

**Girl on Platform 3**  
**by Mark Gallagher**

She used to get on the same carriage as me, I guess because we both got off at Gosford Station and this carriage landed near the exit stairway at that station. It took a few days before I, uncharacteristically slow, noticed this dream-kitten, perhaps because she's the type who tries to subdue her remarkable beauty. But I took note all right. Jet-black shoulder length hair, brown or hazel eyes, fair skin, fine featured and slender, dressed in office garb of sometimes tailored navy blue and sometimes more earthy shades, by my estimation just a year or two younger than myself. Yep, that's right, I was checkin' her out. Without doubt she was the most beautiful thing within eyesight, possibly the most beautiful thing I'll ever see in my life. Sadly, however, her most notable feature was the sombre expression she carried on that lovely face. I don't think she'd noticed me at that stage.

One afternoon I stepped out of the kiosk doorway onto platform 3 and found myself face to face with her. Maybe I was breaking into a lemonade icy-pole, small relief from the summer heat. Her reaction was intense. Her eyes widened and lips slightly parted as if in a gasp, her whole body momentarily rigid. It was the first time I would see the expression, and it told me I had some sort of effect on her, though good or bad I was too dumb-struck to tell. The train arrived and I saw her barge through alighting passengers in a rush to get onto it, almost like she were trying to get away from me. A strange thought indeed.

Now I had to wonder about this because from then on she'd always go stone-faced the moment she'd see me. So why? After much thought (and probably because it was the desirable conclusion) I decided maybe she liked me but was very modest and shy. I formulated this scheme to go out of my way to make eye contact and eventually, if all went well, to say "hello" to her. It was a bold plan.

Most days there is no problem finding a seat on this train when it reaches Strathfield, though two side by side is an event I'm yet to see. There are days, however, when the seats are all taken and I have to stand, or sit in the stairway. The steps are filthy and a little yellow sticker there tells me it's an offence punishable by a \$50 fine. One such day, my birthday in fact, I sat patiently in the stairwell looking down the aisle waiting for the next station when some seats would become vacant. She was there seated beside a middle-aged businessman. "Dear god," I prayed, though I wasn't a believer, "please make him get off this train at Hornsby", what a birthday gift that would be. When he actually did get off at Hornsby my heart jumped into my throat, my temperature shot up and breathing became difficult. What made the oncoming rendezvous seem more inevitable, more significant and therefore more daunting was that his was the only seat vacated at Hornsby. I rose from the stairway terrified, took a deep breath and walked cautiously down the aisle toward the seat beside this princess of my dreams. I approached from behind so her shock when I plonked myself beside her was measurable. She froze. Forty minutes we sat acutely aware of each other while avoiding any acknowledgment of the fact. I tried very hard to appear as though I were paying her no regard, focusing intently in the opposite direction out the window at things I'd see twice daily if I really cared to look. She listened to a tape through her headphones while I tried to act relaxed. Had she not been wearing headphones would I have been courageous enough to speak to her? I don't know. I could see it was as uncomfortable for her as it was for me but for all the world I wouldn't have been sitting beside anybody else. As we approached our station I took out a slip of paper and wrote upon it -

*If I had just one wish*

It was my birthday after all. I handed it to her but it fell to the floor. I reached down and picked it up, handing it to her again. At the time I

thought she'd dropped it, though later I wondered if it hadn't been brushed away. Becoming intensely claustrophobic I rose and escaped toward the stairwell.

For many months we had stepped onto the same carriage each day. After my birthday she went to the far end of the platform and began riding at the back of the train as far away from me as she could get.

A couple of days after the birthday debacle, walking to Burwood Station I spotted her going in the same direction as me. Burwood to Strathfield is the other train we share. She was moving swiftly but I caught up. I felt like some little puppy dog trying to keep up with her as I began to explain.

"Hi, listen I'm sorry about the other day. I just... it was my birthday you see and I... "

"That's okay," she said, striding on as though there were no need for the conversation to continue. I strained to keep up with her.

"I hope you didn't change carriages because of me."

"No, no of course not."

We came to a red light at a pedestrian crossing. As I stood beside her it was all I could do to turn my head away and manage to keep breathing. I can't imagine what sort of impression this must have had on her. It was the first time I'd spoken to her and it was taking me from debacle to disaster. That afternoon we stood at opposite ends of the same carriage between Burwood and Strathfield where we each crossed to our respective ends of platform 3, and this was the rule from then on.

I'd see her most days, offered her not so much as a nod or a hello. I suppose I did try a nervous smile once or twice but the shocked expression still came over her face each time she'd see me. It was this more than anything which had captured my imagination.

I was the first to break the platform territorial rule. It was some time after my birthday, months in fact, when I felt I really had to say something. But I knew if I spoke to her I'd trip on my words and fall flat on my face. There is a flower seller, Kelly at Gosford Station. I consulted with Kelly and over the course of several nights we reached the point where she could confidently identify the beautiful lady. Kelly made a colourful arrangement - a fistful of orange dahlias contrasted by a profusion of stark white daisies, a splattering of exuberant rich purple irises, and three fiery red gerberas, avoiding anything so intense as a rose. I wrote a note to go with them -

*Beautiful lady, always so serious.  
If this small gesture brings a smile to your face  
then my wish has come true.*

Afterward Kelly described the expression on the beautiful lady's face when she'd handed the flowers to her. It was the same reaction, an expression of absolute dread.

"Oh my god, who are they from?" she'd gasped in horror. Was this to be another dismal failure, another crushing defeat?

