

A final fling with the romance of rail

By BERWYN LEWIS

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GREAT trains may continue to pass in the night but with the streamlining of services in NSW, a certain human touch will be lost along with jobs.

While I was climbing aboard a Sydney-bound overnight train at Lismore station last Monday evening — a train so long it stretched out of sight beyond the curve of the tracks — the emotions of parting surged up and down the platform.

Whistles blew, lovers clung to each other, school leavers took leave of mothers and baby-faced girlfriends, mothers dragged infants, and Japanese tourists, clutching snack boxes of sushi, politely excused themselves.

By the time everyone settled into their upright seats (all the sleepers were sold out months ago) the buffet car was declared open and there was a stampede up the corridors.

In the dining car staff scuttled about with cameras, posing beside tables and in doorways, recording their final hours. Rail staff exchanged farewells.

"Some of us won't have jobs after next week," a young waitress from Grafton lamented.

Back in the carriage, passengers were forming romantic relationships with strangers.

In the seats to my left a young couple was spreading an eider-

down under which they disappeared.

Society's code of decorum was breaking down faster than the speed of the train. As the hour of lights-out approached, items of apparel were discarded.

In the seat in front of the young couple a woman cast an eye over the country youth to her left. He looked as though the ink stains of the HSC were still wet behind his ears.

He took her hand. As the train gathered speed her legs lifted across his lap and shoes came off. From the luggage rack overhead he produced a blanket which they drew up under their chins. As the

lights were lowered a long night of love, for some, began.

Behind them the quilt covering the young couple began to move in a manner independent of the rhythms of the train. I had a sleepless night.

Dawn was ushered in by an announcement that the dining car was open for the first breakfast sitting. The overhead lights were flicked on with the sensitivity of Stalag 19.

In the light of 5.30am the young couple were smiling but the couple in front seemed to be undergoing a rift.

He remained impervious to her imploring eyes. He was so much

younger than she and it was obvious she was dealing with a conflict of more mature emotions.

As we approached Newcastle he lifted down his bag.

"I wish you well in your travels," he said and made his way towards the doorway of the train without so much as a backward glance.

At least the young couple's relationship was more on track, a committed train relationship seemed to be blossoming but unlike trains the course of true love never runs smooth.

Before we reached Sydney Central station the young woman was distancing herself. Their night of passion was no more than just a fling.