think it's fun. It keeps my mind off other things.

Flipping backwards I eventually reach the front of the notebook, where a postcard is tucked in. It has a bush scene on the front; just gum trees in the fog, that's it. I bought it last week on that terrible day, because it looked still and serene. Today it feels desolate. Stuffing the notebook back into my handbag, I take up the menu instead. Making a decision about lunch will cheer me up, it's my most exciting order of the day.

Reluctantly I leave twenty-five minutes before closing time, not wanting to be *that* customer who hangs around until the bitter end. I try to slip out unnoticed, but the owner waves me off, saying: "Thanks for coming in, have a good one!" I smile back at him,

wondering how he'd feel if he knew that for some reason his little cafe has become my salvation.

Out on the street I take a right and walk down to the market, stopping at the notice board outside to see if there are any new jobs listed there. Just one, a cleaning position, and I add it to my list from the Classifieds. There's also a new flyer asking for a female roommate; better put down those details as well, just in case. Inside the market I buy some fruit and a few bread rolls for my dinner later. Spent too much on lunch for a proper meal tonight, but it was worth it. I carry on down Main Street then, heading for the little park at the end.

There's a scene happening near the gate; two men seem to be shouting at each other about a parking space. I so want to avoid the tense atmosphere that I consider turning around and leaving, but instead rush past with eyes lowered. I pick a bench as far away as possible, looking out over the hills. This is the last pleasant part of my day, before the long lonely evening. I will sit on the bench until the sun goes down over the hills, while eating my simple picnic. I'm trying to keep my mind blank and just enjoy the late afternoon sun, which is struggling to break through the low clouds.

Inevitably I give in to the creeping unease and open my handbag. From the side pocket I pull a dishevelled envelope; once plump and promising, it's now tattered and looking thin. I stare at it for a moment, warring with myself. I know that once I actually count the money inside, the bubble is likely to burst, and I'll be forced to make a decision. Giving in, I pull a sad stack of notes out and flick through them. Then I tip the contents of my wallet into my lap and count every last coin. What remains is a far cry from the \$430 I left with in such a hurry.

Stay calm. One hot tear, then another. Deep breaths...happy thoughts. The hills blur and it's too late. Tears pour and I'm quietly sniffing to myself, wishing I had a tissue. I hope that no one sees me and I simultaneously want someone to ask me what's wrong.

When I jumped on a bus nearly five days ago now, my only plan was to go as far away as I could. I rode for hours, all the way from one end of the island to the other coast. When there was no more road and the bus threatened to turn around and go back, I got off, and this town is where I found myself.

For the first time since I got here, I properly give in to my thoughts about home. Everything is such a mess there, and I can no longer tell if it's my fault or not. The responsible thing would be to go back. What if I did wreck everything? But I'm being torn apart there!

Everyone wants something from me. I want to stay hidden, start over. Do it better this time.

Either way my game of pretend is over. I have just enough money left for one more night in my grubby room over the pub, and a bus ticket back. I have to decide right now, tonight, if I want to stay here and get a job. No more long days at the cafe, making lists and watching the people. My tears intensify as I think of my armchair by the fire, and I feel ridiculous.

There across the street is the early morning crowd in my cafe, mostly people in business clothes buying takeaway coffees. In an hour and a half the oldies will arrive to sit at their round table and drink cappuccinos, and I will already be far away from here. The time ticks along on the Main Street clock. My bus is twelve minutes late.

I am just sulkily wondering who will sit in my crimson armchair, when one of the baristas appears in the window with a roll of sticky tape to hang a notice in the window. There's a great swoop in my chest as I read the bold black handwritten letters declaring "Help Wanted, enquire within". Completely breathless, I stare transfixed at the sign as the bus pulls up and makes a noisy stop. The doors fling open and I hesitate.

Eyes still glued to the sign, I take a cautious step towards the bus. "Come on darlin" calls the driver, "Running a bit behind this morning." I'm staring up at him from the footpath, ready to turn and walk away, when I'm hit by a moment of total clarity.

What am I thinking? Hiding out there drinking coffees and watching the world go by has been the most pleasurable little holiday I've ever experienced. The day it became my workplace it would be ruined. They seem like a nice staff and all, but it wouldn't be my cafe, it would be my job. This town wouldn't be my escape anymore, it would be my new reality and the usual bullshit would follow. What would I do then, run away again? This island is only so big.

With a lightheartedness I haven't felt in a long time, I run up the steps and the bus doors close behind me. Sliding into a seat towards the back, I look out the window as the Main Street shops go past, and say a silent goodbye. I can't say I'm suddenly excited to go home, in fact I'm dreading it. But just at this moment, I feel gratitude for this time I've had alone, and hopeful for the future.

I take out my gum tree postcard and stare at the image, waiting for the usual rush of powerful feelings. It looks unfamiliar to me now though. Just a picture of some place I've

probably never been, but could have, or might do. Turning it over to the blank side, I take out a pen. When I bought it all those days ago, I had planned to write a dramatic message along the lines of 'Forget about me, I'm never coming back', or 'Forgive me, I couldn't stand it'.

'Thank you for everything' I write, and address it to my cafe.