Six Minutes (Novel)

Theresa Elizabeth Lauf

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Everyone wants to be on top.


Life in a law firm is a contest of wills, a battle of desires, and a magical manipulation of the time / money equation. Justice and fairness is for academics to contemplate over chardonnay, and defeated clients to suck with their sour grapes. Even three year olds know that life isn’t fair. It’s only grown ups that forget, and need lawyers to remind them.

Real-life law, and conversely, real law-life, is to conquer, and not be conquered. To screw, and not be screwed. To know how much you can take before you break. And get out, before you’re beyond repair.

Everyone thinks the law is glamorous. Those of us who would know better, are mostly too busy living in denial.

Or living up the myth.
II

LAW BALL

Another day, another dollar. Or so the saying goes. Everyone was being fractious, even my computer. It was only Tuesday and the bastard was already showing me the so-called Blue Screen of Death. It was the computer’s way of saying “Get lost!” and all the rest of it. I punched the extension number for tech. services into my phone. It seemed like ages before some stuttering nerd on level 21 picked up. He asked me what the message was.

“What message?” I demanded. While on the attack, I thought defensively. Maybe I shouldn’t have automatically clicked “OK”, or maybe he was referring to the garbled text on the computer screen right before I thumped it and the screen went blue? Was that “assisted suicide”? Unlawful damage? Oops. Hopefully it would be untraceable and a new, reliable computer would be issued to me, no questions asked.

This guy sounded junior, brow-beaten. I’m a senior associate solicitor here, partnership material. I would adamantly stand my ground. After all, how was I supposed to keep up my end of the Australian Workplace Agreement when I was expected to make do with a crappy, unreliable, impertinent demon of a computer? Without it, I couldn’t do a lot. Just look busy, and find things to put on my timesheet. Fun times.

Two hours, and three seemingly fruitless phone calls later, Piers, the IT manager himself came up. I could hear him shuffling along the corridor even before I saw him. He didn’t walk with the crisp purpose of the legal staff. IT, and Marketing for that matter, had their own parallel universes within the firm. Piers spent a good deal of time staring somewhere beyond his. Maybe it was a lack of self-confidence? After all, he was acid in the eye to look at. I flinched at my own
nastiness as he neared. I may have been splenetic that it had taken him two hours to travel a few flights of stairs, but there was no need to get personal.

I put on a smile as he entered my office. He tried to reciprocate but came off looking more like a Halloween Pumpkin in a Christmas parade. Before I had the chance to fully rise from my chair, he slid in under me and took up position in front of my wayward computer. That was the IT line dance: shuffle and slide; shuffle and slide; one, two, three, four....

“So, Sandra, what seems to be the problem here?” he asked without even looking at me while he fingered the on/off button. I was standing awkwardly to one side, trying to make sense of the frenetic lines of script scrolling down my screen.

“Blue Screen Error,” I replied proudly, as if I knew what that meant.

There was a pause before he made a clicking sound back to the beeping and farting computer. It was their private conversation. He slowly pecked instructions into the keyboard. Finally, he said, “Ah ha!”

I tried to look attentive and receptive, but really, I just wanted it fixed, or better still, replaced. I didn’t care for an explanation even if he thought I needed one. After all, what does it matter? Anyone who gets excited about the inner workings, or otherwise, of Windows, has issues.

Piers called up my last document and slid out of my chair as unexpectedly as he’d slid into it. Suddenly he was standing right next to me, slightly too close for comfort as I saw his aging acne up close. “So, will I see you tonight?”

Was that meatloaf and mustard on his breath? And where was that vinegary smell coming from?

I stammered, “Yes, yes, I suppose you will.”
“Lovely. Bye then.” He dropped his head and shuffled out. The smells mostly followed him. In a confined space, such as my little glass office, smells mattered. Senior staff did not exude meatloaf. Or tuna. Or mustard. Or vinegar. They had options of course: eat nothing, or eat something that leaves no olfactory trace. Then brush, and deodorize. And promptly apologise to anyone otherwise offended.

As annoyed as I was at the intrusion into my personal space, and the fact that someone passing by might consider me to be the one in breach of protocol, there was something earthy about my minute with Piers. It was like a postcard from back home, reminding me of Mother’s cooking, a kitchen bursting with smells, and someone gentle, waiting to see me at the end of a long day.

I glanced at my in-tray. Right on top, was something that wasn’t there before I had nipped out to the bathroom. It was a form from Marketing with a shabby internal envelope clipped to it, awaiting a response. Of course, it was marked, “Urgent”. Marketing was my least favourite department in the firm, followed closely by the robots in IT and zombies in Accounts and Auditing. Their reason for being in this firm was to support and serve the lawyers, but it rarely seemed to happen that way. Reluctantly, I read the memo. How profound. At tonight’s “Top of the Pops” fancy dress ball there would be corporate games. And this form related to one of the games. It was a simple request: PLEASE FILL IN YOUR ANSWER AND DETAILS BEFORE THE BALL AND RETURN TO MARKETING ASAP. PRIZES TO BE WON.

Prizes, huh? So what was the question? Again, simple: WHO IN THE FIRM WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO SLEEP WITH?

Everyone thought about it, but was it right to legitimize it like this? No doubt, someone else from Litigation or HR would shut it down. What a dumb idea. I put the form into Abeyance and went to Tuesday morning doughnuts with the rest of the Section.
The place was buzzing. "Hey. Hey," I greeted each person as I entered the conference room. Without wasting time, I zoomed in on the partner-funded, morale-boosting doughnuts and pitched two into my mouth before anyone noticed. They were small and, besides, this was the world of the Quick and the Dead. "So what's everyone talking about today?" I asked the nearest available person. He was amply demonstrating how you could be standing in a room full of people and still be utterly alone. By the look of his caved-in posture and lack of eye-contact, he was the new articled clerk in the Section, and he wasn't going to last long. If he'd been half-good-looking, he would've been covered in secretaries. Actually, if he thought he was half-good-looking, he would've been covered in secretaries. He must've been smart though, because Hennessy Clark only took the best. But he didn't have the bravado or the secretarial support to make him more than an outside chance of being kept beyond his apprenticeship period. Poor thing was terrified of his own shadow, or of me, given that I was second most senior in the room. I felt like reaching across and ruffling up his ginger hair, to make him look more relaxed, less glued-down. His stiffness was uncomfortable to look at, and maybe it was contagious.

"They're talking about the competition and the ball," was the somewhat delayed, intimidated, almost-whispered response. I could feel my top lip curl. Free booze was one thing, but having to dress up like a twit for it and fill in a loony form was too much. How was that "team-building" anyway? I stood in melancholy solidarity with the frightened, nerdy little boy until my usual crowd noticed me.

"Hey, Sandra. So, who did you put down on your form?" pressed Tina, one of the girls from the typing pool.

"I'm not filling it in."

"What? No way! You have to fill it in. We all had to. No choice."

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“Come on, Sandra. Who are you nominating?” asked Paul, my senior partner, sidling up next to me. “Do I have your vote?” he breathed across my ear.

Some doughnut went down the wrong way. With tears welling in my eyes, I pointed to my throat by way of explanation and darted for the coffee pot to clear the obstruction. Tina, Paul and my secretary, Suzie, followed. Three gulps of coffee later, and they were still staring at me expectantly.

“So?” insisted Tina.

I shrugged, but they wouldn’t be shrugged off. Paul crossed his arms and started tapping his foot. “All right, you’ve got me.” I still didn’t know what to answer, so I said the most absurd thing that came to mind. “I’m entering Piers.”

The general cacophony went something like this:

Paul: “You mean, he’s entering you?” Chuckle and snort. “Oh sorry, that came out wrong.”

Tina: “Er, are you sure?”

Suzie: “Piers McDonald? You joking? Brother of the original Ronald McDonald?”

Paul: “No, that’s very nice. I’m so happy for the both of you.” Snigger, snigger.

Me: “What?! No, that’s not what I meant. No, no, no!”

They were all grinning like split melons. If my mother had heard what I had just done, she would have made me do ten rounds of the rosary beads and then penance.

I was stuck on REPEAT, saying, “Oh dear, oh dear, OH DEAR!”

When I had returned to my office after the morning tea, the form and internal envelope in my Abeyance tray was gone. Maybe Marketing had taken it back? They were customarily defensive about their deadlines, as if nothing else in a law firm mattered. That was the only
explanation that I cared to entertain, despite the twisted-gut reaction, which was suggesting something else altogether.

The rest of the day was virtually a write-off. The admin staff was so excited about the ball scheduled for later that evening that tools went down a lot sooner than the official three o’clock knock-off. By two o’clock, the bathrooms on every floor had women queuing for mirror space as they changed and morphed into prey and predators of the coming night. At two-thirty, I decided to join the fun, and waited for a cubicle for twenty minutes. Fancy dress was not for me, nor for any of the girls I saw. On the other hand, there were some strange things coming out of the adjoining men’s room. While I was waiting, the men’s door was flung open and there stood two figures, trying to make a big impression.

“Brian? Grant?” I asked, uncertainly.

“Sonny and Cher, actually,” replied the Tax partner formerly known as Grant. He was Sonny now and his brother, who was a partner in Banking and Finance, must’ve drawn the short straw to be Cher.

I cleared my throat. “Brian, did anyone ever tell you that Cher is a woman?”

He snorted gleefully. Brian was most uneventful as a man, but what stood before me was astonishing in a disturbing way. Suddenly, he bowed his head and did an awkward Edward Scissorhands routine around his left eye. He almost made a cocktail onion of his eye twice with his stuck-on nails. Then he got smart and used his knuckles.

“These bloody things feel like spiders,” he complained about the wayward eyelashes, which looked even longer than his nails. One of them was reattached closer to his eyebrow than his eye—in the middle of a nasty blue streak of glistening eye shadow. “How does that look?” he asked his brother, blinking madly.
“Fabulous,” replied Grant, who clearly wasn’t very discerning when it came to men in drag.

Grant, with his 1970s vintage moustache, was the most convincing Sonny I had ever seen. I wondered why I hadn’t realized it before. Only today, he had swapped his crisp white Polo business shirt and tie for a white satin zip-up jumpsuit with bell-bottoms, to match his brother. I could see his chest hair through the costume and made a mental note not to look any lower. In my peripheral vision, however, I couldn’t help but notice him adjusting his crotch. He was known to regularly check his kit, but today he had a particularly good reason. And it probably wasn’t crabs.

“Do you think Mum got our measurements mixed up?” he asked of his shorter but more rotund brother, Cher. “I know she said she was running out of fabric, but this is ridiculous!” he muttered in private conversation with Brian. I couldn’t hear Brian’s response.

“Wanna share a taxi with us, Sandra?” Brian asked, quite seriously, while fixing his glossy white vinyl boots. Judging by the look on his face, he must’ve caught a bit of fur in the zipper.

“No way, but thanks for asking.”

Grant eyed my clutch purse and said to Brian, “Oh dear, you didn’t accessorize with a handbag. Now where are you going to put your cash and mobile phone?” The glint in Brian’s eyes said we really didn’t want to know. The white bell-bottom trousers with matching caftan were more like ballet tights with sad, floppy bits at the bottom. There were no pockets. I was guessing the barman and cabbie were going to keep the change.

I made my own way to the Shadow Room. It was walking distance from work, but on the other end of the prestigious waterfront real estate that was mostly taken up by law firms and brokerage houses. It had the best view of Brisbane’s Story Bridge, all the way around to the Kangaroo Point Cliffs. For ten years I used to go there every Friday night after work, when it was
still known as City Rowers. Moving through the regular crowds was always an exercise in human rowing—with full glasses, it was a sophisticated circus act.

My black crocheted Harry Who skirt flopped about my calf muscles and periodically snagged on my stiletto heels, dampening my top speed to a careful and regretful amble. I swore every time one of my heels became lodged in the pavement, twisting my bad ankles. How did other women negotiate these treacherous paths to beauty? I tried walking more on my tippy-toes, but gave up after a block and returned to comic flat-footedness.

Even though I arrived on time, everyone else seemed to have beaten me. At the entrance, I could hear a vintage 1980s song thumping away: “Tainted Love.”

... Don’t touch me please, I cannot stand the way you ...

“Ticket please.”

I handed my ticket to the welcoming committee, comprising four Spice Girls from Marketing. Luckily, they had name badges on: “Hi! I’m Sporty Spice”; “Hi! I’m Posh Spice”; “Hi! I’m Scary Spice”; and “Hi! I’m Baby Spice.” Otherwise, I wouldn’t have realized they were in costume at all. As far as I could see, they dressed like this most of the time—lots of cheap jewelry, stage makeup, stilettos and little handkerchiefs where there should’ve been skirts. It was the Marketing Uniform. Baby Spice took my ticket and asked, “So, who did you come as?”

“Myself,” I answered gruffly.

“What a shame,” piped in Posh as we flashed fake smiles at each other.

I moved on quickly. The Spice Girls band was huge for all of five minutes about a decade ago. Now they were rushing out to cut and suck away their post-baby bodies in time for their comeback tour. It would be the return of the miming, moveable mannequins. Everyone knew they did lip-sync. Ironically, while the rest of us have to fake it till we make it, the Spice Girls made it and still remain as fake as ever.
Walking into a function on one's own is always a daunting experience. I was never certain that I had selected the right outfit, or that it wasn't tragically malfunctioning in a publicly humiliating way. One had to look cool, self-possessed, and confident. The truth was, confidence came in a bottle, but cool disappeared after the third spew. I scanned the room for the drinks table, walking slowly in any direction until my shortsighted, squinty eyes could find what I was looking for. There was no way I was going to put glasses on with an evening outfit and even less chance that I'd try using contacts. The image of Brian as Cher, poking himself in the eye, came back to me.

There were balloons everywhere—tied to the back of every chair and to weighted centerpieces on every table. It was a thick fog of metallic balloons in the firm colours of peach and burgundy mixed with fake smoke from the DJ’s smoke machine. Not so long ago, people would've been lighting up cigarettes indoors, achieving an even better effect. I couldn’t help but inhale a big puff of it. Of course, it was utterly disappointing. I had breathed this stuff all night at nightclubs, but couldn’t remember smelling it. It was so forgettable, much like the many evenings spent pumping up the dance floor with complete strangers. There was no attendant rush of nicotine, nor the pleasurable promise of romance by a crackling fire, or even of marshmallows toasting. Not even the fleeting adrenaline-induced panic of driving past a scrub fire—reminding one that this is real life and worth preserving. Breathing in the disco smog was a taking in, and becoming a part of, an elaborate illusion.

Now I knew what our Marketing Department did other than play table tennis all day. Posh was still pissed off with me because six months ago, I asked her to verify that the noise I’d heard coming through their office walls was, indeed, the joyful squeaks and squeals of girls playing ping pong. Someone from Accounts and Auditing had told me later that they’d had it approved.
because the girls needed it to stoke their creativity. The lady from A&A had the humourless personality of rising damp, so it must’ve been true.

Finally, I found the drinks table with a sign on it: PLEASE QUEUE HERE FOR DRINKS VOUCHERS AND PROCEED TO BAR. I swore under my breath, and then queued. This was Expo 88 all over again. I didn’t know the people in front or behind me, which made the wait agonizing. Eventually, I reached the head of the queue and was overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the junior solicitor serving.

“Frigging hell, Angus. Where did you get such a green suit? What are you, a leprechaun?” I said, laughing.

“Get stuffed, Sandra!” As fellow litigators, we had a comfortable, adversarial relationship. When he grinned back at me, I got a fright. “What is that on your front tooth, lolly?” I grabbed a serviette from the drinks table and leaned over to help him remove the offending debris.

“Back off, woman. I paid for that to be there. Don’t you recognize me? I’m Mick Hucknall, lead singer of Simply Red and that’s my trademark ruby!” We both paused.

“Really? You went to that much trouble?”

“It’s all the rage, Sandra. It’s called tooth jewelry. Now, here’s your drinks voucher for the night. Don’t lose it or give it to anyone else to mind for you. You won’t get another one. It entitles you to three free drinks. After that, it’s a cash bar.” He crossed my name off his long, alphabetical list.

“What? Those miserable sods! We have to pay for our own drinks?”

“It’s been a lean year apparently.”

“Lean my arse!” I exclaimed, disgusted.

Angus let out a guffaw and said, “I shouldn’t respond to that. See you later. Next!”
Off I went to the bar and ordered a Vodka Screwdriver. I noticed they used cheap orange juice, the kind that was hardly juice at all—imported concentrate in a carton. Real Australian oranges were rotting on their trees, but here we were, drinking some nasty, Asian approximation of juice. I could feel a growl working its way up my windpipe. This was no way to repay loyalty. I’d been married to this firm for more than seven years. I could feel myself starting to itch. I downed the drink and ordered another while I was still at the front of the queue.

"The firm encourages responsible drinking," the bartender dared to say to me, in his best, rehearsed monotone. I glared at him. He was smaller than me. Evidently he’d noticed that too and, quickly deciding that he’d discharged his duty of care, gave me another drink. Tight-lipped, I discretely nodded my thanks and walked off. I felt my grip on the glass loosen ever so slightly as my body relaxed under the influence of the first drink. What a relief. The ill feeling in my stomach started to subside, although I was still keenly aware of the blisters I had acquired on my bunions and heels during the walk here. I looked about for a friendly face and an opening in a group. Because of the blaring music, circles were tight. People were craning their necks to participate in conversations. As the drinks kept flowing, the circles became tighter as people were less inhibited by others’ need for personal space. Of course, then there were those who used alcohol and loud gatherings as a pretext for being as lecherous as usual. I felt a warm whiskey breath on my neck and then a quick kiss on the cheek. It was Paul.

"So where’s your wife?" I asked, as usual.

As always, he answered, "Minding the kids." He didn’t even pause. "Want to dance?" he asked, as he led me to the glowing dance floor by the elbow.

"I don’t dance," I protested, pulling back and trying not to spill my drink.
“Here, you don’t need that.” He took my drink and put it down on the nearest table while dragging me to the killing fields. “I’m instructing you to dance. It’s a lawful instruction which you’re obliged to follow, otherwise I’ll sack you.” He smiled at his own wit.

“This wasn’t in my position description!” I replied in equally silly lawyer-talk. I really hated dancing, especially in public. This was humiliation central. Dancing was not like feigning confidence and expertise in a file you knew nothing about. You rarely had to give on-the-spot advice; you could bone up on something or pick the mind of a colleague later. But with dancing, it was a live, do-or-die show. Here, you either had the moves or everyone could see that you sucked. Or, as in my case, sucked and blew, all at once. To make matters worse, it was Cyndi Lauper’s “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun.”

I could sense people watching me like I was a one-legged mine-sweep. Every beat I missed was my own personal implosion. Paul was singing along, throwing his head back in time with the histrionics and pretending to be Cyndi. Somehow, a man acting ridiculous was endearing. The secretaries clapped. He bowed. “Isn’t this fun,” he said rather than asked, not waiting for a response. The song ended. I breathed a sigh of relief and turned to retrieve my drink. Paul grabbed me around the waist. “Hey, get back here. Let’s see what’s next.”

In his embrace, I momentarily lost the urge to leave and empty my bowels. Then the music began. It was Madonna’s “Vogue.” Great, now I was competing with everyone who thought they could dance. At least there were more people dancing than laughing this time.

I wasn’t sure whether I should try to copy all the cool people who knew the moves or not. It was all right for junior lawyers and secretaries, but it just didn’t seem right for serious, self-respecting female associates to do the same. Men could get away with anything, but senior women really couldn’t. I still remembered the talking to I had received about not being too friendly with administration staff and juniors if I wanted to demonstrate to the powers-that-be
that my star was rising. That was right after the talk about not wearing trousers to court and the
suggestion to avoid wearing any strong colours other than black, grey, brown or beige. Looking
around the room, it seemed all the women were in regulation black mini-dresses, except me. I
was in a long black crocheted skirt and twin set. But no-one knew what I had on under the
cardigan—yet. I hoped that my lucky lingerie would see action tonight. I poked my chest out and
kept dancing. Paul was too busy showing off and looking at my boobs to notice what my feet
were doing. Without talent, one had to rely on resourcefulness.

The song ended and, like a giant broken cog, the whole room ground to an awkward halt.
Paul kissed me quickly on the cheek again and said, "I have to go officiate. Have fun." And he
left me standing alone in the middle of the expansive dance floor with a hundred other people,
trying to look cool while the next song was being loaded. Like a cold wind, the disturbing sounds
of The Cure blasted into the room and cleared the floor of all normal looking people. Just as
quickly, the whole Mail Room department emerged, creeping around each other in circles,
hissing and moving their hands like cats. They were all dressed like Robert Smith, which was
probably their usual way. No wonder the firm never endorsed Casual Clothes Day. But did these
guys go shopping for makeup, or did they nick it from their girlfriends and mothers?

Racing off the dance floor to avoid the "Lovecats" song, I literally bumped into a leather-
clad Piers, with slicked-back hair. "Hello, stranger. And who might you be?" I asked politely.

"Good evening, Sandra. Tonight, I'm John Travolta in Grease."

My heart hurt for him. He was trying so hard. There wasn't even a hint of Travolta in him.
He just looked like a greasy kid in his big brother's clothes. He had on a homemade button badge
that said "Desperately seeking Sandy." I had to say something positive, so I said "Great
costume!" But he didn't hear. It occurred to me that maybe these were his favourite clothes and
not a costume at all. But I had to say something now that he was waiting for me to repeat my

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previous comment. I shouted louder, to overcome the music. The music stopped in time for the whole room to hear me shout, “Great Butt”. Unfortunately, it wasn’t until the music had stopped that I realized I didn’t need to shout any more. I whispered in embarrassment, “ton ... great button.” But of course, no-one else heard the last bit. There were a few muffled giggles. Piers timidly looked himself over and smiled. Someone blew across a microphone to check it was working and tapped it until our middle ears hurt. It was Paul. He was on stage, like a jubilant tomeat on top of a new heap of sand. Everyone turned to look at him.

“Good evening, everyone, and welcome to Hennessy Clark’s Annual Law Ball. All the partners, myself included, hope that you are having a ball. Ha-ha! It’s our way of thanking you all for your commitment and dedication during what has been a challenging year. Now for a few housekeeping messages before I hand you over to the lovely ladies from Marketing who made this all happen tonight.”

He droned on about drinking sensibly and not drink-driving, all butt-covering propaganda since that awful series of cases almost a decade ago, suing pubs and employers for damages occasioned to drunken fools who got themselves into accidents on the way home. I’d unsuccessfully defended the insurer of a pub owner against the first such idiot, Malcolm Pederson. The bastard was an old drunk and all-round menace, who was in the local pub at opening every day, and staggered across four lanes of heavy traffic every evening to get home and assault his wife. It was a wonder he hadn’t been hit sooner. Of course, none of that made it into the news reports. A poor woman, driving home from work to her kids, momentarily looked up to see the price of petrol at the nearby station and didn’t see Malcolm walk in front of her car. Malcolm’s lawyers sued not only her car insurer, but also the pub owner for serving him alcohol after he was clearly inebriated, and for not offering him safe transport back home. Malcolm made a million out of it because his permanent bar stool now had wheels, but it ruined everyone else:

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the lady driver, because she was found to be negligent and the pressure gave her a nervous breakdown, and it forced the small pub owner out of business because he couldn’t afford the increased insurance premiums and the out-of-pocket expenses of the litigation. It was a seminal case, and the decision stank—it extended the law of negligence beyond its natural limits to accommodate judicial social engineering. It was one of the arrows that brought down many businesses and nearly put the Australian insurance market into melt-down. Public liability insurance became unaffordable, fetes and community fairs were cancelled, misery and uncertainty ensued. Just more of the ‘nanny state’…. The thinking was and still is, people who can pay, should, regardless of genuine fault. Anyone who says Australia is a class-less society is wrong. Even the legal profession has layers to it.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, plaintiff lawyers tended to be regarded with the same disdain as their regular clients—the whiners, the ambulance-chasers, the career-opportunists. There was something more artful about defense, except of course, when it related to criminals. Criminal defense lawyers and plaintiff personal injuries lawyers got the worst office space and chambers, and least respect. If corporate law was the grinning mouth of the profession, then crim and PI was the necessary, but unappealing tail end.

I felt Piers taking me in, even though I kept my eyes forward, towards the stage. My cheeks started to feel warm. Did he make the button in my honour? Oh no. What next?

The Spice Girls took centre stage. Scary Spice spoke first. “Ladies and gentlemen, now for the first competition of the evening, with the grand prize of a room for two in the nearby, classy Heritage Hotel.”
Baby Spice continued. “Thank you, everyone, for entering the competition for Hennessy Clark’s Most Beddable Babe. We had a lot of interesting entries, but rather than go on votes alone, we decided to award the prize to the most touching romance of the year.”

By this time, I had turned my back to the stage, but noticed that I was the only one doing so. Reluctantly, I resumed my former position, but stared at the ceiling in defiance. Next I heard Posh assaulting the microphone.

“And the winner is … Sandra Jeeves and her nominated dream-lover, Piers McDonald!”

I was sure that I was the only one breathing in the room, until my brain caught up with my ears. Then I gasped too. Piers turned to me smiling and embraced me in a most gentlemanly manner. I was frozen.

“Thank you,” he said, and hesitantly kissed me on the top of the head.

“Well, come and get your prize, you two lovebirds,” snarled Posh as loudly as she could.

Piers gently led me up to the stage under his arm. Very, very slowly, parts of the room started clapping uncertainly, until a critical mass of applause accrued and someone wolf-whistled and then Angus shouted, “Go Sandra, you man-eater!” Piers had to accept the envelope with the accommodation voucher as my arms were still nailed to my sides. Some moron took our “couple photo” and we left the stage.

“I never knew,” Piers said to me tenderly. “Although I did hope and dream.” He paused, smiled to himself, and looked around the room: a new man. “I guess dreams do come true.”

He took my hand and held it too tightly as we made our way down the stairs. I tried to pull it free on the pretext of doing my hair, but he wasn’t letting go. It was like being half-swallowed by a python—trying to escape was futile! People slowly returned to their conversations and drinks. No doubt they were toasting my new romance.
"You look overwhelmed, Sandra. Can I get you anything?" I handed him my drinks voucher. He saw that two of the three drinks icons had been stamped away.

"Please?" Was all I could say.

"What do you drink? Shandy for Sandy?"

I couldn’t look at him. Here was a man I was publicly committed to, and he thought I was a shandy drinker! Beer and lemonade. "I need some air," I said, as I broke away from him and made my way to the balcony.

As soon as I’d reached the balcony, I broke down and cried. There was another couple out there canoodling, but they quickly left once I started sobbing loudly. I let it all out. The stunning lights of the river and city were blurry through my tears. How could I have been so stupid? To reject this poor man now would be to mortally wound him. I held onto the railings and wondered how far down it would be. No, that would make things worse for both of us. He was so tender and kind. It wasn’t his fault that he looked like the Beast. After all, I wasn’t exactly Beauty. I wiped my eyes. Bugger. Everyone has one-night stands. Maybe that would be enough.

Piers kissed me on the shoulder and slid in front of me, obliterating my city view with the glitter in his eyes. He handed me my drink and, with his spare hand, lifted my chin to make my eyes meet his. Then he kissed me. I closed my eyes and tried to think of something else, somewhere else, with someone else. His mouth was frantically searching for passion and then he slipped the tongue in. I guess he took the meaning of the prize quite literally and explaining it right now was going to be rather difficult. A hand slid down my back and rested on my bottom, giving it a light massage and squeeze. I pulled away from him gently, trying to seem more coquettish than rude and uninterested.

"Let’s go dance," I said, dragging him to the dance floor.

"But I don’t dance," he protested.
“Now you do.”
III

ANOTHER PLACE, ANOTHER PERSON

Today, it was as if everyone was in a play written just for me. Vodka Screwdriver in hand, my Catholic conscience and the debacle with Piers a safe three thousand kilometers away, I was enjoying my surroundings with reckless abandon. My eyes, for starters, were having an out-of-body experience. This was a good place to get my ex, Mick, out of my system too. A few weeks after our break-up, I started seeing him late at night, standing outside, across the street, looking into my windows ... but he couldn’t have been....

The heated outdoor spa at Club Med, Noumea was the perfect vantage point. At least a dozen men were on the beach rigging up their windsurfers for a race. Half of them were resort staff. This, no doubt, was why they chose to work here. The twenty-knot wind was whipping wildly at their restless sails and making mini-tornados from the sand at their feet. I could hear the thwacking noise of the wind teasing the bigger sails, which had been left hanging on their racks all in a row, about thirty meters down the beach. Palm trees around the sailors genuflected and buzzed with the gusts through their fronds.

My one-time windsurfing instructor, whom I regarded as a direct descendant of Adonis, was tightening the downhaul on his sail, reclining in the sand, pulling a rope towards him while pushing the mast away with his booty-covered feet. He made rubber windsurfing booties look good. Every muscle in his body stretched in unison with his downhaul. From a distance, I saw his mouth moving, but couldn’t tell whether he was speaking with someone or whispering to his rig like a jockey to his ride.

My keenness to meet him was the insanity that had driven me to try windsurfing once and only once on this trip. Upon reflection, I didn’t think there was any way of getting him into my

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bed after he’d hauled my dimpled thighs out of the water onto a reluctant board thirty-two times in an hour. Once the lesson in humiliation was over, he had to clean chunks of skin, seaweed and my blood off the equipment. Of course, I had refused to wear the booties and slashed myself on coral almost as many times as I had thought about sex. If I’d had the sort of mother I could talk to, she would’ve said I was being punished for impure thoughts. And in this case, she would have been right.

To his left, an apparent novice was shielding his eyes from the gusting sand with his hands and arms. He didn’t have the look of seasoned confidence and composure. His movements were unsure and jerky and his posture stooped. I could see him breaching the cardinal rule of windsurfing even before he hit the water—he wasn’t keeping his back to the wind. His saggy-in-the-middle sail flopped about violently from side to side as the poor man gallantly tried to connect the board to it. He dug his feet into the sand, trying to prop himself, but the wind was too strong. It was dragging him against his will, turning his perseverance into a parody. He was struggling against the elements, not engaging with them. He was an outsider, not a winner. Even I, with my minimal knowledge of the sport, could tell that. He was a two hundred to one shot.

I kept my body snugly immersed in the warm bubbles of the spa and watched. Only my head was peeping out, but still from below the rim, which protected me from what the honeymooners in the suite next door called a “cyclone”. I couldn’t see why weather would matter when one was honeymooning, but each to their own, I suppose. Of the ten days that I’d already been here, this was by far the best, despite the weather. None of the Barbie Doll girls in their G-string bikinis were game for these conditions and all the fat men were inside watching movies or harassing the barmaids. Only the real men, who played sport rather than watched it, were out on show today.
The last week of February and first week of March wasn’t exactly the best time of year to visit a beach resort, but the managing partners at the law firm I work for had decided that I couldn’t accrue more than ten weeks of annual leave without losing it, so they had forced me to go on holidays for two weeks and deleted all reference to the other eight. They couldn’t afford to be without me, they had said. Disarming an angry woman with flattery was cruel and underhanded, if you asked me. It was such a shame that I had to go back to work the day after tomorrow. In the morning, I had a three-hour flight to Brisbane and half a day of dreading the day to follow.

A Frenchman in Speedos pleasantly distracted me from my thoughts and obliterated my view of the beach. His abundant talent looked good, even in the chill of this day. I wondered what he’d look like in my warm room? Could I be so lucky? I knew he was French because of the way he swaggered, and besides, who else would be bold enough to wear man-hugging swimmers these days? His were no “budgie smugglers”—a sprightly cockatiel, perhaps? Then, of course, he introduced himself to me, in French, as “Momo”, and slid into my pool for two without asking whether the place was taken. Unless he had measured me up earlier and followed me to the spa, all he had to go on was a pair of Gucci glasses resting on the waterline with a jaw-length mop of wind-assaulted cow-brown hair on top. A smile materialized on my face without my permission, and worked its way south.

As a single girl traveling alone, I was finding many of the male resort staff to be most obliging. I was getting the impression that Momo was going to be no different. There’d be a few Frenchies surreptitiously winking at me during tonight’s farewell spectacular by the pool. I was big enough to realize that it was probably company policy, rather than my extreme sexiness at play. After all, everyone knows that happy customers return, and send their friends. So, while some of the staff had to eat and juggle fire-sticks by the pool for the amusement of tourists,
others just had to fan the smoldering fires of the guests themselves. Every workplace has its hazards. At least these hunks get to work in paradise and eat French food instead of boxed Chinese takeaway, alone in the suburbs of sleepy Brisbane. I quietly fantasized about missing tomorrow’s flight.
IV

WAKE UP, YOUR LIFE SUCKS

How life sucked when you had to return to the reality of it! Why couldn’t I just live within my happy moments on holidays, like a slow-motion animation?

Sitting on the edge of my bath-shower in my tiny suburban ensuite, I swished the last of my luke-warm instant coffee around my mouth, and reveled in its bitterness. Reluctantly, I swallowed it, knowing that this marked the beginning of a new workday. There was no going back to bed, and no more lazing around Noumea with real coffee, from today. Not for another few years, until I could convince that prick of a partner to give me another holiday, or I was forced to go on leave again.

The bad instant coffee dried out my mouth and exacerbated my morning breath. Luckily this brand came with milk already in it, because if I’d used the milk that was still in my fridge from three weeks ago, the coffee would not only have tasted this bad, it would’ve been deadly.

I willed my carcass to stand, and my eyes to open properly, and to start seeing the creature in the mirror. It was time to be plucked, brushed and kicked into shape for the new workday. My thirty-plus years, in summary, have been an un-suspenseful, sad movie. And now, I had to take up the lead role again.

Lethargically, I reached for my mother’s homoeopathic happy pills on the shelf beneath the mirror and took three, just in case. I wondered whether she had paid $9.95 for a genuine therapeutic benefit or for the sage words of advice in big, bold typeface on the front of the jar: “Think Positive”. Oh well. At least they didn’t react with my other favourite cure-all: alcohol. And it kept my mother happy that I was doing something positive about my health.
Next, I reached for my toothbrush, but inadvertently grabbed Mick’s. What was that still doing here? I pegged it into the rubbish bin under the sink, and grabbed my own. I scrubbed the hell out of my teeth until my gums screamed. Bleeding? Absolutely! But clean nonetheless—just red and salty. Then I scraped off the white geography of my tongue, lest I go to work smelling like a maggot farm. When I could help it, I brushed and scraped twice a day. But I figured the flossing could wait. With tombstone teeth as firmly stacked together as mine, it was a case of dreading the shredding. And why does floss break and get stuck between the teeth, requiring even more floss to go in and saw it out? A conspiracy to sell more floss, I’d say!

The towel from around my body dropped to the floor. With a good deal of steam and a fogged-up mirror, I looked pretty good.

Stray, horizontal rain pelted through my little bathroom window and stung the side of my face, pushing away the craving for more sleep. Hundreds of moths streamed up from the grass in the yard below, making a quick escape. Even with the rain, it seemed too warm for autumn.
V

WATERING WEEDS

The residents from the “Oh no, I’m from the northern suburbs” of Brisbane were not yet awake when I floored my growling Beemer down Maundrell Terrace. Surprisingly in this day and age of relentless urban sprawl, this unsubstantial stretch of pock-marked bitumen was one of the main arterial roads towards the city. People from the newer but historically less prestigious southern suburbs had freeways, on-ramps and bus ways. There, less prestigious or not, whole suburbs didn’t grind to a halt every time someone hailed a bus. In another hour, this single-lane-each-way road would have cars coughing their way from traffic light to traffic light, for as far as the eye could see. As much as I hate getting up early, my impatience with traffic would give me a violent turn even before I made it to the office. Hence sunrises, unfortunately, are no longer exciting, but routine for most of the year. Even so, I tell myself that there are always benefits in starting before everyone else.

I overtook the local newspaper-delivery van and waved. The driver waved back. He and I have never spoken, but we know each other from sight, being the only two vehicles on the road at this early hour.

He’s seen me change cars from Corolla to Commodore to my BMW-baby. My progression in cars not only reflected my income, but also my choice of boyfriends. Whomever I was with at the time, tended to pick the car. If it made them happy, it made me happy. Top Gear’s Jeremy Clarkson said on his show that until recently, only dickheads drove Beemers—but now, BMW drivers can relax, because the morons have mostly moved on to Audis, thanks to all the movies with Audi car-chases. Product placement! So, at least by his estimation, I am not a dickhead driver. Not any more. It does tickle my fancy however, that my super-sized exhaust
makes people check me out at the lights. I just smile sweetly at police, and they quickly disregard me as person of concern—a drag-racer in a business suit and lipstick? Unlikely. Not her car—just look at that rear spoiler!

I’ve been doing this trek for so long, that I can remember passing the milk-delivery guy during that time of innocence when just about all Brisbane residents would leave a couple of coins and empty glass milk bottles on their doorsteps and find them miraculously replenished in time for breakfast. If you didn’t have enough change one morning, you could even leave an apologetic note and the milkman would still deliver your milk. The friendly doorsteps adorned with sweating bottles and sparkling foil tops are long gone from this area.

It seems that the spread of massive 7-day shopping centers with extended hours and the dispersal of public housing into previously affluent and middle-class areas, has changed the character of Brisbane forever. Loosely-wired teenagers, let out of the ghettos of the outer suburbs, now force their self-expression upon the rest of us, much like (they would have us believe) we are forcing our neat and orderly world upon them. Not only are the bus stops along the side of the road spray-painted with gang tags, but every possible mode of destruction has been attempted on them. Now that I’m old enough to know, I can truly say that I preferred things the way they were: “ghettos” or not.

After some fumbling and lack of attention to the road ahead, I turned on the radio. There’s one spot where reception isn’t all that good. It crackles at a particular intersection where there are above-ground power lines and a traffic-signal control box painted to look like Ned Kelly’s masked face. Admittedly, I didn’t like the dead eyes staring at me every time I stopped at that intersection, either. Maybe Ben, my car (named after Ben Affleck), was reacting to bad art? The painter was hopeless. I could’ve painted a better bushranger, if I’d wanted to. At least I could get two eyes the same size! There wasn’t much more to it, surely.

*Six Minutes*
I ploughed through a pot-hole I knew to avoid. I was too busy changing radio stations from non-stop depressing news to something more cheerful. The pot-hole caused more of a bump than I’d anticipated. What an omen … not that I’m superstitious …

That was followed by AC/DC’s song “You Shook Me All Night Long”—which is probably what I was needing, but not getting enough of. Let’s just say that Momo didn’t work out.

This morning was rather glum and I was sure it wasn’t just my mood. All the signs indicated that I shouldn’t go to work. Even my “stars” in the free local newspaper said that for a Libran, this would be a perfect “doona day”, with chippies and hot chocolate under the covers and a sappy video. Unfortunately, that wasn’t part of my workplace agreement. I started singing to cheer myself up, sliding my notes like a passionate but deaf rock groupie.

This stretch of road was downhill, towards the ring of smog that was the city, or the “shitty”, as I affectionately called it amongst friends. Shards of intense sunlight broke through in places, as if by godly intervention, showing that not all hope was lost. Perhaps this was an indication of the extent of my early Catholic indoctrination: the motivational posters that looked just like this scene before me, plastering over what could be my subconscious longings or the cracks in my faith.

While living in the centre of the city would be a major convenience, the thought of permanently sniffing at society’s rear end causes me to drive thirty minutes each way. Or twenty-five if the lights are in my favour and there are no dumb drivers in the way. If I’d traveled with the rest of the mugs who work normal hours, the trip time would be closer to an hour each way!