I was working at our Parramatta office that week so catching the beautiful lady was going to be difficult as I was on a later train. I managed to get away early one day and made my way to her end of the platform. She didn't notice me at first, walking slowly toward her with a sense of foreboding - toward some tremendous victory or some terrible fate any moment would tell. As I came close the look upon her face was more dreadful than I'd seen before. For the first time I understood that it was indeed a look of horror, but this time she also looked haggard and weary, with dark rings under her eyes. Could my flowers have done this? I was devastated, my courage and energy immediately sapped, though I had to press on.

"Hi," I said, like a small child who'd done something wrong. She looked at me wearily, nodded and turned back toward the tracks. "Did you get the flowers?" I asked.

"Yes. Just as long as you understand this can't go any further."

I had hoped for a smile and a thank you and could not have been prepared for her pained expression and reprehension.

"I understand," I said nodding. There was a pause as I looked away uncertain of myself.

"Listen, I can't... I mean... I've just got a lot going on in my life," she explained.

"That's okay. Did they bring a smile?"

She looked at me a moment.

"Sorry?"

"I mean, did they bring a smile... to your face?"

"They were very nice, thank you," she added dismissively, frowning.

"Well, that's the main thing," I said.

"Just as long as you understand this can't go any further," she repeated with a very stern look on her face.

"I understand," I re-assured her before turning to head back down my end of the platform. Unfortunately a train arrived at that moment disgorging itself of a thousand passengers and I was stuck in pedestrian traffic unable to get away as quickly as I needed, my knees literally shook.

I didn't know what to make of all this. Had she really lost sleep over my flowers? Had she really retreated to the opposite end of the platform on my account? Then why did I horrify her so? I spoke to my friend Eadie at work. Eadie suggested the beautiful lady might have had a bad experience some time in the past and she thought I presented some sort of danger, like a stalker or something. Heavens above, I had visions of half a dozen burly police blokes wrestling me to the ground, wrenching handcuffs onto me as I kick and scream frantically "I only bought her flowers - I thought she looked sad". I went home and spoke to my grandmother, who was concerned for the young lady but could offer no explanation. I guess in her day such things were not so complicated. Others suggested she might be of some religious or ethnic background who shun the type of attention I was paying her. I pictured every scenario ever told of beautiful ladies' sorrows. Being a hopeless romantic I imagined for a moment she was in need of a courageous man to step in and fight some battle in her honour. Was she fearful of some threateningly obsessive ex-boyfriend? Or perhaps the custom required that I should approach her father and ask permission to court her. Such flights of fantasy, though if that was the call I was ready, willing and able.

Months passed and we remained aware of each other. I could see her discomfort at sight of me. I went out of my way to avoid her, and when I did see her my own face now surely displayed the same sense of horror. Out of the blue a day came when, as we were crossing from the Burwood train to platform 3 she turned to go to my end of the platform, not her own. It was perhaps unfortunate that I wasn't going straight there myself but stopping somewhere else on the way. By the time I got to platform 3 she was casually walking away from the kiosk toward her end of the platform. Should I make anything of this event? If she had no ulterior motive then I could be the biggest fool in the world if I believed it so.

More recently there was another encroachment upon my platform territory, this one exceedingly bold on her part. Like any other afternoon she crossed from the Burwood train to her end of platform 3 toward the back, and I to my end toward the front. Some minutes later, however, I noticed her walking slowly the length of the platform in my direction. "Oh god," I thought. "Please no, no please don't make her come to me... please don't... no, no, please no don't. But please do." I sensed her nearing me, I tensed. I did my best not to look at her and I was doing pretty good until she moved into my line of sight, directly in front of me not two metres away. My eyes were in mutiny as they followed her form some several metres. There ought to be a law against being that beautiful. If she only knew she could destroy a man just by walking around looking so gorgeous. She was wearing a new close fitting lilac coloured knit top and a long flowing brown floral skirt I had seen her wearing once before when, taking a day off work to get on top of domestic affairs, I had spotted her walking around a local shopping mall, by some strange coincidence also not at work.

She seemed to hesitate as she walked past me toward the other end of my carriage, or was it 'our' carriage once again? I glanced toward her and noticed her glance back in the direction of me. Was she looking at me? I couldn't dare to hope but what could I do to be sure? For my own peace of mind I wanted her to know I was no threat. Though I didn't want to approach her in case she did feel that way (who knows what a frightened person might do?), how could I accept the possibility she thought I was an ogre? At the very least I needed to know I didn't horrify her. If she feared me it was a shame because I'm really not so bad. If she didn't then my fear she did is equally as sad. We live in often confusing and sometimes fearful times. For whatever reason it is a sorry day when a young man is unable to speak to a young lady.

Perhaps there was no signal intended by her foray into my platform territory. Should I even be looking for one? At any rate, since that day she never came down my end again.

Last Friday week in the afternoon I gathered the courage and stood at her end of the platform as the Flier arrived. But she hadn't turned up. The following week I began a new job at head office in the city - a promotion of sorts. I'll no longer be spending any time at Strathfield or Burwood stations. Sadly, also last week my living companion these past four years, my dear sweet old grandmother passed away. I'll be moving away from the Central Coast soon. The Newcastle Flier will be an item of memory from that period in my personal history.

The chances are that, like my grandmother, I will never see the beautiful lady again. Simple questions probably easily answered will never be resolved, though they will swiftly fade in importance. Years will pass, another beautiful woman will come into my line of sight and she'll be the furthest thing from my mind. But will I now and then be reminded of her and wonder - what was her story, the girl on platform 3?