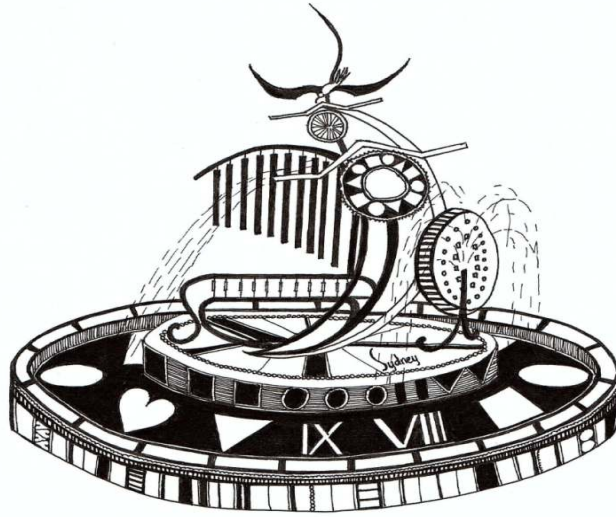


**Sydney's Song**  
Sample chapter.



**The Bloody Bus Just Drove Past Me!**

“The bloody bus just drove past me!” I yelled on my phone to Nicholas at the administration desk. Although it wasn’t considered a profanity in Aussieland, earlier I could not bring myself to use the b-word. It definitely took Sydney’s public transport to force it out of me. “I’m going to be late!”

“Sydney... you shouldn’t...” This week my rolling shift began at the indecent hour of 6am again. “You’ll lose your Attendance bonus.”

“I know I know. Can’t help it. Sorry.”

This was a Saturday morning in December. I had planned to take

the N80 bus because the first Beecroft train would arrive in Hornsby at 05:56. I still had to run up the station stairs, and cross the George Street pedestrian bridge to my office. Fat chance I could make it.

I was furious with the N80 driver. Nightride buses were supposed to help customers while the trains stopped between midnight and early morning. I had planned my trip meticulously. But I had stood there in my bright jacket—impossible to miss!—waving, and the inconsiderate bus driver ignored me!

Unhelpful people should never apply to be bus drivers!

I sat on the first train feeling *sooo* upset.

My miserly office only paid the lowest minimum Australian salary. They gave us various bonuses if we were disciplined and good at what we did.

Attendance bonus was yours if you didn't call in sick *at all*, and were *never* late even for a single minute.

Adherence bonus was yours if you logged in to take calls the *precise* minute you were supposed to.

If they monitored you, and you gave out *accurate* info in a *polite* way, you received the Quality bonus.

*If* you received the Quality bonus, and your Average Handling Time was less than 106 seconds, you would also get the AHT bonus.

But if you did not pass the Quality, you wouldn't get the AHT bonus, no matter how fast you handled the calls.

This Saturday, because of a nasty bus driver, I lost my Attendance bonus for the month. It meant my pay would be nowhere near decent.

As I logged on a few minutes late, I noticed a spill-proof computer mug on the desk next to mine: 'PETE's. DO NOT TOUCH'. Its handsome owner was talking on the phone, his tenor voice soothingly pleasant, and his tone of speaking lovely. Somehow it calmed me down a bit.

My manager Justin called me. He talked for 15 minutes because he was obliged to admonish me for arriving two minutes late.

My mood worsened when the Newcastle Line trackwork victims whinged. The maintenance crews were required to check the tracks on a regular basis to avoid accidents. There was always trackwork on some line every weekend. Except on election days.

A very rude young boy shouted, "You say your (*bleep*) trackwork bus from Gosford is every *ten* minutes? I don't (*bleep*) believe you! Are you (*bleep*) sure?"

"Would you talk politely or would you like me to terminate the

call?” And buy some soap to wash your mouth before the next call.

“I just don’t believe the bus is so frequent when your train is only every half an hour,” he argued.

“The train has eight double-decker carriages. The bus is way shorter.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. When a train runs, 2000 cars stay home.” There. What was so hard to understand?

Next, “I want to go to Silverwater!” an arrogant lady demanded.

“Which part of Silverwater please, Ma’am?”

“Just show me how to get there! You should know! Why do you work there if you have to ask me?!”

“Anywhere in Silverwater, Madam?”

