

## (ZONE 34)

### A STORY OF SYNDEY BY ANNE SLOTH BIDSTRUP

*She didn't believe that a whole country really felt hatred against each other, and felt the need to be divided into zones to be safe.*

Laura looked out the window, and sighed deeply. The weather was grim – It was June, and winter in Sydney. She was late for work, and had to leave. Most days she got a lift with her mom, but this morning she had to take the bus. It was much more troublesome, but not as creepy as the underground subway.

Her mother worked with Laura at the International Office of Overseas travelling. They administrated all applications from the lower classes to leave Australia. When you were in security class A or B, you could pretty much travel as you wished, but any lower than that, you had to seek permission to leave the country, or even the state for class D or lower. There were 7 classes all together, officially divided after income, but actually after racial affiliation. In Laura's division they worked with the overseas permissions, and they were not given without a so-called "good" reason! Laura didn't like her job in particular, but she could keep to herself during working hours, and you had to have a job to get by.

The bus ride took little more than an hour, even though the office was only 3 km away. Traffic was always chaotic in the morning, even more because everyone needed to be inside before 10 o'clock. Since the last riots a few weeks back it had been prohibited to linger at the streets outside travel hours in their area – which made the traffic on the streets even more crazy than normal.

You had to show your ID to get into the bus, because they were divided into classes. Laura was a Class A, which meant that when she got into the bus it was both clean and quiet, and she could relax a little bit before she had to get off.

Even though Laura was 28 years old, it was not unusual that she still lived with her mother. Ever since the new Law, which was established in 2032, women were not allowed to live alone. You had to live with a parent, a partner or a friend. It was now year 2088 and very normal that mothers lived with her children if her husband died. When – or if – Laura decided to move in with a partner, her mother would probably just move in with them. At the moment her mother was sick, with pneumonia, and since Laura did not have a driver's license – she was riding the bus.

Laura was lost in her own thoughts during the bus ride, and pondered as so often before how their country has gotten here. Before her Grandmother had died, she had often told Laura about "the time before", as they called it internally. Grandma didn't say it out loud, but Laura suspected that she had like Australia much better before.

Laura had never experienced it any other way, but could still feel some kind of reluctance against the segregation of the society. She was in the top class, so she didn't experience the discrimination herself, but she still had a thorough feeling that it was wrong to divide humans after how many percentage "British Australian" they were. She was then abrupt interrupted in her stream of consciousness when the bus arrived at her stop. It was still raining, and she could only look forward to finishing work in the afternoon. She was also eager to get home to her mother again – she was worried about her illness, and knew that she was going to be away from her the next evening.

Laura had always lived in Sydney, but hadn't seen the city change. The change had happened long before she was born. Ever since the colonists arrived in Australia before 1800 there had been problems with racism between the white settlers from England, and the indigenous people who had lived on the island in many many years. The Aboriginal people had felt subdued, and this had resulted in more and more ghettos in the larger cities, and fights between the two groups. Australia was already in the beginning of the 21st century a country with many different original nationalities. And the struggle between the Aboriginals and the white escalated in a way that just enforced the hatred between the white with British origin and everybody else. It ended after a massive outbreak of riots all over the country with a military lock-down in 2032 that resulted in the new Law. Laura was not sure how it ever got that far.

After work, Laura went home. The weather had brightened up, but the city was still nothing like it had been before. There still existed pictures of a beautiful city full of life, but Laura found it hard to recognize as it looked now. These days it was most of all grey, and dull. Everyone was kept in control, even though there had not been any real trouble in Sydney for several years.

There were always soldiers present, to keep the society safe. Laura loathed that expression, since the soldiers were the only ones ever hurting anyone. The city had been divided up into zones, and the different classes could only be in the zones they had been cleared for. Laura had clearance to most zones, but if you belonged to a lower class, you only had clearance to be in the zone where you lived, and where you worked. That was one of the reasons why the subway was that dangerous – people from the higher classes believed that the lower classes travelled into forbidden zones via the tunnels. Laura didn't agree, and none of the stories were confirmed, but she didn't like going down there because of the massive array of soldiers.