To be honest, the drive doesn’t really bother me, as much as I might complain. Generally, there’s something meditative in the soothing sound of a car engine, except of course when I’m revving it up to monster an elderly or otherwise incompetent driver out of my way, like the one

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who has just pulled out of a side street and inserted herself in front of me. Crap! I dropped a gear and prepared to overtake. She dropped her speed in response. Typical. I cursed again, but more emphatically, and moved into the right lane, slower than I would’ve liked. Still, I managed to overtake her before the road turned into one lane again for the lights. To get clear of her, I ran an orange. She honked at me with indignation. I honked my horn right back, holding it down just a tad longer than necessary—enough time for her to read my bumper sticker—“Hell was full, so I came back”. Then I accelerated to ensure that I didn’t meet her at the next set of lights.

Thoughts wash over me and the painful reality of my life recedes into the shadows that follow me. Sometimes I think the loneliness does strange things to me. Lately, I’ve even started watering pots of soil, where the plants have long died, just to see what, if anything, pops up. Weeds, I find, are most reliable companions—they require little care.

Initially, I felt quite lost when I was on holidays and yet I despise the very comfort of that familiar rut I call work. I am sick to death of feasting, most nights after seven, on chips, coke and bourbon from the concealed cabinet in the partners’ boardroom. And I am sick to death of sucking in that stale air-conditioned air that is shared with nine hundred other people. And above all, I am sick to death of being sick to death. But I feel there is no way out. I know no other life. My lifestyle is coming close on uninsurable: heart-attack? Yes please. Stroke? Yes please. Liver failure? On every other day, please, with cholesterol on the side.

Occasionally, I console myself by remembering my grim days in criminal law. The memory is usually triggered on seeing my first attempted murder client who, acquitted of trying to kill a police officer, missed out on a dry prison cell and three meals, instead retaining his freedom to sleep in the damp Anglican church gardens with his pet rat. They scavenge through bins all around the city: Morgan, sucking the dregs and discarded ice out of every tin and cup he can find, with the rat keeping watch from his shoulder. Morgan was a half-wit who should’ve

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been in permanent care, like a number of our clients who had been de-institutionalized when all
the centers were shut down as a knee-jerk reaction to reports of industry-wide abuse. The
attempted murder charge was eventually thrown out when it was established that Morgan
accidentally released the handbrake in the police car when trying to steal the copper’s thick-shake
and fries from the center console. The fact that the officer was standing in front of the car when it
started rolling had more to do with two numb-skulls intersecting in the same time-space
continuum than any intention to kill.

I used to work for a small criminal defense lawyer, who rarely had a client who could pay.
He did mostly Legal Aid: “sausage factory” work, which sustained the practice at just beneath the
poverty line. Being a part of that world was like seeing the twinkling of the stars through the
sewer grates—we knew things could be better, and wrongly believed that if we kept working
hard enough, and ignored the abuse from both the boss and the clients, we could be up there with
the bigger and better firms. The legal staff was paid a pittance, monthly in arrears. The secretaries
got more on average, and were paid weekly, because they were: on government subsidies; harder
to come by; and even harder to keep. With a glut of law graduates in the marketplace, we were
modern-day slaves.

The month after I had finished my Legal Ethics subject at university, I remember being
taken out to Wacol prison with a big bunch of business cards. “What are these for?” I almost
asked, the chapter on “No Touting for Legal Business” still fresh in my mind. Before I could
think “captive audience”, I was helping my General Noriega look-alike boss, AKA ‘Pineapple
Face’, hand out bunches of cards to prisoners, saying “Give them to your mates and families.
Group discounts.”

Some people are born with more options than others. While my wealthy friends were
having their travel vaccinations, Noriega sent me to the “me-not-speak-English-so-good” Indian
bulk-billing doctor next door for my hepatitis shots. I asked why. He said he wouldn’t take me out to the prison until I did. True story. What he didn’t tell me, but what I soon discovered, was that prisoners were often keen to impress upon you their mastery of: projectile motion of body fluids (and sometimes solids, if you were really lucky), exotic and erotic (if you’re a dog) language, and Advanced Disease Dissemination 101. Even when you’re apparently on their side. I couldn’t begin to fathom life as a prison warden, or “screw”, as the inmates called them.

In the end, no-one really cared if the accused was guilty. No-one cared if our skills gave them a second chance at life or just a second chance to commit the crime without being caught. Just no-one cared. There was no time and a conscience didn’t earn you more money.

There was nothing nice about working for small criminal law firms. Everyone hated you and treated you like the scum you represented. People from bigger firms laughed at you and got priority in all the queues. Government employees scowled at you and went to lunch just as you approached the counter after waiting an hour. Police lost reports and fabricated facts just to make your job harder. Every time I had to loudly announce the firm I represented, I cringed. No-one respected me or the job I tried my best to do well. Everyone spoke to me in short, clipped sentences, generally beginning and ending with “no”. Life was hard and there was no silver lining. Slowly but surely, I was growing my own chip on the shoulder. It wouldn’t have been long before I started identifying with my clients’ persecution complexes.

I guess I picked up a few bad habits from Noriega and his world, but he taught me one lesson I’ll never forget: survival. His clients also taught me a valuable lesson. Two years with them recast my whole belief system from good and evil to dumb and dumber. Basically, at that end of the gene pool there’s not a lot of evil. It’s probably a misnomer. And the usual classification of Haves and Have-nots along the lines of material wealth is also immaterial in the real world. What divides society into criminals and law-abiding citizens is common intelligence.
and mental health. Noriega had all sorts of clients: bank robbers, murderers, garden-variety thugs, drug dealers, drug users, and thieves. Having a defense of insanity is laughable, because to do the things these people do, you’d have to be insane. That’s the point. Or really, really stupid—and there’s nothing anyone can do about that except sue their own parents. All of that aside, people generally want the same things. Crooks just take short-cuts getting them, or act out things that the rest of us have the refinement to suppress. Really, we’re all just glorified animals.

Noriega once asked me what I was doing in criminal law. I dressed too well and I was clean spoken—back then, at least. He said he could picture me doing corporate or some other “high-flying shit”. I denied it at the time of course, being quite keen to keep my job, but criminal law was just something to pass the time and pay the bills. After two years, the novelty had worn off and going to the prison to be hit on by over-inked inmates had lost its appeal.

So it was that a recruitment agency picked me up and put my good experience in criminal law to better use, defending big-time insurance companies.

I turned into the back alley behind my building and was welcomed by the familiar rotten stench of piss and beer from the adjoining pub’s loading dock. I swiped my access card at the entry to the garage and the electronic door shook and screeched to life. It was struggling. At first I didn’t know why. Then I noticed that a vagrant had fallen asleep sitting against it. He was being pulled to his feet, semi-conscious and cranky. Once he disengaged himself from the door, he slumped behind another beer keg and promptly returned to dreamland. So began my first day back at work.
VI

I'M CURIOUS, IS THAT A DEAD CAT IN YOUR BAG?

"Hey, Suzie, what are you doing in here so early?"

"What do you think?" My nineteen year old, shared typist looked at me rather evilly through her ironed-out blonde fringe, and planted her smooth elbows on her desk. "Billing didn't get done on time, again, and the partners are spewing because they can't work out their goddamn profits until the billing gets done."

"You been in long?"

"Just since five. Was in till ten. Paul wouldn't let me go until I'd done all the FOAI accounts, which he only gave me at six last night!"

FOAI was one of our biggest insurance clients. It stood for something dull to do with friendly insurance, if there ever was such a thing, but its defense lawyers knew it as code for Fuck Over All Insureds. That's where the lawyers found their purpose: defending the firm's standing order to not pay about ninety percent of all claims, despite the heavy advertising campaign to the contrary. It was cheaper to pay lawyers than claims, unless they were really small claims. Besides, if everyone knew it was easy to claim, they wouldn't hesitate to claim again, and again. Or so the thinking goes.

"So, how was your holiday?" Suzie asked, begrudgingly.

"Oh good, fine, yeah, really good." I nodded slowly out of habit, without breaking eye contact. Paul told me that this annoyed a few people because they didn't know whether I was having a go at them or not. I stopped nodding when I realized I was doing it again. "There's really not much to say except that it was a nice break. The beach wasn't as nice as we have here, the men were alright, the accommodation was very run down."

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“Would you go there again?”

“Nope. Gold Coast is better. Way better. Even Airlie Beach wins hands down.”

I started walking towards my office when Suzie called me back.

“Mrs Merritt rang again while you were away.”

“Again?”

Mrs Merritt was a whining bag-of-bones plaintiff who just wouldn’t go away. She wanted to sue one of the local petrol stations for their dangerous driveway, which had caused her to slip and lose her sense of humor. The claim sounded suspect. Not even the video cameras caught her falling. She claimed to have been lying in a puddle of petrol for a full five minutes before anyone rendered assistance.

“Shit, didn’t anyone look after my files while I was gone?”

“Not this one.”

“Well, we all know why, don’t we? Flick it to Andrea. They’ll get on like a house on fire.”

“No they won’t.” Suzie gave me a perplexing sideways glance.

“Why not?”

“Andrea’s not with us any more.” Suzie primly tucked her fringe behind her ears as she put on her affected, clients-only voice.

Everyone knew this was the usual description of a bad parting. “You’re kidding? What happened?”

“Paul sacked her out of the blue,” she said, in her normal broad Aussie drawl.

“Paul did? Well, flame me dead. I thought those two were an item.”
“Yeah, I was pretty sure they were rooting each other too,” she replied in a hushed, conspiratorial voice. “But obviously not any more. She was crying so hard, Tina had to help her to the lifts.”

Just my luck. The one bit of office excitement for the year and I miss it. “What else do you know?”

“Nothing. Go ask Tina. She might know, but she’s not telling me.”

“You two still not talking?”

“Na. I’m sure the bitch is the one stealing my lunch from the fridge. Last Wednesday, I left a slice of pepperoni pizza with anchovies in there, because I know that’s the one thing she doesn’t like, and guess what … my lunch didn’t get stolen that day!” Suzie folded her arms on the desk in front of her like she had made her case.

I tried hard not to smile. “Still, it’s not conclusive, is it? Not many people like anchovies, particularly at work, and the lunch thief, whoever it is, might not have been hungry that day. Or the person was away that day.” I wasn’t sure whether to joke about this or not. Everyone in law firms gets so hung up on evidence, and takes themselves so seriously. The showdown between Tina and Suzie was going to be a cracker. Neither of them knew how to hold onto their tempers. I changed subject because encouraging her to talk about it felt as culpable as placing bets on an illegal cockfight.

“Tina did her typing for years. I doubt she’ll tell me anything. So who’s going to look after the Dover Industries file now that Andrea’s gone?”

“Argh! Jennifer Frank is her name. She sits in Andrea’s old office, nice and close to Paul.”
In support of Suzie, I snorted my anticipated dislike of this new woman. “I suppose I’d better go and introduce myself,” I said with as much snarkiness as I could muster first thing in the morning.

“Yeah, totally,” replied Suzie, curling upwards the left side of her top lip, revealing her savage snaggletooth. No doubt that twisted canine could be corrected, but it added character to an otherwise transparent and un-memorable face.

The Dover Industries file was massive. It involved defending the drug company from a class action of one hundred and fifty women who claimed that the company’s Intra-Uterine Device caused their infertility. If the company lost, it would create a legal precedent unlike any other in Australia’s history. Dover Industries would be brought to its knees with all the compensation payments. We would be arguing the floodgates theory and the lack of knowledge about certain risks associated with the manufacturing processes of IUDs at the time. That was my guess. Of course, I wouldn’t know for sure, because I wasn’t glamorous enough to come anywhere near the file. It was the territory of the beautiful people.

The whole litigation department jostled in an attempt to be in on that file. Friends became foes, and strategic alliances were forged where only contempt had existed. In the end, Andrea had been the chosen one, and everyone knew why. She was Paul’s office playmate of the moment—his life-sized, squeezable stress toy. The question now was: Why was Jennifer chosen to replace her?
VII

LITIGATION IS A LOUSY LOVER

I made my way around to Paul’s office to gawk at the new kid on the block. She had to be a stunner, typically long legs, blonde hair, bee-stung lips—I’d seen it all before. If Versace were still alive, he’d probably pull her from her mundane captivity and immortalise her in a fashion magazine. It’s rumored that Paul’s wife had once been that beautiful, until his seed made her the fat and frumpy mother of four she is today.

Here I was, taking a perfectly normal walk around the kitchenette biscuit tin (which happened to be very near the partner’s office) feeling like a complete criminal. I could see my guilty reflection in the glass walls of the professional offices: pale face, goldfish eyes and a splotchy red neck. I should have thought to bring my mug along to look more convincing. How many people went to the biscuit tin without their mugs or china cups? I certainly did when no-one was looking, and that, no doubt, explains a lot of the extra weight I carry around for company. If I were any shorter than my five foot three, I’d be a cube with legs. Thank goodness for high-heels and my fantastic boobs—men don’t tend to notice much else, anyway.

Distracted by guilt, I lost balance outside another associate’s office and struck the glass wall with my right hand. He looked up from his work, frowning, perturbed. It’d take him another unit of time to settle back in again. And that was a unit of billable time wasted. Knowing him, however, Slippery would find a way to recover the time without over-exerting himself.

A unit of time in the firm equated to six minutes. That’s ten units in every hour. Every producer has to achieve at least seven and a half billable hours a day, no excuses. Billable hours do not include research, coffee breaks, toilet breaks, chats in the corridor or cleaning out one’s bottom drawer, although many people would like to think so. Each unit of time has to be allotted
to a file number and client for billing at the end of the month. Sick days and days off have to be made up. Progress reports are printed for each department and individual author (as the lawyers and paralegals are jointly known) and compared mercilessly against one another. Anyone who falls behind par is quickly pulled into line or weeded out. But unlike my pet potted weeds, which spring back to life after every watering (no matter how infrequent), there’s no coming back after two below-average reports.

The pressure causes some people to charge more time than they actually spend in the office. There are two ways of doing this—the first is defendable within reason, the second, not. Spending two or three minutes on a file still gets charged out as six, that being a whole unit of time, since they can’t be split into part units. When we call our clients, we have to punch in their file number first, so every call is accounted for—even the itty bitty short call you didn’t think you were being charged for. Then there are the complete scumbags, like Slippery, who is competing against me for promotion.

Suzie’s told me that he slips them twenties under the desk to do his typing and copying before mine and that his articled clerk complains that he scratches time off her timesheet every evening and transposes it onto his own—claiming to have done the work himself. He did that to the last articled clerk too, but when she complained to HR, they sacked her on performance grounds. So this one’s staying quiet for now, and he’s still getting away with it.

I apologized to Slippery with a solemn little nod and continued on my way. Bastard. My heart quickened to the sound of Paul’s voice, shouting “What?” from behind his closed office door. Silly, silly! I told myself, but my heart rate didn’t slow down.

I headed for the kitchenette. I shook the tin and heard a lone biscuit rattling around. I flipped off the lid to find it was Orange Cream. Bugger! It was always the last one. How desperate was I? Then I remembered: chocolate biscuits were only served on Tuesday and

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Thursday mornings, although Tim Tams, my favorites, were no longer supplied at all, due to cost cutting. Office morale never recovered. Knowing that living is about compromising, I grabbed the biscuit from the tin and shamelessly stuffed it in my mouth. At least the sugar would make me feel better for a while.

I gathered my wits and realized that the perfect excuse to have a look-see was to say hello to everyone after my holiday. Nothing wrong with that. And I had to introduce myself to the new person. Nothing wrong with that. I put a slight (and what I hoped was a professional and aloof) smile on my face and went to see what I could see. I'd just have to work back a bit later tonight to make up the billable hours.

She was gorgeous all right. Suzie's emphatic "Argh!" was entirely justified. I walked into a cloud of atomic-strength jasmine perfume and introduced myself. She looked up from her work and acknowledged me with a catty little turn of the mouth. "Jennifer Frank, and you are?" She put out her hand, fingers and palm tilted slightly downwards as if she were expecting a kiss or assistance alighting from a fine carriage. I shook it—harder than necessary, turning her hand upright and even with mine, not above it. The force wasn't reciprocated. Her barely-there touch was far too warm, from holding a cup of tea. The delicate china cup and saucer were still on her desk, with tea leaves in a little puddle at the bottom. So she wasn't a teabag girl—she brought her own loose leaf. Like the teacup, her hands were perfectly sculptured and refined. Long fingers, nails covered in the most delicate clear pink, and rings on every second finger. I hated myself at this moment and pulled my hand back in embarrassment. My nails were naturally square and jagged, with only specks of copper-shaded polish that had not come off over the length of my holiday.

Her voice was deep, professional and distant. She had a very proper boarding school accent. I hated her. She had only been working here a few days, so I told her where I sat, what I

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did, and offered to help her in any way. I asked about her background. She started telling me from the very beginning, in her quiet, restrained, low voice, how she came to decide to do law. Why do young people talk about themselves endlessly and with such conviction and self-belief these days? Is it because they haven’t been knocked about by a recession yet? Since her grades were so high, she could pick and choose universities. I nodded in a way that I hoped was polite, but I inadvertently stopped listening to her. Instead, I started to hear parts of the conversation between Paul and his secretary in the office next door. God bless these lousy, thin walls!

“Not my child” and “Andrea’s a liar” hit my eardrum with a thud. Is that why she’s no longer with us, I wondered? I was keen to hear more and nodded more vigorously at Jennifer, encouraging her to continue her droning while I gathered the gossip. “She might sue” was the last thing I heard before my welcome in Jennifer’s room had expired. The typical, well, *I guess we’d better do some work now* served as a constant reminder that our lives were on the clock and they weren’t worth much. At Christmas, we might be thanked with a beach towel or baseball cap with the firm’s logo on it—so we could, not just think about our place of employment while we were away from it, but also advertise it for free.

I left her office and slowly made my way past Paul’s, hoping that the door would open and I could find a plausible reason to say more than “hi”.

Disappointment being a key feature in my life, the door didn’t open and I had no other reason for loitering: there were no biscuits left, I had no mug, the new kid no longer wanted to talk to me and Paul’s door was shut. And there was work to be done.

This was terrible, just terrible. I kept telling myself that Andrea deserved it, that she had it coming, but I couldn’t bring myself to believe it. No-one deserved to have their career torched and life mangled for falling pregnant, not even a lipsticked leach like Andrea. I wished I’d never let my curiosity get the better of me. Now what was I supposed to do with this knowledge?

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Telling just anyone could get me into a lot of trouble and God knows that’s the last thing I need, especially with Paul.

Sitting at my desk, I felt the walls start to creep in on me. I beat and squeezed my stress ball. After three months of wear and tear, it was failing to return to its original shape, instead remaining egg-shaped and sad-looking.

I shouldn’t have gone on holidays. Coming back makes it so much worse. Not knowing a better life is sometimes for the best. Being completely immersed in work tends to support the assumption, which becomes a rock-solid belief, that everyone who’s anyone, lives like you do—that there are no other options. Besides, the pace and rigour of legal life leaves little time or energy for remembering or imagining something better. For me, not taking holidays would have been just an extension of missing two years of lunch breaks. I could feel “poor me” tears welling up in my eyes. Damn it! I blinked them away and clenched my jaw. I would not cry. If only I could afford to leave this place. Unfortunately, there were too many people counting on me, including, but not limited to, the bank that was providing my mortgage and car loan.

I pulled the mail tray towards me and started sifting through the last two weeks’ worth of letters, pamphlets, abusive phone messages and documents to review. I had three trays: in, out and “Abeyance”. Abeyance meant I was waiting on something, usually the motivation to do the job required, but occasionally, instructions from clients, copies of cases or court documents from the other side. Once, I had been sent to a time management course that said in fifty different ways (to take up a whole day, naturally), “only handle each piece of paper once”. Well, that’s all well and good for some people, but not for me. So, in my unhappy state, I dumped everything from the in-tray into Abeyance. It could wait. I had to have a smoke, but remembered with some guilt that it was a waste of money and that I was giving up. That habit had been costing me a hundred
dollars a week. Besides, smoking is so 80s. With horror, it occurred to me that the 1980s were
two decades ago!

A friendly secretary walked into my office for a chat. She took one look at me and asked,
“You’ve been on holidays or you’re going?” I asked her what she meant and she said that I
looked like I hadn’t been at all, that my stress-meter must be malfunctioning. Wait until I start
working, I thought. I’ll bet no-one covered for me while I was away and there are things
outstanding other than Mrs Merritt, and no doubt there’ll be various court actions threatened.
Litigation is like stomping out bush fires with your bare feet. No sooner have you stomped out
one fire than another one has cropped up behind you.

I muttered half to the secretary, half to myself, “I don’t know how I got stuck in litigation.
It’s so not me.”

The secretary replied, “Yeah right” and walked away smiling. Was she laughing?

I decided to take a walk down four flights of stairs to see my mate, Frances Mackay. She
was always good to talk with, although I hated how she had to finish my sentences. It’s not an
uncommon trait in lawyers, finishing off other people’s sentences. Some lawyers regard non-
lawyers as intellectually and socially inferior and demonstrate their contempt towards the rest of
humanity by chipping away at it, one word at a time. But in other cases, like Frances, they’re just
too busy for punctuation. Oddly enough, all other professional and social courtesies are extended
to the utmost degree; just not the luxury of hearing out the end of one’s sentence. Admittedly, the
profession does also have its share of rogues, who engage in a similar methodology to lead
witnesses—but that wouldn’t be anyone from this firm, well, not that I know of. Maybe Slippery.
With Frances, I’ve learned to speak faster, to catch her off guard and not give her a chance to
think what I might say next. Whereas I’d ordinarily feel happy speaking at the speed of a farmer
leaning on a fence post picking at his teeth with straw, my conversations with Frances dart and weave like dragonflies.

My office was on level twenty-seven of thirty. I didn’t typically take the stairs, unlike many of the younger staff members, who were in training for corporate triathlons, or their older counterparts who did not understand the concept of aging gracefully. They all say that exercise is a form of release, that they feel better after it, both physically and emotionally. Yet to be convinced, I was, however, prepared to start small, by walking down to Frances’, with the option of catching the lift back up. Walking downstairs shouldn’t be difficult. By this stage, I had completed one flight of stairs, with only three to go. It occurred to me that the last time I took the stairs was for the fire alarm, which no-one took seriously until the police came to defuse the bomb on level one. There was a sole practitioner on that level who did Family Law—an area our firm refuses to do. He had an unhappy spouse of a client visit him, pin him under a heavy piece of furniture and leave him with a ticking package, neatly tied up in pink legal ribbon. A few years prior, that practitioner had been held up by a suicidal maniac who wanted a copy of his estranged wife’s will. Some people have all the luck. Needless to say, he finally gave up the law and became a landscape architect. Smart man.

By the last flight of stairs, I was feeling more negative than positive. Like why did my knees want to give out; why was I puffing; and why was I holding onto the handrails, like a little old granny?

I pushed along to level twenty-three and tried the door. It was locked! Flame me dead! I walked another flight of stairs to twenty-two and dared it to be locked. It was locked. Flame me dead then bugger me. Twenty-two flights of stairs later, I was squinting into the early morning sunlight. It was only eight and no-one had unlocked the stairs. Why hadn’t I thought of that? There were a few secretaries in their designer sunglasses having a smoke and a chat. This is

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where the office gossip comes first. I'd really missed that when I gave up smoking, but I told myself that there were other ways to find things out (like slipping twenties under the desk) and really, I should be happy about saving my money and my lungs ... in that order. Unfortunately, while attempting to save my lungs, my liver got a horrendous workout. I drank away my tension and cravings at every opportunity. I even had a mini-bar in my bottom drawer at work. I don't know how it's possible, but I'm sure I felt cravings unfurl from their hidey-hole and wrap themselves around me, even when unconscious: drunk, asleep, or both. At first, I drank to get to sleep, but before long, that didn't work any more and I just drank because ... well, just because.

What money I saved on the smokes, I spent on the booze. It's so easy to blow a hundred in two days on alcohol, and that's if I'm drinking at home, alone. A hundred in a pub is one night's entertainment for one, if that.

At work, I went through the traumas of nicotine gum and then patches. The gum was a nightmare because someone of importance would invariably walk in or telephone me while I was chewing what well could've been my cud. Not a professional look, particularly as I'd chipped the secretaries about chewing gum in the office previously. Of course the secretaries still persisted with doing their frog impersonations and flipping the gum under their tongues whenever I approached, and I avoided confrontation by pretending that I hadn't noticed. But still, I couldn't be seen to be joining them, whether or not mine was for therapeutic purposes and theirs only for the bubblegum flavor and man-luring breath. I found the patches to be evil and uncomfortable, with a mind of their own, much like sanitary pads with wings. When it was hot, the patches came off with the sweat, when it was cold they came off with bits of hair and skin. I was not impressed. In any case, I doubted the efficacy of a tiny patch when I was coming off a daily packet of Camel 20s. I'd need to be plastered in nicotine tape from head to toe like a mummy.
So I didn’t join the secretaries. I gave them an unenthusiastic, yet professional wave and kept moving, like I was suitably preoccupied with things beyond their comprehension.

I rode the lift up to level twenty-three and took a seat in Frances’ office. She wasn’t in, but her computer was on, so I decided to wait. She must be nearby. If she weren’t, she would have put her screen-saver up to protect her work from prying eyes. That’s what we were trained to do. And to never leave files open on our desks for extended periods, especially if a client could be shown into an office full of other people’s or indeed their own files. Realistically, we were hiding our work more from our colleagues than from any clients. Competition. Not confidentiality.

I started wondering whether I should talk to Frances about it, or not. Apart from being my friend, she did know a thing or two about Employment Law, having spent the last four years practising in the area. But it wasn’t really legal advice that I was looking for. Something about Andrea’s dismissal tore me up inside and left a hollow space, which was fast filling with despair. I was the child on the beach, trying to bucket away the tide.

“Hi Sandra, how was your holiday?”

My back was to the doorway. I turned around to face a cheery Frances.

“Oh, hello Frances. It was fine thanks.” What was meant to be a smile turned out to be a stretching of my lips across and down my face with a simultaneous sucking in of my cheeks, instead of the upturning of a happy mouth. I could feel it happening, thinking this wasn’t what I’d intended at all. I probably looked like I was drying my teeth.

“I take it you’re not happy to be back?” Frances closed the dark timber door, walked around her desk and sat down. She leaned forward attentively.

“It’s not that.”

“Oh, so you are happy to be back?” she teased.
“No ... not that either.” I looked down at my hands and realized that I had completely unraveled a paper clip. A sharp end had scratched my left thumb, which had started bleeding.

“Could I borrow a tissue please? I seem to have cut myself.”

“I think you can keep it. We’re not that tight in this department.” I nodded my thanks as she passed me a scented pink tissue.

“I don’t know whether I should talk to you, you didn’t send me a postcard or anything. I’ll bet you didn’t even bring me back a tee-shirt,” Frances joshed.

“No, I didn’t actually. There was nothing to buy there that I can’t buy here. If you want we can have lunch together and go to Brisbane Souvenirs and I’ll buy you a nice tee-shirt there,” I said. “They’re all made in—”

“China. I’ll pass.”

“What, on the lunch or ...?”

“Tee-shirt? On both actually. I’ve got heaps to do. Billing wasted about four hours of yesterday and I really should keep going ...”

I cut her off, for a change. “I would really appreciate your input on something. May I talk with you now?” I was overriding the firm’s official training on how to get time-wasters out of your office. We actually had a special course on it, and I saw how Frances’ brow creased when I’d thwarted her attempt. Her brow remained furrowed as she moved around in her chair, and picked up a pen.

“No, no notes. This isn’t about a file. It’s about something else.” She reluctantly put her pen down. A lawyer’s pen is like a smoker’s cigarette, the absence of which makes one fidget and look for substitutes. Frances grabbed a bottle of liquid paper and rolled it around her desk.

“What is it? You look spooked,” she said, as casually as she could.

“Spooked, or mad. I’m not really sure which.”

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I began by asking Frances what she knew about Andrea’s departure. There had been a morning tea planned for her last day, Frances had said, but Andrea didn’t turn up. It was a bit odd, but no-one complained because the scones with jam and cream were a real treat. The partners explained that Andrea had called in sick at the last minute. She had been sick on and off for the last few weeks, apparently.

I outlined what I had overheard and waited for Frances’ reaction. She remained poised and professional. The friendliness in her face was gone.

“So, why did I want to know this?” she challenged, staring me in the eye. Her reaction was exactly what most lawyers thought, but didn’t exactly say, when their clients had blurted out an admission, or a relevant but inconvenient detail, that would sink the case. Yes, come to think of it, there were definitely some things lawyers would rather not know.

“It’s just not right.” My response sounded flat and defeated, even to me. Unconvincing. What would be right? Truth in a broken-down relationship was going to be hard to come by, but the law, which was something entirely different, stipulated that contracts had to be honoured, and people should be free to work without discriminatory practices being applied to them.

“It might not be right, but it’s not our problem either. You overheard something you shouldn’t have. Forget about it. Let it go.”

I was gob-smacked. Frances had rarely disagreed with me in the past, let alone dressed me down like this!

“You never liked Andrea anyway,” she went on. “Why should you suddenly feel sorry for her? She nearly had you fired once, remember?”

I did remember. It wasn’t a pleasant experience at all. Andrea had gone behind my back to my boss, Paul, accusing me of tampering with mortgage documents, backdating them to help my client avoid the relation-back period in bankruptcy where transactions up to six months before...
bankruptcy could be declared null and void. I didn’t do it. As it turned out, one of our summer clerks had tried to be helpful without contemplating the full extent of his actions. It was embarrassing to say the least. Her actions, her pillow-talk had riled me at the time, but she did apologize and sent me flowers when she realized how wrong she was.

“I don’t hold grudges.”

“Sure you do.”

“Okay, well, not always and forever. I mean what happened to Andrea is terrible. It’s wrong. That bastard made the baby, didn’t he?”

“We don’t know that.”

“Yes we do.”

“Where’s the proof?”

“Don’t give me that. Everybody knew they were sleeping together. Lauren’s secretary caught them at it one night in the conference room, remember? Bet they didn’t put that time down as continuing education!”

“But we didn’t see them. How can you trust everything you hear?”

“Why would Lauren lie?”

“She probably wouldn’t, but that’s not the point.”

“That is the point, Frances.”

I left her office, without either of us having given ground. Fuming, I made my way to the stairwell, but this time checked that the door had been unlocked. I sat on the cold cement stairs in the semi-darkness for what seemed like hours. The guilt of wasting so many billable units magnified every minute by ten. Stuff them. I’d put the time down as admin—sure it wasn’t billable, but it was better than leaving a huge, gaping hole in the middle of my timesheet.
I turned Frances’ response over and over in my mind. It was like a ball of tangled wool, needing straightening out. Strictly speaking, she was correct, since we weren’t Andrea’s legal representatives. But were we innocent bystanders? At what point did innocent bystanders become culpable through inaction, by failing to render assistance when it was needed?

It made me think about the nature of truth, justice, the law, and ethics. Ironically, the court’s demand for “The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth” was to many people, an empty cliché. They rattled it off as well-practised parrots would, not seriously considering its significance, or the fact that every person’s truth depended upon his or her perceptions, biases, beliefs, and unreliable memory. That made truth unstable and frequently self-interested. Truth was no mathematical conclusion. It was always a human approximation, or a believable manipulation of facts and circumstances. Facts were facts—propositions that could be verified, and held fast, like “it was raining”. Truth was something more, or potentially, a whole lot less.

On the other hand, the law was the system of rules and expected norms—it didn’t necessarily prevent human mishaps, or always result in what people thought to be just, or fair. Unfortunately, the law was like a chain with several potentially weak links, a break in any of which could bring good order undone.

Like truth, justice and fairness were also dependant upon perspective. And what was justice anyway? Was it distributive or egalitarian? Was it in any way related to the ‘politics of envy’? Was it a leveling of the playing field? Did justice only relate to appropriate property ownership issues, or did it become confused with moral determinations?

In my opinion, laws existed to guide people, and particularly rein in those who lacked ethical or moral consideration for others. Ethics and morality of some kind were always intended to underpin the law, not be ignored because of it. But by the same token, the law was not to be applied according to individualistic views and ideals. And the law of precedent was supposed to
iron out the individuality of judges—they couldn’t just come up with a decision out-of-the-blue that satisfied their personal sensibilities. They had to explain it in terms of following or departing from prior decisions in the same area of the law.

Impartiality. Was that what Frances was doing? Perhaps she was attempting to be impartial, and hence, completely professional, as opposed to just slack?

It wasn’t that lawyers were dishonest or bad. No. That’s been a common and inappropriate slur. It was like calling doctors uncaring because they maintained a professional distance between themselves and their patients. Feeling was not supposed to be part of the service in medicine or the law. Diseases of the body; maladies of society. On a purely analytical view, the treatment of physical and social ills was intended to be value-free and independent of moral or other evaluative judgment. It was possible, I was seeing, that in particular cases (such as Andrea’s) where we were lawyers but not her lawyers, the purported value-free system could tilt the train right off its tracks.

My head was throbbing. Instinctively I knew that I was thinking myself into a problem rather than out of one. But somehow, it wasn’t just Andrea’s problem. It was mine too.

I was glad I didn’t tell Frances everything. She wouldn’t understand, but Andrea might …

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That night, in my dream, I was sitting at the top of a cliff above a sparkling beach, in amongst the lively sounds of seagulls squawking, waves carelessly breaking themselves apart on the rocks below, and the buttery warmth of the sun about to set. Stories of the day were being written onto the sky in shades of red, orange, grey, blue and white—endless and intertwining accounts of hope, love and despair. Nothing stayed the same. Nothing stayed recorded, as if, ultimately, in

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the ebb and flow of things, permanency was unrealistic, irrelevant. The experiences of the day were as insignificant and ephemeral in the grand scheme of time, as the etchings of the tiny but determined soldier crabs in the sand, twenty meters below. Yet, their daily toils were important to them, essential in fact—and ultimately, part of the perfection of today's unique story. But only partly.

Suddenly, I found myself propelled towards the cliff-edge with my body and legs lame. How did I come to be in a wheelchair, paralyzed? How did I get to be at the top of this cliff in such a state? Was he the one who pushed me, up the hill? Or over the cliff? The whirring of the cold steel spokes gained momentum as the wheelchair conveyed me across the next five meters of embankment, now bumping over rocks and dirt and grass indiscriminately, until it flung me into the sky—no longer friend, no longer foe. The wheelchair's fate would be kinder than mine. Metal on rock was still metal, but flesh splattered and carried away by crabs, fish, birds and waves, could cease to exist.

I started to fall. I felt the wind abrading me with sand and sea-spray, hissing WRONG WAY GO BACK! My trousers and jacket filled with air and flapped wildly like flags caught around their poles, twisting and tearing, beating against my body. This is my story, as layer by layer, cell by cell, I'm stripped back to nothing, and become a part of everything.
Tuesday should have passed uneventfully. It started with a breakfast for International Women’s Day, at the huge, characterless cement-box that is the Brisbane Convention Centre at Southbank. I was here representing the firm and keeping up with Frances, in that order.

Unfortunately, as soon as I arrived, I bumped into two women I despised: my old high school English teacher and school counselor. The years that had unkindly aged them almost beyond recognition had done little to diminish my dread of them. They must’ve been close to seventy. Were they friends out-for-breakfast, or were they still working together? Most teachers retired closer to fifty-five, but there were always a few who wouldn’t be worn down by the students … or who couldn’t afford to stop working.

I was awash with fresh feelings of unshakeable feebleness; those years of caning would eventually be forgiven perhaps, but never forgotten. Punishing me for not being lady-like enough, amongst other Catholic-girl sins! I pretended not to have seen them, but Mrs Bleakley, the tyrant and keeper of the English language, said to my back “Hello Sandra”, with a voice as flat as yesterday’s country road-kill. I thought to myself, if you don’t like a person why would you bother talking to them? I entertained the idea of pretending I didn’t hear her, but she knew I’d heard. I’d felt my spine freeze, making the rest of me rigid. I slowly turned around to see the only face that could match the voice—flat and furry in places, pock-marked with skin lesions, and half a nose missing to skin cancer. Her bird of prey eyes dared me to flinch. How could one pretend not to notice half a nose missing? Instead of looking her in the eye, I was unwillingly looking straight inside her head. She tilted it to the side, slowly sizing me up for a kill. This was a particularly unflattering angle for Mrs Bleakley. I wasn’t sure whether I should admire her self-
confidence in not getting a prosthetic nose, or dislike her even more for her obvious disregard for the comfort of others.

I greeted Mrs Bleakley by name, still calling her “Mrs Bleakley,” not “Brigid”, and turned to shake hands with the counselor. I started saying, “Hello Mrs …” hoping that Mrs Bleakley would fill in the gap, but of course she didn’t. Nor did the counselor. To make matters worse, Mrs Bleakley corrected me, like only an English teacher could, by saying, “Ms” in the most unpleasant tone of voice possible. Somehow, without a nose, the resonance was all wrong. She put so much emphasis on the ‘zzzz’ that something flew out of the big hole in her face. Was it spittle? Was it snot? I couldn’t be sure, but I made a mental note not to vomit immediately. I could wash it off the front of my blouse later. Or burn the blouse and get a new one.

I was sure the counselor was a Mrs back then. Or maybe she just used that title because Miss seemed all wrong for an older woman and the nuns disapproved of Ms. As far as the nuns were concerned, you tied yourself to a man and took his name and orders, or you sacrificed all that to do the work of the Lord. What a choice. I can still remember the religious instruction classes that dared touch on the topic of sex. A couple of indistinct, embarrassing diagrams and a cautionary note that this was only for the enjoyment of married couples, was what I was sent out into the world with.

The counselor put out her beefy hand and fashioned her thin rubber-band lips into a smile around her crooked coffee-stained teeth. I could feel the prickle of shaved hair on the back of her hand, and a scaly rough wetness to her palm. Then, she clamped her other big paw over the top of my hand, bracing me like a vice. Perhaps she was trying to save the situation with an attempt at showing feminist affection. Maybe it was a counseling thing, but to me it came across with all the subtlety of a counter-terrorism maneuver in a crowded airport. No wonder kids came out of her room crying. It was the office of broken dreams—perhaps even of her own.

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Mrs Bleakley asked me what I had done with my life, with words as precise as those. I told her I was a lawyer, a litigation lawyer—the kind that defended cases in court. Her cat-bum lips remained tightly pursed and her hands firmly placed on her hips. Her head was still tilted like she didn’t understand something … that what I was saying made no cosmic sense. I wasn’t sure whether to slouch and be casual to counterbalance and diffuse the situation, or stand up taller and look down my nose at this tormentor. At least I had one—a nose, that is.

I wondered how much Mrs Bleakley remembered of me: the number of times she sent me to the principal’s office for talking too much, or the number of laps of the oval she made me do to get my attention.

It’s not that I was stupid.

Thankfully, the Master of Ceremonies called us to our places and Mrs Bleakley and I could stop scowling at each other. I began to feel angry with myself that I hadn’t handled her better. I had always hoped that one day I would show that bitch that I’d made something of myself, that I was really someone, but instead, I’d reverted to the same old defensive Sandra they had always known.

I took a seat at the table near Frances. Since we lived on opposite sides of town, we came in separately. She didn’t exactly turn her body to greet me. I thought I’d relieve the tension by pouring her a tea. She clearly appreciated this and started talking while I reached for the coffeepot for myself. Now she was facing me.