“Anywhere!”

Right. So I whipped up a travel plan to get her to Holker Street near Silverwater Road. The address of Silverwater Jail. I hoped she would be very happy there. Have a nice life!

But then a meaner lady (two in a row!) wanted to go to Frenchs Forest, address unknown.

“But Frenchs Forest is very big, Madam. Bigger than the City. Where specifically, please? So we can send you to the correct location.”

“You should tell me where it is!” she snapped. “It’s your duty! Call your supervisor! NOW!!!”

For the next 20 minutes she spitefully doxed my ineptitude and unhelpfulness to Justin. Since she refused to be put through to Your Say, our feedback section, these 20 minutes added to my handling time. There went my AHT bonus.

It did not stop there. Next, harassed Justin assigned me to assist her *again*, assuring her I had been fully trained to do so. Grudgingly she granted me the dubious “honour” of advising her about *every* single bus that went to Frenchs Forest.

“I plan to buy a house in that area,” she announced now, “I haven’t decided on what street it’s going to be. It will depend on your advice.”

Ohmygod, now I’m a real-estate adviser?

“How about we mail you the buses’ Region Guide for Frenchs Forest, Madam? Also all bus timetables there. You can peruse them carefully and decide for yourself.”

“No, no, no! Don’t you try to get out of this! You’re being paid to

take this call! Now just tell me what's available!"

So I read her departures and arrivals of every single direct bus as well as every combination of buses—both government and private buses—for weekday mornings, weekday nights, Friday nights, Saturday mornings, Saturday nights, Sunday mornings, Sunday nights.

Of course she just had to ask, "And where would I catch a taxi if I missed them? Where's the nearest train station and major bus stop?"

"Have you written down all this information?" I asked.

"Yes yes, just tell me the nearest place for a taxi now!"

I was dying to transfer her to Pizza Hut. But I duly advised her that the nearest train station was Chatswood. She then demanded I read the departures and arrivals of trains and Nightride N90 bus between Wynyard and Chatswood.

Next I had to advise her that the main bus corridor was Pittwater Rd in Dee Why. For this, too, she made me read the schedule of the nightride 151 bus between Wynyard and Dee Why. Weeknights. Weekend nights.

"Right," she said after all that, "What bus was it again that went direct?"

"But you said you'd written them down." Ma'am, I'm about to kill you!

"No. No... I think it will be better if you send me that Region Guide after all. And all the bus timetables of course. Please take my mailing details now. My name is Fu Lyn ..."

I looked away to the streets of Hornsby, visible from our northern glass wall, remembering Winston from Pennant Hills High School. A brilliant Chinese Australian, he was one of the most pleasant people alive, even when we always badgered him with questions. If only Mrs Fu was half as nice.

Mrs Fu then felt justified to end her call with the following farewell, "I'm very disappointed with your service today. Not good customer service at all. In the beginning you deliberately pretended not to know anything about the services in Frenchs Forest so you could get rid of me. You're such a lazy person you tried to get out of your duty to provide me with information. I've spoken with your manager and reported your refusal to help a customer seeking assistance. People like you should never get a job in customer service. You're a disgrace to your company and to Sydney's public-transport provider. I'm extremely appalled at you."

She railed on and on in this condescending tune for the next ten minutes while my bruised heart was screaming, *“Daddyyyy... can you see me? Can you see me now? Would you allow this person to batter your daughter to pieces? Daaad... take a look at me now. How can you let this happen to me? Daad... you promised to always be there for me. I need you now. Dad, heeelp!”*

“I hope my words will stay with you and help you improve, because I feel very sorry for all your customers. I pity those unfortunate people who call this number and get you on the line. I’ve never before encountered such a lazy and deceitful customer-service person such as you.”

Very thorough, was she not? Blah blah blah. Ra ra ra. Mrs Fu was simply unstoppable.

“You’re also disgustingly incompetent. You dawdle when delivering the information, taking over an hour of my very precious time. Do you know I get paid over 200 dollars an hour at my work? Would you care to compensate me? I don’t think so. I hope never to talk with you again.”

Though reaching the end of my dwindling patience, I closed the call with a cheerful “No worries. Thanks for your call!”