Laura and her mother lived in a small house near Coogee Beach. The area had probably once been attractive, but now days it was just neglected. The strict curfew didn't exactly enhance the desire to do garden work or socialize with your community. Before Laura's father died, they had lived together in the same house. He had worked in the government, but had not been very good at it. He had been more or less openly against some of the more radical laws, and it had not made him popular. This was one of the reasons why Laura didn't talk with her mother about her doubts considering the regime. Her mother was terrified that Laura would get into trouble, or maybe disappear as her father had done.

Laura had a secret. Whenever it was possible for her, she would go to one of the zones where Class E and F lived. Even though the area Laura lived in was shabby, it was nothing compared to Zone 34 – where Michael lived.

Michael was her lover, and her fellow conspirator. She was honest to him, and could tell him all of her doubts. And he did the same with her. Michael was an Aboriginal, only mixed with other nationalities - not British. Their relationship was forbidden. They were not allowed to speak privately with each other. But they did, and had done, for almost five years.

They had met at a chat side. Laura had bought a used computer in an antique store, and somehow the restriction that normally was on the internet had not been there when she used it the first time. Somehow the computer had not been formatted before it was sold again, or formatted wrong.

She had already back then been very curious about the other classes and wanted to talk to people from the other zones. She had been too scared to try something in the first month she had it, and then her curiosity had won – her journey on the “forbidden” part of the internet had begun. In the beginning she just browsed around and didn't find anything extraordinary, but then she clicked on a chat side that was open to class E-G – the lowest classes. When she first talked to Michael is had felt so natural, and safe. It had taken almost a year before they had

met the first time, but after they found a way to meet without drawing attention they had seen each other almost every week.

Laura always went to his zone, since she was cleared to travel there. Once she got there, she was allowed to visit the official buildings, and it was in the Post Office, where Michael worked as a laborer, that they had found a small repository where they could hang out for hours without getting caught.

This evening Laura prepared her mother for the next day – when she had a date with Michael. She told her mother different stories – this time she said she had an appointment with one of her colleagues that her mother also knew – that calmed her down, and she didn't worry if Laura was gone for long. Something had broken inside her mother when her father was taken away. Laura used to think of her mother as a courageous and proud woman, but now she was just broken. They had broken her, and she was more and more filled with fear and hatred every day. Laura hated the government for this, more than everything else.

Laura went to zone 34 with the bus straight after work the next day. She would have to go home after the curfew, but she had to take the chance. They had chatted about it for almost two weeks – he didn't want her to come because he thought it was too dangerous with all the interracial controversies these days, but even more because he was afraid that the soldiers would see her get home – and question her. People tend to disappear after such questionings.

But Laura was not afraid of the riots – she had decided so a long time ago, and tried very much to uphold that decision. She was afraid of the soldiers, but she missed Michael more.

During the bus ride she looked out the window, and a feeling of despair came over her. You could literally see the change in the city as you drove through the different zones. In the top zones the city was worn down, but working and there were open shops and public transportation was functioning. But in the lower zones, people was actually living on the streets, there was only jammed up shops, and only the busses from the top zones was still driving – and the inhabitants from the other zones was not allowed to ride them. The infrastructural problems had evolved from the poorer part of the population, who lived in the lowest zones, not being able to buy their own car, to now, where it was impossible for anyone but 95%-whites to ride public transportation.

Laura shook her head, and looked up.

She hadn't realized that someone was staring at her from the other side of the aisle. Her stop was still 10 minutes away, on a good day, and she really didn't feel like talking to a stranger, so she looked quickly down again. But the woman had seen Laura looking back at her, and came over and sat next to her.

"Do you know you are on the list?" the woman asked Laura. Laura must have looked puzzled, because the woman kept whispering to her. "You are on their list – you are under surveillance. I work for them – I know how they do it. They will find some reason to question you – and then take you to custody. It is dangerous for you to do anything peculiar. I don't know what you are doing on all of these bus rides, and where you go, but I have looked in to you because you made me curious. I ride this bus a lot, because my son is excluded, and forced to live in zone 34 – so I visit him often. I work... Well I work somewhere secret, but I just wanted to warn you!" The woman then looked away, and soundless slid away from the seat.