“So have you thought more about what I said yesterday?”

“Which bit?” I asked.

“Well, you know, about minding your own business.”
“Oh, that bit.” I took a sip of coffee to disguise my hurt and disappointment. I’d hoped that she’d made that statement in the heat of the moment, even though it would’ve been uncharacteristic for a lawyer as well-trained as Frances.

“I was thinking she could probably use some support, now that she’s alone, pregnant and unemployed.” I added hopefully, “Maybe just a few hints on an unlawful dismissal cause of action?”

Frances didn’t even shift in her chair. Her mind was resolute as always. How could she be so sure of things at such a tender age? I had more than five years on her and I’m still not sure about most things. “I agree that what happened to Andrea was very wrong and that someone should stand up for her, but do you really think we should stick our necks out? I’m reluctant to bite the hand that feeds me.”

I placed my cup of coffee back on its saucer as carefully as I could. My co-ordination in the morning usually improved after about the third cup.

“I know what you mean.”

I didn’t tell her about the nightmare. She wouldn’t understand. She was too sheltered in her life experiences. She’d find me unacceptable, appalling, in fact... if she knew...

“So where does that put us?” I asked, fully knowing that there was no “us” until Frances said so.

She turned away and took a sip of her piss-weak tea. The question was well avoided, so rather than reignite tensions then and there, I changed the subject.

“How’s your dishwater?” I asked.

“It’s fine, thanks.”

We made small talk about the other women in the room. There were fat ones, skinny ones, ugly ones, and beautiful ones. I was willing to bet that the official photographer wasn’t going to
pay much attention to the fat, ugly ones. He might take a couple of shots of the refugees and then spend his time usefully following the celebrities of the morning, including the Lord Mayor. The powers that be in the firm would always coo happily when their stars were photographed in some notable journal or newspaper. Why couldn’t I be photographed for a change? Maybe if I stuck with Frances someone would take my photo? After all, she was the Attorney-General’s daughter. That made her trophy-material to social climbers. Maybe that’s where I fitted in. Apart from being her friend, I was her guard, swatting away undesirables with my complete lack of charm. Maybe that was it.

I wondered then, what I was getting out of the deal. I wasn’t a social climber, per se—well, at least, I didn’t think I was that shallow. But it’s not like I could talk with Frances freely about many things that were significant in my life either ... in particular—men, how to get them, and how to get over them. Or drinking. Beyond that, it was mostly work, and we couldn’t even discuss the details of our cases because of confidentiality and legal professional conduct. Frances was a good, church-going Anglican, who occasionally watched or played tennis, and almost never swore. I really didn’t know a lot more than that. We went to movies together occasionally, but that didn’t involve a lot of self-disclosure, just a non-challenging acceptance. Perhaps it was a comfortable professional acquaintance? I wasn’t sure any of us had the time to develop deep personal friendships at Hennessy Clark. We weren’t there to have fun. Then again, maybe this was what adult friendships were about, and the childhood one-friend-for-all-seasons was replaced with several adult companions, each for different reasons.

The MC touched her big blonde hairdo to make sure it was still there, took the mike and parroted off the usual welcome, including an Aboriginal Welcome to Country phrase and general housekeeping messages, and introduced the Liberal Lord Mayor, who gave a talk about the
importance of International Women’s Day. Then they brought out the refugees to tell their stories as our breakfasts were being served to our beautifully laid-out tables.

The first lady was from Ghana—she looked to be in her twenties, was very tall and rake thin—she could do with a good feed, poor thing. She spent more time sobbing into the microphone than talking. The MC had to take her script and read it out, somehow dislocating the African woman’s story with a broad Australian accent. She told of how she had been vaginally mutilated at the age of eight by her own aunts. People she had trusted called her to a hut where she was held down while her clitoris was cut out so she could never be tempted by sex, and her vagina sewn up to keep her virginal until she had a husband. There was nothing to numb the pain, only a rag between her teeth and her mother holding her hand. The infection and fever afterwards nearly killed her. When she was ten, she was given to a much older man, as was the custom of her tribe. She ran away, and the man, and even her own family, tried to hunt her down to murder her. She was saved by an international aid agency through a local family planning clinic, at the age of eleven. I pushed away my plate of bacon and eggs. This wasn’t something one wanted to hear over breakfast … or at all, truth be told.

The next speaker in the monologue of human horror was a petite and softly spoken Thai woman, dressed in a smart black skirt and white blouse. She could’ve been sitting in the audience, and wouldn’t have looked out-of-place. She told of how her family was so poor that her own mother sold her into prostitution. She’s never seen her family again. For some reason, I wanted to hear it from the mother’s side. So far, we were hearing the victims’ stories—the direct, first-hand victims, but surely, the mothers were victims too? What could drive a mother to give up her child to such degradation? To give up? I remembered my mother once saying that my pains hurt her more than me. Surely motherhood was universal.
Frances turned to me and said, “Seems like some of these poor women were forced into betraying their own ...”

I responded with what I’d hoped was a most thoughtful “Hmmm,” and then, had a go at summarizing the cases before us, in my own way. “The women were victims of three things: their culture; poverty; and ignorance...”

For some reason, Frances’ use of the word “betrayal” didn’t sit easily with me, even though I didn’t directly challenge her on it. She was probably right. But was she talking about the women who did the terrible things to other women—the mutilation, the selling into prostitution and so forth, or was she meaning these women before us today were betraying their own by speaking out?

The next story, at first, didn’t seem to fit the script. It was the most horrifying of all. A man from The Salvation Army spoke about how frustrated and desperate women in Papua New Guinea’s Highland region have become. “All the women folk agreed to have all male babies born killed because they have had enough of men engaging in tribal conflicts and bringing misery to them,” he quoted one of the tribal women he had met at a three-day peace and reconciliation course in the region’s capital, Goroka, recently. “They see this as the only way to end a tribal fight that has warred for more than 20 years—one particular fight, over sorcery claims, continues after starting in 1986,” he said.

I knew from my study of criminology that about five per cent of any population has psychopathic potential, which can be acted out in times of war, or generally when the social context permits ... or as coppers would put it—when there is opportunity. But to hear of whole tribes of women, on Australia’s doorstep no less, who were co-operatively killing their own babies to stop them from being recruited into fighting, just seemed extraordinary. Maybe not hearing the story from the women themselves made them seem more callous than desperate—a
pay-back of their own? Surely it could be waged in some other, less devastating way? What was the world doing about this? And how come this wasn’t common knowledge?

I was always up with my current affairs, and this PNG story had never been mentioned on the TV, radio or in the papers. Were journalists too busy trying to make and manipulate the news to report it any more—spinning opinion as fact? It was frequently so trite, petty, tacky—oooh

*George Bush has put his foot in his mouth again...* Tell me something I didn’t know.... In the Third World, it took guns to rig elections. In the First World, whoever owned the media, pulled everybody’s strings. And made it seem legal, innocent, unassailable.

I sipped my coffee. There was no way that I was eating this morning.

The MC re-emerged centre-stage and introduced the final speaker—“a lone voice from the Northern Territory intervention to give the perspective of black, traditional women, please warmly welcome Auntie Alirah Brown...” Everyone clapped. And clapped. And clapped. Auntie Alirah was in no rush to get to the mike, regardless of everyone else’s obsession with the clock—this relaxed attitude of the Australian Aboriginals is known culturally as “Koori Time”.

Back when it wasn’t a crime to be funny, my Administration Law lecturer used to joke that government departments ran on Koori Time, because they were so damned slow to reply to requests for information. Once someone complained about his racist inflection, he had to refer to bureaucrats as having a “nominalistic attitude to time”. “Koori Time” sounded so much better—like the world could get its knickers in a knot, and it just didn’t matter.

Auntie Alirah was taking so damn long that I was getting my appetite back. I grabbed an apricot pastry to soak up my coffee.

Auntie Alirah was a fantastic looking woman—as black as a moonless night, eyes that could see forever, and a complete lack of self-consciousness, despite her heavy build and

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unstylish clothes. She had the presence of an ancient soul. I liked her, even before she started speaking. The other women came to tell stories ... this woman was the story.

I was surprised that they'd recruited someone from within Australia, when in every other year that I'd attended these breakfasts, the focus on women's rights issues was firmly and safely planted in someone else's backyard. Besides, the intervention had not been portrayed by the media as popular, but was rather on the nose and considered deeply divisive. It wasn't even a water-cooler conversation, because it seemed impolite—it was almost like asking someone point-blank, whom he or she voted for. Of course, I'd heard enough impolite pub-talk about the matter, but that was something else altogether....

Bringing in Auntie Alirah seemed like admitting to a problem that had been denied for so long. Of course, I didn't know what she was going to say—the predominantly portrayed version in the media was of male elders who'd made careers on the back of Aboriginal welfare and victimhood, screaming for the intervention to cease, because it was another invasion. I can't say they had my sympathies. Instinctively, I felt there was something wrong with their narrative; their anger seemed to be misguided, completely overlooking the suffering of the people the intervention was trying to help. Their people. The loud-mouths were trying to be victims, when my time in crime told me that they weren't the victims at all.

Psychologists say that forcing people to confront something they're not ready to admit even to themselves is akin to rape—psychological rape. I wondered whether as a nation we were truly prepared, if ever one could be. And whether the Aboriginal people were willing, if presently unable, to save themselves.

Auntie Alirah tapped the microphone seven times to make sure it was working. Then she turned around to the MC and asked if she should start talking. The MC nodded her bouffant. The room went silent and very still. Even the waiters seemed to stop clearing tables.
“Thank yous all for havin’ me,” she started and looked around the room, as if she were addressing each one of us. “I dunno whether it’s a good thing that I’m ‘ere or not, but to tell yous the truth, I’m hopin’ it’ll make a difference, cause I dunno what else ta do.” She paused and looked at the MC again, who nodded as vigorously as her hair would allow without fracturing.

“Ya see, where I come from, up in the Territ’ry, things are not good an’ haven’t been for a very, very long time. What struck me this mornin’ on the way over ‘ere, was listening to the radio news and thinkin’ this isn’t news at all—a rape in West End, a break-in in the Valley, a drunken fight at a party in Nundah, a car stolen from a shopping centre in Toowong. This stuff happens every day, all day up my way, and it hardly ever gets reported. It made me start wonderin’ whether it matters less to the rest of Australia ‘cause it’s in the Aboriginal communities. Or who decides what is and isn’t news. Hah?” She paused for what seemed a painful minute. “The drink is killin’ our knw-cha ‘n our people. We’re dyin’ a slow death an’ not enough is being done. There’s hardly any fresh food gettin’ through to the settlements and camps and it costs too much. There’s no jobs an’ the dole money is goin’ on the grog. Too many parents are passed out, ‘n kids are starvin’, scrounaging ‘bout with the dogs, lookin’ for a feed, or some cash—an’ they’ll do just about anythin’ for the money—sex, run drugs, join gangs, steal it....” She stopped to wipe angry tears from her eyes, onto the paler underside of her wrists. “You know, I’ve been ‘round a long time and lived where no-one should have to live. What was done to me by my own uncles would make yous all sick—here, in the city, it would be news. But the stories my grandmother used to tell me, were not much better. Before she knew what was what, she was taken by the tribal elders, the men, out into the bush, and they got her ready for life as a grown woman by forcin’ a penis-shaped stone into her. It was her initiation....” I noticed the MC nervously shifting her weight from foot to foot and whispering through a headset. Was she going
to shut Auntie down? Auntie was getting pretty worked up and was jumping from topic to topic, not to mention being somewhat controversial.

"Back then, that was accepted because no-one knew better. Only thing that's changed now is that there are bad men and boys—drunk or drugged or just bad and bored, who don't bother with the stone, and many don't even wait until the girl is ready to be a woman. And still, there ain't enough people challenin' it even though they do know better!" Two women at the table next to me started to clap in support, but quickly stopped when Auntie continued. "My two year old grand-daughter, Ruby-Jane, was raped! She was raped while her parents were sleepin' with the drink!" The MC went up and touched Auntie Alirah on the elbow—in support? The older woman gently pulled away without looking at the MC, and continued.

"They only realized something had happened the next day when one of the older kids noticed the nappy was off and the baby was screaming and bleeding. Bleeding!" More angry tears. She pulled a tissue from in between her breasts and wiped her eyes. "What I'm here to tell you all, is that my heart ... is bleeding. And as a woman, a mother, a grandmother.... What colour my people's skin is don't matter one bit—we all bleed the same. And I know a lotta people are sayin' on the news that this intervention is no good, but what I'm here to say today is that we have no choice. We need your help to fix the real problems in our communities and they're not gonna be fixed quickly. All the people in gov'ment, please listen, please help. We've been ignored for too long...." She took three steps back from the mike when she was done, wiped her eyes again, and looked around. The MC rounded up the other speakers and had them line up next to Auntie Alirah, while she thanked her and opened the floor up to a few minutes of questions.

Most of the questions began uniformly, as if scripted, taking up half the time restating the same thing over and over.... "Thank you for sharing your stories. They were so touching, heart-
wrenching, just so terrible.... You are so brave....” Then there was a clanger. There always had to be one.... It was like a trumpet in the middle of a string quartet at a garden wedding. The floor mike squealed inconsolably as it was passed to an audience member. Someone in the sound crew was working fast to resolve it, judging by the crackling, muting, and sudden burst of volume when she started speaking. We couldn’t see her from where we were sitting.

“Yes, thank you,” said Mrs Bleakley, curtly. “I guess this is a question for all of today’s speakers, except for Auntie Alirah. If they’re not up to answering because of the language barrier, perhaps the MC could assist. I was wondering whether any of them were asylum seekers to this country, and how they arrived here—whether they could speak about that and what they think of our policies. Thank you.” And she sat down.

Frances raised her eyebrows and looked at me. “My old English teacher,” I replied, matter-of-factly. Frances raised her eyebrows even more.

The refugees were looking around for the MC, who was desperately scrambling to get a mike. People started murmuring in the audience. The MC looked through her notes, consulted someone just off-stage, and came back to take the question herself. She declared that they were out of time, and that perhaps the question would be better directed to someone who dealt with migration—a certain Mr Chung—whom she could approach later. No doubt, the speakers were traumatized enough and remembering how they got to being here was not only going to take proceedings over the time allocated, but would also be like rubbing salt into wounds. Besides, organizers had to be careful that the members of the audience were only sympathetic to the refugees and weren’t going to take political pot-shots at them. Putting away an embarrassing question was nigh on impossible once it was out.

“Sandra?” Frances said.
"Yes Frances?" Her tone made my heart quicken. Was she going to apologise and say I was right about Andrea?

"Let's go to the Ladies'."

"Oh.... Okay."

We left the main hall in search of the restrooms. Unsurprisingly, we found them by the long line of women out the door and into the corridor. Frances was two or three paces ahead of me, clearly in a hurry. She took her place at the end of the queue.

"Oh shit," I muttered under my breath. She was standing right behind Mrs Bleakley and the counselor. Were women's bladders timed to go off in sync? I couldn't turn around now. Reluctantly, I followed Frances and stood behind her.

"Slow today, aren't we?" Frances said to me, teasing.

"Indeed," I replied drily. Mrs Bleakley turned in the line to face us, her long wooden bead necklaces clacking as she did so. She straightened them out with her silver-ringed claws.

"Hello again, Sandra," she said, in her most affected voice. She pronounced my name "S—ahm-drah," which I hated passionately. "Are you here with a group of lit-ig-a-tion lawyers, are you?"

The way it came out, she could well have said, "Are you here with your pack of vultures", and I could see Frances stiffen, and her usual friendly demeanor sour.

"A pair, actually...." rebutted Frances. "There are only two of us." Frances spoke the Queen's English always, and her accent was authentic.

Mrs Bleakley's eyes flicked from me to Frances and back to me. I just smiled; with as much saccharine sweetness as I could muster. She didn't reciprocate, instead took a sharp intake of breath and changed subject. "Did you know I taught Sandra in high school English? Difficult,
she was.” Then she looked me up and down with the same eyes that told me every day that in her estimation, I would never amount to much.

Frances stayed silent, face uncharacteristically frozen, mouth and jaw tight. She let it pass as a statement rather than a question, and she wasn’t encouraging any more. How was Frances to know who this individual was in front of her, other than a nosey, no, wrong word, annoying, chatty stranger in a bathroom queue? (Why was there always one in every long bathroom queue to the Ladies’?) I wasn’t planning on introducing them—it didn’t seem like the time or place for it, and besides, I still couldn’t remember the counselor’s name, and would get reprimanded for it yet again. Now that the numbers were even, two against two—Frances and I against Mrs Bleakley and the counselor—I didn’t feel so out-of-sorts.

Two women came out of cubicles, to be replaced by the next two. The line moved up slowly, but kinked where the counselor and Mrs Bleakley stood. Frances took two steps into their personal space to prompt them forward. She didn’t need to say a word. She had handled them. Put them in their places. Hosed them down. She stood up for me. For me!

The good-byes with Mrs Bleakley and the counselor were swift, like ‘hallway sex’. The only thing missing was the reciprocal “Fuck you.”

\[ \Omega \]

At eleven in the morning, Frances and I returned to work.

On my floor, good humour was in critically short supply. Suzie sent me a text message saying that one of our major insurance clients, Bevilles & Stein (appropriately shortened to “BS” in file notes and this text message), had declined to renew our consultancy because they thought

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we weren’t aggressive enough, and didn’t like the advice to settle a ten-million-dollar claim instead of fight it. Some clients were bad like that—government departments, particularly so, followed closely by insurance companies. They think that they can buy the advice they’re looking for, to justify the enormous stuff-up that just can’t be buried, so they shop around the lawyers and keep firing the ones who tell them what they don’t want to hear. When a client insists that he doesn’t want the advice on paper, alarm bells start ringing and everyone scrambles to cover arse with reams of ‘contemporaneous’ file notes.

As soon as the lift-door opened, I swear I could feel the de-stabilised atmosphere on level 27. The receptionist’s lipstick was smudged, and her usually stuck-on smile was no-where to be found; a light in the corridor was flickering; the typing pool ladies didn’t lift their heads and cluck “hi” as I walked by; and our timid little articulated clerk, who had only recently been hired to manage the documents in the ten-million-dollar dispute, was whimpering in his windowless, wall-less ‘cubicle’ which abutted the typing pool. Behind stacked boxes of documents (which served as his partitions), he was frantically pulling at his usually tidy red hair—it was standing up such that it honestly looked like his head was on fire.

When the work dries up, so do the jobs. I wondered whether Paul told the kid himself or whether he had the immensely insensitive Human Resources Manager tell him that he had to find somewhere else to serve out the remaining eighteen months of his two-year term. I went looking for Paul, and started calculating how many of my three-hundred-and-fifty files would be lost because of this catastrophe.

Just as I approached his door, Paul pelted his mobile against the wall, splitting the battery from the phone, and stormed out, without even looking at me. He wasn’t good company at times like these. Maybe this was his way of showing his vulnerability and the extreme stress he was under? Perhaps I should stop by the pub downstairs to see if he was there, later, when he settles
down. Maybe we could have a couple of drinks together to improve our working relationship? Perhaps he could use some more help (my help) on the Dover Industries file?

Seven hours of preparing status reports on forty-nine different files, four headache tablets and a paper-jam later, I decided it was time to go home. It was only six o’clock, but tonight I wasn’t hanging around for appearances or conscience. There was always tomorrow, and besides, I now had forty-nine fewer files to contend with.

I had (albeit under intolerable duress) agreed to go out tonight with an insurance salesman my mother had teed up for me. Could it be any worse than staying here for the night?

Even ‘bad daughters’ honour their agreements with their poor old mothers.
IX

THE DEVIL'S TONGUE

I don’t know why I ever listen to my mother. All she ever wanted to do was marry me off so that she could die in peace. Knowing that I’d be cared for, she says. It’s a very Catholic preoccupation: planning everybody’s life, so that you can die in peace. She’s started cooing about grandchildren again too. I told her to wake up to herself—that her only child is thirty-five years old and a spinster. She, in turn, told me to wake up to myself and get a life.

Five years ago, when I turned thirty, my mother, who had always been too busy counting rosary beads to give me advice about my appearance, out of the blue gave me a silver-plated tweezers set and told me to pluck my facial hair. Given that she needed glasses to see an elephant, I was somewhat surprised and taken aback. To that point, I had been one of God’s beautiful creatures, quite acceptable: mild moustache, sun-visor eyebrows and all. Suddenly, being single and thirty made me the unacceptable centre of attention at family gatherings and church meetings. “So how is your daughter? Is she with anyone yet? ... Oh, that must be so disappointing for you.”

Perhaps I should be cruel to be kind and announce that I’m gay? At least then my mother could give her hopes of grandparenthood a proper burial and get through the grieving process once and for all. The non-existence of husband and child in my life is like a funeral with an empty casket or a terrible crime without a motive. It was something my idealistic, this-is-the-way-it’s-supposed-to-be family couldn’t cope with.

It took me forever to get dressed, undressed, dressed and undressed about four times. It was a fat day’s evening and nothing looked good. It wasn’t the case that I was desperate to impress this guy whom I had never met, but I did want to feel at ease with the way I looked. The
blasted *Carbohydrate Retention Factor* was at work again. Consoling myself with the fact that I would outlive anyone else in the jungle was no consolation at all.

I finished combing my hair and spritzed some pretty floral perfume on my neck and wrists—Sonia Rykiel, no less—when I heard the front door open. I stepped out of my high heels and padded as quietly as I could in stockinged feet on old timber floorboards, and hid behind my dresser. My date wasn’t supposed to meet me here—we were meeting at the local Chinese restaurant. My God! Who could it be? Didn’t I lock the front door?

The floorboards in the lounge gave away the intruder’s location—past the TV and coming towards the corridor. Fuck! What should I do? Scream, so that the person turns and runs out the front door? What if the person was after *me*? Oh God, oh God, oh God.

He walked into my bedroom.

" Fucking Hell, Mick! You scared the shit out of me!" He looked out of sorts, and truth be told, I was still scared … those intense desperado eyes. Then he smiled, weirdly … it was like a shabby theatre curtain being haltingly drawn up to reveal a dilapidated white picket fence on stage. My attention was immediately drawn to the missing fence post, top right—that was a new development. He had always been so careful with his appearance…. Making the most of what he had, anyway. His lower lip remained stationary—an inverted crescent-shaped slit that was one with his chin, and moved like a puppet when he spoke.

"Hello, darling. I’m home." This was like watching a horror movie, with a sudden extreme close-up of his mouth. It wasn’t the mouth I thought I’d once fallen in love with. In hindsight, it must’ve been my bias towards function rather than form … and oh my goodness, what that man could do with his mouth…. Then the camera pans down from his mouth to the arm hanging by his side and the glinting long knife being slowly raised….
“Did you miss me, babe?” He put his favourite knife down on my dresser, where it had been many times before. Bedroom games.

Might I add at this point, that a knife between the teeth was no rose? And a knife in the same room as someone who had been put in a mental health facility only a few months ago, by his own parents … was not a moment to cherish. Fuck.

“So, when did you leave Sargent Street?” I asked conversationally about the private mental health facility in New Farm. It must’ve been the only inner-city building with bars on the windows to keep people in, not to keep intruders out—as was the case with all the other old Italianesque brick n’ arch homes in the area.

The phone started ringing. There was silence for a moment. Mick froze, listening and watching what I would do. I couldn’t exactly get to the phone with Mick standing between me and the door. The answering machine picked up the call—it was from my mother. She took a deep breath. That’s what she did when she was winding herself up, just before dropping her voice an octave into lecturing mode.

“Sandra, I hope your date goes well tonight. Remember, you have to be less picky. There’ll be no-one left by the time you decide to settle down. Raymond is a very decent fellow. Nighty-night.” I heard a gentle click of the receiver being replaced.

Next birthday, she’d just have to settle for a bunch of flowers.

His tie was off and the top four buttons undone. He flung his tie down onto my bed, clearly hoping that our bodies would follow, as once they did. I stood as far away from him as I could in the confines of my bedroom. He had me cornered.

“You know you want it,” he said confidently as he rolled his eyeballs over me.

“No.”

He took a step towards me. And then another.
"Please don’t," I said, as nicely as I could. "And I’m very sorry to say, that, well, um.... You see, this is very awkward for me ...." I cleared my throat. "You see," I said hesitantly, "I’m on my way out to meet someone...."

"And?" he asked, his Adam’s apple bobbing up and down.

"And... um, well, it’s just that we’re over. You and me? We’re over. Now, what makes you think you can just let yourself in here like this, and scare the living daylights out of me?" I waved my arms around and tried to sound angry not scared. But I was fooling no-one. Dogs from four blocks away would smell my panic.

Without waiting for a response, I lunged towards the bed and swooped up his tie with one finger, holding it out to him, rather like dripping rubbish. He roped it around my wrist and pulled me towards him, in one swift action. This was not what I had intended. I was sending him out. He was subverting the script, inverting my intentions, confusing my sensibilities. He took my breath away. He always did. He had the Devil’s tongue and magic fingers.

He held me up close, tightly, too tightly, gripping both my wrists with each of his hands. Then he clasped both my wrists together with one hand against his chest, while the other hand lifted up my skirt and thrust itself into my underwear. His fingered me gently, stroking away my resistance ... but he didn’t for a moment release the grip on my wrists. I couldn’t move, damn it, and why wasn’t I protesting, screaming, shouting, biting?

"I think she misses me," he said, speaking of my vagina, but looking me in the eyes. I turned my face away. I couldn’t stand to look at him, for all that he had done. For all that he could do. He took the opportunity to lick my neck all the way from my collarbone to my earlobe, lightly scraping me with his stubble as he did so. "Nina Ricci? No, don’t tell me ... Sonia Rykiel...."
He knew my scents. He knew everything about me. Strange though, that he didn’t have his trademark *making out* scent on today—*Jazz* being his favourite.

“Hey 96, wanna 69?” he whispered in my ear, thrusting his fingers deeper to make his case. It was his way of being romantic … bringing up the first time we met—at a solicitors versus barristers football match at an annual Law Society event about three years ago. I had someone else’s old uni jersey on, which had a number 96 on it, for 1996—the girl’s graduation year.

By this stage, I couldn’t take it any more, and started kissing him back, open-mouthed, breathless, trying to close my mind to the haunting past and equally frightening immediate future…. He started peeling off my clothes—the top lost its buttons in the process, the bra was on the ceiling fan, the short black skirt was pushed up around my middle, and the stockings had a new access point torn into them.

He’d released my hands, and instead of beating him, I found them pushing his shirt off his back and holding onto him around his neck—him kissing my breasts, my legs wrapped around his upright torso. I felt my body shudder—as the momentary physical manifestation of my continuously conflicting internal life … my simultaneous fear and desire, revulsion and compulsion, hatred and love for this person I knew intimately, but ultimately didn’t know at all.

He lowered us onto the bed and pulled his trousers off while still frantically kissing and licking me. The room smelled of sex already. In fact, it reeked.

I pushed him off me and said, “No. I can’t. Stop it. Please go.” I rolled away from him. He grabbed me mid-roll.

“You can’t say no, now. We’ve gone too far. Fair’s fair…."

I knew it was risky. The knife was within reach, to both of us. So this was how a person became a statistic…. He glanced over at it, aware that my gaze was following his.

“You know what I could do, don’t you?” he asked.
"I do, but I also know you’re a good man, Mick, and you won’t.” I was hoping that he was considering the unpleasant reality of life as a lawyer-turned-convicted-murderer, or the prospect of time in somewhere far less congenial than Sargent Street, with the type of inmates who didn’t pay for their stay.

“So that’s it?”

“Mick, I love you, but I can’t live with you. I have nothing else left to give you.”

But he was still lock-jawed and mad-looking. Evidently, he had imagined or planned a much warmer welcome home than he was getting.

“But we had a life together …” he started, voice quavering.

“Had being the operative word. We’re over, I know it’s unfair, that you got sick, but I have nothing more to give you, Mick. I’m all cried out. I’m broke. And I’m broken. Please don’t make this any harder than it has to be.”

He pulled on his trousers and shirt, leaving the shirt hanging open, picked up his shoes and strode out the door without looking back. He’d left the knife behind—he meant me no harm. My body went limp with relief. I felt terrible abandoning him because of his illness, but there truly was nothing more I could do for him. He would bring us both down. It seemed to be what men did best. Mick and Paul. Paul and Mick. Bastards.

I rang my mother and begged her to cancel the date—said I had a migraine. I apologized profusely and genuinely felt bad that I had let her down. I couldn’t call Raymond myself. I couldn’t bear to think about, let alone face another man tonight.
IF LOVE IS BLIND, WHY IS LUST ALL EYES?

On Wednesday, a fluorescent pink blouse walked into the level 27 reception. It was Mrs Merritt, the client who made enemies for life with a glance. Secretaries anxiously dodged her and professional staff averted their eyes so as not to attract her attention. Everybody knew her because she made it her business to know everybody, whether they liked it or not.

The receptionist dialed me. "She’s here and she wants to see you now." I pleaded that the file had been handed over to Jennifer. But to no avail. I knew that I had to see her, explain the progress of the file, and introduce her to Jennifer. Apparently, people hated being handed from lawyer to lawyer. Luckily for Mrs Merritt, the idiot of a managing partner I chose only to refer to as “FBI” (short for Frigging Big Idiot) had something to gain by offering to do the work on a no-win no-fee basis. Perhaps Mrs Merritt was related to his wife or something. Maybe their dogs had puppies together. FBI, who was not my greatest friend in the world, chose me out of a field of one hundred litigators to handle the file. Vindictive bastard. Ill-will had boomeranged back to me in the form of foul files before. This one was super-foul and probably the result of an office Christmas party indiscretion. I suspected it was for power-spewing over his Hugo Boss suit. I knew the dry-cleaner’s bill was only going to be the start of it.

Since my holiday, I had somehow come to not overly concern myself with consequences. I just didn’t have the patience for this game any more. I knew that FBI would be splenetic if I flicked the Merritt file to someone else, but I just didn’t care. He could come and talk to me about it. Or better still, get knotted. I’d love to ask him why he assigned such a senior person to such an insignificant file. I mean, given Mrs Merritt’s history of similar claims, the claim looked as fake as fur in Fosseys. I was convinced that the woman was fabricating the whole story and was

Six Minutes
claiming for the same injuries she got paid out for three years ago by Coles. Back then, the claim was for slipping on a lettuce leaf, which was never seen by anyone but her. If you’ve ever wondered why supermarkets now install rubber mats in their fruit and vegetable section, the Mrs Merritts of this world may well hold the answer. Not much can be said for obese women wearing stilettos to the supermarket.

“Mrs Merritt, come through please.” Without smiling or looking directly at her, I led the way. The killer red heels had no trouble keeping up with me. She fingered the timber inlay on the reception desk and dragged her hand across the textured, wallpapered wall down the corridor to my office. Why did people do that? The sudden shooting pain in my jaw joint suggested I ought to unclench my teeth and relax. Somehow, while adjusting my face to be less painful, I let go a gasping snarl, not entirely unlike a cornered, injured animal.

I was disgusted even being in her presence, but I had to behave. Unfortunately, although Mrs Merritt was not paying, she could cause a stink if provoked. In fact, the people who were least likely to pay an account were the most likely to complain first, as a preemptive strike. In this case, complaining wouldn’t be as a means of negotiating down the fee, but simply because she could. And sadly, someone would listen.

Appreciation is generally lacking in this world. When the partners asked us to provide them with copies of letters of appreciation or thanks to include in the Department’s annual report, thirty people managed to turn up only three letters. However, when thirty people were asked to provide copies of letters of complaint, sixty were fearfully uncovered!

Mrs Merritt made herself comfortable in my office before it occurred to me that I had working files all over the place, which should not be seen by others. I quick-dialed my secretary.

“Is the conference room free?”

“Yes.”
“Good, book me in now for an hour. Thanks.”

I hung up and apologized for uprooting the now firmly ensconced Mrs Merritt, explaining that the conference room was available and would be more comfortable and appropriate. If Mrs Merritt’s visit were not unscheduled, I would have booked it in advance. I was lucky that it was free.

As could be expected, Mrs Merritt started groaning about her back. What a performance, I thought. It would take more to convince a judge. Would she wear flat shoes to court? Would she need to borrow a pair, like my old criminal clients had to borrow suits and ties? With any luck, we’d get a defendant’s judge and Mrs Merritt and her claim with no merit, would be up shit creek. On the other hand, the prospects of getting a plaintiff’s judge were much better.

Most judges found it hard not to award plaintiffs something when the defendant was a large organisation with extensive insurance coverage and the capacity to pay: that affliction was known in legal circles as the “deep pocket syndrome.” I didn’t tell Mrs Merritt this. She already knew from her experience, last time. That’s why she was back.

This time, she wasn’t keeping my pace, as I powered down the hallway towards the conference room. I didn’t want to spend a second more than I had to with this piece of human refuse.

As I walked, I was thinking, if this matter did end up in court (and not settled), and Mrs Merritt lucked out and got a defendant’s judge, then real justice might hopefully be done. There were one or two such judges about, who were more skeptical in personal injuries cases. They came from commercial and business backgrounds with attendant understandings of the way the wheel of financial fortune turned. They were typically Liberal appointments from a while back. Actually, eons ago, in the State system, because Labor had been ruling for so long. However, at Federal level, there were several more because of the John Howard Liberal government, which
had held the reins for an equally extensive period of time. Unfortunately, we couldn’t forum shop. We were stuck with the State system, in accordance with the applicable statute law.

Unlike many lawyers who were appointed to the bench, the so-called “defendants’ judges” had some sympathy for employers and business people, whom they saw as normal people trying to make a living like everyone else, instead of some different species, trying to exploit the under classes. There have been mutterings around the Inns of Court that barristers are to have more say about judicial appointments from their ranks. I’ll believe it when I see it. And who knows whether this would improve the balance of judicial political persuasion? It’s not something that is openly discussed, at any rate. We don’t go around calling people “Plaintiffs’ Judges”, “Defendants’ Judges”, or as is the case in criminal law proceedings, “Hangman Judges”.

It was understood, and it was something for behind closed doors—for lawyers’ ears only, even though clients who had been through the system enough times, soon got to picking what was what and who was who. This was particularly the case for criminal law clients with friends behind bars.

Politics aside, another reason there were so few judges with a soft spot for business, was the economic reality that a great barrister or business person could make seriously more money than any judge could hope for. People forgot that judges were elevated public servants. If a lawyer wanted more status, he (or sometimes she) accepted an appointment to the bench. If he was after money more than social responsibility, he didn’t. The couple of women on the bench were all recent Labor appointments, without backgrounds in business. The government’s token women, vote winners. While I wholeheartedly supported the notion of women on the bench, I disagreed with the way they were being selected and the huge media hoo-hah surrounding their appointments. Just because they were women. Extraordinary.
Once we were in the conference room, I spent some time explaining to Mrs Merritt that Jennifer would best handle her file. She reluctantly accepted my apologies but spilled the water a secretary brought in for her, all over the marble and timber table, to make sure I knew she wasn’t happy. I clung onto my cool and dialed Jennifer.

“Hi Jennifer, it’s Sandra. Would you like to come down to the conference room? I’ll introduce you to your new client, Mrs Merritt.”

“Oh, Jeez, I’m sorry, Sandra, but I just couldn’t take on another file, not even one as simple as Mrs Merritt’s. Paul has me working on this Dover Industries file and it’s nearing the hearing date. And with all the bad press since Andrea leaked that confidential report on the IUDs....”

“What?” I gasped. My eyeballs were ready to pop out of my head. “But you have to!” The bit about Andrea leaking a report to the press was very interesting, but I would have to return to that issue later.

“No, I don’t. That’s your file. Paul doesn’t want me taking any files from you, especially not that one. He says a blind monkey could run it.”

In my mind, I slammed down the phone. However, in reality, I put it down so very slowly, that I had time to contemplate at least seven ways of killing both Jennifer and Mrs Merritt with the very same telephone. If not for Mrs Merritt’s piglet eyes observing my every move, I would have actually thrown the phone. This was insubordination! This was outrageous! The guts of the girl! She wouldn’t last long here if I had any say in it.

“It looks like I’ll be conducting your file, Mrs Merritt,” was all I could bring myself to say. It was through clenched teeth and hatred like I had never known. Paul would pay for this. He was hiring and firing with his smallest member and it was time he was brought to account. My sympathy for Andrea grew.
I befuddled Mrs Merritt with a bit of legal jargon and showed her the door.

Small claims like hers rarely went as far as the court because they were a waste of everybody’s time. Instead of fighting, the insurers usually rolled over within 12 months because it was cheaper that way. Every insurance company had an unwritten policy about what it’d defend. Essentially, most worked out that if they could pay a claimant off about $3,000, then it wasn’t worth the lawyers’ time at $150 for an inexperienced solicitor, going up to $650 an hour for the supervising partner. And $3,000 buys a lot of Tim Tams and Tetley tea for such claimants.

It was ironic really that insurers chose to defend against expensive but legitimate claims rather than fraudulent little ones. If they’d made life harder for people like Mrs Merritt, such small-time frauds would get the message and look for other soft targets. Or just piss off. It made me sick that decent citizens paid higher premiums because of individuals like her.

In the final analysis, it wasn’t that I’d have any trouble running her file, it was just that I didn’t want to, on the principle of it. For now, I would have to bide my time, but one day, I’d let Paul and company have it between the eyes.

There is nothing more delicious than knowing that people who have troubled you in life will soon find out that they’ve grossly underestimated you.
I’d left work early again. It was 7 p.m. and there was still time to do my groceries before 9 p.m. when the shops closed. Then I could return to my crusty little corner.

I pulled into my local shopping centre and parked as close as I could to the main entrance.

I absent-mindedly wandered through the aisles, picking up this and that, until someone rode a trolley up my heel. By the time I had turned to glare at the culprit, he or she was gone. My body must have been moving as slowly as my mind. My pantyhose had been torn and my leg slightly grazed. I briefly wondered whether I needed a tetanus booster shot, but thought life was traumatic enough without unnecessary injections. They were for kids.

I found myself in the chocolate biscuit aisle. I picked up a packet of expensive chocolate chip cookies for Frances’ next visit. I’d die if I held my breath waiting for an invitation to her place. She actually still lived with her parents, which I found difficult to comprehend. Once I had turned twenty, no house was going to be big enough for my mother and myself. Luckily for Frances, she had a placid personality, and her parents’ house was so big it could sleep four in the letterbox.

Time passed without so much as another thought. I emptied my trolley at the checkout and vaguely acknowledged the shop assistant. This one was going to be a nuisance. She was trying to make eye contact.

“Hi, how are you?”

“Good,” I snapped out of my stupor, “and you?” I only asked to smooth over the embarrassment of my curt reply.
“Oh, all right, you know. Only half an hour until shut-up time.” I just nodded as if I knew what it meant to have a finishing time.

“So, what did you do on the weekend?” She was persistent.

“Nothing much.” I wasn’t going to tell a complete stranger that I had spent my weekend in Noumea! The girl looked at me intently. I took the bait.

“What about you?” I suspected that I was going to regret asking.

“Oh, I was studying all weekend. Really boring!”

Still feeling guilty for my rudeness, I asked what she was studying, assuming, by the way she was talking, that she was already in university. Hopefully she’d put my groceries through quickly.

“I’m in grade 11; I still have 20 months until I get into law.”

“I see.” I tried not to sound surprised. “Why do you want to get into law?”

“Well, I figure that if I do Science/Law, I’ll earn $200K within the next couple of years.”