Surprised? It was obligatory to thank callers, even revolting torturers, or you lost your Quality bonus. I had become so robotic I even hung up my home phone automatically saying “Thanks for your call!”

I logged off the phone despite having missed my allocated break. Hang my Adherence bonus! I had been abused by a malicious woman. I was feeling very sorry for myself. I had nobody to talk to while somewhere in the world my parents were blissfully happy. How could they be?

Blurry-eyed and depressed, I ran to the disabled toilet in anguish. I locked the door, closed the toilet lid, sat down and cried. And cried.

One heap of a mess. That was me. I had been there at the office every day, battling my depression. Tears could still well up when I thought of my parents.

I was scared of being home alone. I dreaded my loneliness. Feared my suicidal thoughts. To keep playing with a full deck, I had to get out of the empty house and keep working before uni started.

With my limited talent and abilities, hardly any appealing career path was available. This job sucked, but at this stage of my life I was not ready to cope with anymore changes. I had no mental energy to

enter a new work environment. Or to face contemptuous strangers. I had to stay within the current sphere because I felt safer with the devil I knew.

Soon fury began to stir and flare. Tears subsided. I was now angry with myself. I shouldn't let hostile people shake my composure. Shouldn't have allowed a mean bus driver to make me cross. Shouldn't have disintegrated when aggressive customers insulted me. I was above all that! Nobody would ever, ever have the power to make me swear again. No customer would bring me down.

I would not allow them!

Chin up. I would face my problems. I would not hide, cowering and morose. They would not beat me.

Sadly, from the 5,219 calls I had taken, the majority of torturers were of my own gender. I decided not to copy them. I was very determined to grow up NOT to be difficult like them. I would be kind and wise. And I could not wait to be a wonderful old lady of 70...

I looked into the mirror and cringed when I saw my mutinous eyes. Taking a deep breath, I tried to soften my expression.

The open-floor call centre was accessible either from the rest rooms through the reception, or through the busy break area with its internet café and table-tennis room. I was intensely private. To evade nosy co-workers' interrogation I opened the opposite door.

Pete was sitting right in front of me, long legs stretched out from the reception's black-leather sofa. He made eye contact, scrutinising me with an expressionless face but thoughtful eyes. As always I could not help but notice how beautiful his eyes were. Along with the rest of the package, actually. With skittering heart I nodded and strode briskly to the centre door. I swiped my electronic security pass and went in.

Our American management introduced a system called E-time. Excused time. It meant agents could take an unpaid break or go home early if the floor was over-staffed when we were not busy.

Not busy meant there was no possibility of a call queue. Also no special events, games, concerts, bushfires, flood. No wild wind hitting signal wiring. No hurting soul committing suicide on the rail

track.

Businesswise, E-time was a sound cost saver. Only willing agents volunteered to take it. Ranging from 10 minutes to many hours, we took it to go shopping, watch movies at Hornsby cinemas, or simply go home.

“Yellow pages,” I requested with fake cheerfulness. That was where they recorded E-time.

“No deal,” red-haired Nicholas replied. He was monitoring the call volumes and the graphs showed we were on red. “It’s Saturday, our busiest. No way can we give agents E-time. Sorry.”

Just my luck.

Tall and slender Justin approached me with a beaming face. Some managers had an abrasive personality, but Justin was your friendly Aussie kind of guy—down-to-earth and always helpful. Very gay, too.

“Tough one, wasn’t it? Poor Sydney. I feel for you. Some of these customers are pains in the butt. Man, you guys earn your money. The good news is, though you may have lost your AHT bonus by that long call, and Adherence bonus by having to talk during your scheduled break, you’ve definitely passed your Quality for the month! Ryan was monitoring your calls then. He was very impressed by your handling of Mrs Fu. Well done!”

Wonderful! I mentally gave myself a pat on the back. With the Quality bonus in, I just saved myself from being the lowest-paid Australian. Oh Dad, weren’t you happy for me?

I sat down and logged in.

Soon I became aware that my co-workers—who on other days sat elsewhere—were gossiping about Sinead. As Sinead had the weekend off on this roster, her followers didn’t camp around me. Except for Pete, who was still on his break.

One of the gossipers was Monashi. Unlike several other Indian agents, Monashi seemed to think it was cool and very Australian to use a swear word in every sentence. She even swore—while pressing MUTE—when callers were difficult. What if the expletives slipped the MUTE state and got to her customer’s ear?

