

First date

By Nathan Hobby

That night Phoebe and Leo have to make a transition. One moment, they are housemates; the next, as they step out the door, they are on a date.

They catch an empty bus into the city. It's one of the old buses - wide, square and noisy. She likes the way the noise and the vibrations fill in the silence. This bus is invincible, and has seen thousands of nights like this one.

'Sometimes,' he says, 'I think I'd like to be a bus driver. Or a train driver. I believe in public transport. It's the only public thing we've got left.'

'What about public libraries? And parks?' she says.

'Oh yes. Okay - libraries, buses and parks - the only good things about the system. Come the revolution, they're the things we'll keep.'

She laughs. Beneath the bluster and rage of his Communism, he is innocent, good-natured.

'The thing about parks,' he says, 'is that the green grass, the trees, the benches promise so much. And yet I never get to that promise. I never stop and enjoy them. And libraries - so many books. I've gone in twice and got out a pile of books but I never read more than a few pages.'

'I sit in parks quite often,' she says. 'And I read the books I get from libraries. You're too busy and anxious, that's why you can't.'

He resolves to change, to stop being busy and anxious, to enjoy parks and libraries.

They get off in the city centre and walk over to the shabby Piccadilly Cinema. The film, *Memento*, starts and layer upon layer of memory unpeels on the screen as the amnesiac man keeps coming to. He can't remember anything; can he trust the people around him?

The man reminds her of Leo. His loneliness, his intensity, his inability to relax. He has to get to the bottom of it all. Tears come into her eyes. She feels an urge to protect Leo. He's next to her, breathing and thinking in his own head. They are seeing the same things and yet thinking and feeling different things. It's so strange, she thinks, to watch a movie with someone.

Afterwards, they sit in the foyer drinking complimentary tea. They say nothing, letting the film sink in, allowing each other to return to the real world. She's glad he understands that, glad he cares so much that he gets absorbed into the film world too and needs time to come out of it. When she saw a film with Zac and Samantha, as soon as the credits started Zac was saying in his dominating voice, 'What did you think of that?'

She thinks about memory and how past events get buried by time. She imagines the generations of girls and boys, men and women this cinema has seen. So uncanny - the cinema stays silent, just a space where things have happened. She imagines it new and fresh in the 1930s. Her grandparents would have come here. Back then, Grandad was young and invincible. He didn't know how he'd end up, that he'd xxx his days coming to in a nursing home, not knowing anything.

The next session has opened, and the foyer is suddenly clear of people. She wonders how tonight relates to Leo's revolution. He can't stand anything which isn't about the big picture.

'What are you thinking?' he asks. 'I'm always curious about what you think. You never let on much.'

'Oh. There's not usually much there,' she says, habitually.

'I bet you were thinking *something*.'

'I'm just wondering... How does... yeah. Never mind. Nothing. Nothing.'

'No! Please tell.'

She waits to see if he will insist further. Silence. She realises his silence *is* insistence.

'How... how does your revolution fit into... you know, everyday life?' she finally asks.

'The revolution will bring a new society where people aren't oppressed by the greed of others - or by their own greed. So they start living in harmony. They can enjoy everyday life more.'

He never leaves a moment to think after a question, he always leaps straight in with an answer, and it annoys her. He didn't even understand her question.

She stands up and he stands up and they leave. As they wait for the bus in the cold, he feels the date slipping away and it seems like his last chance so he blurts out, 'Did you know you're one in a million? There's no other girl like you.'

Embarrassed, she says quietly, 'How does that song go? "There's five more just in New South Wales?"'

He takes this as a rebuff and goes quiet. His sudden quiet makes her think he didn't really mean it. They get on the bus and return to their share-house in silence, wondering if they'll do this again, both wanting to, both wondering if the other wants to.