I raised my eyebrows, perhaps a little too sarcastically; nevertheless, this kid wouldn’t notice a freight train coming at this rate.

“I’m sick of packing bags in a supermarket.”

“$200K?” I asked incredulously. It took me over a decade to crack a hundred. Should I tell this kid that she was dreaming? Should I burst the bubble now, or let her disembowel herself upon her own ambition?

“Law’s a difficult profession for women,” I commented, while glancing at the sweets rack. I don’t know why I made the comment, but once it was out, I had the distinct feeling of an “a-ha!” moment fingerling its way up my spine.

“Oh, I don’t think so. Maybe it was a few years ago, but now it’s really opening up to women. What do you do anyway?” she asked, posing me a challenge.

*Six Minutes*
“I’m a lawyer.” I leveled a look at her that should have said I knew what I was talking about.

“Where do you work?”

“Hennessy Clark. Do you know it?” If she didn’t know it, this kid was talking through her hat. Her face was drawing a blank. “It’s the largest firm in the country—a top-tier national law firm.”

“Yeah, I know it,” the kid said, unconvincingly chewing her bottom, sore-encrusted lip.

“Who told you that young lawyers earn $200K anyway?”

“It says so in all the John Grisham books.”

I tried not to laugh. “John Grisham’s an American—he’s prone to exaggeration.” I took my receipt and left. I should’ve said, “Goodbye, have a nice night,” or something, but didn’t feel inclined to extend the conversation. I’d have to dodge her checkout from now on.

When I came back to where I had left the car, it was gone. I stared at the space in disbelief. There was a white pearlescent love heart sprayed onto the bitumen in thick shaving cream, perfectly centred between the yellow lines—at a glance, I thought, how OCD, how precise, how like someone I used to share a life with. Then I read the inscription, but knowing I really didn’t need to. *Mick was here.* Here, in my car park space, now in my car—the car he chose, but chose not to pay for. Clutching my shopping trolley in the dark, mostly empty car park, I couldn’t hold back the tears any more. When he went into Sargent Street, I had hoped that his parents’ intervention had heralded the end of my responsibilities to Mick. He’s been the most expensive hook-up I’ve had, and not just financially.

Bastard kept the spare car key, and I’d thought I’d lost it—lost the key and lost my mind.

I called a cab on my mobile and waited on the curb for twenty minutes for it to arrive.

Bloody Mick. I wouldn’t fight him for the car, even though it was worth about eighty grand. How
much more would it cost me to chase him? Probably couldn’t report it missing, because it wasn’t exactly missing—it was with him. Surely he’ll return it…. He’s just playing with me. If I report it to the police, they’ll say it’s a civil matter, a de-facto property dispute, sort it out yourself or through the Family Court. Coppers have better things to do than mediate non-violent domestic bust-ups. Sure, I could insist that it was an Unlawful Use of a Motor Vehicle, but then it’d become a case of He said / She said and how could anyone truly know what is said within relationships, even broken-down ones? And the embarrassment of it all…. For all a court would know, we were back together and I lent him the car and changed my mind later to get at him for some other perceived infraction. Life was obscenely unfair.

If it meant there was nothing else Mick could want from me, then maybe it was better to let him feel he’s won, than to have the paranoid schizophrenic with obsessive-compulsive tendencies try to re-insert himself back into my life. That’s what he had become—a list of disorders, rattling around in a body that didn’t know what to do with itself. He never told me he had problems up front. I discovered them one by one, nasty Halloween surprises wrapped up in lovely Valentine’s paper and smoochy kisses. He’d seemed so normal for the first year, at least for a Legal Aid lawyer.

The sky started spitting rain. I moved under cover and shivered slightly from the cool wetness on my head, neck and arms.

After only two years of being with Mick, I’d lost all my savings, and now my car. I covered his medical expenses because there was no choice, I supported him when he lost his job, I repaid his gambling debts. I did my best to keep him together, when the man was clearly falling apart. The next time someone says Love conquers all, I’ll be issuing the amended version of Love solves nothing. Love is devastation. The only thing Mick-free, is my house. And I know he can’t get his mitts on that. Not after a de-facto relationship of only two years. He didn’t contribute
nearly enough to general living expenses, let alone loan repayments. And while I could try to get the car back, it would just be re-engaging with endless trouble. I had ended the relationship when his parents had him hospitalised. The doctors were on-side with me and upped his medication to smooth the way.

The fact that he took the car from a shopping-centre car park rather than from home probably meant that he had been keeping an eye on my movements. Had his stint in the mental facility upgraded him to stalker status? That was the problem with prisons and group therapy alike—the unintended consequences, the new ‘skills’, new acquaintances, new perspectives.... If two heads are better than one, as the saying goes, then surely, two sick minds are worse than one?

Mick hadn’t actually done anything to physically hurt me. It was just that he was scaring me, and I’d had enough.

I watched the rain peck away at the shaving-foam heart until it was no more.

The cab arrived and I loaded my shopping into the boot. I looked over my purchases with more scrutiny than I had before I bought them. I could’ve bought cheaper brands, or not bought the luxuries at all. I had blown my savings on the Noumea trip and only had enough to cover the house and car repayments from month to month. Plus I was supporting mum and nanna, since mum lost her savings when the investment group collapsed. My wage was being split three ways. There was no dependable boyfriend or husband. My choices were frightfully limited, but they were still better than Andrea’s.

The next morning, I had to participate in the public-transport-system debacle, becoming another morbidly unhappy, eco-friendly statistic. The train service wasn’t very accessible from my area and busses were expensive and notoriously unreliable. Sometimes, they didn’t even show up. At least mine managed to do that, but ten minutes late. What would I bill that time to? Client marketing? (“So, where do you work, Dear? I’ve not seen you on this service before?"

*Six Minutes*
Thank you for helping me onto the bus. It’s my hips, you know...”) At this rate, I’d be so late to work that I’d have to put in an annual leave application!

A festering, already sweating human blob took the two seats directly behind me. Being early March, it was a mild and rather lovely autumn day. Had she just completed a marathon run? She had no right to be sweating at all! The woman had both hands gripping my headrest, like grotesquely swollen, pink, sparkly talons. She clearly couldn’t turn her head, as I could feel her eyes pinned to my scalp, and her curdled-milk breath gusting over my hair. She snorkeled in through one partially blocked nostril and excreted a sulphur-and-methane slick through her fish lips. When her nostril finally blocked up completely after bus stop number four, and she started whistling through her mouth on the inhale and exhale, I knew I had to move. I dashed for the back of the bus and sat next to an anorexic teenage boy. He looked horrified. Was that the look I just gave Miss Big-As-The-Universe back there?

I arrived at work and Paul asked me why I looked so chafed. “It’s my birthday,” I lied, and walked off. Half a minute later, he came into my little fortress and found me behind a mountain of files.

“So, how old today, Dee? Twenty-one?”

“It’s not my birthday you boof-head and if it was, I certainly wouldn’t be telling you.” I grinned at him. I couldn’t help myself. Why was he calling me “Dee” again? It was almost tender.

“You should settle down a bit. You don’t want to be the first person to die of a foul mood.”

I threw my desk calendar at him and he left the room.

After drafting one hundred interrogatories (which was a fancy word for questions) seeking to find out from the other side why one of my client’s dredges sank, I gave Frances a call. After
that, I cut the hundred down to the permitted thirty questions. It was crazy. Everybody knew the bloody thing drank water because it wasn’t built to specification, but we still needed to get the information the painfully slow, proper way. This was why the courts were backed up. It’s not us; it’s the system! Frances answered her telephone.

“You sound peeved, Sandra. What’s the matter?”

“Mick took my car last night—from the supermarket car park. I had to catch a bus to work this morning.”

There was a distinct pause. Frances knew better than to enquire too much about Mick. He was a sore point and a potential I told you so on her ledger. She did tell me gently, in a round-about way, that according to things she’d heard around the courthouse even before he moved in with me, that his behaviour was sometimes erratic. “That does sound like a bad start to the day”, she said diplomatically. “What are you going to do about your car?”

I could hear her flicking through papers as she spoke. If she kept working while talking to me, she could still bill the time. I started rifling through a file absentmindedly, to make the right impression on Frances—that I was in control and unaffected by things beyond the office door, and anyone walking past my room would see me looking busy. But I wouldn’t bill the time. I wasn’t being productive on this occasion. You had to be “in the zone” to be able to pull off two jobs at once, competently.

“Well, there’s not much I can do. I’m maxed out on my borrowings, and I don’t think I can fight Mick for the car. I can hope he gives it back, but I suspect the return of the car would be conditional upon him coming with it.”

“Oh.” More paper shuffling, and then typing. “So you’re definitely not getting back together?”
“Absolutely no way. And I can’t keep catching the bus. It’s just not me, Frances. You know what I mean?”

“You’re a bit special, aren’t you?” she teased. “Look, if you need help with transport or something, let me know,” she said casually, trying to wind up the conversation.

“Oh, about ten grand ought to do it,” I sulked. I pegged my stress ball as hard as I could, into my waste paper basket. I was so far beyond being helped by a stress ball, but no doubt I’d pull it out before I went home. The desk seemed incomplete without it.

“Do you need a loan?” The paper shuffling ceased. I had her full attention, and that rarely happened.

This made me feel uncomfortable: Frances, being younger than me and having money to lend! I certainly wasn’t expecting her to save me.

After some coaxing, I accepted the loan. I would pay it back within 6 months at 10% interest. It was a bargain, really. I said that I would draft up an agreement in the afternoon.

Perhaps Frances had it easy, living with her parents—of course she could save up money. In my case, things were difficult, complicated. It would’ve been nice to have another income to maintain the mortgage. Maintain me, perhaps. Secretly, I think, everyone wants to be saved at some time in his or her life. Many die, waiting—unsaved, and undiscovered. And bitter.
It was a chilly, unremarkable autumn evening with only a toe-nail clipping of a moon. I thought about Paul and I thought about Andrea. She must be feeling even lonelier than me, quietly accepting that she would be bringing a child into the world on her own.

I finished the last of my red wine, and accidentally swallowed the gritty sediment. I should give her a call. I must give her a call. I will give her a call. Tomorrow. Can’t cope today; not today. She could wait until tomorrow.

The doorbell rang.

“Who is it?” I hollered from the comfort of my lounge chair.

“Frances.”

“Coming, be there in a second.”

I pulled myself up from the ratty chair and threw the chocolate wrappers under a cushion.

“What a surprise,” I said as I let her in. I should’ve said “what a lovely surprise” but I was too engrossed in a “poor me” frame of mind for niceties. She’d evidently come straight from work as she was in a stylish suit, with a briefcase under her arm. Her face was rather white, perhaps from the cold, and her eyes were wide, as if startled by the light.

“I hope you don’t mind; I won’t stay long.”

“Well, I hope you appreciate that you’re breaking up a lovely party.”

Frances looked around just to make sure I was being my usual, sarcastic self.

“Take a seat.”

Frances took the chair in the corner of my living room.

“Drink?” Frances shook her head.
"I really wish that none of this was happening and that it was all a bad dream, but...."

"Just tell me, what's wrong?" I sat in the two-seater opposite and pushed my wine glass aside.

"Well, I was in your office, borrowing your Supreme Court Rules tonight, when I overheard FBI and Paul talking in the corridor. They were talking about Andrea."

I leaned forward and stopped fidgeting. "What did they say?"

"I didn't hear it all, but Paul told FBI to inform the firm's insurer of a potential claim by Andrea for wrongful dismissal."

"Is that all?"

"No. FBI told Paul he should 'send a message' to Andrea so that she didn't get any stupid ideas...."

"... Like going to the media or taking it to court?"

"I guess so. FBI then said he's got the marketing and media department preparing a press statement in case, as we speak. After that, all I heard was FBI telling off Paul for sleeping with his staff."

"That's very interesting."

We both studied the ceiling for a moment. I felt awkward, but surely Frances didn't suspect or know of my indiscretions?

"What are your feelings about Andrea?" I asked.

Frances kept studying the ceiling as if the answer might be plastered on it. As she spoke, she looked past me, in deep thought. "You know, I don't really have feelings about her one way or the other. In some ways, she had it coming, but really, if we don't help her, no-one will. To tell the truth, it's more the principle of the matter rather than the individual it happened to."
There was something tense and unnatural about her reply. Was it the use of the word “truth”? The strained look across the eyes? The jerkiness in the way she suddenly started picking at imaginary lint on her skirt? I let it slide. Whatever it was, it was no business of mine. I wasn’t a living saint to cast the first stone. St Peter wouldn’t put my involvement in this case down to a good heart, but an angry one.

“That’s probably a good way of saying how I feel too.” I felt my ears burning. Mother would accuse me of deceit, and of having a forked tongue, if she knew. “What can we do, anyway? We can’t represent her while we’re working for the firm, because there’ll be a conflict of interest. Chinese-walling us won’t be enough to prevent that conflict.”

“Chinese-walling” was the legal jargon for isolating lawyers in the firm, to prevent a potential conflict of interest from occurring. Usually, it just meant being moved to a separate floor until another case finished.

“Let’s face it. If FBI knew we were getting involved, he’d have us for breakfast,” Frances replied matter-of-factly. “If nothing else, we should talk with Andrea and find out what really happened. We could be losing sleep over nothing.”

“Good idea. Are you going to call her?” I asked, hopeful.

“I think you should. You knew her better,” Frances said with the finality of dried cement. I rolled my lips inwards with displeasure. “That wasn’t the answer I was looking for.”

“Life’s tough.” Frances stood up and straightened her skirt. “I’ll be going now. Good luck. Keep me posted.”

I nodded, showed Frances to the door, and said good night.

I wondered what a person would say to Andrea in circumstances such as these. *Hi, I heard you were sacked and that you’re carrying Paul’s baby. So how are you?* There just didn’t seem a natural way of bringing up the real issues. *Is there anything we can do for you?* Like you care.
she would think. How can one sound sincere when professional relationships dictated distance from personal lives? *Hi, I'm Sandra, remember me, from Insurance Lit.? Wanna meet for lunch?*

I went to sleep wondering what the hell I was going to say. There was no telling how she would react. There was no telling how I would react.

My sleep was once again tortured with the dream of falling over the cliff with the wheelchair. But this time, at double speed.
I could’ve called her from home, except it’d probably be at some indecent hour in the morning or late at night, and that wouldn’t go down well. A few people have told me off in the past for calling them after 8 p.m., so now I take it as a rule across the board, just in case I offend my few remaining non-work friends. Keeping friends takes more time than the firm affords me, so I have to be picky. It’s not that I’m unsociable. Unfortunately, I get home from work after 8 p.m. most nights. What am I supposed to do other than make my personal calls during the day?

We were supposed to key in what file the phone call pertained to, before placing it. Alternatively, we had three seconds to enter the number after the person picked up. Plugging in a seven digit number in three seconds was beyond my manual dexterity. If no file number was logged in, the call would be recorded as a personal call and a bill for all personal calls, along with a print out of the phone numbers dialed (and time spent!), would arrive at the end of the month, without fail. Even if the bill was for twenty-two cents, the firm would extract it from its employees. There was no room for generosity when it came to big company profit margins. The most impoverished of small firms were more generous than this.

I dialed her number and left the file number blank.

“Hi Andrea, it’s me, Sandra Jeeves from Insurance Litigation.” There was no reply.

“Hennessy Clark?” I added.

“Yes, I do know where you’re from. Are you calling on the firm’s behalf?” She sounded aggressive, like a snarling dog.

“Oh, no, nothing like that. Listen, I’m not sure exactly how to approach this subject with you, so I’ll just talk straight, okay?” Silence. “Jeez, you’re not making this easy on me.”
I was walking around my office with the phone, with my door closed. I was nervous as hell and couldn’t bring myself to stand still or sit down.

“Look, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way. I’ve heard some things about why you’re not with us any more—things I now wish I hadn’t heard. What happened to you wasn’t fair. Like I said, I haven’t heard all of it, I’m sure....”

“Who else knows? Have there been rumours about me around the office?” Her words were cutting, they were challenging me.

“No, I don’t think there are rumours. I just got back from holidays on Monday and wanted to flick you a juicy file and was told you weren’t with us any more. Then I overheard some things that Paul said. The walls are pretty thin, you understand. I wasn’t looking for trouble.”

There was another painful pause and then a barrage of demanding questions. “What did Paul say? What do you know? And who else have you told?”

“Whoa, slow down right there. I’m going out on a limb here, I hope you understand. If anyone knew I was ringing you, I’d be....”

“You’d be what?” she cut in, rudely. “What can they do to you? Hah? You’re an associate; their token woman—you’re untouchable. You’ll never know what I’m going through!”

She slammed down the phone.

_Could that have gone any worse?_ I wondered.

Paul walked in without knocking. Thank God I was off the phone.

“What’re you up to?” he asked, looking around my office, ensuring I had at least eighty hours of work to do this week. “Busy?” He started strutting, unashamedly turning over my files to see what was underneath them. “Need more work?”

“What do you think?” I threw my words at him like spears. I didn’t want to take this nonsense any more.

_Six Minutes_
He ignored my question and continued. “You’ve been away for quite a while. Your billing is down for last month. You need to hit the ground running this month, Sandra. You have to make up for the time you had off.”

“Tosser,” I grumbled under my breath after he’d left. What is the point of having paid annual leave if you’re not allowed to take it when you want, or oftentimes, at all. And then, you had to work even harder before and after!

I picked up the phone. I had to ring Andrea again. I couldn’t leave things as they were: it would be gutless of me. Sure she had a point about my not being in a position to exactly understand the trauma she was going through. I haven’t had her exact problem before and don’t expect to at any time soon. But she was unfair to assume that I was above personal accountability, that I was the untouchable token woman. What the hell did that mean anyway? Token woman, my arse. If any other woman had put in as many hours as me behind the desk rather than on it, she could have the bloody honour of being the token woman. What’s being a woman got to do with anything anyway?

I dialed her number. It was engaged. I pressed redial. The call-waiting facility would alert her to the fact that I, or rather, someone, was trying to get through. Her conversation was long. Every time my quota of rings was up, I pressed redial. This would bug the shit out of her. Tough.

“Hello?” She finally picked up and sounded all sweet again. Maybe she was hoping it was Paul calling, to profess his undying love for her.

“Yeah, it’s me, Sandra. Please don’t hang up. It does terrible things for my ego.” I heard the start of what could’ve been a giggle. “Really, I mean it. I want to help you.” I spoke in a monotone to control my nerves and to keep my voice down.

“How exactly do you intend to do that? Get my old job back? Turn back the clock thirteen weeks to a time when I wasn’t pregnant?”
She was starting to get up my nose. Why should I go out of my way for someone who doesn’t appreciate it: resents it, in fact? I could feel the muscles in my jaw tense up.

“Listen, Andrea. You’ve obviously got yourself all worked out, so forget I called, all right?” I was about to put down the receiver, but paused for her response.

“No, wait! Hold on. Please.”

I let her stew in the uncomfortable silence for a while. Let her see what it was like.

“Are you there?” she asked.

“I’m here. Look, I have to get back to work now.” More silence. “I was actually ringing you to invite you to lunch, if you’re not too busy.” I rubbed it in, perhaps unnecessarily. “Lunch would be with Frances Mackay and myself. She knows about your situation too.”

“Um, well, I suppose so. I, um, appreciate you calling.”

We made plans to meet in King George Square later that day, since she was coming into the city anyway. We could buy sandwiches and sit in the pleasant autumn sun and talk. King George Square was five minutes walk from the office. At least it was less likely then for anyone from the firm to see us together. Most lawyers eat in the office, or escape briefly to an arcade of coffee shops. Sun is something they mostly stop experiencing after two years at law school, which is why we’re all so pasty-skinned.

I emailed Frances, Lunch is on, King George Square today. Meet at my office, 1 p.m., SJ. She would know what it was about. Meanwhile, I flipped back thirteen weeks in my calendar to see what I was doing at the time. It crossed my mind that Paul had been a busy man in December.
Frances turned up at my office at 1 p.m. as planned. We took the lift down to the arcade and bought some sandwiches at our favourite Carvery. No-one had been food-poisoned there yet. Lawyers would know and it was a real lawyers’ hang-out. The guarantee of personal safety was like that of eating Chinese where the Chinese ate. I went for an elaborate Vegemite and cheese sandwich with chips drowned in tomato sauce and a bit of gravy on the side, while Frances, obviously of the upper crust, bought an eight-dollar lamb-and-tabouli roll with a diet soda.

We meandered down Adelaide Street, in virtual silence. Perhaps we were both planning our reactions and what we would say.

We crossed the road, this time waiting for the walk signal. Usually, we didn’t wait. Being a lawyer didn’t mean upholding the law, it just meant selling it to those who had the money to pay you. We obviously weren’t in a rush today. There were no court-imposed deadlines, trials to instruct at, or clients to see. In fact, we didn’t have to be here at all. We didn’t have to see Andrea at all. And yet we wanted to.

She was at the fruit vendor, the pretty new carts brought in around town by the city council: Billy’s Carts, how cute. Andrea was wearing a long floral dress with sandals. I wasn’t accustomed to seeing her dressed so casually. Usually, she wore designer suits, tailored to her last curve, and shoes that cost more than my entire outfit. She took a paper bag of fruit from the vendor and spotted us. She didn’t exactly wave at us, but sort of put her hand up so that we could see her. She wasn’t showing yet. There was no way to tell she was pregnant.

Frances looked at me, and I at her. I noticed the lower lid of her left eye twitching ever so slightly.

We walked up to Andrea and awkwardly shook hands. It seemed like an odd thing to do, in retrospect. Here we were, establishing some sort of women’s coalition, and we were doing the man thing, shaking hands. I had to stop myself from patting Andrea on the shoulder as I shook
her hand. That would be really off. I was surprised at how naturally I executed these blokey maneuvers—tools of my trade which were so out of place in the real world of women. Maybe my mother and Mrs Bleakley were right to strap me for being so unladylike? Imagine where I would be now if not for their early intervention. Or maybe I did it to rebel against them? My father always said I had a streak in me.

Andrea looked positively nervous. And who could blame her? She didn’t know what we wanted from her; whether we were friend or foe, perhaps sent out by the firm on a reconnaissance mission. I wouldn’t trust anyone if I were in her position. I trust almost no-one as it is, and that’s not just because of my training at the firm. Life in general, has taught me that we all walk alone.

“Shall we sit down?” I suggested. I kind of waddled in one direction, hoping that they’d follow me, and they did.

“Do you have lunch?” Frances asked Andrea, somewhat redundantly and awkwardly.

“Yes, the fruit-lover’s special,” she replied, rustling the paper bag on her lap.

“Sounds healthy,” I offered. Everyone smiled slightly. It was clear that there was some ice to be broken.

“Well, now that I have another body to feed, I have to think about what I eat, although, I haven’t decided whether I’m going to keep the baby.” We were all seated next to the statue of a soldier on a horse. I couldn’t look Andrea in the eye. I was uncomfortable with sudden outbursts of personal information. Besides, if she carried out a termination, would it make me complicit in the unnecessary death of another human being? At thirteen weeks, it was more than a bunch of cells. Andrea looked down at her stomach and gently touched it. “Here I am, ensuring the baby gets the most nourishment and yet, I’m still contemplating killing it. Am I twisted?” Tears started flowing down her face.
I looked at Frances. She didn’t let a lot of emotion show in her face, but I could see that this moved her. It was the softening around her eyes, rather than the tense business-as-usual look. She reached out and stroked Andrea on the back, in long, slow lines. I thought putting my hand on her back too was a bit redundant at this point, so I started digging through my handbag for a tissue. I found a clean handkerchief instead and gave it to her.

“It has my initials on it,” I said pathetically as I handed her my hopelessly creased handkerchief. It was my attempt at cheering her up. Stop crying. Just stop. This reminded me of the time I was in grade two, a mere seven years old, and a grade one girl came up to me crying because some grade three kid had taken her lunch. I didn’t know what to do to stop her crying, so I gave her my lunch and I went without. It seemed to work. At least life was simple back then.

Andrea wiped her eyes and blew her nose into my Harrods handkerchief several times. I told her quite emphatically that she should keep it. Nothing personal. She insisted she would wash and return it. I said not to worry.

Andrea settled down a bit and Frances put her hand on her lap. “Are you all right?” she asked. Where did she get it from, this compassion on demand? Did I ever have it? Did I bury it? I thought I was more emotionally connected than Frances. Why did I have so many unanswered questions? By my age, I had once thought that I’d have everything worked out, right down to whether it was better to be buried or cremated! I just seem to have no idea.

I inched closer to Andrea on the park bench and cleared my throat. I wasn’t about to be outdone by Frances, although remaining distant and aloof had a way of preserving my seniority. “Did you want to talk about things, Andrea? Let us know exactly what happened?” I could feel myself squinting and my throat constricting as I said this.
A scruffy-looking man came and sat down on the bench next to us while talking on his mobile phone. He kept looking at us until I gave him a death stare that he would not quickly forget. Then he turned away, his phone still secured to his head.

With our privacy reinstated, I started to pick at a now stone-cold potato chip. I offered some to Frances and Andrea, but both politely declined. I felt like such a glutton, but to not eat my bucket of fried chips would be an admission of just how much I can be influenced by others. To avoid obvious questions, I ate them silently, and listened while Frances extracted what we needed to know from Andrea.

Andrea was still sniffling, but at least she was in control. Since I was admitted as a solicitor, I can’t remember crying in front of anyone … well other than at the Law Ball, in front of Piers. Jeez, I wish I could purge the memory! I knew I had to be tough to cut it in this world and tough I was. As for what I’ve become, who knows. Wasn’t it Nietzsche who warned: *Whoever battles with monsters had better see that it does not turn him into a monster. And if you gaze too long into an abyss—the abyss will gaze back into you.* There seemed to be an abundance of monsters and abysses about lately.

“Where do I start?” she half-laughed sadly. “You probably knew that I was having an affair with Paul.” Frances and I avoided eye contact with Andrea. Of course we bloody-well knew! How else would she get a bigger office than me and be second chair on the most important client we had to date? I looked for a non-existent crispy chip until the rhetorical question passed. “Well, everything was fine for almost two years and then I fell pregnant, to Paul, of course.” Andrea was staring down at her newly acquired handkerchief with the initials SJ as if it had a sedative effect on her. “I wasn’t seeing anyone else for all that time. I really loved him.”

I started shifting around in my seat. Oh, boo-hoo! How could a youngster like Andrea know what love is? I wasn’t sure that I had ever experienced it, so how could she have?

*Six Minutes*
“I know that my actions and behavior at the firm didn’t win me many friends...”

*But you certainly influenced people,* I thought to myself bitterly. I kept poking at my chips, madly.

“I was only protecting my interests. I know that’s a poor excuse, but that’s how I saw it at the time.” She wiped her eyes again. “You know, Paul promised that he was leaving his wife two years ago, and I believed him. He kept saying they were living separate lives and she never appreciated him. I never would’ve started a relationship with him if I’d known he was lying to me.”

I was thinking, *doesn’t every affair begin with a lie? It’s the nature of the beast. Why would the lies only go one way?*

“As I now know, he never intended to leave his wife, because he stood to lose too much in the divorce settlement. There was a nasty prenuptial agreement, which would’ve left him penniless if he’d left her. I was so stupid to think he’d leave a comfortable life to make me more than his mistress!”

Andrea broke down in tears. The scruffy man was looking at us again. “Do you mind?” I said to him, and he turned away. I didn’t fancy myself as part of a lunch-time entertainment trio. I felt completely out of control. Paul’s name sent nasty tension up my spine.

“Should I keep the baby? I mean, I just don’t know!” she wailed. “I don’t think I’ll be able to love it. I’m so messed up, I just don’t trust myself!”

“There, there,” Frances sympathised. I could’ve been sitting in a corner eating a banana and going *Ooh! I didn’t feel that I was usefully contributing to this conversation. Every time I wanted to say something, there was a lump in my throat. And if not for that damned lump, I would’ve happily eaten my Vegemite and cheese sandwich, because I was still starving—the cold chips just didn’t cut it and I had skipped breakfast again.*
I wasn’t about to give Family Planning advice, but I was under the impression that abortions had to be done fairly early in the piece. Thirteen weeks into a pregnancy seemed a little late to me, but I could be wrong. I just imagined a little heart beating and wondered how anyone, if they really thought about it, could pluck a precious little person out of its mother’s womb and throw it away. The intensity of this thought scared me. It wasn’t just about choice, or even morality. It was about responsibility. It’s not like children chose to be born.

“‘I think you should keep it,’” I offered. Frances scowled at me, as if I weren’t supposed to express an opinion. I shrugged my shoulders as if to say, Well, she asked!

Andrea looked at me with cocker spaniel eyes, “You really think so?” She sounded relieved, grateful. “You think I’d make a good mother?”

That’s not the question I was answering. I bit my lip, raised my eyebrows, looked around and responded as best I could in the circumstances, “Sure you would.” This seemed to be what Andrea wanted to hear, as she bear-hugged me and started crying again. Truth be told, I hadn’t even considered whether she would be or could be a good mother. As far as I could see, that was something you aimed for and learned on-the-job.

Why was every question surrounding motherhood so vexing, so loaded with personal value-judgments and so often misconstrued? Why was Andrea suddenly seeking the opinions and support of others when she had lived and acted so independently and against the grain to this point? Was this women’s ultimate vulnerability?

“Thank you, thank you,” she kept saying. I suddenly felt a lot better about myself. I hadn’t stuffed up completely.

Time was ticking away and we had to be back at the office in fifteen minutes. I really wanted to hear the end of the story, since I had had to sit through the beginning. It was a bit like paying for a movie and refusing to leave until it was finished, no matter how bad it was.

Six Minutes
“So what actually happened, Andrea? I mean, why aren’t you still at the firm?” The lightness in her eyes disappeared.

“I broke off the relationship with Paul. I didn’t tell him I was pregnant, because I wasn’t sure what I was going to do with the baby. I didn’t want him to force me into a decision either way, because by this stage, I had worked out that he wasn’t really going to leave his wife.”

“I see,” I said as I scratched my chin. Frances kept her eyes on Andrea.

“I was really in a mess. I didn’t end the relationship because I stopped loving him, I just knew that we weren’t headed in the same direction. I wasn’t satisfied with being a mistress. I wanted my own husband, big house, white picket fence and all that.”

I could see that this was going to go around and around unless I led her a bit.

“So you didn’t tell him that you were pregnant?”

“No.”

“But did he know, do you think?”

“I think so. The symptoms were there. I was a bit swollen the last time we had um, relations, and he had seen me leaving the room a number of times during important meetings, to go to the bathroom.”

“I see.” She was picking up the ball again, which was good, but calling it “relations”?

That’s what our firm’s newsletter was called, “Client Relations”. Sex is what it is—sex. Relating has little to do with it, particularly at climax, if you thought about it. In the end, it was about satisfying one’s own needs.

“A few days after I broke it off with him, he fired me. He said that my work had become sloppy and that I wasn’t a ‘team-player’. I thought he was joking. I asked whether he was just threatening me because of our split. He said, ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about. You’re fired.’ I fainted and he just left me there on the conference-room floor for somebody else to find.”

_Six Minutes_
“You poor thing,” Frances said. Andrea looked at her for reassurance and Frances nodded. Andrea continued.

“The worst bit was yet to come. When I came to, he returned with Fredrick. Then Fredrick proceeded to accuse me of leaking a highly confidential and damning report on Dover Industries IUDs.”

“I remember the one. It was in the Courier Mail not so long ago, wasn’t it?” Andrea nodded and looked away from me, as if in shame. “The report alleged that a vital component could cause infertility in 23% of all women who used the product.”

She turned and looked directly at me, like there was no-one else. Her eyebrows were quivering, she was about to cry in crescendo. “I didn’t leak the report. You have to believe me! Oh God!”

“I wondered why we were hearing nothing about the Dover Industries leak, internally,” said Frances. “Did they find out who was really responsible?”

“Not to my knowledge. Officially, I’m it.”

While listening to Frances and Andrea, I had the indistinct tickling behind the ears of an idea not yet formed. Every time Fredrick’s name was mentioned, the hairs on the back of my neck trembled in recognition.

“You know, I get the feeling that this firm has a problem with pregnant women,” I said matter-of-factly.

Frances looked at me, and framed a silent “What?” on her lips.

“You remember Gloria, don’t you?”

Frances nodded at me, her eyes glistening, as if to say, I know what you’re thinking and I agree.

Andrea was too caught up in her own little world to catch onto the quick exchange.
“Exactly how much did you tell Tina?” I asked. Tina had been Andrea’s typist for about three years.

Andrea went pale and replied, “Everything. Why? She was my friend.” I could feel Frances’ eyes boring into me, but I refused to look at her.

“Well, let’s just say, she’s now looking after her own interests.”

Perhaps I should’ve been a little less ironic, however. Frances then addressed Andrea’s quizzical expression rather more bluntly.

“She told Paul everything. Sandra overheard Tina telling Paul on Monday in his office. I overheard him speaking with Fredrick on Thursday about it. That’s how come we know you’re pregnant to Paul and he fired you. I’m very sorry we had to tell you that.”

Andrea was shocked. Her mouth hung partly open and she started gasping.

“I wonder what other things she’s spread about me and to whom!” Her eyes welled up and she started crying again.

This was getting a bit heavy for one lunch hour. I suggested that I could take an hour off in the afternoon, and drive her home, if necessary. She shook her head and declined my offer, but thanked me profusely. We patted her on the back some more, rubbed her hands, and when she had brightened up again, said our goodbyes. She understood; the firm would hear no excuses for tardiness. We said that we’d keep in touch, to see how she was going, that sort of thing, but kept it light. Andrea tidied herself up and said she was off to the doctors “again”.

We hit the pavement fast and J-walked. Luckily there were no police around. In between puffing and limping with my blistered toe, I asked Frances what her thoughts were. It was outrageous, she said and I agreed. That was easy. That was obvious. What she said next quite surprised me. Frances wasn’t the little goody-two-shoes I thought I knew.
"What if we have a snoop around Paul's office later tonight after everyone has gone home?"
XIV

JUST CALL ME MARTYR

We kept walking towards the office as quickly as possible, looking straight ahead. People around us were pushing to get back to work too.

“It’s Friday. He usually finishes early and goes to drinks.”

I turned to look at Frances. She momentarily glanced sideways at me, her eyes gleaming, but her face otherwise not giving away much.

“Are you serious?” I gulped. “I thought you were Switzerland?” The cold chips with tomato sauce were giving me indigestion. Maybe it was more related to the stress around me at the time I was eating them. “We could get caught.”

“We could, but it’s unlikely. How will anyone know if we just go through Paul’s and FBI’s offices in the night? We won’t take anything, just make copies if necessary, charged to another file, of course. Making photocopies to a personal account in the middle of the night would look suss.”

This was all happening too fast for my liking.

She went on, “You were the one who always said that if you believe in something, you have to stand up and fight for it. Remember how you told me off the other day for being so complacent? Well, now I’m saying we should do something.”

Flame me dead, now she was quoting me. Misquoting me. Joining the dots of my hesitation.

“Did I say that?” I asked, in a tone that came out fuzzy with panic.

Frances cut me off. “So you didn’t mean it?” She was looking squarely at me now, rather than looking where she was going. Luckily, the sea of people parted for her. Was it a sign?
“Of course I meant it.” I really and truly meant it all right. But what’s it going to do for me, to stand up for all these issues? Why can’t someone else do it? My life was quite fine as it was, unfulfilling and boring perhaps, but at least it was predictable.

“Don’t think about it so much, Sandra, otherwise we’ll never do anything.”

“That was a bit cutting.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it that way.”

We walked some more in silence. A block away from work we had to stop at an egress to let a vehicle drive past. While the warning signal of an emerging vehicle beeped over the top of the rest of the typical city noise, I collected my thoughts. Frances had stopped talking, to save shouting.

It was okay for Frances to be making grand plans. If they fell through, she’d still have a place to live, parents to feed her and a well-connected political daddy who could get her a job if really pushed. On the other hand, I had a mortgage, a car loan, an elderly mother and grandmother to support, and no-one to support me. This job was everything I had. Somehow, contextualizing it made it seem like everything and not much, all at once.

The beeping stopped.

“I can’t do it,” I said to Frances. She looked pissed off.

“Why not?” she demanded.

“Look, I really don’t want to talk about it right now. Paul’s screaming about my billing, my files are out of control and—”

“Your files are always out of control. That’s life in litigation. As for the billing side of things, you were 160% of budget the month before you went away, so surely they could cut you some slack?”

That was typical. Give her a reason and she’d give you another three rebutting it.

_Six Minutes_ 108
“I just can’t!” I moaned.

“Or won’t?” The trap had been set. “If you change your mind, I’ll come past your office at eight tonight and collect you on my way to Paul’s office.”

Frances sped up and left me behind at the traffic lights. I became absorbed in the circle of glowing red and tried to breathe slowly.

For the rest of the way my mind was numb and blank. I had a dull feeling that I had to do something—either prevent Frances from acting unethically or join her, but the agony of doing nothing either way would finish me off.

At the bottom of the mall, I passed Henry, the blind, old street-busker, who wore rose-coloured glasses. The irony brought a smile to my face, even though I’d seen him here just about every week for the last ten years. With his enthusiastic sax and joyful disposition despite his apparent circumstances, he was a wonder to behold. His almost equally aged golden retriever lifted his heavy head in recognition, and lowered it again with a groan. I couldn’t just walk past. I went back, dropped five bucks into the saxophone case, and gave Rusty a quick scratch on the ears. I could see the corners of Henry’s lips rise, even while he was playing. No-one knew whether he was completely blind or not, but he had an uncanny knack for knowing when the money was coming his way.

When I arrived back at work I took the newspaper from the reception desk and locked myself in my office. I put the paper down on top of the twenty files I had spread over my desk, and gave my stress ball a work out. I sighed repeatedly.

I started thinking again. Who had ever helped me in my life? Other than my own good mother, what woman ever stood up for me? Who would stand up for me now, if I needed help? I suppose Gloria Bates, my old boss before Paul, had helped me in her own way, by toughening me up, in her words. “I’ll whip you into shape, Ms Jeeves,” she would say.
Still, I don’t know that even Gloria would’ve stuck her neck out for me. She kind of let me hang around because I was of use to her at the time. I don’t think she would’ve gone out of her way for me otherwise, feminist fight or no fight. I managed to get by all right on my own, why can’t Andrea, and every other woman for that matter? Why do women need help anyway? Can’t they stand up for themselves? I thought that was the whole point of the feminist movement: equality—women can do it just as well as men....

When I was starting out, women lawyers were thought to be a joke. Now who’s laughing? Maybe the women are giving the men something to laugh about? They want to be taken seriously, but they don’t take themselves seriously. They want to be noticed, but they get noticed for all the wrong reasons. They’re either ball-crushers or cry-babies. Why can’t there be an acceptable and promotable in-between? Like just being lawyers, instead of “women lawyers”.

I picked up the paper. Page one decried leadership instability, as always, when there was nothing really to report. There was also an article on an ugly teenager blaming society for his broken neck. According to him, if stage-diving were illegal, then he wouldn’t have done it and he wouldn’t be in a wheelchair today. As if he would’ve cared about whether it was legal or not! He was just looking for compensation for his stupidity. He was a product of his times, a child of the “nanny state”. I wondered how the former Premier, Mr Peter Beattie, would contextualise things for us, since he was the one who put “Queensland—The Smart State” on all Queensland motor vehicle registration plates? Queensland’s old mock title of “The Banana Republic” was closer to the mark. At least back then we all knew how to laugh at ourselves. No-one really believed that adopting daylight saving in line with the southern states would make our curtains fade faster.