“So our single agents, managers, and IT guys have been hitting the pubs frequently?” elderly Susan queried.

“Yup,” Thomas clarified. “We have Friday social drinks.”

“A hard night’s drinking will end with pairing within the group,” Monashi added. “Sometimes they can’t even (*bleep*) look at each other the next morning!”

“Agent-manager pairing is against our workplace policy!” Susan protested.

“Who’s going to play law enforcement on consenting adults outside office hours?” Thomas countered.

“Sinead drinks the hardest and f(*bleep*)s the wildest!” Monashi announced. “All the boys are (*bleep*) crazy for her! They all wait to see who’ll be chosen to get (*bleep*) lucky. It’s (*bleep*) pathetic.”

“Wow,” Susan was wide-eyed. “You never know, do you? Sinead’s not a flirt. Here she’s very decent and friendly. Smiles at everybody. She respects us oldies.”

“She’s enjoying her backpacking heaps,” chipped in Thomas. “Said she was going to uni in Dublin and would be sober by then.”

“She likes to choose her own moments,” Susan commented good-naturedly. “It’s up to her who to drink with. Or to be with afterwards.”

“It’s been Jack,” Monashi gleefully imparted her broad knowledge of others’ private lives. “Earlier it was Kevin and some of the (*bleep*) managers. But Pete’s often around her at the office.” One shapely eyebrow arched, “You think?”

No one could exclusively own Sinead who valued her freedom. I remembered her flirting with Kevin while Pete looked on with possessive eyes. Did he have a thing for her? Foreign agents loved to flirt with the locals, but Pete sort of sat with expressionless dignity near Sinead. Now, why would I bother about other people’s lives when I had my own to live? This flitted through my mind as they gossiped. Until Pete returned to our pod and silenced this line of conversation.

Noting Pete’s permitted-only-on-weekends casual clothes, I remembered him complaining that this was the first time he had been forced to wear a tie outside the US. Absently I wondered what he was doing working at a call centre. Or in Australia, for that matter.

And I wondered what my fun-loving rowdy co-workers would be doing after work. I loathed my isolation, yet feared mingling with others. I was not a fan of my appalling self. In my misery I could hardly relate to people and, being 17, I still had a legal excuse to dodge their invitation. I did not want them too close to see the real me. I could not be like Sinead who was enjoying life immensely with



lots of friends. Lots of sleep partners too, by the sound of it.

I did not judge people or begrudge their choices. Before my parents' divorce, I'd only hoped to save myself for that special someone who might happen by, strolling into my life. Since it was obvious true love did not exist, shouldn't I go party and throw my reserve to the wind? That was what my friends would do with their freedom—instead of endlessly taking photographs or sitting among my roses drawing cartoons.

But I lacked courage. I was terrified of getting hurt. A coward, still.

With and without friends, I was a loser.

One of my callers wasn't a coward though.

"I want to get happy tonight," she confided in a hush-hush tone of someone imparting a secret. "I'll go pubbing. But if I don't pick up a guy, how safe is Campbelltown Station after midnight?"

It *was* a secret. I was the only one privy to her thoughts. Her first time to step out? Alone? She sounded cute, shyly deliberating her wild night out but determined to carry it out. Who was she rebelling against? Strict parents? Revenge against a faithless partner? Or simply to break free from boredom?

After my shift I walked fast to the station. My Northern Line train—the red line on Sydney's Rail map—departed Hornsby from platform 3. While waiting, I saw Pete going down the stairs to platform 1 for his North Shore train to Roseville. No Sinead today, they had different rosters.

Pete lifted his hand to wave. His beautiful eyes still looked at me in thoughtful assessment. I had the impression he was trying to really *look* at me. As he held my gaze with his appraising one, I felt stripped of all pretensions. Time stood still. I felt, *he saw me*. *He knew what loneliness was like*. I sensed he understood what it took to present a dignified front when all you wanted to do was howl at the moon.

Had he seen me running from the pod in a terrible state? Had he sat at the reception area waiting for me out of concern? How mortifying! I was normally cautious and shy about showing others my feelings.

Heat rushed to my cheeks as I jumped onto my train.