

HOMECOMING

I'm coming home for good this time, I tell them. I don't want to grow old in London. Old and cold.

I don't own a car in London. It's the principle of the thing. Anyway, they say it's cheaper to travel by taxi when you need to than to own a car. Support our public transport system, they say, urging its improvement in efficiency and safety so that the community can continue to enjoy its benefits and some of the endless, clogging traffic is removed from the roads.

Then there's the pollution: the noise and the insidious emissions which damage our brains, poison our trees and which, they say, will ultimately and inevitably lead to our destruction. Strong arguments against the car. Almost, you might say, an airtight case.

Conversations overheard in London buses, dramas played out in trains and tubes, the stuff of writers and anthropologists. Where else can one sniff and see at the closest proximity the denizens of society's dark, dank corners? The odiferous touch of a tramp, the forceful attentions of a drunk, the fingering of a pickpocket, the sly poke of the peak hour groper?

The commuter by car enjoys his hygienic isolation, cocooned against cold and cramp, secure in a private capsule, all the comforts of home. Free to smoke or to swear, enjoy a quiet fart, disinterested and unaware, a race apart.

'I had to take a month off work when I hurt my wrist and couldn't drive – I couldn't risk taking the bus, I might have been mugged!' said the medical secretary.

'Sorry we're late,' said the City banker at a social gathering. 'Had to take quite a detour to bypass Brixton. The ladies were frightened we'd be dragged from the car at some traffic lights by a mob of blacks!'

Meanwhile I'm waiting at the bus stop for the 159. A grey London morning. It's sleeting down. I grow old, I grow old... old and cold. I'm going home for good this time, I tell them. Can't think why you've stayed so long, they reply, when you could have been there all along, in the sun.

There's fear in these sunny suburbs, a creeping, shrinking feeling. A world away from the expansive warmth of that remembered open friendliness. I'd always boasted that in Australia you smiled at people in the street and they smiled back.

It's not safe to walk down Sydney's George Street in the late evenings now, they say. It's dangerous to be in the Penrith Mall after dark, they warn. Our trains are patrolled by plainclothes and uniformed officers, say the signs. When travelling at night, sit in the carriage by the guard's blue light. He can radio for police assistance, should you need it. Notices in shop or office windows inform the passerby: No money kept on these premises. No smokes. No drugs.

They've always said you've got to have a car to get about here. As soon as you turn 16 you apply for your learner's permit. The distances are too great and the communities too scattered. You've got to be mobile in order to meet people and socialise. Otherwise it's just isolation and loneliness, mistrust and fear. It seems there's little difference after all, with or without the car.

I'm growing old. Perhaps I'll buy a small car. As long as the planet holds together for a bit longer, for my lifetime, I'll be all right. All these years I've done my bit for the earth, railed against the spoilers of the environment, put my money where my mouth is. To what end? Here I am, feeling old, and in spite of sitting in the sun, I'm cold.

Rosanne Rayward