I flipped through half the paper until I came to an article of interest. A whole feature on a forty-two year old actress who condemned the use of young women in nudity scenes in movies. According to her, the one movie she made at the age of nineteen ruined her life, because it
involved a sex scene with a much older man. Gee, I wondered, perhaps facetiously, how many times had Catherine Zeta-Jones rented that movie? Yucky! The interviewee admitted that she d already engaged in sexual intercourse off-screen before the age of nineteen, but that was different. Her life of drugs, messed-up relationships, and depression were all caused by the Hollywood producers, who used her in that film. How could anyone take her seriously? She was a washed-up actress who wasn't half good to start with, and now she was berating others for it? Get a grip, I thought.

*Flip, flip, flip.* In an article in the Higher Education pages, a female economics lecturer was half apologizing for not specifically encouraging women students and fellow staff during her “masculine phase”. In her defense, she stated that it was not enough to be a woman in order to be a facilitator and encourager of other women. She said that it was necessary also to be active and interested and empathetic. *Active, interested and empathetic?* The following paragraph particularly caught my attention:

“I did not consciously suffer from the dangerous delusion that because I could do it, and without specific help, so could/should other women.”

This riled me. How could you be consciously deluded? Was I under a *dangerous delusion?* Surely not! I closed the newspaper and returned it to reception. Crap, absolute crap.

I went back to my office, closed the door and rang Frances. This time, I used my mobile.

“I’m in,” I whispered. “We could just have a look around and anonymously tip Andrea off on anything we find. That way, we’ll help her, but not hang ourselves. Okay?”

“Fine. I guess we’ll be looking for anything that shows she was a good worker, had a good record, was not responsible for the leaking of the report and that she was sacked for her pregnancy.”

*Six Minutes*
“If we could find out who could've leaked the report and why, that would be a big help,” I added.

“I agree. Maybe there’ll be a memo floating around somewhere. I’ll search the filing cabinets and you can check Paul’s emails.”

“Okay, but I doubt that they’d use email for something as controversial as this. Email isn’t secure enough. But I could check.” I had some concerns about this. The firm had a way of tracking what time individual computers were switched on and off, and what programs and documents were accessed. I wasn’t sure how specific the records were, but I had a feeling that they were more specific than I would like.

“So, see you at eight.”

“Bye.”

In spite of my doubts, I felt marginally better about myself. At least I had decided to do something. However, it was still a bit like giving to charity because it was expected, and there was no way out of it. After all, it wasn’t like I could refuse Frances, if her friendship mattered to me. Just like I’d never turned down raffle tickets being flogged off by my work colleagues; even though winning the school or church “pamper hamper” was about as appealing as throwing money at ducks. If charitable intent were coloured lavender, then the primary colours used to form it would be red pester-power, blue self-interest and a whole lot of white guilt.

Now I had to go through the Akuna Architects file and draft a defense, looking at the fifty pages of statements taken from geotechnical engineers, the architects, and the builders, and three folders of site reports. A house wasn’t supposed to partially collapse within two years of being built. The insureds (the architects), the builders or the engineers had stuffed up somewhere. The plaintiffs who owned the home, were probably extra pissed off since the house ran over time by six months and over budget by three-hundred-thousand dollars.
I would’ve gone for a cup of coffee at this stage, however, it involved walking past Jennifer’s and Paul’s offices. I realized that over the past few days my coffee intake had been negligible. The two weeks away must’ve broken the habit.

I sifted through site report after site report. Raining – no work. RDO (Rostered Day Off). Dug the trenches – crossed the Western boundary – hit rock - fucked up bad ...

There was nothing less helpful than a builder telling you in writing that your client, in his respectful opinion, fucking up bad. I would definitely need a coffee now.

I took my Doggy Woof Woof mug into the kitchenette and loaded three teaspoons of instant coffee into it, then two of chocolate powder. The brand of coffee they supplied us with kept getting cheaper and nastier. One could only sigh. Once upon a time, we got drip filter freely available, but that only lasted two weeks, and then we had to sign at reception for each of our two cups a day. Anyone who went over their quota was severely admonished by Kiki the Fijian cookie lady and got another dose from the section partner at the next group meeting. It was very bizarre, particularly considering that the firm on average grossed fifty million a year, and on a fifty percent overhead there was money enough to buy each one of us a coffee machine and a junk food vending machine of our own. Then Kiki would be superfluous. She could be sent to assist the U.N. Peacekeepers in maintaining order during food drops in Somalia.

Lawyers run on coffee, Diet Coke, chips and biscuits. Denying it, or rationing it, is just cruel. You should see our sad little faces, as we circle the empty cookie jar at ten o’clock at night, and again at ten in the morning.

While pouring boiling water from the hanging urn, I heard giggling behind me. It was Paul and Jennifer, oblivious to the fact that someone could be in the kitchenette, someone unfortunate enough to hear them flirting with each other. I burnt my hand and nearly dropped my favourite mug. Flame me dead, that hurt! Paul and Jennifer came into the kitchenette and stopped
giggling abruptly when they saw me. She walked in first and stood next to me, while he admired the way her polyester skirt clung to her bum. I grunted their names to acknowledge them and to let them know that I wasn't impressed. Paul asked, “Going to drinks tonight, Sandra?” while still looking at Jennifer.

I shook my head and said “Too busy” and left the kitchenette in a hurry. In the corridor, I realized that I had forgotten to add milk to my coffee. This annoyed me considerably, but there was no way I was going back there.

The rest of the afternoon passed painfully slowly as I knew what lay ahead. I had started work before 6 a.m., and was awfully tired. Restful holidays actually diminished my capacity for long hours at work upon returning. What a life—sleeping in late, going to bed late, eating every two hours and devouring a novel a day, with a bottle of red in between. Putting in twelve hours or more a day at the firm had completely lost its appeal. The law of diminishing returns correctly suggested that the more hours put in, the fewer the returns. Unfortunately, however, there were many people out there who would give their front teeth, and a choice limb, to work any number of hours for a firm like this one, and the firm was quick to remind its employees of this. I had thought about applying for positions at other firms, but quickly realized, after observing the internal workings of our HR Department, that nothing was confidential and soon the whole of the city would know that I was applying. Besides, it could be worse elsewhere. Same shit, different flies.

Two hours passed and it was 6:15 p.m. I heard a commotion in the hallway and went to investigate.

“Mum, I want a chocolate bar!”

“Me too! Choc-choc! Choc-choc!”

“I need to go wee-wees.”
“Shhh, children, Daddy’s very busy. Be nice and quiet now. We’ll drop Daddy off some dinner and go home. Poor Daddy has to work late again. Emily, take Jacob to the toilet.”

“But I don’t want to!” retorted Emily.

“I said now!”

“No you didn’t,” Emily argued. Meanwhile, Jacob was standing in the corridor cross-legged, cupping the front of his shorts with both hands. He wasn’t budging.

It was Paul’s wife and their four children. They didn’t notice me, which was just as well. I could be tempted to spill the beans on Paul and his troubles with Andrea in a weak moment. To my disgust, I noticed that Paul’s wife was pregnant again. It looked like she would be having it soon. I wondered whether those children would ever know that they had a half-brother or sister, or maybe even more than one. However, the greatest tragedy was that all Paul’s offspring were essentially fatherless. The children he lived with would hardly know him any better than the ones he fathered in sin.

I wondered why Paul’s wife came in tonight of all nights, to deliver him dinner. I hadn’t seen her at the office for a long time. I assumed he didn’t encourage it, and I could see why. It wasn’t exactly a family he could put on show. His wife always looked like she’d just stepped out of the kitchen, with food (or was it snot?) wiped down the sides of her clothes and the children looking wild. The other thing was, of course, that Paul would prefer to have his dalliances go unnoticed. Having his wife familiar with all the staff would be an impediment.

I felt a bit sorry for her. Why did she marry him? Did she know he was going to be like this? Did she care? Was it him she married, the reputation, or the rich lifestyle? She had been his secretary, it is rumored. There’s a saying, that if you marry for money, you deserve every cent.

Paul’s family came and went. The noise died down and I could get back to work. I had no idea how I was going to get everything done on time. I had about thirty-five different defenses

_Six Minutes_
due within the week, and disclosure to do on a file that had run for the last seven years.

Disclosure involved bringing in all documents which touched upon any issue in the matter. A list had to be compiled for the other side, stating what documents our client had, excluding only privileged documents. Any that had been lost or destroyed had to be accounted for. I had to make sure we had everything. It was a tedious task, but a necessary one. There was a whole office, filled with boxes of documents, on this matter. To top it all off, there were two hundred hours of tapes to listen to and transcribe.

At a quarter to eight, I walked to the kitchenette with my mug to “scope the place out”. Paul was still sitting in his office. Damn! And he saw me walk past. That wasn’t hard. The place was so quiet, one could hear a ghost breathe.

“Working late, Dee?” he shouted out, a little too loudly in the circumstances. You get like that, after hours of solitude and silence.

“Yep, getting those billable hours up!” I gave him a thumbs-up to show I was on the ball, but really meant it sarcastically. He responded with a thumbs-up to me, and I knew exactly where I would’ve liked him to stick it. I flashed him a fake smile and continued to the kitchenette. I would have to call Frances and tell her to postpone our start time, maybe an hour. Hopefully, by then Paul would’ve left. For crying out loud, he has a family. He should be at home! At least Jennifer’s light was off, so Paul wasn’t bonking her tonight. He either had a lot of work on or he was just avoiding his family. But there must’ve been a good reason why he wasn’t at drinks.

I rang Frances and gave her the bad news.
"Are you ready, Sandra?"

Frances was at my office door at 11:15 p.m. Paul had gone home about ten minutes ago. I saw him walk past my office and go to the lifts. We left a small window of time in case he came back up for something. I dialed Frances when he had left. She was punctual. At least the place would be clear at this time on a Friday night. All the most conscientious brown-nosers would be out drinking as hard as they worked.

"Ready as ever," I replied.

I felt acutely sensitive to my surroundings at this point. My guilty reflection in the glass walls of the professional offices scared me on more than one occasion. The patterns in the carpet looked like they were crawling up my legs. Every step was an effort. I could feel my breathing quicken and my heart palpitate. I had to force myself to blink because my eyes were getting dry and tired from being wide open. They were feeling gritty.

Frances led the way, cautiously but confidently striding towards her purpose. How could she do it? I had thought she was a big moralist, and that everything had to be done by the book. I was starting to doubt whether I was a good judge of character. Maybe I was overreacting. We were doing this for an important reason, which had slipped my mind some time ago.

I hated being afraid. It was a lack of control.

I started licking my lips. They had become cracked and irritated in the air-conditioning. Luckily I had gone out for lunch today, so my body had at least had a short break from the fungus-filled air of the office.
We finally reached his door and pushed it open. None of the doors had locks on them, which was lucky for us, because we’d be up for Break and Enter, rather than just Enter and whatever else we were caught doing. Break and Enter committed between the hours of, from memory, 10 p.m. and 6 a.m. received heavier penalties. There were apparently social policy reasons for that, to the effect that people should be allowed to feel safe and sound while asleep in their comfortable beds. I’m not sure that burglars thought about these things.

Frances pointed to the metal filing cabinet in the far corner and proceeded to go through it. She then pointed to me and the desk and computer. *Damn*, I really wasn’t sure that I wanted to break into Paul’s computer.

I sifted through the documents on his desk. He subscribed to the more-the-merrier philosophy and must’ve had bits of every file he’s ever looked at, spread and stacked everywhere. It explained why many advices never reached the clients. They were placed on his desk for signature and remained there to decay. Once, he was caught with his face planted atop a pile of documents, deeply asleep. He later explained that he was trying to demonstrate that the Shroud of Turin was probably a fake, and that anyone could make one. He posited that if you left your face in one place even for a day, what with drool and all, you could probably get an imprint that would go yellow with time. Though he didn’t quite clinch the case, it did make for an amusing kitchenette conversation.

I found a memorandum by Paul to FBI outlining why I should not be put up for partnership this financial year, which I felt inclined to read. *Hell*, if I was going to be crucified for killing a sheep, I may as well do the whole flock. Frances hissed to get a move on, so I quickly finished scanning through it and put the memorandum under my arm for photocopying later, and kept sifting.
Frances finished going through the first drawer of files and was onto the second. She looked up at me, grey-faced and tired. It didn’t look like she had located anything. The outcome of the whole mission wasn’t looking promising. As if Paul would keep anything sensitive in an obvious place. That was it! Look for hiding places that weren’t obvious!

I scoped the room and noticed the opposite corner had a lounge chair, partially pinning down a floor rug. A large plant was positioned on one corner of the rug, just to ensure that it wasn’t easily tripped on, or lifted, for that matter.

I excitedly rushed to the lounge chair and started pushing it off the rug. I also moved the enormous pot plant. Frances looked at me as if I was crazy, but I didn’t care. This had to be it. I rolled back the rug as quickly as I could, almost forgetting to breathe. Something was beginning to show, I was sure! I got down on all fours, rolling the rug faster and faster. It was surprisingly heavy, although I was sure that it wasn’t nearly as hefty as the money he would’ve forked out to buy it. The firm didn’t pay for such furnishings, just the basics. A swirl of dust engulfed the room. Bloody cleaners. This was why I would purposely spill the contents of my hole-puncher all over my office floor, just to make sure they vacuumed properly!

Once the dust settled and the disappointment of finding nothing but the rug’s cleaning instructions passed, I unrolled the rug and moved the lounge chair back into place. I didn’t bother moving the pot plant because I was worried about chipping the ceramic pot, spilling the plant all over the floor, and breaking my back. Paul probably wouldn’t even notice it. I had hardly moved the plant ten centimeters.

Frances motioned towards the computer. I screwed my face up but realized that I had no real choice in the matter. I was there; I had the opportunity, the means and the motive. I had to do it.
I fired up the computer and took a seat. In the still of the night, the hardware sounded like a small plane on takeoff. Somewhere, I knew that there was a monitor identifying which computers were being used, perhaps like bleeps on an air-traffic controller’s screen. I just hoped that no-one was paying particular attention to who was still in and who wasn’t. At least professional staff didn’t have to clock-in and clock-out like the admin staff did. Clear skies, no turbulence. Was it too late to pray?

The firm had recently converted to a new security system, which many people still didn’t understand. Instead of carrying photo ID around, the firm gave us individual electronic tags that we were supposed to attach to our clothes. I’d left mine in the car. The two-month window for compliance had just passed and I was still in the habit of forgetting to wear mine. I didn’t like the idea that the firm could monitor where I was in the building at any given time. Frances had left hers in her office tonight, for obvious reasons. Paul and FBI were the dorks who introduced the system. I had on occasion seen Paul wearing his, but only when he wanted to be “seen”. There were days when he was apparently in the building because he had turned on his computer and greeted his secretary, but when it counted, no-one could find him. The welcome screen came up: *Hello Mr McClyne*, then a series of numbers and computer words. The password and access code page appeared and I entered Paul’s initials, hit enter, and then entered the access code, “PARTNER”. Everyone had their password as their initials and their access code as their position, unless consent to alter them had been obtained. It was crazy that it was so easy. At this point, I had wished that there was more to it, so that I could say that I had tried and just gone home with a clear conscience. The computer clunked and beeped some more and finally the calendar, email, word-processor and billing program came to life. I tabbed through the programs until I came to email. There was an email of yesterday’s date, which I highlighted and selected.
was entitled “Confidential” and seemed like a good place to start. It was from FBI and started, RE Your Recent Concerns.

I heard some rustling and thought it was just Frances, but I could smell stale cigarettes. It definitely was not Frances. My heart felt like it had stopped. I looked up to see the burly night-guard standing in the doorway.

“Evening, ladies.”

How could such a big man move around so quietly that neither of us heard or saw him coming?

“Evening!” I responded as cheerily as I could. This was where he was supposed to take the cue to move along, but he didn’t.

“Hi,” said Frances, somewhat belatedly, from the far corner of the office, near the filing cabinets. She turned to face him square-on.

He looked her up and down. She smiled coyly. Was she flirting? Our young Frances? Her cheeks were flushing. Seems she was taken by surprise too.

“Everything okay in here?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” I said, but he was still looking at Frances.

She didn’t disappoint: “Well, put it this way,” she said “... we’d be a whole lot happier if we could find what we were looking for and go home to bed ... It’s been such a long day.” She tilted her chin down and looked at him through her fringe like the coquettish late Princess Diana.

It wasn’t a lie, and in spite of the mention of Frances’ bed, he didn’t look entirely convinced. The name on the door was “Paul McClyne,” and neither of us looked much like a “Paul”.

“Would you like to help us?” I joked. “Paul’s so unreliable with his filing. It’s impossible to find anything in here!”

*Six Minutes*
The guard didn’t smile—perhaps doing so didn’t comply with the Tough-Guy Manual. He looked at Frances and raised his eyebrows.

“Okay, Ladies,” he said. “Have a good night.” He had another backward glance at Frances and gave me a perfunctory nod before walking off to continue his beat. Mr Serious.

Once he was out of ear-shot, Frances said, “That was close!”

“Tell me about it!” I could feel my heart going da doof, da doof.

“Hey, he wasn’t bad looking, was he?” asked Frances.

“Our type?” I enquired.

“Not really. Still, he wasn’t bad …” We returned to the task at hand.

“Frances, how about we wind this operation up in the next few minutes. I don’t want to tempt fate.”

“Good idea. Let’s move it, then.”

We worked as quickly as we could. Trawling through truckloads of paperwork was what we were trained to do, but it still didn’t make it any more rewarding. No-one likes digging through shit.

“Have you found anything?” Frances asked me.

“Nadda. Zilch. Except for this memo about why I shouldn’t be made up as partner.”

“Care to share?”

I had decided not to risk being caught at the photocopier, so I put the memo back where I’d found it and piled a few more sheets of paper on top of it, for good measure. “Yeah, some other time. Suffice it to say, Paul and FBI are arse-holes.” Frances closed the last of the filing cabinet drawers.

We made our way to the lifts after picking up our handbags from my office. We rode down to ground level in silence, disappointment hanging in the air.
Once we were safely outside the building, we walked towards the car park where we had moved our cars earlier in the afternoon just to be sure we weren’t leaving a blazing neon trail of this evening’s activities. “We didn’t really expect to find anything did we?” I said to Frances.

“Nope, not really. But at least we tried.”

“Yeah, we tried,” I said, defeated.

“Though, I was hoping to find some hint of who really leaked that report to the media. My money’s on Paul. Don’t know why … but there’s something about the man….”

We reached our vehicles and went our separate ways. Our part of the city was spooky at this time of night. There were none of the Friday night or weekend revelers—just the people who were here because they had no choice—the corporate night-owls getting home, the derelicts, the addicts and prostitutes—all jumping at their own shadows.
FBI and Paul were sitting in my office at 7 a.m. the next morning, waiting for me. Their faces were stern, and there was no “Good morning.” This wasn’t good.

“Good morning,” I offered.

“If you say so,” replied Paul.

“Let’s go to the conference room,” FBI directed. Paul and I followed.

“What’s happened?” I asked Paul as we made our way. “A problem with one of my clients?”

Paul ignored me. FBI opened the conference room door and held it for us. My skin prickled as I brushed past him.

“Take a seat,” FBI barked. The tone of voice wasn’t the one used for we’ve got a problem and we’re going to solve it together, but rather the more catastrophic you’ve got a problem and you’re on your own.

FBI lit a cigarette. I thought of saying that smoking wasn’t allowed in the building, but I knew this was just another part of his routine of: I make the rules, you follow them. He was a master of cruel games. He knew that I was quitting smoking. I couldn’t concentrate; all I wanted right now was a big drag on a noxious Camel.

“What do you think you were doing, Sandra?” FBI asked in a most contained voice.

I looked past him and stared at the pink wallpaper, without a word.

Six Minutes
“I’m talking to you, Jeeves.”

I continued to ignore him.

“It looks like it’s time to remind you of the ground rules here. I say things once for normal people, twice for the hard-of-hearing and thrice for retards. Which are you?”

“Paul, would you kindly tell him that I won’t be spoken to in this way, and that I have no idea what he’s talking about.” I wouldn’t even give him the courtesy of using his name.

“Let’s get down to business, shall we?”

I still ignored him. He had nothing on me. I hadn’t actually done anything, yet, and besides, what could he prove?

“Now, where would you like to start?” He walked up to me and turned my chair to face him. “How about the leaked Dover Industries Report? Hmmph?”

His face took on the ecstatic, demonic look of a snake with its fangs embedded in its next meal. Paul looked on, expressionless.

“What the fuck? I didn’t do that and you know it!” I blurted.

“Lame, Sandra. So … lame.” FBI said all this on a deep, luxurious exhale. It was feigned disappointment.

Paul piped in. “Security reported two women rifling through my office late last night. When we called up images from the building’s security cameras, we saw you and Frances Mackay. The guard confirmed that it was you both that he saw.”

Shit. Time to think fast. Poker face ON. I consciously willed my body to RELAX.

“Someone had taken my Supreme Court Rules again, so I went to borrow yours. While I was there, I thought I’d look for an advice I’d put on your desk several weeks ago for signature, which the client still hasn’t received. I thought I should retrieve it, and check it’s still appropriate and reprint a more current date before you sign it.” I took a breath. Fuck, even I was starting to
believe my own spin. “You really ought to keep your office more tidy. Can’t find a fucking thing in there.”

“Which advice was that, Sandra?” Paul asked, flatly.

I stammered, “Shit, you know the one Paul…”

“No, as a matter of fact, I don’t.”

“… It’s on the tip of my tongue … you’re asking me before my first cup of coffee? Fair crack o’ the whip!” I tried to cover up the fact that I was thinking through three hundred files, trying to come up with one that could plausibly fit…. “The Reeves matter. FOAI was still waiting on the quantum advice and I hadn’t seen it come out of your office.”

“I’d signed and sent that advice a week ago.”

“Oh. Well no wonder I couldn’t find it on your desk, then. Bloody case manager at FOAI sent me down the garden path, didn’t he?”

“What was Frances doing with you?”

“You know, we were just keeping each other company. Gets lonely around here.”

“Sandra, stop shifting us.” Paul was sitting opposite me, far away, with the huge conference table between us. If I didn’t have him on side, I was seriously screwed.

“Sandra, you were caught red handed this time.” Impulsively, I looked down at my hands as he said this, ironically noting that they were indeed red from nervous scratching—all the way from the fingertips to the wrists. What a Lady Macbeth moment. I hadn’t done the nervous scratching since high school! I hid my hands under the desk.

“How many other times have you done this, huh? Slipped a few valuable trade secrets of the firm or its clients as well, perhaps?”
FBI started strutting again, the rhythm of his steps like a metronome against the racing of my heart, the gushing in my ears, the sound of my dry-mouth trying to swallow and my syncopated, panicked breathing. My fingers and toes started feeling very cold.

“You know, that leak really hurt this firm.” Then he left me to marinate in well-timed silence.

This didn’t make sense. Why was he blaming Frances and me when Andrea had already been sacked for it? This supported my theory that she wasn’t sacked for poor performance or for leaking the report, even if she did leak it. She was sacked for her pregnancy and for breaking off a sexual relationship with a partner. It also didn’t go against Frances’ idea that somehow, Paul was behind the leak. Or FBI. Or someone other than us. Shit—unless we could find out who it was, and clear our names, our careers were over and our reputations stuffed.

I looked up at Paul and narrowed my eyes. He continued to stare at me with a lifeless expression. That’s what made him such an effective negotiator for clients. No one knew what was going through his mind.

“You know, we have quite a nice conspiracy theory, Paul and I.” He threw an unmarked envelope on the table, just within my reach. “Have a look at those and tell me if I need my eyes checked.”

I opened the envelope. There were 5x10 inch colour photos of Frances and me with Andrea, in King George Square. Bloody hell. My hands were shaking, so I put the photos on the table and slid them around the marble until I had seen them all. To cover my unease, I thought I’d have a go at my interrogators. “So, who’s the keen photographer? If you wanted a photo of me that much, you could’ve just asked.” Paul and FBI stayed silent. “What are you suggesting anyway? That it’s a crime to have lunch?”
I needed more information. Was he suggesting we were helping Andrea in some way, or
that we were linked to the leaked report, or both? I didn’t want to say too much. It was a good
time to play stupid. Why had we been followed and then photographed? It was extraordinary. I
know we did this kind of thing in suspected insurance fraud cases all the time, but to follow your
employees during a lunch break?

“What do you think I’m suggesting, Sandra?” FBI asked from the other end of the room
as he pulled out a bottle of Johnny Walker Black Label from the cupboard and poured himself a
glass. He didn’t offer any to anyone, including Paul. He took a long sip and then drowned the
remainder of his cigarette in the glass.

“Drinking and smoking before eight in the morning? Isn’t there a policy against that?” I
asked FBI. He said nothing. “So you have pictures of us having lunch with Andrea, so what?”

“You know what. Would you like to hear the tape of your conversation with her that
day?” He threw a micro-cassette on the table. He loved intimidating people. I was about to
decline his offer, but thought the better of it. Maybe he was just bluffing and I could catch him
out. It could be a blank tape. I had used that technique once.

“As a matter of fact, I would like to hear it, if you wouldn’t mind. I have plenty of time to
kill and you don’t look to be in a hurry.” I crossed my arms and legs like a critic waiting for the
start of a new show. A little bit cocky. Just a bit. Claw back some ground. FBI stopped smiling
and his eyes went dark. He hated being challenged. I wasn’t supposed to ask to hear it. I was
supposed to break down and confess all.

He looked at Paul who took the cue to find a micro-cassette player. Paul left the room.
FBI stayed silent. He was silly to remain in the room with me alone, for I could always claim that
he said things he never said or did things he never did.
I thought of throwing myself at FBI and attacking him so that he would have to retaliate. If I could get a bit of his skin under my fingernails and a couple of bruises here and there, I would have a case. No one would be able to prove it otherwise. If I rip my skirt, he could go into the slammer. Paul walked in before I had time to consider this fantasy further.

Paul played the tape, placing it right in front of me. “You’re so kind,” I said evenly. Not even a twitch around his eyes registered a reaction to my comment. I was hoping to get some sympathy from him, knowing our history, but he was clearly hanging me out to dry. I felt like a broken-hearted schoolgirl.

After the initial scratching noises of the tape commencing, I could hear my voice say, “Did you want to talk about things, Andrea? Let us know exactly what happened?” It was a shame really, because now it meant we were well and truly screwed. The tape reached the bit where I told off a man for staring at us. That’s who it was! The mole! When I spoke directly at him, telling him off, my voice was clearer and louder on the tape. He must’ve been holding the recorder and the photos of us were probably taken on his mobile phone.

No-one’s privacy is safe any more.

Paul turned the recording off. Clearly, he only wanted to prove it existed, but he wasn’t all that keen to air his dirty laundry again. Extra-marital babies were such a bother....

“What, not comfortable discussing your sex life, Paul?” I sniped.

This was almost as awkward for him as it was for me.

The temptation was too great to resist, so I let it rip. “Soon you’ll have two families to get home to. How on earth will you cope? Wait till your wife finds out, you fucking, selfish bastard!”

He slapped me, hard on the left cheek. Beauty. This bruise would be a whopper. I started screaming “Stop it! Call security!” and crying.
“The fuck you do that for?” FBI reprimanded Paul. “Shit for brains!” He dropped his second cigarette into his glass and sent Paul out of the room. He followed him and announced loudly to the corridor in general, “Everything’s alright. Go back to work. Just a misunderstanding.” He came back in and closed the door.

I was alone with him, but he stayed as far away as he could. I touched my face—it was swelling. To my surprise, I was sobbing. I wasn’t sure any more how much of it was my own, personal best attempt at a Mrs Merritt performance, and how much was due to shock. Was I kidding FBI, or myself?

FBI opened the blinds on his side of the room, so that every passer-by could see him, but not me—with my red, throbbing face and tear-filled eyes. He wasn’t going to fall for any tricks. He was pulling some of his own—making this look like a bad performance review....

He fired up another cigarette.

“You’re in no position to be a smart arse, Jeeves,” FBI reminded me. He stared at his cigarette from all angles while he spoke, rolling it around in between his forefinger and thumb. It must’ve been so frigging interesting. He was trying to regain composure, re-install his authority, make me sweat. “So what do you propose we do, Jeeves?” He put a leg up on a chair he was standing next to. “Call the police? Would you like that? Would that serve your purpose?”
XVII

IS THAT A MONSTER IN MY MIRROR?

We had been so naïve, thinking that we could beat the firm at its own grubby game. On the up-side, however, I did negotiate a confidential, *ex gratia* payment, to compensate for my *personal injury*, and it was equivalent to six months’ salary. Of course it was *shut up money* and had nothing to do with the value of a slap. And for Frances, I negotiated a “redundancy package” of another six months’ salary. It still didn’t please Frances, but it was surely better than poverty.

“So this is how it feels?” Frances eventually asked. She and I were leaving a pub at close, and this was the first time I’d seen her rotten drunk. She was hanging off my shoulders like a fur stole.

“How what feels?” I grumbled, rubbing my arms against the chill of the pre-dawn air.

“Depression.”

“Are you asking me as the expert on the subject?”

“Are you an expert?” Frances asked, while letting a solitary car go by before crossing the road. She didn’t even look at it, or at me, but straight ahead at nothing in particular.

“Well, I just let that car pass without jumping in front of it, so I can’t be too far gone. Having said that, I’m not sure how I’m going to get home or what I’m going to wake up to in the morning.” With one arm, I started digging around in the zipped section of my handbag for my emergency ciggy. One cigarette wouldn’t start me up again; it’d just help me through the crisis. Frances turned her head to look at me with a horrific blood-shot eye, which stood out against the tired paleness of her skin under the mid-city lights. Her other eye didn’t even register in my vision. All I could see was one huge red eye up so close that it looked like it’d jump out and bite me. It was like seeing a Gary Larsen monster close up in a rear-vision mirror where *things are*
closer than they seem. I took an involuntary step back in fright. We both nearly fell in a heap, because she was leaning on me so heavily. “What the hell happened to your eye? Did you punch yourself?”

“It’s my contacts. They’re killing me. They’re not supposed to be in for so long and I rubbed them.”

With that, she bent over and spewed into the gutter. It came out in waves, her whole body convulsing. Poor thing. I pulled her hair away from her face as best I could. Nothing worse than having spew-sticky hair plastered onto one’s face.

I was glad to have Frances’ company, even given the putrid stench of the moment. It was a diversion from the creepy quietness of being alone.

I found my cigarette, with a sagging end like a neglected lover. I straightened it out as best I could and lit it up. I let my head roll backwards as I luxuriated in the guilty pleasure of its warm and inviting breath, and waited for Frances to hit EMPTY.
XVIII
SNAKES ALIVE!

Last night’s marathon drinking session was a wipe-out. I couldn’t remember how we got home, only that I’d come home with more money in my wallet than I’d started out with at the beginning of the night. Someone must’ve bought me drinks, and somehow, we got a cab. But who paid for it, was beyond me. It was probably best not remembered. I hoped like hell that Frances didn’t remember more than I did.

This morning, in keeping with the thinking that the only way to avoid a hangover is to stay drunk ... I started with a liquid breakfast in the bath. The bath was a comforting place to be, particularly with a bottle of scotch. It’s not that I needed to drink. It’s just that it helped fill a need. Besides, there was nothing more sympathetic than a silent bottle. No one to say I told you so or How could you?

All being said and done, I still managed to walk out of Hennessy Clarke with two big cheques—one for me, and one for Frances. That was worth toasting. Cheers to us! Hurrah! We’d have to tell Andrea the good news. Hah! Well, news, anyway. Later.

I slid around in the bath trying to find a position that didn’t antagonize my recovering tailbone. I couldn’t believe how long it was taking to heal after my windsurfing mishap in Noumea. It wasn’t like I could even say that I had been injured in the thrill of a twenty-knot spill—I was only mounting a disobedient long-board in the coral shallows, scaring away little fish. At the time, my pride had hurt more than my body.

Crack! Johnny, my good friend fell off the end of the bath as I sloshed about trying to regain my balance in amongst the slippery bubbles. Now the place smelled like a brewery.
I pulled my foot out above the bubbles and scolded it for its clumsiness. It looked back at me with an accusing bunion for an eye. No doubt it would’ve said, given half a chance, that we wouldn’t have been in the bath with Johnny at all but for my recent stupidity. I re-submerged my foot and let my whole body slide under the bubbles, head and all, letting my hair swirl around my face like nimble water snakes, forming and reforming like the painful question-marks in my brain. Which of my actions exactly, were stupid? Meeting with Andrea? Talking Frances into helping her? Letting Frances talk me into helping Andrea? Getting caught? Or, becoming involved at all? Would I have felt worse for not becoming involved? What was my problem anyway? Why did I have to poke my head out of the crowd when everything had been so safe?

I came up for air, my hair plastered on my face. I carefully lifted myself out of the bath and tiptoed around the broken glass and pools of amber fluid on the floor. Drying myself off, I tried not to look at the reflection of my sorry self in the mirror—especially the dark side of my face, but plodded off in my towel to the kitchen for a drink of water. I went to the glass cupboard and found it empty. Everything was in the sink, my stainless steel, living and breathing compost heap. The acrid stench of rotting food scraps made my head spin and my lungs contract in horror. If only I were a man. Then I wouldn’t feel bad about inviting my mother over to clean it up.

“Later,” I said out loud, and left the kitchen, stomach heaving.

I remembered a dedication by an early feminist academic, in the front of her book, which I couldn’t remember the title of. I had never read beyond the first three pages. One of the snooty barristers bought me the book for Christmas one year, along with some edible panties, thinking it was a great joke. As if Sandra was a feminist! He had deliberately left the $2 markdown sticker on the book, just so I knew what he thought of it. To make matters worse, all the men in my office received good bottles of wine, thanking them for the briefs they’d sent during the year.
The dedication read more like an apology, although I now accept it as a statement of fact: that an education makes a woman neglect her domestic duties. Anyone with better things to do would rather learn Latin than squander their lives in front of the sink. Not only women. It’s just that it took women eons to cotton on to the idea that they had an equal right to an interesting life.

I started swaying and made a beeline for the couch. Educated or not, I was stupid enough to make liquor my savior and now I would suffer the consequences. I threw my weight onto the couch and tried to find a comfortable repose in which I could feel sorry for myself for a good few hours. I cleared the back of the couch of all my week’s clothes with one swipe and swung my legs up across an armrest. I heard a crinkling noise under my head and reached under the cushion to pull out whatever it was: a bag of snakes of the confectionery kind, one of my favourites. I ate the whole packet, three defenseless snakes at a time, with a shameless lack of self-control.

Remorse would come later, as it always did.

The rain that had been regrouping over the last few days finally came down in bucket-loads. It was the perfect accompaniment to melancholia, an empty bag of snakes and a house with no booze. If I couldn’t enjoy the world, no one else should either. The old mulberry tree outside my living room started pawing my window with its impressive foliage, pushed flat against the glass by the gusting wind. It was still losing its leaves. There was a collection of partly decayed, partly crumpled hearts on my windowsill.

The wind was whistling through the cracks in my old timber Queenslander. It was forcing its way through gaps around the windows, up through the floorboards, and sieving itself through the original, decorative ventilation grills. In all, it wasn’t much fun being in a Queenslander during a severe storm. The only consolation was that it was on high stumps and hence, wouldn’t be easily flooded.

*Six Minutes*
I was through with fighting. I closed my eyes and let my head spin into unconsciousness. My thoughts wandered to a time when I was happy. I was six years old and had just finished my first day of school. Both my parents were there to hug me to bits at the school gate. I was grinning so broadly that the top of my head was perilously close to falling off. My parents picked me up between them so that my feet felt like they were miles from the ground. They hugged and kissed me until my armpits hurt. At home, they had cake and milk waiting for me, and a beautifully wrapped present, with white paper and pink ribbons. “For being so good today,” my dad had said with what I could now swear was a tear in the corner of his eye. My mother had wandered off to make tea just as I was about to open the present, but daddy called her back. It was my moment and I was the most special person in the world. I opened the present with as much restraint as I could muster (for the criticisms of being too hasty and reckless with the paper at Christmas time still stung my recent memory). I found the most beautiful wooden pencil case I had ever seen, with fresh, slightly sticky varnish and a clear plastic top. “Only the best for my Sandy,” daddy said, taking me into his arms again. Under the pencil case, was a blank diary. My mother piped in, touching me lightly on the shoulder, “Let your diary be your best friend.” Slightly perplexed, I thanked her, thinking a best friend was someone you shared lollies with.

Not three weeks later, my whole world was engulfed in black. My father had died in a work-related accident. Hoards of people came to the house, wearing black. I was the only one wearing white, because I was too young to wear black, my mother had said. They descended upon us like a dark storm cloud of condolences and prickly kisses, and dispersed three days later. My mother wouldn’t let me look into the coffin. It was sealed. For years, I wondered what my father looked like inside that box, and in my dreams, half expected him to open his eyes one last time and tell me something that made sense of the world and alleviated the pain.

*Six Minutes*
I awoke to find a windowpane smashed and the curtains billowing into my face. By some stroke of luck, I had not been cut by the glass that had shattered over the lounge-room floor. I could hear the huge gum tree outside my kitchen window, thumping against the guttering of the house. It was one of those things I hadn’t gotten around to doing—paying someone to radically cut back the branches. Giant Australian gums were known to snap, split or fall over during storms or dry seasons. Gorgeous as they were, they were a nuisance to live with. And it’s not unpatriotic to say so.

I sat up cautiously and brushed off a few stray shards from my towel. The rain continued to whip in through the broken window, along with shredded, soggy leaves, but I didn’t care. There was nothing I could do about it right now. The floor was wooden, so it would dry itself. The curtains I had never liked anyway. This mess could wait until I was sober and I cared, along with the smashed whiskey bottle in the bathroom. Fuck, what a mess. Not just my house, but my life.... I ran my fingers through my hair gingerly to ensure that I wasn’t bejeweled with silvery splinters and left the lounge in search of some order and sanity in another room.

Staggering towards my bedroom, a flicker of movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention. Of course, when I looked back, it was just my stupid reflection in the hallway mirror. I would’ve thrown something at it, but for the mirror’s sentimental value: my dad used to comb his hair in front of it every morning before work. I wondered whether any part of him had stayed with the mirror to watch over me. The skin on my arms prickled. Thoughts of sharing space with anything not made of tangible carbon matter should not be entertained lightly. Maybe it was disrespectful to the dead; maybe it was just plain scary. Sobering in any case.

I went back to the lounge and cranked up my Best of Sandy Shaw CD to distract myself. Behind the stereo, I found an emergency stash of Camels and a cigarette lighter. I resisted for a whole two seconds. It should go on record that resisting for any length of time was better than
offering no resistance at all: it showed some strength of character. Thankfully mother wasn’t there to argue with me. I know cigarettes are bad for me and it was the wrong time to restart expensive habits. After my first puff, I stopped to wonder whether I should have a second. Childishly, it was only my reluctance to be berated that made me pause, not genuine concern for my own welfare or economic rationalism.

It was my dentist I was thinking of: with those compassionate, long eyelashes and gorgeous brown eyes above the dental mask, surrounded in a halo of white light, studying every crevice of my mouth, like someone who really cared. He has already put me on a six monthly recall to keep an eye on a spot that had the potential to become an oral cancer. The combination of regular drinking and smoking makes me the perfect candidate for it, I’m told. At one stage, the fear of losing half my palate to the surgeon’s knife and having to breathe through a straw was enough to make me give up smoking, but not drinking. I figured I’d be safe enough as long as I didn’t do both. Simultaneously. Or something like that.