Laura was startled, but had to make a quick decision, because she was at her stop. She got off. She was terrified, but she needed to see Michael, and tell him about this. It could be a scam, or a crazy woman. Which list? Where did she work? Laura doubted the truthfulness in the monologue from the woman.

She looked nervously over her shoulder as she crept along the grey façades. She glanced around, and then walked into the post office. She went straight for the bathrooms for class A and B, and turned just before the door. In the corner of the cleaning room the door to their secret room was concealed by a set of shelves. She hurried into it and through herself in Michael's arms. She told him what had happened in the bus, and they agreed that she had to leave at once, and then keep a low profile for a while. They were both very sad when she five minutes later left the post office, very nervous but determined to come again soon. They should not take this from her! Just because they – whoever they were – only believed in hatred and fighting, they should not keep her from Michael!

The society must be biased; Laura thought when she was home safe in her bedroom. She didn't believe that a whole country really felt hatred against each other, and felt the need to be divided into zones to be safe. The government was nothing but a military dictatorship, and she wouldn't take it anymore. There must be another solution to the racial problems that had led the country into something that resembled a civil war. She thought about the riots a few weeks back. Black men from some of the lowest zones had been fighting the military that wouldn't let them into other zones to work and get food. It had led to fights in pretty much every zone, but all the white people in the top zones had just been told to stay inside.

Laura thought, as often before, that the inhabitants of Sydney needed to be enlightened about how it worked in other countries. Laura had seen a bit on her computer, but could also remember how her grandmother had talked about the time before, where they still got news from other countries. They managed to live in peace, even countries with as many nationalities as Australia.

The system would have to be changed, she knew that much. Under the regime that ruled now, equality would never conquer the hatred. And the citizens needed a role model, to tell them that what is different is not necessarily something to be afraid of.

She went to bed with a feeling of despair, after making an appointment with her doctor the next day. The doctor had access to her files, and she needed to see what was written about her.

When Laura spoke with her mother the next morning it was difficult for her to hide her mood. She was both afraid and angry, but had to try to act normal for her mother's fault. Laura didn't want to make her nervous. She left for work, but went to the doctor's office instead.

From the doctor's office she went to zone 34. After what she had seen in her file she had to talk to Michael. She got there without trouble and with no sight of the mysterious woman from the night before. She sneaked into their usual meeting place without anyone noticing, and waited for him. When he got there she was eager to tell him everything.

She told him how she had been sleepless all night, immersed in thoughts about their future. She had fooled the doctor into leaving the office for five minutes when she was there, and had quickly read her folder on his computer. And it seemed that the woman had spoken the truth the day before – she was regarded as a "low treat" to the country, and was being watched.

Michael was just as shocked as Laura, and they spoke for a while about how anyone had found out that she had impure thoughts about the regime, as they had called it in the file.

Michael agreed in Laura's interpretation of the society they lived in, but he had a more realistic point of view. He didn't think they could do anything about it, and was mostly just afraid that anything would happen to Laura.

When he explained his feelings once again to her, she took his head between her hands, looked him into his eyes and said that if anything ever was going to change, everyone needed to be brave. They had to be, but they also needed to encourage everyone around them to be. Because the regime was not going to surrender without fight and the government was only half the problem. The public needed to be turned around, and accept that everyone was equal, no matter their origin. Laura didn't know how to make this change, but first of all she would have to figure out what the soldiers part in the riots were – she had a feeling that they often started them, and if that was the case, she would have to enlighten the city about the governments cover up. She told Michael all of this while caressing his shoulder, and then looked at him. She could not understand how their love could be illegal. They were just two people, with different color. It didn't matter to them, and it shouldn't matter to anyone else.

Michael looked at her and promised to help her with this impossible quest – and then the door was blown in, and suddenly there were noise and smoke and dirt everywhere. Then everything became black, and Laura fell to the ground. The soldiers won even before the fight had started.