Shit, my head hurt. I turned down the music.

In any case, I was nothing if I couldn’t get heady with self-importance alongside the partners and other associates at the bar most nights after work. That’s when the real business was done and the strategic alliances formed. Giving up smoking had already closed portals of communication for me within the firm. Smoking was the universal icebreaker, even across the classes. “Do you have a light?” Or sidling up to another victim of the clean-air brigade at the butt-and-ash collector outside a building, would often give you a ticket to that extra bit of information, about what was going on at the office, or less interestingly, about the world at large.

Sometimes secretaries had the best information, if you could wait long enough to hear them out about the latest Hollywood scandal, nail-varnish product or complaint about how they worked so much harder than anyone else, solicitors included. However, I couldn’t go drinking
with the secretaries. While they were free to brag about their companies (providing they were on the way “up”)—dropping comments in the tearoom about who they were out with, what they wore, what they drank and how many drinks they were shouted—a serious solicitor’s stocks would fall in the eyes of the establishment to be seen with one of them. It was all right for the men to share sexually transmitted diseases with secretaries, even marry them if they had to; a professional woman whose star was rising should show herself to be different from, and better than, the rest of the women in the office.

At office morning teas, I was always aware of the partner’s eyes boring into me when I spent too much time being friendly with administration and support staff. What he probably didn’t realise was that if the administration and support staff didn’t think of me as a friend, supportive mentor and someone with an office they could come and cry in, my work wouldn’t be done. I tried explaining that once to Paul, but he didn’t get it. The only boss who understood that was Gloria Bates, and even she did nothing to help me out when, as a junior solicitor, the bitchy women typists used to give me a hard time. Instead, I got a talking-to about solicitors being a dime a dozen, thanks to greedy universities pumping us out cheaply and quickly, whereas good secretaries were hard to come by. To be sure that nothing was left to the imagination, Gloria told me that any firm would quickly sack a solicitor to keep a half-good secretary happy. She even went so far as to say that many secretaries were hired for reasons other than their abilities at the keyboard or in the filing drawers. It would get me nowhere to think about it, just do your own typing and filing, she had said. I remember how angry that made me. Administrative work couldn’t be billed to a client, so essentially, the other female solicitors and I had to do the work that someone else was being paid and congratulated for, in our own time. Worst of all was having to give these women flowers on Secretaries Day, particularly when the general rule which applied
all year of I'm not your secretary somehow went by the wayside on that one dreadful day of the year.

I had been staring out the broken window, mesmerized by the billowing of the curtains and waving of the mulberry tree, for at least half an hour. I was shocked out of my self-absorption again by a crashing noise. At this rate, I could see how a city could collapse in a day. This time, it was my Themis figurine, which Gloria had given me upon my admission to the Supreme Court as a solicitor. I hadn't thought much of it at the time, even when Gloria had explained her significance, particularly to us women lawyers, but now my heart ached at the thought that I had lost her. I looked down to the floor. She was laying facedown at my feet now, fallen from her high perch on my bookcase-cum-stereo stand, from where she had judged and protected me for the last ten years. She generally looked intact, and her scales of justice were fine, but her sword and right arm now pointed away from her body at a peculiar angle. It was with some shame that I noticed she had fallen into my pile of stamped-out butts and ash. I had never dropped cigarettes on the floor in anyone's house, let alone my own. My mind must really be gone, I thought, and what a way for a Goddess to die.

I took a tissue from the tissue box on my coffee table and bent down to Themis, carefully collecting her should any bits come off. It was safer for her and for me. As soon as I touched her, her sword and sword arm, up to the bicep, flaked in the tissue. The broken porcelain was fine and sharp. There was a crack running up the base, making its way towards her legs.

What was this all to mean? I turned the music off, took my disabled, maybe dead Themis to the couch, sat down, and called out to Frances. She was still passed-out in my spare room. Not even the music had made her stir. She hadn't wanted her parents to see her inebriated last night, so she came and stayed here. Besides, neither of us could remember her address to tell the cabbie.
“Frances, it’s eleven o’clock! Get up! Themis is dead!” I shouted. There was a pause as Frances woke up and worked out that it was me calling, not some crazed lunatic. She’d been so drunk that I bet she’s wondering what she’s even doing here.

“Sandra, is that you? Have you been drinking?” She laughed, and then moaned, “Oh, my head!”

“I’m not drunk.”

“No, of course not. Neither am I!” More laughing. “What are you going on about then?”

“Themis is dead.”

“Yes, I heard you the first time, what on earth do you mean, and do I want to know?”

“The storm broke my window and blew her off the shelf. Now she’s dead. Well, maybe not dead, but seriously disabled, at least.” The long pause suggested that Frances either didn’t care or was taking her time working out what I was prattling on about. Or she had passed out, again.

“Are you talking about that figurine in your lounge room?”

“Yep. Her sword arm and sword have broken off. What’s it all mean?

“Are you all right, Sandra?”

“I’m fine thanks, and you?”

“Not really. Did you say your window was smashed in the storm?” she asked, now with some concern in her voice.

“Yep,” I said, running my finger carefully along the broken edge of Themis’ arm stump, and finding a corresponding ridge cut into my fingerprint.

“You okay?” she persisted. “Um, I’ll be there in a minute. Oh my God. This is awful….”

As I rolled into a reclining position, still clutching my Themis, I felt like a child who had unintentionally pulled the wings off her guardian angel. To me, Themis represented the idea of
the law that I thought equated with justice, and a nobleness of the human spirit. The figurine was also all I had to memorialize the last decade of my professional life, apart from the framed law degree and admission certificate. Themis and I were broken.

By lunchtime, Frances would be demanding answers from me about what the hell we should do now. That’s what I’d be asking, I am the older of us two. I should have some answers. I wished I could speak with someone else, older again and wiser, who had been through this territory before, or maybe flip through a book of precedents. No wonder clients were prone to fretting when told that there was no one correct answer to their legal conundrum, just a sticky web of equally unpredictable possibilities.

I put the broken figurine down on the coffee table, in a reclining position, lest the wind should catch her again and throw her to a certain death. It was time to get out of the white fluffy towel, as comforting as it might be, for regular clothes, and before Frances appeared. I stepped around the glass then walked past my father’s mirror and said, moving my lips but without sound, “Hi dad”, then kept going to my bedroom to get changed. I put on my finest I Love New York t-shirt with shorts and glass-proof slippers. In the ensuite, I ran a brush through my hair, making it crackle, and used some drops to clear up the “party eyes”. I managed to avoid looking at my whole face or body. In fact, all I noticed in the mirror was the red of my eyes. I didn’t even have to look at my hair to know it would, with my unsympathetic nylon brush, frizz. I could feel the hair rising around my ears with the static electricity. I still knew myself as the freckled ugly kid who was always laughed at for her perpendicular hair.

Frances appeared in the corridor outside the spare room. It looked like she was gallantly trying to prop up the walls against the storm.

“The storm seems to be passing. You can let go of the walls,” I joked. She laughed but her laugh coincided with her seeing me through my bedroom doorway. I had been sure that I had put...
shorts on—instead, she found me with a t-shirt, knickers and slippers. They weren’t even my good undies, but the ones that had been through the wash about a hundred times and were losing their shape.

“Oh, you think I look funny? Take a look at yourself?”

We both laughed, holding our heads as we did so. I’d never seen Frances in such a state of dishevelment.

“Frances, you look truly disgraceful!” Her hair was stuck to her face, despite my best efforts at minimizing the carnage. The pillow she used would pong today…. And she was still in last night’s clothes, again, adorned in various shades of vomit. “Woman, get into the shower NOW!”

“But I don’t have any other clothes with me.”

“Oh what, you don’t think I have a spare set? Get in there. Be gone, oh wafty-one!”

I pushed her towards the main bathroom. At the doorway, she stopped. “Um, there’s glass everywhere…”

“Shit. Sorry. Forgot about that. Had a little accident in here earlier, when I was trying to sober up.”

“Interesting way of sobering up. Did it work?” She was still clutching her head, trying not to laugh.

“Not really. Wait here. I’ll clean this up.” Frances was not standing completely upright. “Here, prop yourself on this.” I gave her the chair I used to throw clothes onto, and wandered off to get a dustpan and brush. “Don’t move! You’ll cut yourself.”

“Okay. Not going anywhere…. I would help, you know…. It’s just that I can’t see straight, yet. I think only one eye is working…. Um, I’ll just stay put, if that’s alright with you.”
The dust brush could've been a dangerous weapon in my hands, flicking glass shards near and far. Looking at the floor, it was clear that I was succeeding in spreading the mess more than cleaning it up. I went and got a pair of rubber thongs, or what Frances called "flip flops". "Here, Frances, put these on and get into the shower. Leave them on until you're ready to step out of the bathroom, and leave them in there. I don't think I've regained my co-ordination enough to do a good job of cleaning this mess right now. And frankly, you need cleaning-up more urgently than this bathroom!"

When she finally got into the shower, she mumbled something about mildew and called out, "Did the cleaner get the sack?" without any sense of irony.

"Sorry, only the upper classes can afford their own cleaners. The rest of us mugs have to fend for ourselves."

"That's cock 'n bull, Sandra. All our secretaries have cleaners and ironing ladies." We both paused after considering the possessive notation of "our secretaries", and the fact that we no longer actually had any secretaries. We no longer had jobs.

"Hey Sandra," she called out again. "... So, are we self-employed now?"

"Let's run with that, shall we?"

Ω

After her shower, we both ate a few dry crackers and drank black tea. Then I gave Frances a clean pillow and we went back to bed until mid-afternoon. When we awoke, Andrea had the house clean—the glass window was swept up, the floors gleaming, the bathroom scrubbed and no longer smelling of scotch. And she'd ordered pizza, which was delivered. But how'd she get in?

Hovering over us as we emerged, somewhat unbelieving and startled from our bedrooms, she twittered far too energetically. "Hope you don't mind that I let myself in. I rang the doorbell,
knocked, called out, but no-one answered. You must’ve been pretty smashed to have not heard me … and to have gone to bed leaving the front door unlocked!”

“Really? That’s a worry,” I replied. “But you’re right—we got totally dog-faced… Wow! Look at how clean this place looks! Thanks, Andrea!”

My goodness. She’d even made the kitchen habitable again.

“No worries. I called an emergency glass repair place too. Should be here soon to fix your window.”

“Brilliant, cheers,” I replied, as gratefully as I could with such a king-sized hangover.

“Feeling better?” Andrea asked. “Oooh, look at that bruise! Is that where … Paul … slapped you? I’m so sorry….”

“Nah, it’s alright. Looks worse than it is,” I diplomatically avoided the whole I’m-sorry-to-have-dragged-you-into-my-problems bit. No point going back there. “How did you know Paul slapped me?” I asked, suspiciously.

“You texted me on my mobile, remember? But I could barely get any sense out of you.”

“Did I text you?” I couldn’t remember texting anyone. “News to me!” Frances looked as surprised as I was. Collective amnesia was better than doing it on your own.

“One message was something about getting sacked, another about getting slapped by Paul, and the third message this morning, was about needing money for a cab-ride home.”

“Oh, shit, really? Sorry about that.”

“Hey, what are friends for? Lucky my old flat-mate was out on the town—I asked him to give you the cash, and I’d pay him back—but you don’t remember, do you?”

“No, but I did remember thinking it strange that I came home with more money than I’d started with. Frankly, I was a bit worried about how that happened.”

Frances and Andrea laughed. “We could have fun with that,” said Frances.
“You’ll never live it down, Sandra!” added Andrea.

“Indeed ... so how much do I owe you for the cab-ride?”

“Forty bucks.”

“We’ll split it,” suggested Frances.

“And what about the food, Andrea?” I hoped she had used a cheap place, because in my experience, gourmet pizza rarely tasted as good as the box it came in, and besides which, I couldn’t afford to buy gourmet too often without knowing how long my payout needed to last.

“This one’s on me. I had a discount voucher, anyway. Next shout is yours, okay?”

Frances gave Andrea twenty dollars from her bag, sat down on my couch and looked at my sad Themis. Andrea went and fussed about the kitchen. “She’s not much good without her sword is she?” Frances said conversationally.

“Isn’t she? But she’s still holding the scales. That’s the main thing, isn’t it?” I replied.

“She’s defenseless without her sword. She’s got nothing but an ugly looking stump of an arm left. You can’t even glue the arm and sword back on; it’s shattered. Aren’t you going to throw her out?”

“I don’t know. Maybe she is defenseless,”—like us, I thought—“but maybe she isn’t. Have you run your finger across the broken stump? Careful, it’s very sharp. Maybe the old Goddess has some intrinsic defenses, even when crippled? Maybe the sword wasn’t for defense but for battle anyway?”

“You’d think it was about fighting for justice, but then she’s most often shown with the sword pointing to the ground,” said Frances.

“And when she has it up in the air, it’s still a gentle pose, not at all threatening.”
“Maybe, like the rest of us women, she didn’t know what to do with the sword other than try to look good with it? It’s not like she’s in battle attire. She could be just holding the sword for her husband while he’s getting his armour on.” Frances started to chuckle.

“Good point. I’m sure die-hard feminists would have you for breakfast over comments like that. You know, the sword’s purpose is the one thing Gloria never really elaborated on when she gave me the statuette for my admission. She told me all about the obvious stuff, like that she’s the Greek Goddess of Justice, holding the scales, being impartial and all that, but the bit that seems really interesting she left blank. I wasn’t going to sound stupid by asking. Anyway, at that stage, I wasn’t the slightest bit interested in Greek mythology, or Themis. Or women’s issues. I just wanted to blend into the profession as one of the men and make a bucket of money.”

Andrea came back from the kitchen with plates for the pizza, and asked “Frances, one question I have for you. Assuming Themis was just holding the sword for someone else, what were the scales for then?”

“She was in the middle of baking a cake.”

“Oh, nice,” I added. “I’m glad I didn’t spend too much time over the years wondering why we had this Greek figure outside the courthouse. Really, it was just a convenient place for pigeons to take a crap.”

We all laughed loudly, and not at all in a lady-like manner. Andrea served everyone pizza, and we tucked into it.

“Now, in all seriousness, don’t you think it’s absurd that a woman would be shown as the figurehead of such a male-centred profession?” I asked Frances.

“I’ve never thought about it, but now that you mention it, I suppose so.” Frances picked at her pizza, looking as unimpressed as I was about so-called “gourmet pizza”.

Six Minutes
“In all the big firms around town, not even ten per cent of the partners would be female,” I reflected aloud.

Frances added, “I can’t even think of ten female partners in town in total. Although out in the suburbs, in the smaller general practitioner firms, there would be more women partners.”

I filled my mouth while contemplating a suitable answer. Andrea jumped in before me: “Yes, but that’s only where they’re doing crap-law, struggling to eke out an existence.”

“So, what type of law are we going to be doing, girls?” Frances diplomatically avoided using crass language.

“Do you think we should open up together?” Andrea asked, ironically.

“Well, with Sandra and I securing six months worth of income, it’s doable.”
Already, Frances was talking about the future. I only wanted to lament the past ... have a rest ... and just not care. We were at crossroads in our friendship much faster than I had expected. I felt like I was on the verge of a major breakthrough and just wanted to let it happen in its own time, with a bucket of ice cream on my lap. On the other hand, Frances wanted to force things forward. Andrea took a back seat, knowing she was there as a passenger.

Frances dragged Andrea into a discussion about the nitty-gritty of money.

"In fact, it's logical for us to open up a small firm together. We can base it here, at Sandra's place for now. We wouldn't bring clients here ... we'd go to them—old people would like that—we could visit nursing homes and hospitals to do cheap wills and powers of attorney ... advertise cheap conveyancing in the local paper ... basic stuff to keep the money coming in. All the while, if we can get a payout from the firm for what they did to you ... it would be worth it. Then we can decide what we do with our lives afterwards."

Andrea added enthusiastically, "And I could do some tutoring at uni in the Law Faculty and the Built Environment Faculty. They're always looking for casual staff with a law degree and a bit of industry experience."

"Brilliant!" declared Frances.

"Fantastic, I suppose," I added, unenthusiastically. So now I had a home business.

Frances turned to me, her face bright with another big idea. "Sandra, so where's Gloria now?"

I shrugged my shoulders. Andrea looked from Frances, to me.
Frances persisted. "Why don’t we get in contact with her and see whether she’s got any suggestions about things? She got fired. We got fired. We have something in common, as well as a common enemy."

"Na." I thought about it, and reiterated, "Definitely not."

"Why not? She’s been in a similar situation before …"

"Similar to Andrea’s situation in terms of sexual discrimination, but different. Bad idea. Move on." I stuffed my mouth with as much pizza as I could fit in, pre-empting the obligation to reply to a typical Frances-probing-type question.

"Why not get in touch with her? She shouldn’t be too hard to find even if you didn’t keep in touch. She’s still registered as a solicitor, isn’t she? She’d be listed with the Queensland Law Society."

I shrugged my shoulders and pointed to my full mouth and smiled as much as my stretched cheeks would allow.

"A full mouth never stopped you talking before, Sandra. Now talk. Where is she and why won’t you get in contact with her? Did you have a falling out?"

I pointed to my mouth again, covered it, and making a show of struggling with so much food, pointed towards the toilet and got up to go. Frances followed. In desperation, I went into the toilet room, still with a mouthful, and closed the door. Surely, I thought, it would be against Frances’ better sensibilities to follow someone to the toilet? I was wrong. She was obviously determined to find something out, so she stood at the door and continued haranguing me. I put the lid down and sat on it despondently, chewing tasteless pizza. How long could I sit here in silence? How long could I avoid her questions?

Then I wondered what I was so afraid of and what would be the harm in talking about it with Frances? My reluctance was at least in part because I had never felt particularly close to
other women, not even my mother. The relationship with my own mother was born of coincidence and continued by necessity. As a child, I needed her, but always felt that with dad gone she was some sort of consolation prize. Once dad died, I can’t remember her saying she loved me, although I could never doubt her commitment to me. I remember the time she brought home a potential daddy #2 to meet me; two years after my real father had passed away. She had spent the entire day cooking all my favourite foods and cleaning until every surface gleamed. She even bought me chocolate ice cream and lollies, which to me meant clearly that something was going on. When she eventually told me she was bringing someone home that afternoon and that I should behave nicely, I took an evening’s supply of comfort food to my bedroom and refused to come out. After that, my mother never dated again. Sometimes I wonder whether it was because she never found anyone or because it was her way of showing me that my needs were always paramount.

Two brisk knocks on the toilet door. “You can’t stay in there forever, Sandra. You know we have to talk about our future and about Andrea’s. I thought maybe Gloria could help us, that’s all. If you think it’s a bad idea, that’s fine, just come out of there.”

I doubted Frances was going to give up on the Gloria idea that quickly. Frances was nothing if not single-minded. Was this like the time I hid under the laundry sink as a six year old to avoid ballet lessons with that fat and nasty ballet teacher, Mrs Lunn? Back then, I couldn’t believe a fat woman could teach ballet. As if! It’d be like a deaf choirmaster. Everyone knew ballerinas were as skinny as sticks. I felt my parents were being conned and I was being foisted with some hopeless wannabe. I would have much preferred to have avoided the pretense of learning a fat woman’s pirouette and playing with lizards and snails in the garden all day.

Why would I want to seek advice from Gloria? Wasn’t she just like Mrs Lunn? A loser in real terms? Someone who couldn’t make it on her own skin but was prepared to tattoo her
wisdom onto someone else’s? What did Frances want to do anyway? Form a losers’
co-operative? Maybe we could grow cabbages together and discuss how the world did us wrong?

“Are you coming out or do I have to call the fire-station for assistance?”

“It depends how attractive the firemen are,” I retorted.

“I don’t think they’ll be interested in a madwoman who locks herself in toilets.”

With some hesitation, I stood up and opened the door. “Since you put it so
persuasively....” Obviously, I was qualified to talk about losers. “So what’s the plan, Frances?”

She followed me back to the lounge room and flipped the pizza box shut. Not even a stray
dog off the beaches of Bali would want to eat that pizza cold, or reheated for that matter. There
wasn’t even enough cheese on it to melt down the sides of the pizza and stop it from sliding
around in the box. It was a poverty pizza at a premium price. As consumers in a capitalist society,
we were all such suckers. “Did that come with Coke?” I enquired hopefully.

“No. There were about ten different varieties of mineral water, but they were extra,”
replied Andrea.

“Shame.”

As soon as I sat down, Frances was at it again. “So, why don’t you want to contact
Gloria?”

In exasperation, I let my hands fall off the couch and hang loosely like one of our tree-top
ancestors. Perhaps it would be easier to tell her than to continue the evasion and risk hurting our
friendship. Andrea’s eyes were pinned to me, too. Thinking about Gloria pained me.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for lots of reasons. First of all, it’s not as if Gloria is in a
position to help us. The profession blacklisted her years ago when she rocked the boat about
family-friendly policies after she became pregnant herself. Note my emphasis on her timing. She
never truly stuck her neck out before then, although she would make a lot of noise about how

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supportive she was of women's rights to me behind closed doors, like locker room talk: all hormones and hyperbole. She wouldn't even save me from the deranged tax partner who used to walk past my office at seven o'clock every night to see if I wanted a root. That man had a head like an orangutan and a prick like a torpedo." Frances flushed and opened her eyes widely as if they were wedged open by exclamation marks. "Yes, he showed it to me on a number of occasions, starting with the time he came into my office with his zipper undone and brushed himself against my thigh."

A puzzled frown creased Frances' forehead. "What did you do?"

I couldn't fathom Frances' disbelief. Was she immune to such acts of degradation by virtue of her father's important public office? Or was she just well insulated from life? Her nose was scrunching up like an innocent grade-five girl who had accidentally opened the dictionary at "intercourse".

"I pretended it wasn't there and picked up my telephone and started dialing. Either he was worried about my calling the police or security or the romantic mood was broken. He turned around, zipped up and walked out."

"Did you tell anyone about it?" Andrea asked this time.

"Yep, Gloria. She told me, next time he does it, start playing with a pair of scissors at waist level."

"That's it?" asked Frances.

"Yep."

"Did it work?"

"Once. After that, the shock value was gone and it became a turn-on, a game." I got up to look for my Camels. I'd never spoken with anyone else about this.

"Did you tell Gloria that her idea wasn't working?" continued Frances.
“I told Gloria. I asked what my options were. She said that I had lots of options, but that none of them were consistent with keeping my job. She reminded me how hard it was to get a job as a woman lawyer in the first place and then asked me with an ironic smirk, did I think I had any options.”

Frances shook her head in disbelief. Andrea nodded, as if she weren’t at all surprised.

“Keep in mind the context,” I added, as if in Gloria’s defense. “Women weren’t so liberated in the eighties and early nineties. Anyway, as Gloria always said, you can’t change the system as an outsider; you have to be on the inside.”

Frances piped in. “You know, I’ve handled all sorts of complaints, but just about always on the defense side. Being detached from them, and spending all my time countering and diminishing the scope of the alleged wrong-doing and trying to implicate or find ways how the complainant contributed to the problem, made the horror of sexual discrimination seem only hypothetical. I know that sounds strange, but until you experience a bit of it first hand, or see it up close and happening to someone near you, it’s really just a case of ‘he said’, ‘she said’ and the feeling that you’ll never really know what was behind the complaint—revenge, lust, disappointment, or genuine discrimination on the basis of gender. Most of the cases I handled were just straight-forward instances of bosses trying to avoid maternity leave benefits, or explaining why women with family responsibilities were overlooked for promotions or why they weren’t offered the same benefits as some of their male colleagues.”

“It almost sounds like Family Law. No-one’s happy in the end—it’s just dicing with disappointment,” I replied.

“Pretty much. Except that companies usually end up paying the complainants and the solicitors, whereas in Family Law, just about everyone ends up doing it tough, including the lawyers, who can’t charge nearly as much as we did at Hennessy Clark.”

*Six Minutes*
I found my Camels and lit one up. Once they ran out, the depression would surely set in. Right about five minutes after Frances left me alone again this night, I guessed. What was the point of having people visit when their departure left you feeling lonelier than ever? Particularly now that my Pandora’s Box of emotions had been levered open.

“I can see how you’d still be angry with her,” Frances offered, while leaning further forward in the couch. “She let you down terribly.”

“I’m not angry with her. At least I don’t think I am. I have no real right to be. It happened a long time ago, anyway.”

“How can you say that? She left you stranded and in a very dangerous situation.” Frances started folding and unfolding her ever-so-slightly-dirty napkin over and over, without even looking at it. She was staring at me. Andrea was silent.

“Yes, she did, but I wonder whether I would’ve acted any differently if I were in her situation? Would you? Who would you go to? Would you take it to the partnership meeting where as the only woman you were rank outsider to start with? Would you take it to the Human Resources Manager, who would sooner fire you than talk to you? Everyone knew what that tax partner was like and he was the butt of many a quiet joke amongst the other partners. As old and wealthy as he was, not even Catherine Zeta-Jones would be interested in him. Anyone who raised the matter would no doubt be threatened with a defamation action.”

“When did he finally go?” Andrea asked.

“Many years later, the other partners got rid of him, but only because he wasn’t making budget. You have to understand that blokes won’t undermine other blokes unless it comes to money and power. What happens between a man’s legs is his own business and if he can pull his fair share of extra-marital roots, he’s admired. Orangutan-torpedo-dick is now at another firm, exploring a new jungle.”
“The firm must’ve worked hard to keep this all quiet, or at least to insulate the Employment Law section from any details about Gloria’s dismissal,” said Frances. “And I don’t believe I’ve seen anything come across my desk regarding your friend, the former Tax partner. HR and the partnership committee must’ve managed him.”

“It’s unbelievable how these same partners were so vicious to Gloria, even though she seemed to have toed the line. They made sure all sorts of ugly things were printed about her in the newspaper, putting everything on record,” I said.

“Because she’s a woman. They had to prove women aren’t cut out for the job. But what I don’t get is why the firm put Gloria up for partnership in the first place?”

“Pressure from a major client who wanted her to be partner on a matter,” I replied.

“Shame that doesn’t happen more often…” said Andrea.

“What doesn’t? A client pushing for a woman to be made up? You’re right. Most clients wouldn’t know what shit goes on in law firms and wouldn’t care. The rest of them wouldn’t realise what power they as clients wield over us. The more money their matter is worth, the more power they have to influence who’s on the case, what fees are charged, and how the matter is handled. If the profession was open to more consumer pressure, we might actually get some positive changes and, no doubt, a lot of negative ones, like working harder for less.”

“Right, so seeing Gloria is of no use,” Frances said, in a strange voice which didn’t quite suggest she believed what she was saying. She was still pleading the point, but using reverse psychology on me.

A gut-full’s worth of venom suddenly converged in my throat and there was no keeping it in. “Unfortunately, I have realized that I don’t have any good mentors. Gloria is a hypocrite of the highest caliber. Last I heard, she had become a small-time academic on the Gold Coast, preaching about women and the law, all in the name of some new brand of feminism.” I blushed

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at my outburst and immediately apologized. To smooth over my embarrassment, I reached for another Camel, and gesticulated with it. "Like I said, I'm not angry ...much ..." and smiled pathetically like a dog pretending to its owner that it was at home all day, despite the foreign prickle in its paw.
Frances, Andrea and I talked for hours.

We talked about strategy. We talked about the humiliation of our recent experiences. We talked about men. I even suggested Andrea move in with me, to help consolidate funds, pool resources and keep each other company—particularly as her pregnancy progressed.

We didn’t notice the time, until Andrea fell asleep on the couch and Frances said, looking at her watch, “Gosh! It’s after midnight!” This was a real achievement for people who up until recently had measured their lives in six-minute intervals. Still, I was dreading their departure, be it today or tomorrow. Acres of sleeplessness sprawled out ahead of me. There were no nice dreams to be had.

Frances decided to stay overnight again, in the spare room. We stretched Andrea out on the couch and covered her with a blanket.

Within minutes of Frances going to bed, I heard happy snoring float down the corridor. It was comforting in its own way, but invoked jealousy for an insomniac.

Sure as bird-shit on a newly washed car, the small amount of sleep I did get that night was blistered with nightmares. Thankfully, I couldn’t recall any of them in the morning. I just knew that they had visited me in the night and tortured me through my sub-conscious. At 5 a.m., I finally put a bedside lamp on and poked around in my feelings, trying to ascertain what exactly was bothering me the most.

Were Pollyannas really happier in life than Cassandras? I had an uncanny feeling that I was about to find out. I dressed, put a note on the fridge for the girls to help themselves for
brekky, grabbed the first set of car keys I could find (which turned out to be Frances') and left.

The sky was just starting to get its pre-dawn greyness.
XXI

IF FEMINISM AIN’T DEAD, WHY IS SHE LYING FACE-DOWN IN A CHALK OUTLINE?

Fifty minutes later, I found myself driving erratically, accelerating and braking, diving into and pulling out of slightly too-tight parking spots like a violently ill fly trying to land in a headwind of traffic. Abuse flew out my window as fast as it was flying in. At one point, my gesticulations to a thoughtless pedestrian were so emphatic that my face smacked into the sunshade, causing my sunglasses to rearrange my sinuses. Jeez, that hurt. At that point, I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. There were just too many people in this city, all egotistically pursuing their own immediate ambitions as single-mindedly as I was.

I tried to find a parking spot near the Gold Coast University’s Law Faculty, where Gloria worked. She couldn’t be too hard to find: a Burberry, pearl-laden brunette in a sea of blondes in thongs, sarongs, silver anklets and toe rings. That’s what people wore here, regardless of the time of year. One university advertised itself as “The University for the Real World.” This one was affectionately known as “The University of the Surreal World.” Shoes were optional.

The Gold Coast was the wannabe California of Australia. I couldn’t imagine Gloria Bates being happy here.

I remember the first time I looked into Gloria’s face and marveled at her amazing widow’s peak and Spock-like eyebrows. She had the look of a woman going places. Gloria had the kind of determination and aura that either had men slapping her back (but hoping for a tickle?) or going turtle and dribbling pathetically at the corners of their mouths. Personally, I was scared of her, and rightly so. She was the Mother of All Queen Bees. Men tolerated her because she was good looking and she kept the rest of the women in check.

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On my fifth lap of the oval car park, Bimbette of the Business School pulled her Barbie-like four-wheel drive out of a prime spot and waved me in sweetly. She had her rag-top down and sunny golden hair flying in the coastal breeze. I had the urge to spin my wheels and kick some dust her way.

With my car safely parked, the parking meter suitably stuffed with all my loose change (and a twig when it refused to issue me a ticket or refund my money), I set out to find a map of the campus for the geographically challenged. One with brightly-coloured buildings and an arrow marking: YOU ARE HERE. When I found one (hidden under a tree), I wondered how I’d ever read it. It was covered in bird shit, pelican-poo size, blotting out entire departments. Then, of course, I couldn’t make out which way I was facing. Why couldn’t these things be placed on rotating stands or be oriented to face the right way, so that spatially maladjusted people like me could read them? Surely the first person to work this out would become a millionaire. I kept looking for YOU ARE HERE, only to find it five minutes later under a wad of dried-up chewing gum. How thoughtful, an interactive map in Braille.

Checking the key, I worked out that I was looking for a purple building, next to a green building, over a walkway, past a Visual Arts pavilion, somewhere between here and Bangkok. Forget it. I joined a throng of barely post-pubescent students who were making their way towards a cluster of environmentally-conscious-looking buildings. Did modern Australian architects not get it that Europe was bulldozing these 1950s Communist-style blocks? What looks bad must be good for us? Nah. Just ugly. This was the brussels sprout of architecture. No-one could like this, surely? Grey cement is for footpaths, not walls. Nor should it be polished and passed off as a finished flooring or bench top of choice, in uber-trendy homes and restaurants, or libraries for that matter. Poor taste should not be marketed as anything but. Communism wasn’t intended to be pretty, just utilitarian. Communist architects weren’t setting trends, or building monuments to
themselves. They were being cost-effective and functional. Ironic then, that modern-day architects are notorious for building memorials to themselves in their projects, that aren’t cheap (or cheerful)!

It’s just rude that they get to inflict their sense of self upon the rest of us: “Ooh, look at me, I’m so radical!” Bunch of wankers.

Every so often, I asked someone for directions. If only the building were actually coloured purple, to match the map. Now wouldn’t that be a revelation and a triumph for modern urban planning?

I won’t admit how long it took me to find the Law Faculty, because it’d end up in the Guinness Book of Records, and I’d be remembered for what I couldn’t do rather than what I could. Needless to say, it’d be the last time I would seek “short cuts” when the long road would’ve been quicker. The building itself was surprisingly unimpressive. It blended in with all the other buildings of grey and steel, which was so unlike the prestigious faculties of law and medicine on other university campuses. I somehow expected a monolith rising in the distance, with a sandstone façade of Latin gibberish and a statue of Themis to welcome me. Maybe these new universities were leading the way with change on more than a visual level? I wondered whether the curriculum was any different to the one that I had been subjected to so many years ago.

Even in my day, the university was a haven, a sheltered workshop for women lawyers, gay lawyers and other misfits. Of course, there were some brilliant lecturers too, those who really had a calling; but they could be counted on one hand. Most of them had had a dreadful time trying to forge a career in the real world, and had eventually retreated to academia, where they could dish out their own brand of hell to the next generation. Many of the idealists had become dried up and bitter after spending too much time being bludgeoned near to death by the greedy 80s and early 90s. Even the political activists among them had started to despair, with more than
a decade of Liberal federal leadership. Australia had become too corporatised and prosperous for them to find a foothold for their various causes.

I strolled through the gloomy, fluoro-lit corridors of the academic staff quarters. All the feelings of undergraduate apprehension came upon me again as I remembered the stuffiness of the old air in the lecture theatres, dust in the library, and distinct lack of joy within a two hundred metre radius of the Law Faculty buildings. The last time I had had to see a lecturer for anything was to beg for special consideration in my final exams, which I sat while deathly ill with glandular fever. Sympathy was in short supply that day, as I was forced to sit the exam like everyone else, but in a separate room, in case I really was sick. I just didn’t know how to work the system back then. Other students were making up all sorts of stories and getting bonus marks for sprained ankles and dying distant relatives. One claimed to have lost her glasses on the morning of the exam and that she couldn’t read without them. Maybe that’s what it took to become a good lawyer—the ability to spin a really good story. I should’ve seen it for what it was a long time ago, and considered some other career.

“Sandra! Is it you? My God!” A blonde bombshell with black eyebrows poked her head out of her human-sized chicken coop, taking me completely by surprise. “My God, it is you!” This woman was positively squealing. I felt my eyes narrowing and my face tensing, defensively. The woman I was looking at was a botoxed, blonded, younger version of Gloria. But what was with the black eyebrows? Did she run out of bleach? Do people bleach their eyebrows? This suddenly seemed like an important question. When taken by surprise, I tend to focus on the small things and then work outwards towards the bigger picture. It helps my DOS-based brain cope better. Gloria took a step out of her office-cum-pigeon-hole now, towards me. Was she going to hug me? God, was she going to kiss me too? I wondered as she leaned towards me. Surely not. This thin, blonde, black-eyebrowed creature in a brightly coloured wrap-around short skirt and

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low-cut v-neck t-shirt glided into my personal space and kissed air on both sides of my face. Strangely, her ample and apparently augmented bust line brushed rigidly against my arm. What was this? Milton’s café latte society or Oxford Street, Sydney on a Friday night? This woman had never come within three feet of me in the time that I had known her. And it wasn’t like we were friends. Her perfume was subtler than I remembered it. It hinted of roses and sandalwood; a well-kept lingerie draw but with a modern twist. At Hennessy Clark, she used to wear Safari so strong it made my head spin. She used to spray the room with it too, I’m sure. It was her hunting scent.

“What are you doing here, Sandra? How good to see you!” she twittered, as if to fill in the void between us. I felt her looking me up and down, mentally taking my weight and assessing my wardrobe selection. My eyes unexpectedly followed her gaze down my legs like a pair of lost dogs, and horror of horrors saw that I was still in tracksuit pants and sandshoes. The pants weren’t the kind with flashy white stripes down the sides and my sandshoes didn’t have bright colours and platform soles, so all in all, not even a skinny lesbian could make this outfit work.

Having a woman measure you up (particularly when you know you don’t measure up) is far worse than having a man disapprove. At least men were usually gracious enough to avoid answering questions like “Do I look fat in this?”, but with other women, the question was unavoidable: it was asked and answered without any exchange of words. With women, you have to be up-to-the-mark, but not beyond it, to be acceptable. Club rules apply.

“Hello, Gloria. I’ve come to see you, actually. May I come in?” A curious look passed over her face. I wouldn’t call it an expression, because her face was motionless. Then, seemingly in one fluid movement, she spun on her heels and rematerialized beside her desk.

“Close the door,” she said forebodingly, like a gypsy preparing to dish out the cards of death, disease and dishonour. The twitter in her voice was gone. She waited for me to enter and
take a seat, before she sat down herself. One hand was resting lightly on her desk, announcing her comfortable ownership and domination of this space.

"Now, what can I do for you?" Gloria was sitting on a fabric-covered secretarial chair next to her computer, behind her desk. This was so different to the way she used to be seated in her high-backed leather executive chair at the firm. However, I still didn’t feel relaxed. There was no "I’ve been thinking about you lately and wondered how you were going, thinking we should catch up some time...." It was business as usual. The clock on the wall beside me was stuck on a quarter to ten, with the seconds hand flicking back and forth on the nine, like a nervous tick. It was now late in the afternoon, so it surprised me that Gloria hadn’t fixed it immediately. The old Gloria I knew was almost obsessive-compulsive about such things. Could people change? As much as I didn’t like the old Gloria, I wasn’t comfortable in the presence of the new one either.

I sat on the edge of my chair and uneasily fought my natural tendency to sit with my legs sprawled. It was particularly awkward, trying to look elegant sitting in obscenely unattractive trakkie daks. I didn’t know whether to cross my legs or casually swing backwards on my chair.

"I’m not really sure where to start, actually. I was just really keen to catch up with you—it being so long since you left the firm and all."

Gloria seemed to relax. The hard edge of her shoulders softened against the back-lit window. I could barely see her face as the full afternoon sun pelting through her window dazzled me. I fought the urge to squint (then she’d see my collection of crows’ feet). The image before me was other-worldly. The random motion of the dust in the air around her made things appear to be in slow motion, as she sat quite still. There were multiple rings of light around her head; maybe it was the sun reflecting off my eyelashes I reasoned, but I couldn’t help feel in awe of what I saw before me. I was staring straight into the sun: as much as I knew it was bad for me, I
couldn’t turn away; I was mesmerized, watching the colour and light shift around like
glimmering quicksilver above Gloria’s now-golden head.

I eventually looked down at the desk, seeing black blotches drifting in and out of view.
“Pardon me for not looking at you, but the sun’s really glary,” I offered so as not to offend. In
reality, I was nervous about her reaction to my question and couldn’t bring myself to look at her.
As the minutes passed and I told my story, the room changed colour and mood: from stark,
blinding white, to golden yellow, to muted and relaxed orange. If only the tone of our
conversation had followed suit. Somehow, we became stuck on blinding white—the whiteness of
unrestrained rage. I was getting a very bad vibe from Gloria.

“Why the hell would I want to get involved in defending the office slut?” she blasted. She
stood up, promptly sat back down, then leaned menacingly across the desk. I could’ve fallen into
the gaping red-lined hole in front of my face that was hollering at me. The old Gloria must’ve
been abducted, because she would’ve been outraged that a Beautiful Madonna was cast aside as a
sining Mary Magdalene (and all women but those she intensely disliked were Madonnas). And I
hadn’t thought “slut” was in her vocabulary!

“These days, it’s everyone for themselves, Sandra! No-one helped me! What’s with this
collective women’s liberation anyway? It’s crap. It took me years to work that out, but now I
know. Shit, Sandra. Haven’t you worked it out yet? You know, once upon a time, it was
Communism and hippy communes, but that’s out now, just like the dream that women would
band together and help each other. Unless you’re talking about sending aid to Third World
countries, where the women you help can’t get promoted above you, screw your husband or look
better than you in a swim suit, then forget it. Everyone’s for themselves. It’s more fashionable
these days to be a ‘lipstick lesbian’ than a ‘capital F Feminist’, so get over it and find yourself a
girlfriend. End of discussion.” She turned her chair to face the window, back towards me.

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I sat silently, stunned. Maybe she’d turn around again and give me another audience? Maybe this was just a dramatic pause? If only I could get my legs to move.

Maybe Gloria had had a nervous breakdown after being ditched by the firm and publicly humiliated? Coming after a nasty divorce couldn’t have helped. Was she now hiding out in academia until she gathered her “marbles”? Remembering some of my weird law professors made me shudder. Particularly, the criminal law lecturer who played with his balls (the hairy ones) under his desk during tutorials, and chased me around the dance floor at two Law Balls (the dancing ones). Oh, God. I hoped that I wouldn’t turn out like Gloria.

Beyond the window, a gaggle of geese flew in the distance in a V formation, each knowing instinctively how to keep up with the others, all turning almost in unison, catching the last of the thermal breezes, gliding effortlessly. I watched numbly as I saw two of the geese were falling behind and struggling to catch up.

Gloria’s aural assault had been even more intense than the blazing sunlight. I left her office, lost and limp, like a lizard’s tail in a catfight.

The drive home started painfully. I passed a cliff-top and momentarily wondered whether I should drive over it. If only Frances were here, it’d be a Thelma and Louise replay, except we wouldn’t be famous for it, just fatally stupid. I repeated “Flame me dead”, quietly fuming my own personalised mantra until the blinkers of my morbid mood lifted.

Checking the rear vision mirror, my eyes paused on the reflection of my strained face. “Stop it, woman. You’ll get wrinkles,” I thought to myself. I looked at my reflection some more and decided that maybe half the world was at least as messed up as I was, so all in all, there really was no need to despair. I was in good company.
XXII

MENTOR, TORMENTOR...

"Did you hear about Justice Hill's replacement?" Frances asked as soon as I switched off the ignition. She had been waiting for me. Andrea had popped out somewhere, but was coming back.

"No," I said, getting out of the car. "You know I don't listen to the news, it's too depressing." I only occasionally listened now, because if there was something truly noteworthy, I knew someone would tell me; someone like Frances. She, who gets up at the crack of dawn to read the delivered broadsheet newspaper with her cup of English Breakfast tea, Bircher Muesli and scones. She's the baker's first customer in the morning. I wondered whether she was in a tweed suit at that uncivil hour ordinarily and whether she still dressed up for the baker now that she didn't have a job. Today, somewhat surprisingly, she was wearing my old jeans and a sloppy shirt: I didn't realize how tatty they'd become, as I reflected upon my own savage attire comprising said tracksuit, acquired circa 1982.

"She's been replaced by a man."

"So?" I queried. How this was going to change the outcome of my day was completely unclear to me. "What of it?"

Justice Hill was the first and only female judicial appointment to the High Court of Australia, the highest court of the country. I really hated some of her judgments because they didn't make sense. Particularly in her early cases, she would bend the logic to reach an outcome she preferred, instead of going along the lines of her fellow justices.

"Aren't you outraged that she's been replaced by a man?" Frances insisted, hot on my heels up the front stairs.
“Um, let me think about it—No. I’m not cut up about it. Well, not at the present point in time. Should I be?” I could sense that Frances wasn’t going to allow me to put this issue on lay-by to think about later and potentially change my mind with minimal investment upfront.

I felt pressured to move a bit quicker when Frances was around. Somehow with her, time was always of the essence, and I felt like I was the only obstacle standing between her and some important achievement of Nobel Peace Prize proportions. She rushed me inside and walked past me into my own home.

Frances did two whole laps of the room before stopping in front of the window. Her foot started tapping irritably. The stress this woman carried into a room was enough to give me indigestion. I pulled a chewable spearmint from my handbag and, with prophylactic fervor, popped it into my mouth. Frances turned from the window to face me. I sat down on the couch, already tired and defeated, anticipating the insurmountable burden I could see she was about to unload onto me. While she was fuelled by the stormy passion and power of her convictions, I was overwhelmed and deflated: a rubber ducky torn apart on the coral of her ambition.

She took in a deep, impatient breath and exhaled through her nose slowly and emphatically, like an English teacher catching a boy at the back of the class reading comics. To her credit, Frances didn’t cross her arms. Instead, she picked up my disabled, disfigured Themis statuette and turned it around slowly in her tiny pink hands.

“Don’t you think it’s all part of a bigger picture?” she said, more to the Themis than to me. “I mean, look at what a drama it was to have Justice Hill appointed in the first place. She was scrutinized beyond reason because she was a woman and then her appointment was tarnished with the label of ‘token woman’ anyway. Even if she was the best legal mind in the Southern Hemisphere—”

I cut in: “Which she wasn’t!” My tone was more facetious than I had intended.
“But no matter what, she’d always be ‘just another woman trying to do a man’s job.’”

“Whiskey? Chocolate? Anyone?” I asked somewhat hopefully, getting up and going over to the sideboard where a half-empty bottle of spirits miraculously remained alongside some leftover Lindts. I suspected this would be dining for one.

“Come on, Sandra. Think about it. It’s not that one woman should be replaced by another upon retirement, or that there should be positive discrimination in the recruitment process, but doesn’t it concern you that more than a hundred years after the first woman was admitted into the Australian legal profession, there will be no female representation in the Highest Court of this country? Especially given that women make up 51% of the whole population and about 52% of law graduates? Why should women lawyers get out of bed in the morning if they’re not taken seriously?”

I helped myself to one drink and then another. My own silence, my momentary inability to speak, surprised and unsettled me. It was like being cornered in an alleyway without the ability to scream for help.

“If all things were equal, don’t you think that, by now, half the court would be female?”

“Indeed,” was all I could say.

“I mean, who’s setting the criteria which stipulates that men are the natural selection for judicial appointments?”

I gathered up my courage and decided to play Devil’s Advocate. “Couldn’t it just be a reflection of the reality that women often drop out of their careers to have kids and men just overtake them? That anyone who spends enough time at work to get to the top just can’t have a good life as well?”

“So merely the number of hours clocked up at work makes a good lawyer and good judge?” Frances was seething. “Because if that’s the case, Snakes and Ladders and Chess, not to
mention the pornography, should be deleted from all work computers. The male partner who
takes the credit for my work could then quit giving his wife lame excuses and go home early for a
change. And he wouldn’t have to steal time off my timesheet for his own.”

I was going to correct her present tense to past tense, but charitably decided against it. Her
job at Hennessy Clark was in the past. It interested me however, that someone had been stealing
time off Frances’ timesheets too. Perhaps it was a more common practice than I had realized? It
was ironic then, that the perpetrators continued to get away with fraud and theft because the
victims were too afraid of defamation and dismissal. These things didn’t seem to happen so much
in small firms, where everyone knew each other properly and people pulled together as a team, or
failed as a team. Lawyers in big firms competed against each other like a tank full of hungry
sharks.

Frances did another lap of the room. “Who was counting the number of hours I spent at
work? Or were they counting the number of hours they thought I had left of work in me, before I
would be putting in for Maternity Leave?”

“Well, I don’t know.” I hated being a victim and searched for another logical explanation
for the obvious imbalance. “It would also be a product of there being very few women joining the
Bar, for lifestyle reasons. Most judges are taken from the ranks of barristers. Only 30% of the Bar
is female. You know that.”

“Don’t you think that says something about the Old Boys’ Club?”

“Sure it does, and it doesn’t. Making it in the Bar is hard work and not exactly compatible
with having a life, let alone a family.” I knew that I was incapable of nurturing even a cactus
plant myself, so how anyone else could juggle career and family was beyond me.

“So you’re blaming it on biology?” Frances almost shouted. Luckily, I was mellow if not
partially marinated by this stage, otherwise I might have shouted back.

Six Minutes
“Again, yes and no,” I said, restrained. I found some white chocolate frogs in my remote
control pouch, which hung inelegantly off the side of my lounge chair. “Chocolate?” I asked
again. Frances would’ve ignored me at any other time, but this time she was furious that I wasn’t
taking her seriously enough. In my view, my fast-approaching hypoglycemic state was of more
immediate interest than Judge Hill’s replacement.

“Do you ever think about anything else?”

“Yes, but you don’t want to know what.”

Frances, who knew me well, made a disgusted choking sound like a kid hearing a
sentence with “sex” and “parents” together in it and walked off to the bathroom. Finally, a
repite.

I knew all the arguments for and against. I used to believe that positive discrimination was
a bad thing, but now I quietly wondered whether it was a good start in just lifting the numbers to
meet some invisible threshold (30% of a population before significant change can begin, some
opined) or whether it was just a pipe-dream. It stood to reason that if the men were setting the
standards by looking in the mirror, then the only women who would get promoted were going to
be as nearly like men as men themselves. That’s not to say that bristly upper lips, wombat legs
and rodentesque armpits would be tolerated, oh no. Sexy skirts and pantyhose were still required.
If I had been made partner I wonder whether I would’ve cared half as much about Andrea’s
problems. I’m also still wondering whether my present situation is simply an example of
curiosity killing the cat, rather than some higher moral ambition.

Thinking about it though, I don’t buy the argument that women fall out of the profession
to have a family and ergo are less qualified than men to hold positions of power. Who is to say
that life skills learned outside the profession wouldn’t add some humanity and sanity to the law
and society in general? How can a “legal god” with only an esoteric interest in life, understand
and rule upon the common problems of mere mortals, or businesses for that matter, when they
have no practical experience of either?

Frances came out of the bathroom. I smiled at her. “I know what you mean. I’m just being
difficult. I’ve had a rotten day myself.” Then I told her about my meeting with my former
“mentor” (or was it tormentor?), Gloria. Frances, Andrea and I were on our own—geese with no
hope of catching up to the flock.
XXIII

ANDREA MOVES IN

Andrea walked up to my front screen door. I saw her even before she rang the doorbell. She had a little suitcase standing at her feet and a healthy green pot-plant under one arm. She was moving in.

"Coming," I shouted from the lounge as I was getting up to open the door for her and help her with her things. She mistook this for "Come in", and let herself in. Andrea walked into my lounge room, put down her suitcase and pot-plant on the floor inside the front door, gave me a perfunctory "Hi" but looked everywhere but at me. Was she assessing her new digs? It's not like she hadn't been here before, but now, she was taking in the details of it all.

I wasn't a collector of fine treasures, just pleasures. Most of my things came to me. I never pursued them. People gave me what they thought I'd like, and not wanting to offend, I mostly kept them, unless they were good enough to be passed on to others. I learned "re-gifting" from my frugal mother. So the things on display in my house were mostly what I was too embarrassed to give away. That is probably the only unifying feature of my décor—too clichéd to be chic in any era and too cheap to be tasteful. Overlaid of course, are my religious iconic pictures and memorabilia from aunts visiting famous grottos where the Virgin Mary appeared or where St Francis of Assisi spoke to an animal. These somehow didn't clash with my collection of spoons from around the world—tarnished but displayed anyway. Hey, none of us look good forever, nor do the possessions that possess us!

"I'm just going to use your bathroom for a minute. Is that okay?" Andrea asked, as she was half-way down the hall, casting a backwards glance with shiny, wet eyes. Keenly, I consented to the use of my amenities, if only to prevent a pregnancy mishap in my living room.
I looked around my habitat again, with the new and self-conscious eyes of someone who had just realized that others were taking her measure by an assessment of her worldly possessions.

I wondered what Andrea thought of my “historic” Australiana spoons from the Big Pineapple, the Big Orange, Dog on the Tuckerbox, and Magic Mountain. Did she even remember, or ever see those places? Magic Mountain, the amusement park, magically disappeared under a pro-development National Party state government in the late 1980s, and reappeared as resort accommodation overlooking Nobby's Beach. Now, two decades later, a three bedroom sub-penthouse on Nobby's Mountain would set you back $900,000. I can’t remember how much admission had cost my parents, with all the other happy families, but I’m sure that $900,000 wouldn’t now buy what we had that day. The best part (“Ooh mummy, daddy, I’ll never forget this day!”) began with a ski-lift ride from the carpark at the base of the mountain, to the park at the top. There was the pit filled with colourful plastic balls, for thrashing about in, and having the obligatory, “I’ve been to Magic Mountain” photo. And the parachute ride. And who wasn’t besotted with the beautiful two-storey carousel? The slide back to the carpark was a strange experience—exciting, yet so very like the sinking feeling of disappointment at having to leave paradise. We didn’t live in Brisbane at the time. My family had come in from the bush for our first beach holiday. As it turned out, it was also our last, with my father dying a year later. Since I can’t return to the Magic Mountain I loved, the sad-looking spoon is all I have to commemorate it. I wonder how many other people have kept their Magic Mountain souvenir spoon. Was it the “done thing” any more? Or did our memories now need to be co-ordinated with our Vogue-ish interiors?

I took Andrea’s suitcase to the guest-room, now her room. It was smaller than the main bedroom, but not by much. It only had a single bed in there, plain pine slats with foam mattress,
and matching pine bedside drawers and a dressing table. The house had been renovated to include built-in wardrobes in the bedrooms, so she’d have enough space to hang her clothes. I had already made up the bed with fresh linen, with dainty floral patterns on it, and set a teddy-bear on the pillow to make her feel welcome. She could keep it, for the baby.

I heard the sound of the toilet flushing. I wondered whether Andrea had admired my piece of Brisbane up on the ceiling. That was from another historic site that ceased to exist under the National government: Cloudland. It is still missed today. I can remember how Brisbane radio listeners awoke to the shock of what they thought was a prank—that during the darkness that preceded the seventh of November, 1982, the iconic Brisbane dancehall had been bulldozed.

My uncle had roguishly souvenired a small, round light fitting from the rubble of Cloudland after the Dean Brothers’ bulldozers had left the site. It was the only thing not crushed to smithereens. Its glass was opaque white and scalloped, suggestive of a cloud. Risking a trespass suit to rescue the unlikely treasure, was my uncle’s way of preserving the memory of a beautiful and irreplaceable by-gone era—the glowing dome of dreams, high up on Cintra Hill, overlooking Brisbane, and commanding its admiration. For between 1940 and 1982, debutantes came out into the adult world there, singles became coupled, and European migrants converged and forged connections between their present and their past. The modest light-fitting, for better or for worse, now illuminated the smallest but most significant room in my house.

“So Andrea, let me show you your bedroom. I’ve already put your suitcase in there ... we’ll get the rest as soon as you’re ready, and I’ve given your plant place of honour in the lounge room, since it’s the only living pot plant here....”

Suddenly, my ramblings were cut short by the wetness on my shoulder and neck. I didn’t recall extending the invitation to a hug. Here was I, patting her back again, searching for some...
maternal backbone in myself, but feeling limp and frightened, like a washed-up jellyfish
surrounded by boys with sticks. Where was Frances when I needed her?
Within a day of Andrea moving in with me, she was at home like she’d been here forever.

“Sandra, there’s someone at the door!” Andrea shouted, a bit too loudly, a bit too enthusiastically. Like mother’s feigned surprise on Christmas morning, earmarking Santa’s work.

“Well, can’t you get it? You’re closest to the door,” I replied from the kitchen. What’d she do, order me flowers?

“Nope, I really think you should get it.” The banging at the door became more insistent. Whoever it was, had given up on the doorbell. It had been a windy day, so it wasn’t just the screen door—I had closed and, by habit, locked the main timber door.

Reluctantly, I went to answer my own door, still intending to look through the peep-hole. Not that I could pretend to be ‘out’, since the whole street would’ve heard Andrea. It was 5 o’clock in the afternoon—it could be Jehovah Witnesses spreading their doomsday brochures and salvation before dinnertime. With Andrea here, I’d have to open the door and be polite at least the first time. Then, I’d let her know my policy on pretending to be not-at-home for certain door-knockers.

“Um, Andrea … do you know something about this?” I asked, looking through the peep-hole.

“About what? Are you opening the door, or not?”

“There are two men on my front porch, dressed in bowties and not a lot else.” Sweet! This was better than flowers.

“Well, that’s enough reason to let them in, isn’t it?” she giggled.
“Andrea, did you dial-a-stripper, or something?” I asked, with my hand already turning
the doorknob.

“No, they’re friends of mine—besides, they owe me. Thought they’d cheer you up. I’ve
been worried about you slouching about the house, so I’m throwing you a ‘firing party’. Frances
is coming too.”

“Not sure what she’ll make of this,” I muttered under my breath.

I opened the door fully, and stared. “Oh good, you wore your Butler outfits!” said Andrea,
from the comfy lounge chair.

“Butler outfits?” I asked, perplexed, and still frozen to the spot. My eyelids seemed to
have gone on strike, too. I couldn’t blink.

“We’re here to serve,” said the tall, dark one, with a string-thin smile. He was the type of
cliché I could live with, at least for a night. On his right hand, he balanced a white antipasto
platter with multi-coloured erotic-looking foods around the rim, and a little dish of black caviar
placed precisely in the middle like a dilated pupil. Over his other arm, which was bent across his
waist, a crisp black lap-lap of a tea towel hung regally. He watched my eyes move down to the
fine print on the strategically placed cloth—it said, The Butler Did It…. I gulped.

The other Butler was resting a frosted bottle of Belvedere up his left inner arm in
presentation stance, and held high a twinkling silver tray with exquisite, blue floral-painted shot
glasses, on his right. He smiled warmly at me, perhaps not entirely in character with the usual
stodgy British Butler-look, nor precisely in the fashion of Butler-turned-stripper, either. In fact,
there was nothing British about either of them. They looked fully imported, like the gifts they
came bearing.
Andrea gently bumped past me, into the doorway. She kissed each of them on the nose, so she must’ve known them pretty well—not like our ‘friends’ in our profession whom we air kiss but dare not touch.

“Sandra, these are my old flatmates—Joe and John. Boys, this is Sandra, my saviour. Frances is still on her way.” They both said “Hello, Sandra,” more or less together, I replied in kind, and I let them into my lounge room, black Y-fronts and all.

“What, no G-strings?” I asked as they passed me.

“Darrry-link,” said John, presumably meaning to say darling, “we’re all class. Besides, it’s a matter of food-hygiene.”

“Oh, sorry I asked.” Strippers, class, food-hygiene. This was too much to comprehend in one go.

The phone started ringing from somewhere down the corridor. “I’ll get it!” said Andrea. If only she was as motivated to get the phone every other time it rang.

“You’ve left the handset in your bedroom again, haven’t you?” I chided. Andrea blushed and toddled off as fast as she could without running.

In the meantime, the boys put their edible wares down on my coffee table, and fidgeted through what felt like an unscheduled intermission in their show. I suppose they had to wait for Andrea; and what about Frances? We couldn’t start the party without her? After all, it was her firing or just-fired party too.

“So, which one of you is Joe, which one John?” I asked, in an attempt to make small talk. Of course I remembered which was which. The tall, dark one was Joe, and the honest-looking one was John. Honest John.

The tall one spoke first. “My stage name is Joe, but I prefer The Supreme, Lean, Lebanese Love Machine.” He wriggled his eyebrows. Honest John laughed.
“Come on man, cut it out. Everyone knows Poles do it better!”

At that, the Love Machine whipped Honest John’s arse with the official corporate tea towel. So much for food hygiene. Honest John yelped, flipped around and grabbed Love Machine in a headlock. Love Machine grunted while trying to work himself free of the shorter man’s vice-like armpits. Honest John was bent forward, partly squatting, and completely unmoving, until Love Machine gave him a king-sized wedgie. Honest John let him go, panting from the exertion.

“You like my arse, Joe? You seem obsessed with my arse. You know you’re not my type, for fuck’s sake. Leave my arse alone!” We all laughed.

Andrea came back into the room, looked at John straightening out his pants and Joe doing a pelvic victory jig and commenting “and of course, Joe’s the winner!”

“This isn’t how I remember the Butler Show,” Andrea said, matter-of-factly.

“Nah, we were waiting for everyone to get here. We were just foolin’ ‘round,” said John. Andrea returned to the comfy single-seater lounge, which she had commandeered since moving in with me. She says it’s because of her back. “Well, we can start the party, because that was Frances. She can’t come.”

“Oh really?” my response bolted out the gate like a frisky horse. “That’s a shame,” I added, thinking thank Christ! She would think less of Andrea and I. Enjoying the company of Joe and John was probably unsophisticated.

“Her elderly aunt took a tumble, so Frances is on her way to hospital with her mother.”

“Will the aunt be okay?” asked John.

Isn’t he just the sweetest? I thought.

“Broken ribs and maybe a broken leg. They’re hoping she didn’t do her hip as well because that’s when things really start to go bad.” Andrea was eye-ing the antipasto platter as she
was speaking. “Hey you guys, there’s nothing here for me! Pregnant women can’t have deli food and vodka!”

John responded first. “Well, this isn’t really your party, is it?”

Andrea pushed herself up and out of the couch and went scavenging in the kitchen. That woman was going to eat me out of house and home. “Ha-ha!” she shouted. “A packet of corn chips! Mine, all mine!” She ensconced herself back in the lounge chair.

The boys looked at each other, and then me. “Well, no point arguing with a pregnant woman. We’ll leave her to her corn chips while we have...let’s see...what can we have...” teased John. “Caviar! Who’s for caviar?” With that, he dipped his pinky into the little dish and scooped out what was probably five bucks worth of the really good stuff. He tucked it into his mouth.

Joe, who was standing next to him on the other side of the coffee table from where I was, poked him in between the ribs. “Hey man, don’t they use cutlery where you come from?”

“You fuck-wit. You forgot to bring any. Besides, this is more fun.” He reached forward for another go, but Joe grabbed his hand in his fist, in a friendly fight.

“Oi, no double-dipping!”

“Okay, okay! I was going to use another finger!” he said, shaking his hand free and going in for seconds. He dipped it in, scooped some out, and balanced it on the tip of his ring-finger of his left hand, which I noticed, was without a ring...and came to sit next to me. “This is for you,” he said, matter-of-factly, as he directed it towards my mouth. If my mouth was open it was from surprise, because I didn’t actually like caviar. Not one little bit. Not since the Japanese businessman with a fetish for food sex. John grabbed a tissue from the coffee table and gently wiped the corners of my mouth. There were black smudges on the tissue as he pulled it away, scrunched it and held it in a loose fist. No doubt it was in between my front teeth now too. I
forced myself to swallow. There was nothing good about black caviar. I could fake an orgasm better than I could fake my appreciation of caviar. “Not a fan, I see,” said John.

I smiled feebly.

“Here, wash it down with Belvedere,” he said as he poured me a full shot glass. Now that was better. It was icy cold in the mouth, and gorgeously hot going down.

Andrea gave me a knowing look. But what did she know?

“Hey, Joe, want to go to a movie with me?”

“When, and what?” he asked, stabbing a row of mini red peppers with a toothpick.

“How about now, and whatever’s on,” she insisted. “Got some clothes? Don’t think you meet the minimum dress code, even for New Farm cinemas.”

Joe was still chewing his peppers, almost spitting them in his quick response to Andrea.

“Fucking New Farm. Don’t talk to me about New Farm. Me and John got done out there last week. Thought we were booked for a hen’s night but when we turned up, it was all men! They blocked the exits and made us dance to Queen and the soundtrack to Muriel’s Wedding! Fuck!”

Andrea was pulling him out to his car by the arm, not letting him comfortably finish his story. “Diddums. Come on, let’s go. We’ll go out to the ‘burbs, where you’ll be safe.”

“Oh, very funny. You shoulda been there. Wasn’t funny then....”

“You drive. I’m going to call Frances on the mobile and see if she can meet us at the cinemas.”

We heard Joe protesting all the way to the car, then listened carefully for when the car had pulled out and become lost in the distance.

“John, so ... what is it ... that Poles do best?” I asked. He was sitting next to me on the couch, with one arm behind me outstretched. He treated my question as an invitation to put the other hand across my knees.
“Well, vodka and sausage, are our specialties,” he replied, watching his own index finger tracing circles on my right knee.

“I’ve heard that Polish sausage is good,” I dared. I wasn’t thinking of Kranski—to which I was quite partial, but of the unofficial and more interesting topics of discussion at the last Women Lawyers Lunch. Katrina, known amongst some as “Cyclone Katrina” for her voracious sexual appetite, claims to have tried just about all the nationalities at least once, and professes to love Polish sausage the best. Big, fat, Polish cock.

He smiled, but seemingly let the dare pass. He stood up and was facing me. “You know what?” he said. “I’m starting to feel silly in this costume—either I put some clothes on, or, I get them all off. Which would you prefer? Eh?”

He put out his hand, to help me up. I don’t remember saying anything, but clearly, he had his answer. He took the bottle of Belvedere, two shot glasses and me, down the corridor, towards my bedroom. What a brilliant firing party this was turning out to be.
I can’t say that I was happy about the situation, about not having a choice any more about the
direction of my life, but I did feel more settled. Somehow it was easier when the decision was
taken away. Now, rather than spending my days getting anxious about my options, I could sit
around and get depressed about the lack of options. Or, I could pull myself up by my bootlaces
and do something constructive.

Frances, as always, made a cameo appearance at just the right moment. If this were
Broadway, everyone would applaud, because the audience would know, even before the other
characters in the play, that this unassuming individual was about to save the day.

“Hey, Sandra!” she shouted through my unlocked screen door.

“The door’s unlocked, let yourself in.” Boy, I was lazy and uncouth and all those things
my parents had hoped I wasn’t going to be, but inertia won the day. It took too much effort,
particularly when I knew my actions wouldn’t be rewarded. It wasn’t like Frances was the ice
cream truck and I was twelve again, living a life of little consequence and consequent freedom.
No, I was thirty-five, with no ice cream truck to look forward to, living a life of no consequence.

Bugger.

“Where’s Andrea?”

“She had a doctor’s appointment and she was going to pick up a few groceries.”

“That’s good. Your fridge is empty. Let’s get started with Andrea’s case, shall we?”

Frances was here on official “Andrea business” again. It had occurred to me that morning,
that despite our friendship over the last however many years, we had never actually gone to each
other’s houses. Not before our firings. We always met at coffee shops, bars and restaurants. No
wonder she looked shocked that time she saw my kitchen sink. In restaurants and coffee shops, everybody looks sophisticated and “with-it”. Only once you’ve seen someone’s kitchen sink, however, can you truly say you know them. I’ve only seen Frances’ parents’ house from the outside when I dropped her home after a firm function two years ago. Although she knew mine very well now, her kitchen sink was still a mystery to me. In my mind, mine was just a clear break from my mother’s expectations of my life. She taught me to polish the sink with Jiff or Ajax after every load of washing-up, and to rub it with the tea towel I’d just used to dry up, until every bit of stainless steel gleamed. The tea towel went straight into the laundry afterwards, which meant lots of tea towels in the wash at the end of the week. It seemed to me that shiny sinks were to housewives of my mother’s generation what polished chrome on cars was to their men.

Off she went to my kitchen, like she owned it. Today, it was looking decidedly better. I had ordered in Chinese takeaway, and was energetic enough to have thrown the empty cartons into the bin. It’s amazing what an effort that can be when the world’s on top of you.

I heard the fridge door open and shut all too quickly. If I had listened more closely, I probably would have heard the mould dropping off the leaky fridge seal onto the floor, but instead, I heard the comforting clack clack of Frances’ shoes on the timber floor and the quiet clinking of glass against the kitchen bench top. It was good being served in your own home. I imagined that this might be like having an attentive wife. She brought back two glasses of tap-water, since I didn’t have anything worthwhile in the fridge except for alcohol and some basic mixers.

“You don’t have a computer at home, do you, Sandra?”

I shook my head. “I never needed one to this point. I lived at work, so I used the one I had there.”

_Six Minutes_
Frances started walking towards the front door.

"Where are you going?" I asked, thinking this was the shortest visit ever.

"To my car, to bring in my laptop. We’ve got to start planning our action for Andrea."

"But we already did. The other night."

Frances grimaced. "Oh, yes. When we were hung-over. This is going to be the sober version."

That was the end of any "discussion". As soon as she came back, she started moving furniture. I felt obliged to move out of her way. It was the least I could do. This was like a bad episode of "Changing Rooms" or "Room for Improvement" where someone came in and turned your life and living room upside-down and you were supposed to act more grateful than horrified. Suddenly, my coffee table was near my dining table and my couch was no longer in direct sight of the television. This was a major incursion.

"There, how’s that?"

"Hmmm," was the best that I could manage. She went out to her car again and brought in a waxy fruit box full of papers, a dictionary and, hello, "A copy of the Court Rules? Where did you get those?"

She touched the side of her nose and winked. Was I seeing Frances telling me that she lifted these from work?

"You didn’t!"

She didn’t respond, but the cheeky little smile stayed where it was. Jeez, I hadn’t stolen anything in my entire life, except maybe some basic office stationery, but that accidentally ended up near my home phone and in my home office. It wasn’t like pens stayed put. They were like shopping trolleys. Once they’re let out of their restraints, you could find them anywhere.

"What are the papers?" I asked.
She smiled even more. “Precedents.”

“From work?”

She shushed me, as if not articulating it meant it hadn’t happened. She had clearly printed out copies of standard precedents from the work computer over time and filed them away for future reference. It wasn’t something you could do in a night. She had been collecting for years, by the look of it. Damn. Why hadn’t I thought of that? Was I that cock-sure of my future at Hennessy Clark? Apparently so.

“They’ll be useful,” I commented, somewhat redundantly.

I toddled off to find some of that office stationery that had found its way to my home. Unfortunately, I couldn’t make quite as impressive a show as Frances. All I had was two foolscap note books, one bottle of liquid paper, and four pens of questionable quality. The first pen from which I removed the lid, snapped near the nib, making it wobble all over the place when I tried to write with it. Our firm had never engaged in the common marketing ploy of giving out nicer pens with our name on it. We just got the standard blue, black and red Bic pens, which I remember were also the favourites at the back of the school bus. If you pulled out the inky bit with the nib, along with the plastic cap-end, you could stuff chewed-up bits of paper bus ticket inside and spit-bomb people you didn’t like. Of course, I wasn’t a spit-bomber, but a spit-bombee. When those green tickets were chewed up properly, they really stuck. Again, I was shown up as the un-resourceful one. While I saw pens, other kids saw spit-bombers. While I was throwing out old drafts of documents and printouts of precedents I didn’t immediately need, Frances was saving them up for a rainy day. Like today.

“My place isn’t quite as nice as at work, is it?” I enquired, hoping to gain her attention. She was looking much too industrious, considering neither of us was on the clock.

“Well, I don’t miss the pink paint scheme. Do you?”
“Nah, I guess not. But I do miss the view, ordering in coffee and doughnuts on a Friday. Oh, and Shingle Inn cakes for birthdays and special events. Nothing comes close to a Shingle Inn cake with passion-fruit icing....” Just thinking about it made me salivate. It occurred to me that I was being more nostalgic about food, not the firm. That had to be a good thing.

“I suppose …” Frances answered after a significant pause, so much so in fact, that I had actually forgotten what she was responding to. She was sorting through her box now. This was the real law. The way people should see it. If I could stretch out the description of her scratching around for about an hour, others would get the general impression that the law wasn’t all that glamorous or interesting. And that would be the truth. Reading, sorting and summarizing documents is not sexy. It’s bloody awful.

We knew more or less what we’d be claiming on Andrea’s behalf. As far as I could see, she was unlawfully dismissed for her pregnancy, which just happened to be to Paul. He probably had cause to know of her pregnancy even though it was not visibly obvious at the time of the sacking. This could be tricky to prove. She suffered economic loss and so forth, and should be compensated or reinstated. Reinstatement would not be feasible in the circumstances, considering that their relationship in every sense had irrevocably broken down and all trust and mutual respect had been lost.

We’d have to research other cases to see how much we could claim in the circumstances, but I thought it’d be pretty clear-cut, that we’d measure it against the income she could have expected. Maybe we could get some extra money for the aggravated nature of the circumstances. A lot also depends on which judge you have on the day. After I’d made all of my assumptions about where this case was going, Frances spoke up.

“I don’t think we can do this as an unfair dismissal case.” She kept rummaging through her court rules.
"Why not?" I asked. Not that it really mattered to me which jurisdiction we did it in.

"The law is quite prescriptive in the legislation. I think Andrea would have a hard time making the case because she never told Paul that she was pregnant before he sacked her."

"Are you joking? He knew. I overheard him saying it when I was in Jennifer's office! Remember, it was my first day back from holidays, and I met you in your office and cut my thumb on a paperclip and bled all over the place."

"Do you really want to base Andrea's whole case on hearsay? How credible is your word against Paul's and the whole firm's? Not that I'm being rude, but think about it. You just got dismissed for allegedly leaking highly sensitive documents on the firm's biggest client, to the press. Your reputation isn't looking great at the moment. Even though you cooked up that settlement with the firm and it's confidential and all that, you know you're poking at a bee hive."

"Yeah, you're right. So what do you suggest?"

"Well, as I said, Andrea never told Paul and he really had no reason to suspect it."

"But surely we could come up with evidence that he would've noticed that she was swollen, suffering morning sickness, was unusually absent from work and so forth?"

"We could, but it's drawing a long bow. And it would be in a tribunal or commission rather than a court, which could be good from the point of view that they're less strict on evidence rules and potentially more generous on payout than a court in this case. But a tribunal or commission hearing isn't going to hit the firm where it hurts."

"And where is that exactly?"

"The firm's reputation. Humiliate them publicly."

"Like they humiliated all of us?"

"Something like that." Frances coughed nervously, as if admitting human frailty and susceptibility to thoughts of revenge were beneath her.
"If we take it to court, you know we could have costs sanctions against all three of us if we lose? That could send us to the wall!" I was starting to feel nervous, but exhilarated.

"It’s risky, I agree. But I’m hoping they offer to settle before we get too far."

"So, if we’re not in a tribunal or commission under the anti-discrimination legislation, what’s our cause of action?"

"Breach of contract. They didn’t give sufficient notice of termination."

"What? That doesn’t seem ideal. And anyway, doesn’t the alleged leaking of the report and poor work performance obviate the firm’s need to give notice? They could terminate on the spot for the leaking of the report, for example. That would be viewed as a serious breach by Andrea."

"You’re assuming as a fact that Andrea actually leaked the report. Do you forget that we were also blamed for it?"

"Well, excuse me for being slow. So, what you’re now saying is that if this thing actually gets to court rather than being settled, we’re going to have to prove that Andrea didn’t leak the report, is that it?"

"Spot on."

"So, do we have to find out who actually leaked the report, or are you proposing that we take the fall for it, because that would be the other obvious conclusion that a judge like Snappy Tom might like to make."

"Well, the firm might like to lead the judge to make a conclusion that we colluded with Andrea, unless of course …"

"What?" The suspense was killing me now.

"Unless we find out who really did leak the report."
“Fabulous. That ought to be easier than proving that Paul knew that Andrea was preggers. Frigging fabulous,” I reiterated.

I was feeling despondent again. For a while there, things had begun to seem hopeful and exciting. Just the same, despondent or not, I knew we had to keep going.

“One other thing,” I said, taking the proceedings into hand. “Who’s going into town to file the court documents?” I was hoping Frances would volunteer. “And then there’s the small matter of serving the documents on the firm.”

I certainly didn’t want to go in. Not to court and certainly not to the firm. It was as if the whole world already knew that I was a loser and turning up to court without the firm behind me was just enough to confirm it to anyone who happened to recognise me and ask how was work. It did occur to me that Frances was in the same boat, and Andrea was even more so, however, I did rightly recall this originally being her problem, so I voted for her in her absence. “I say Andrea does it.”

“How about we just get them done first. Then you and I can draw straws. It wouldn’t be fair to ask Andrea to do it. You know that.”

Back to fairness again.

And, of course, I drew the shortest straw.
"So, she didn’t know what she was doing?"

I shook myself out of my stupor. The kind of stupor that sets in when you’ve been queuing up at the court house registry at a quarter to four on a Monday afternoon with fifty other suckers. The big chocolate-skinned woman on the other side of the counter was addressing me. It wasn’t like court clerks were paid to talk to you, usually. They were flat out telling you why they rejected your court documents, even though they knew your life depended on them being accepted. Sometimes it was the font size of the notation in the margin. Other times it could be the number of spaces you left between paragraphs.

"Pardon?"

"Your client. You reckon she didn’t know what she was doing? You know, I see young girls flirting with their bosses here every day. I watch them walking past, through the metal detectors, acting all proper, like no-one would notice. But I see it. The looks they give each other, the gentle hand in the small of the back, stories you hear, that kind of thing." Her voice was sing-songy, like she was channeling some Negro Oracle. I was sure she was about twenty-five percent Torres Strait Islander. Strongly influenced by American culture though—she had the whole bobble-head-on-spring action happening while she was emphasising her point. I wondered whether she’d ever get around to discovering her own culture, before it was too late.

I shuffled the other copies of the court documents that I was still holding, not fully believing that this discussion was taking place. "I guess it’s not my business to know who knew what, just whether my client was unjustly terminated without due notice." The woman smirked
and nodded her head, not in agreement, but in a way that suggested she was thinking.

“Whatever!”

“Do you always read them?” I ribbed her. I thought these drones just lifted a rubber stamp if they felt like it or pushed your documents back at you if they didn’t.

She gave me a grin, well, what I thought was a grin, but could’ve been a grimace.

Without answering my question, she stamped my documents, kept the originals and pushed the copies back to me, rather than at me, under the half-screen.

“You’re just lucky I’m in a good mood today,” she whispered conspiratorially and winked. She laughed me off and shouted “Next!”

Good on her. Not only did she still have her sense of humour, but she was the first black Australian court worker that I had seen in the Brisbane registry, even though government departments were subject to quota requirements in recruitment—so many disableds, so many women, so many ethnics and blacks. Disgusting that the world had had to come to that. I looked along the formidable bench of registry workers, lined up like modern-day gargoyles against the torrent of paperwork bombarding the registry like rain on a gothic church roof. The next one along was missing an arm.

The registry was always shut by four. If it had been a quarter to four on a Friday afternoon, this queue would have moved much faster. No sucker in this public service was interested in going overtime into the weekend. Fact of life. In absolute emergencies, by special arrangement and for a King’s ransom, you could have the registry kept open for fifteen minutes after the usual closing time, but I never had a boss who gave me that as an option.

I had the kind of bosses who said it wouldn’t be worth coming back to the office if I didn’t get the documents in on time, even though they were the ones who gave them to me at five to four in the first place. They always had excuses, like “they didn’t come back from the

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photocopier on time” or “there were major amendments to the pleadings”, but the gofers never had any excuses. Run over by a bus? Well, couldn’t you have found someone else to get them there on time? Unfortunately for me, when I was junior enough to be the shit-kicker gofer, no-better-than-the-mail-girl girl, I was into wearing the fashionable cork wedge shoes that virtually catapulted me down the street. They made the run a lot more exciting, in a dangerous sort of way. Particularly as twisting one’s ankle at height and speed was a nasty experience that couldn’t get in the way of pushing towards court as fast as possible. By the time I became sensible enough to wear boring, flat court shoes, the registry run was no longer my job.

Nowadays, very few articulated clerks, trainee solicitors, shit-kickers, cannon fodder or whatever you want to call them, get to go and do the filing run. Only if they come from very small firms. Otherwise mail staff do it for the medium-sized firms and specially trained administrative staff called “filing clerks” do it for the largest firms. Most of them are very young, although they don’t think so.

I pulled back behind an ailing indoor palm tree in the registry foyer and watched the lines of worker ants scuttling about their business. You could tell who came from the better firms and who came from suburban or sole-practitioner offices. Generally, the skirts were short, but some were also short on style—those from the less ritzy end of town. The girls who did this filing work day-in day-out looked like professionals. This was their stratosphere. Documents got past the gargoyles with gushing gratitude, returned favours, flirtatious smiles to the male registrars and so forth. They had their trendy sunnies on top of their heads, and their Parker pens poised suggestively against their perfectly outlined pouts. It was our filing clerk who gave me the suggestion that the way to keep your lipstick on all day (before the advent of eight-hour lipsticks) was to colour your lips in with lip-liner and then put lipstick on top. This was one of her greatest
life tips of all time, and she was proud of it. She asked me whether she could patent the idea. I said it was unlikely.

The career filing clerks also had great legs. No doubt, from all that walking. Legs and sunnies were to a filing clerk what boobs and eyelashes were to Dolly Parton. Difference is, it was hard not to like Dolly Parton. Wasn’t it she who said, “It costs a lot to look this cheap.”

Soon, the lawyers, barristers and trolley boys began to emerge from the court rooms, all serious-faced and important-looking. The barristers, who were usually male, walked up front, with their wigs and gowns on, with the most senior solicitor or partner at their arm, nodding in agreement, followed by a string of junior solicitors. I could tell, just as reliably as by looking at the client, which were the more impressive commercial matters as opposed to the small-time mums and dads stuff or “crim” files, simply by looking at the procession of lawyers.

With the criminal law matters, the client always looked uncomfortable, dressed in someone else’s clothes, wearing someone else’s hairstyle. A “mullet” or “rat’s tail” could look so much better tucked into the back of a man’s shirt … who were we kidding? And what was with the borrowed (and usually coloured) suit, unfashionable tie and sandshoes? Interestingly enough, I had only represented two female crim clients, one a cheque fraud and the other, shoplifting. Commercial clients usually had this indignant look of “how dare they”, while other clients just looked distraught and overwhelmed. The criminal law clients were generally left to walk behind with the juniors, like dogs, once court adjourned for the day. The barristers and senior solicitors only talked to them and acted like they were on the same side when they had to (which was during the day rather than at the end of it). They spent a lot more time trying to catch the attention of other lawyers as they walked by. They would nod at the other lawyers they secretly wanted to be and ignored those who were either their competition, or beneath them. They tried to look like they were doing something really important and challenging, other than finding ways to pay the
rent and keep the slightly tatty black gown on their backs. Sure, someone’s liberty and someone else’s revenge was important, but really, these small-time lawyers were merely picking the flies out of the better lawyers’ massive vat of corporate ointment.

In large commercial matters, the junior usually female instructing solicitors, who did all the hard work, got to walk behind the barrister, partner and client. I still remember being told not to walk up front when I started. It was unheard of. Women might have been let into the profession, but they were still to be seen only when necessary, and rarely heard. I once spent six whole months of my life on a big trial like that and when we won, I was given no credit for it. In fact, I wasn’t even invited to the victory lunch. The barrister I had been instructing asked where I was. He was told that I was busy, apparently. Later I found out that my superior, who barely knew the facts of the case, had taken the credit for all the work. No-one objected. He became an Associate on my back. Delightful to think how half a year of your life could be spent so fruitfully.

I wondered how we’d look when Andrea’s case reached court. The three of us women, walking in a row. No pushing to the back or front. When we came down the corridor, three-wide, people would have to get out of our way for a change. Although, walking through the metal detector, I’d probably go first, by seniority. Then Frances as my instructing solicitor, and finally Andrea. I imagined Andrea would have that vague, frightened look of an average being who had been pulled into this vacuum. We hadn’t spoken with Andrea about whether she’d like to have a barrister do the talking in court. I doubted that she’d be able to afford it, considering her impending medical expenses and the costs of raising a child, all without a job. I wondered whether this strange trio could be made into some more enduring commercial relationship. We all had some skills. I was sure people with less ability had set up law firms. It was just the bit that didn’t involve the law that scared me. Like finding clients, keeping clients, running a business. It

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wasn't just about working in a profession. I didn't have the faintest idea of what operating a business meant. I didn't even have to go out to buy biscuits and coffee at Hennessy Clark. Everything was done for us. It was almost like they had crippled us into dependence. I'd never start a business if I thought I had alternatives, but unfortunately, I knew only too well how the legal profession operated. It was its own union of bosses against the rest of us. Once you were dumped from one firm, it was damn hard getting into another. Everyone knew everyone else, and they could quite easily make life hell just for the fun of it.

It's like one big, mad family.
XXVII

RUNNING ON THE SMELL OF AN OILY RAG

Andrea brought a whole lot of party food to celebrate the start of her proceedings. Secretly, I wondered whether it was anything worth celebrating. We were all digging our holes deeper, and the cardinal rule of getting yourself out of a hole is first of all stop digging. I wasn’t going to be the bearer of bad news. At least we had something to do and we had each other’s company. We were in it together.

Frances was unusually cheerful today too. She went home for a change of clothes and arrived back dressed in a floral knee-length dress, which was a little too colourful for someone as typically serious as her. Maybe she really was happier in action, or maybe she was merely acting for Andrea’s benefit. That, I’d probably never know, but I had to give it to her: she really kept our spirits up.

“Sandra, why don’t you tell Andrea about your visit to the firm?”

If I had known that Frances wouldn’t get offended, I would have light-heartedly called her a bitch to her face at this point. The story she referred to would only be funny told when drunk; otherwise, to me, it was just plain sad. Andrea looked at me wide-eyed and expectant, so I tried to smile instead of squirm.

“I’ll need years of therapy. *Years*! I hope you’ll both chip in.”

“Come on, Sandra,” said Frances. “You’re tough.”

Goose pimples appeared on my arms. For me, retelling it this soon afterwards was like reliving it. Andrea was still looking at me.

“Do you want a hug?” she asked.
“No, of course not!” I responded, just a little too harshly. The sympathy could make me cry. I brushed the crinkles down out of my clothes and continued. “You’re right, Frances. In hindsight, it was rather funny.”

This is how it happened.

I had turned up at level 23 reception, where they accept service of documents, hoping no-one would know who I was. After all, the firm takes up about eleven floors, and I’d never been to level 23 and didn’t know the receptionist, so what was there to worry about? Well, that’s what I’d thought at the time. Everything was going fine. I waited until 11 a.m. before taking the lift, since I figured that I was less likely to bump into anyone I knew. Mostly people would be in court or in their offices rather than coming or going. That went well. It was just people from other firms and a documents boy. When I arrived at level 23, I walked quickly to the reception counter and asked the young receptionist whether she could accept service of documents on behalf of the firm.

Before she deigned to look up from her manicure set on the desk, she had said “Yes”. I mentally noted her name on her desk sign and felt rather pleased with myself. Then all hell broke loose.

She looked up and said, “Oh! Oh, no! I can’t accept service of documents from you, Miss Jeeves. Take these back!”

I was shocked that she knew my name. At first she didn’t want to touch the envelope that I had placed near her manicure set, expecting me to withdraw it. But she soon realized that I was walking towards the lift as fast as I could without attracting attention to myself. So she shouted, across the whole reception and lift foyer, which was full of people:

“Miss Jeeves, come back here! Take this back!”

She was shouting at me and people were staring. She picked up the envelope and started chasing me, so I started running towards the lift. In the process, I lost a shoe. There was no
flaming way I was going back for it, so I kept loping like a polio sprinter in the disabled Olympics.

By this stage of the story, Andrea was covering her eyes and looking down, and Frances was laughing her guts out, with a hand over her mouth. I tried to keep a straight face, and continued.

The hound from Hades was hot on my heels. Luckily, someone had pressed the lift button and a lift arrived in time for me to dive in. I pushed past a water-delivery guy with his full container of water on his shoulder and another lawyer with her briefcase which I bumped and she dropped. She missed the lift but I didn’t care. Boy, did she give me a dirty look. I kept pressing the close door button, looking at the receptionist running towards me with the envelope. Just as the lift doors were closing, she pegged the envelope to try to get it into the lift with me, but missed and hit the woman lawyer in the head as she straightened herself up after collecting her briefcase. “What’s with you people!” she screamed.

Once the doors were closed, I momentarily shut my eyes with relief, only to feel the bloody lift going up. As we all know, what goes up must come down! The receptionist would have checked which way my lift was going and pressed the button, waiting for me to return. There was no way I was going back there, so I went up, all the way to my old floor, level 26. I knew people on every floor above level 24, so it didn’t really matter where I got off—I was in trouble. And it took me two whole floors to come to my senses and decide what to do.

I paused in my retelling of the story and looked around for a drink. A stiff drink. My nerve endings were on fire again, my hands fighting the urge to make fists.

“So, what did you do, Sandra?” asked Andrea, with tears of laughter streaming down her face.
“Well, I got out of the lift, acting like I was supposed to be there, even with only one shoe on, looked around and made straight for the toilets. I sat in there for ages, hoping that the receptionist would have given up on waiting. I regrouped and came up with a plan about my lack of shoe.”

“What? You were going to go back for it?”

“No frigging way. No. But first, I had to get out of the toilets and out of that building. So I snuck out of the toilets into the lift foyer, and Rebecca the receptionist on level 26 noticed me. She cleared her throat uncertainly and asked me what I was doing there, given that I was no longer allowed on the premises. Then she looked me up and down, noticed my missing shoe and disheveled hair, and turned her back on me while she called security. I kept pressing the lift button, hoping it would make the lift come faster, and looked over my shoulder for security. It occurred to me that security would come walking out of the lift, so I ran for the stairs. I mean RAN. You have never seen me do twenty-six flights of stairs any faster.”

In hindsight, I probably should have explained myself to Rebecca before she called security, but the way she looked at me made me lose my composure. She was projecting a judgment of “guilty” and I started acting accordingly. How odd was that? I wasn’t even sure what I was guilty of. Of not being allowed on the premises perhaps? By that stage, I was just so embarrassed. I wanted to get out of there. Last thing I needed was another meeting with that security guard.

I was lucky they didn’t act any faster. If I was a really high-risk person of interest, I would like to think that security procedures would have had the receptionists on every floor leave their manicure sets and lock the stairwell doors, trapping me. But, I suppose, such dangerous activity is not in the job descriptions of staff. I was beginning to realize what crims had known all along:
security was more for appearance than anything else. It was to make everyone else feel safe. I took a sip of water, adjusted my position, and continued.

“After that, I limped my way out into the streets of lunch-time Brisbane, still wearing only one shoe. I wasn’t sure what would look worse, one shoe or no shoes, but I stayed with one shoe. I couldn’t bear to be in the city appearing like a bare-footed buffoon in a business suit. I found a shoe shop a few blocks away and went through the motions of choosing a pair that fitted, but found I had only ten dollars in my purse. No sale. I had left my credit cards at home deliberately, to stop me spending money I didn’t have. The shop assistant, who wasn’t much assistance at all, gave me a strange look, but didn’t say anything. I left, despondent but not defeated. A few other people looked at me funny, so I said, ‘Blisters,’ and smiled. They turned away and left me alone.”

Frances hurried me along. “So then you went to the chemist.”

“That’s right. I didn’t have a plan exactly; I just went in and browsed the aisles, until I came across bandages. Bingo! I had just enough money to buy a roll of bandages and tape for my bare foot and a bus ticket home. I paid and took myself off to the nearest public toilets to put on my new fashion-shoe alternative. However, the toilet floor was disgusting. It was covered in water, sloppy toilet paper and smelled like someone had missed the toilet altogether on a number of occasions. So, as you do with one bare foot, I hopped. Slipped. And landed on my arse in the wet mess.” I waved my arms around expansively as if to showcase my point. “And that, ladies, was my excruciatingly crappy day.”

“Hey, but at least you got the documents filed and served,” chortled Frances.

“Yes, you saved the day, Sandra. I owe you one,” said Andrea.

I just held my tongue.

We finished our tea, coffee, biscuits and cake. I looked at the others, hoping they’d go.
“So, can I move all my furniture back to where it belongs?” I asked, after stubbing my toe for the third time since they had arrived this morning. For some reason, I couldn’t get my brain around the new arrangements, and couldn’t get comfortable in my own house. Frances gave me a weird look and Andrea just laughed.

“Do you think they’ll roll over that quickly?” Andrea added. “It would be nice, wouldn’t it? But seriously, you could be working from home for a while if Paul has his way.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, ladies,” Frances reeled us in. “Now that we’ve had our little celebratory morning tea to mark the beginning of Andrea’s action, we should go out and help Sandra buy a new car.”

“It would be misrepresenting things a bit to say new car, because it would only be new to me. Given my current financial status, even with the kind loan from Frances, we’ll just have to ignore the fact that any car I can currently afford is probably as old as me and in worse condition.”

“Oh, diddums. I’m sure we’ll find you something nice,” said Frances.

I cringed at the word “nice”. Car enthusiasts say, “You are what you drive.”
XXVIII
THE CHOICES WE MAKE

It had taken us four hours. We all contributed to the selection process in our own special way. My experience of buying cars with men involved a lot of tyre-kicking to inspire confidence that one knew what one was doing. Frances stood a respectful distance away from any of the cars in our price range. She read the fine print on the signage and would peer through the window at the odometer. Frances was strictly hands-off. Andrea, on the other hand, got in and out of every car, testing out front and rear seats and opening every inner storage compartment there was. None of us bothered lifting the bonnet. We wouldn’t know what we were looking at. We couldn’t even fake it.

We came back with a real heap of a car, but at least it had a new paint job. It was a revitalized VW in metallic frog green. I would never live it down. Andrea wanted to call it “Kermit”, but I didn’t think it rolled off the tongue very well. Frances suggested “Lazarus”, given it looked like it had been resurrected, so Lazarus it became. I could see the car salesman smirking even before we’d left his premises. Not a good sign. No doubt this one would be shitfing bananas out its exhaust pipe in no time.

I thanked my friends for their assistance and we all left. Frances gave Andrea a lift to visit her old flat-mates, and they’d drive her home later tonight. I got to drive my new purchase home. It dawned on me that we hadn’t even asked for a test drive, and that if I’d been too embarrassed to ask for a test drive, why was it that I was now driving it home? Maybe Frances and Andrea recommended this car to me as a practical joke? I mean, it did seem the best value at the time, or so I thought, but had we really thought this through very well? Andrea liked the colour. She said it suited. But suited what? The salesman said it had been “lovingly restored”. Did we fall for the

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emotive language in his sales spiel? Surely we knew better than that. Bygones. Lazarus and I went home for the night. We were obviously meant for each other.

I slowed in front of my driveway and looked closely at the sexy silver Mercedes M Class parked crookedly on my nature strip. Only one person I knew parked like that and drove that model Merc. It had to be Paul. My heart raced and my mind went numb. All the usual fight or flight clichés happened to me as I pondered what to do next.

I parked my car in front of the garage and sighed aloud, “Oh God.” I said it over and over.

I felt no better for it. God didn’t answer.

I went upstairs and found my front door open. Paul was inside, semi-reclined on my couch. He had one of my best crystal glasses in his hand and he was swirling it—chasing the scotch around the glass with the ice, the ice with the scotch. He seemed indifferent to my arrival, but I knew that couldn’t be the case. Why would he be here otherwise?

“How did you get in?” I demanded.

He didn’t even turn to look at me. “You gave me a key once, remember?”

Shame flushed over me. It was only supposed to have been a one-night stand. “But I asked for it back and you gave it to me.”

“Yes, but I copied it first.”

“You bastard!”

“I used to love it when you called me names, Dee.”

Smooth. So smooth. I wanted to fight it, but I could feel my prickles wanting even more to turn into fur—fur that wanted to be touched, stroked. Were men born knowing this about women, or was it just my weakness, and Paul’s strength over me?
“Come, sit down, Dee. It’s been a while and we have some talking to do. First of all, I’m truly sorry about what happened. I should never have slapped you. You know I still have feelings for you....”

My instinct told me to run, but I shut it down. After all, where would I run to? I was sick of running. Here, at least, I had the home turf advantage. “What do you want?” I demanded.

“Well, it’s just a little matter really. Nothing of any great import at all.” He said it while studying his scotch.

“Then why are you here?”

He moved around a bit in the couch and spread his legs more, like he was comfortable and unafraid. “I just thought it would be best dealt with personally,” he paused, looked up from his glass at me, seductively. “Besides, you probably miss me. Am I right?” He could put on a new persona like a change of clothes.

“Paul, you can just fuck off.”

He got up from the couch. I thought he might leave as requested, but instead, he came and sat next to me. He put his hand on my knee, and the other arm, still holding the scotch, around my shoulders. He rubbed the cold glass on the top of my breast, and said, “Dee, you don’t have to be like that. Come, now. Let’s be adults.”

A million thoughts raced through my mind. Then the thoughts were displaced by panic. But something much stronger was at play.

“Okay, let’s.” And with that, I turned to face him, open-mouthed, engulfing his lips, his nose, his chin. He responded without hesitation and slowly poured the rest of his drink down the inside of my top, across both breasts, the iciness gaining the immediate attention of my now stiffer than stiff nipples. His mouth left mine and, panting as he undid my blouse and yanked my bra down, began moving across my breasts, licking the scotch from one, then the other. Paul put
the glass on the floor, as the hand holding it had become otherwise preoccupied with squeezing my breasts together so that he could suck both nipples in quick succession.

The front door was still open. It was late afternoon. My mother could even drop by! Girl Guides with cookies! Jehovah Witnesses! Andrea could come home early! But neither of us cared. My clothes were coming off piece by piece and the pleasure of anticipation was painful. Gasping, I stripped him of his clothes. The Polo Ralph Lauren jacket, the faintly striped shirt, the impeccably cut Emmanuel Ungaro trousers. I licked his aftershave from every inch of his face and neck—he still wore the sweet and overpowering Christos. I could eat him up like a lolly, but I wasn’t the kind of girl who liked to suck, even if it did make it last longer.

We made our way to my bedroom. Twirling around each other like mad comets. We crashed onto the bed, him first. I liked to be on top. He didn’t seem to mind. He was inviting me closer, he was ready to fire, but I wanted to play some more. The awkward talk could wait. This is what I needed now. I pinned him down between my legs and started licking his nipples frantically. He moaned, back-arched, inviting more. I worked my way down to his ribs, kissing quickly, so quickly, and licking, working up to a crescendo. I started nipping. I loved nipping. Then rib by rib, I started biting. Not hard, but biting. Leaving little smiley red messages from me, all over. Every time I bit, he jumped, but then I’d relax him with more licking and kissing. And Paul was a man who didn’t know how to say “no”. He was going to take what was coming, because it was always better than nothing.

I moved my way down to his pelvis and saw him noticeably shudder. He doesn’t know what to expect, I smiled to myself. This was the way it should be. I couldn’t criticise a man for wanting power, because I knew domination was an aphrodisiac and I’d grab it whenever I could, so why be a hypocrite? He opened an eye cautiously, making a surreptitious site inspection after the first little nip. I nuzzled his fur with my nose to make him relax and tickled his nipples with

*Six Minutes*
my outstretched fingers. He lay back and relaxed again, only to work himself to his full length and glory at my command. He was ready to come at any moment. I can’t say why I did it, but I did. I couldn’t contain myself any further, and I bit him so hard, I had to stop myself from biting it off altogether. I drew blood. It tasted mildly salty. He howled and jumped out of bed, cursing.

“You slut! You bitch!” he yelled.

I felt strangely satisfied. He ran to get his clothes. He was holding his genitals in his hands, shouting obscenities down the corridor.

“Our little secret?” I teased. “Or will you be telling someone about our love affair?”

“You slatternly bitch. Whore.”

“You didn’t seem to mind before.”

Once he had his pants up and his shirt on, but unbuttoned, he stormed into my room to face me down. “You’d better drop Andrea’s case, or you’ll regret it!”

“You think so? I’m just starting to enjoy being a free agent. I’ll repeat my earlier comment. Fuck off, Paul. And just remember that little clause in your pre-nup agreement. Remember the one you were crying to me about when you were off-your-face at the firm Christmas party two years ago?”

He stopped and stared at me, directing every ounce of hate he had through his livid eyes.

“You wouldn’t.”

“I wouldn’t what?” I asked, stirring. “Wouldn’t tell your wife about your love child and numerous other infidelities? Humph, now, wouldn’t that mean that your wife could take her family fortune and the kids and take you to the cleaners as well?” He started shaking a finger at me, speechless. His whole body started to tremble, like he was going into shock, or was about to slap me again. “Why didn’t you think about that before if your family and wife’s fortune meant
so much to you? Get the hell out of here and don’t come bothering me again. Next time I see you, it’ll be with a restraining order and a copper.”

He left, trying to stand tall and not hold his penis. He was not in a happy way. I, on the other hand, felt fantastic. I didn’t think Paul would be mentioning it to anybody, so I was confident that my new strategic plan didn’t need to be revealed to the rest of the gang. No-one was going to intimidate me without getting some back.
XXIX

WHAT GOES AROUND, COMES AROUND

That night, I slept more soundly than ever. I had no dreams, just the blackness and velvety peacefulness of sleep. It was as if the afternoon had released all the troubling devils and finally, I was feeling free and whole.

The next morning, I sang while I dressed, and I was unafraid of looking in the mirror. Andrea accused me of being “cheerful” at the breakfast table.

After breakfast, I went out to see Lazarus. Maybe we’d go for a spin together to the shops for some groceries, and to the TAB for a little flutter on the horses. A win could hold me over for a while. I went to put my key in the lock. What I saw next put pause to all happy thoughts.

When I had seen Paul’s car outside my house yesterday, I was in such a state that I didn’t drive Lazarus into the garage. I left him out for the night, to fend for himself. What I saw now was that he didn’t fend for himself very well at all. Lazarus had lost his sheen and looked as if his paintwork was melting. I went up close and walked around my car twice, in disbelief. It was covered in a runny, watery greenish substance that had a slightly oily smell to it. The metallic frog-green paintwork on Lazarus was peeling and dissolving, beginning to expose raw metal. I ran upstairs, telephoned my mechanic, and described it to him. Did I buy a really dodgy paint job? But it looked fine at the dealers yesterday I said, answering my own question, not wanting to come to the obvious conclusion. My mechanic was in a hurry and wasn’t going to soften the blow for me.

“Someone’s poured brake fluid over your car. Call the coppers and your insurer. Do you want me to book you in for a new paintjob? I do insurance claim work too. Who’s your insurer?”

“Never mind for now. Thanks Frank.” I hung up, stunned. Paul, the prick.

Six Minutes
I wasn’t having much luck with men or cars, lately. My autobiography would be called, *Worst Case Scenario: on men, cars and the sad life of Sandra Jeeves*....

Andrea overheard my phone call. She went outside to look at the car herself, while I was still on the phone.

What was I supposed to do? Should I call the police? What would I tell them? The truth? Which part? Was this revenge from a thwarted lover or intimidation by the partner and the firm we were about to sue? If I wanted a restraining order against Paul at any stage, I needed to get a police file started on him to demonstrate a pattern of conduct, otherwise the next time he did something it would appear to the police to be the first time. Did this strengthen our case, or weaken it? I was in lawyer overdrive. I could not be a victim. The pragmatist’s voice took over: if I was to get insurance to repair the damage, the insurer would want a police report. I’d give the police a sanitized version of the events. They would be entirely used to that. I’m sure it made no difference to them whether or not I had had a fling with the perpetrator.

I called the local coppers and the insurance company. Neither sounded concerned. It was just another claim, just another case, it was only property. When I described the car to the insurance claims officer, he sniggered and said that it sounded like the paint job would be worth more than the car. But he would send an assessor out within a week. The coppers arrived mid-morning, which was sooner than I had expected. They looked like juniors. The male copper took the notes, looking extremely bored, while the female copper did the questioning.

“Do you know who did this?” she asked, tilting her head to one side to look more sympathetic than she really was.

“I think so.”

“When you say you think so, what do you mean?”
"I think I know who might’ve done it, but I didn’t see him do it.” The woman copper pursed her lips.

This was why coppers and lawyers rarely got along. Even though she didn’t yet know that I was a lawyer, we were locking horns, testing who was the cleverer of us. Coppers always had the intellectual undertog chip on their shoulders, which could make them nasty. Besides that, they thought that lawyers merely undid all their good work. To a point, this was true. And it was also true that being a lawyer didn’t necessarily mean you were smart. It could be a case of dumb and dumber.

"Right, so who do you think did it and why do you think that person was the one who did it?"

"Well, I think it was my old boss.”

The male copper looked up from his notepad. I couldn’t make out what he was thinking, but he wasn’t radiating warmth.

"Does this old boss have a name?” the woman asked, growing impatient.

"Paul. Paul McClyne. He’s a partner at Hennessy Clark lawyers in town.”

"I see.” The male copper started tapping his pencil on his notepad and chewing the inside of his bottom lip. The woman continued. “So why would he do this to your car?”

At this point, it occurred to me that the coppers had a preconceived mental picture of the type of person who commits this kind of offence and the kind of person it usually happens to. They weren’t buying the story. I probably wouldn’t either if I was one of them.

“Me and another lawyer, recently commenced court proceedings against him and the firm on behalf of another woman whom he unlawfully sacked. She was pregnant to him.”
I was hoping the footnoted explanation of Andrea’s pregnancy might win some support or sympathy, but all it evoked was an emotionless response of “I see,” and more dead eyes staring. These coppers were probably happiest in high-speed chases. Like dogs and postmen.

“So why did he damage your car and not one of the other women’s?”

I should have expected this question and rehearsed my answer in my head before the police came, but I was in shock and not thinking straight. These sorts of things usually happened to other people.

“I really couldn’t say,” I replied after a moment’s pause. “No, I really don’t know,” I added to sound more convincing.

“Is it possible that someone else did this?”

“I suppose anything’s possible, but I don’t think so. Paul was pretty angry with me that I wouldn’t drop the case. He came over here yesterday to intimidate me. He threatened me with some unspecified danger, that I’d regret it if I didn’t drop the case.”

The male copper finally spoke. “Did you report that incident? I don’t see any record of it.”

“No, I didn’t. I thought he was bluffing. I had no reason to expect that he’d actually follow through with anything like this.” I couldn’t tell them that Paul had slapped me, because the payout was conditional upon my signing a confidentiality agreement. I needed the money more than the point-scoring with Paul’s reputation, at least, at the moment.

The woman copper kept punctuating the ends of my sentences with “I see” like they were full stops. Eventually, she and her partner turned their backs to me and she muttered as quietly as she could, “Do you think it’s worth fingerprinting?” He craned his neck around to glance at the car, and then turned back to her, “Probably not.”

“Was anything else touched or damaged by this person?” the male copper asked directly.
“What do you mean ‘touched’? Are you after a fingerprint? Nothing else was damaged if that’s what you’re asking.” I still had the unwashed whiskey glass in the kitchen sink. Should I offer that up, but that would complicate things for me, surely.

“It would make it easier for us, should we fingerprint the car. That way, we wouldn’t have to get a print from Mr McClyne at this point in time.”

I thought it through. “Do you think the person would’ve touched the car at all? I mean, all he or she had to do was pour brake fluid over it. They didn’t need to touch it at all.”

Now the male copper started tapping his foot and staring at me indignantly. Lawyers and coppers don’t like being challenged, not by each other, and not at all.

“That may well be the case. If you have nothing further to add, we’ll be going now.”

“That’s all. Thank you for coming. Will you let me know what you find? Will you be contacting Paul McClyne soon?”

“We’ll be getting a statement from him next. Good day to you.”

They turned and strode away; the new Tarzan and Jane of the urban jungle.

Frances drove into my driveway. Andrea came down the front stairs as the cop car pulled away.

“Hello. What was that about?” Frances asked.

“Someone did a job on Lazarus last night,” Andrea replied. “Sandra thinks it was Paul. Or at least, Paul was behind it.”

“Oh my goodness!” exclaimed Frances. “Why would he do that?” she asked, sensible as always.

“He came here last night and told me to drop the case or else. I told him to get lost. And this is what he was talking about when he said ‘or else’.” I moved out of their line of sight so that they could see poor Lazarus better.
“Oh no,” Andrea and Frances said, more or less at the same time.

“I didn’t know whether to tell the police, but I really had no choice. The insurer wanted a police report, which is fair enough.” I moved my feet around in the dirt, making little semicircles in front of me: monochromatic rainbows that only I could appreciate. “Has Paul threatened either of you? Or has the firm contacted you at all?” My enquiry was genuinely curious, but not overly concerned. I knew what I had done to deserve this, and it wasn’t exactly the mounting of the court case.

Frances and Andrea looked at each other and shook their heads. Andrea, always the one needing to verbalise, added: “No. Paul did threaten me at first, when I was fired, but nothing came of it.”

“What did he say?” Frances asked.

“Just what you’d expect an angry man to say. Go quietly, or else... something to that effect. I wasn’t that worried. Paul had done a lot of nasty things to me, but nothing physical.”

“From now on, we might all like to watch our backs,” I said as matter-of-factly as possible. “Paul’s not happy.”
Andrea went to stay with Frances for a few days. They were doing day-trips to the beach. I just wanted some time alone. I assured them that I would be fine.

It was two days before I finally plucked up the courage to go outside again and collect my mail. Being fired, being slapped and having my second car damaged and my first one stolen, was eating away at my confidence. Thoughts and fears were repeating on me like bad takeaway. I was even wearing my poo-coloured (or was it "chocolate-latté") velour tracksuit again.

After the last rain, the grass and weeds on the sides of my garden path had let out vigorous little runners, one of which I nearly tripped on as my toe caught in it. There were booby traps in my own garden.

At the letterbox, I paused to look up and down the street; something I hadn’t done in a long time. Things looked different to how I had remembered or expected them to be. Not that I’d thought about it before now. I suppose I had never been home during the week in daylight hours to collect the mail and see who inhabited the world at that time. I often collected my mail after the rest of the street was peaceful and asleep.

In the late afternoon sun, houses seemed to glow with new, energetic paint schemes that were too ambitious for my liking, and there were mothers and babies everywhere. This was nothing like the grey cement city of power suits and barren wombs that I was accustomed to. When did all this happen? What was going on? The lady across the street waved at me. I was unable to wave back, but I tried to smile. I doubt she would’ve seen it from a distance. Now I’d be blacklisted and talked about at the Neighbourhood Watch meetings. She was snipping away at her carpet of alyssums in her tidy rock garden, with a little tike bobbing around uncertainly on his
play-mat next to her. Two doors up, another mother was out watering her already green grass with a baby walking on all fours like a miniature bear by her side. The house next door to her had a revoltingly bright-coloured pram parked at the front door. Soon, I’d have Andrea’s bright pram parked at my door.

The babies were like happy mushrooms sprouting everywhere after the rain, their big cheerful heads held upright on firm, straight stems, looking towards their mothers. Not a slouching one anywhere. Looking the other way, up the street, I saw another two mothers with infants tending to their gardens and pets. Was I in the wrong street, or what? All these people around me and I had never felt lonelier. Shamefully, I wished the gentle breeze would pick up and blow them all away like dandelion seeds.

I kept moving towards the letterbox. It was the only thing I could do to stop myself from crying. Hand in, pushing aside the cobwebs, my fingers found mail. Official looking mail. This must be the firm’s response to our action. I ripped it open. That’d be right, I thought, glancing at two lines, ignoring all the rest, which I knew would be standard. They wanted a motion to dismiss. We’d have to be in court next week. They don’t think they have a case to answer. We’ll see about that. I went inside and called an old friend.
Frances and Andrea came back in the evening to discuss strategy. I’d already gone ahead, off my own bat, and involved another party. Our three would now become four.

“Guys,” I said to get Frances’ and Andrea’s attention. “There’s someone I want you to meet. He’ll be here in a minute. You’ve probably already seen him around work. He’s agreed to help us.”

Frances and Andrea looked at each other and then at me. “So who is it?” Frances asked.

“Piers McDonald”, I said while I casually had my back to them, to hide my face.

“Piers? IT manager Piers?” Frances asked, disbelieving.

“That would be the one,” I said coolly, but flinching on the inside.

“The one you....”

“Yes, the one I, um, you know ...” I gesticulated uncertainly, not knowing how not to be crass.

Andrea wasn’t following. I had sworn Frances to secrecy, so no-one else technically knew for certain. Andrea’s brow was furrowed and she was looking at me with her head tilted like a parrot. Did I really have to tell the story? Silly Sandra time again.

“Look, it was at the last Law Ball.” Andrea seemed to understand this, without further explanation. She’d obviously been there, done that, as evidenced by her current state of affairs. When a story begins “It happened at the firm’s Christmas party or Law Ball ...” punters tend to bet that it doesn’t end with a “... happily ever after”. I had my own set of fractured fairy tales to tell, starring me in the role of the anti-princess.
Frances piped in. "Why don't you tell Andrea what happened and then explain to me how this man is going to help us."

I picked up a tea towel that had been left hanging on the back of the couch (probably after a TV dinner) and started dusting shelves and ornaments, talking at full speed, without looking at anyone.

Frances and Andrea nodded as I summarised my history with Piers. Neither of them had been at that particular Law Ball. Frances had been overseas. I didn’t know what Andrea’s story was.

"Unfortunately, some twit at that morning tea entered Piers’ name on my behalf, and we were selected on the night of the ball as ‘The Most Touching New Romance’. Our prize, as you would possibly remember, was a room at the Heritage Hotel, right above the party."

Andrea exclaimed, "You slept with him?"

I thought it a bit rich for her to be asking. I was cringing at the memory of it. For Pete’s sake, some days his face was so raw, it looked like he’d been dragged along gravel at speed.

"I know, I know, but people have slept with people for much lesser things and really, I was doing a good deed." I was almost gagging on my own words. If I could have purged the memory, I would have. "You should’ve seen how happy he was afterwards. He was so confident with himself. He even went back down to the party!" Whereas, I had gone straight home, and cried for the rest of the night.

"And this man is going to help us how?" Frances asked, getting back to business once the background had been filled in. I sensed that maybe she was questioning my judgment and that having me retell the story to Andrea was a way of getting Andrea to side with her without even asking.

I told the girls my plan. They remained silent for a full minute.

Six Minutes
“You are a strangely resourceful woman,” Frances finally said. It wasn’t quite a compliment.

Piers turned up on time with the biggest bunch of flowers I had ever seen. The sight of them made me blush. Unfortunately, they weren’t for me. Just as I approached to graciously accept them, Piers walked past me and gave them to Andrea. “So sorry to hear about your bad luck lately. It sucks.” Then he sat down. Andrea was so stunned she didn’t know what to say. I just tried to hide my disappointment. Piers offered a cheerful “How’s it doin’?” to Frances and myself. We replied with the usual nodding and “Fine thanks.”

“Thanks for coming, Piers. Can I get you anything to drink?” I offered.

“Diet Coke, thanks.”

That was the standard firm drink. We all lived on it, to make us work faster, harder, longer, defying what the human body was supposed to do. I went to get it, but thought I’d get the ball rolling, to catch the others up on my grand plan.

“Piers, could you tell the girls what you’ve found at work? You know, what we discussed earlier today?”

“Sure thing.”

While I rummaged around the fridge for his drink, I could hear him tell how he’d been doing his usual hardware and software inspections when he’d found an anomaly on level 26, the level where Paul, Andrea and I had worked together.

“What kind of anomaly?” Frances asked.

“Not many people know this, but it’s part of my role to protect the intellectual property and data security of the firm. The exact scope of that role isn’t defined and it certainly isn’t in writing. That’s where it becomes a bit tricky. I basically do what I think the firm would want me to do, and sometimes a bit more. Sometimes I find things I’m not quite sure what I should do.
about. This is one of those times. Just as I was thinking about turning over my discoveries to either the firm or the police, my good friend Sandra here rings, asking whether I’d have anything that might be of interest to you all. In fact, I do.”

He took three sips of Diet Coke, paused to look at us, probably to gauge our interest, and continued when no-one interrupted. It seemed this was his fantasy coming true: commanding the undivided attention of three women, all while talking tech.

“About eight months ago, I was traveling around the offices of Hennessy Clark, doing the routine hardware and software stocktake, checking for the usual signs of tampering, theft and so forth. Given some of the firm’s high profile cases, I thought I might also do a sweep for any broadcasting devices, you know, those that could be sending sensitive data outside of the firm.”

I could see Frances taking mental notes. No doubt, she, like me, had been wondering who had leaked the details of the Dover Industries report, and how and why.

Piers didn’t miss a beat. “That’s how some journalists operate. They plant devices that record, or record and transmit, either video or audio signals. You can quite easily do it from one building to another where they’re close together. You don’t need to be an IT genius to do it either. Would you like me to show you?” We all nodded as he switched on Frances’ laptop. “Is this on-line?” he asked. I helped him with the passwords to dial in. He called up a website selling discrete surveillance cameras with transmitting capabilities. You could even download basic instructions on how to install these things and where the best places were to mount cameras to avoid detection. We were appalled.

“So did you find one of these?” Frances asked.

Piers tapped away some more and closed down the computer. “In short, yes.”

Andrea started looking more pale than usual. She was rubbing her chest like she had heartburn and excused herself to go to the bathroom.
Frances sat further forward in the couch.

"My laptop sniffing software sniffed out a wireless access point, but at first, I didn’t know where it was. All I knew was that something was being sent from somewhere in our building. I thought the best thing to do then, to determine the degree of security risk, was to intercept the data that was being transmitted, to see what it was. I pretty quickly figured out that it was video stream, but next, I had to break the encryption. I applied a cracking algorithm to find the encryption key. Thankfully that wasn’t too difficult. Once I had de-encrypted it, I could see that it was video feed from inside one of our conference rooms."

Frances interrupted. "All our conference rooms look almost identical. They all have the same décor and layout. How did you find out which one it was?"

Andrea came back into the room, but she didn’t look any better. She sat down with her arms wrapped around her belly.

Piers went on. "I watched for a while to see who was in the video. I was looking to identify the exact room as well as to establish who was doing the recording and what the person was looking for—whether there was a pattern to the surveillance."

"Was there?" Andrea finally piped in.

"Not that I could tell after watching for the first few days, then the first few weeks. It all seemed pretty random to me. Voyeuristic, but random. You people do some very weird things in conference rooms. I don’t think I can ever look at a lawyer the same way again. Or at a conference table."

We all shifted in our seats. Even being caught farting on tape would be bad, but I could vouch for myself that I’d done worse than fart in conference rooms the whole office over.

Frances, as usual, deflected the heat from us by redirecting our attention to where it mattered. "So did the same people keep appearing in the footage?"
Piers slowly and gently rolled and rubbed the joint of his right index finger between the thumb and middle finger of his left hand, like it hurt. He seemed momentarily lost in thought before he replied. “Um...” He looked nervously at me as if to remind me of something. He wanted to protect Andrea’s feelings; he did mention something about this during our telephone call. I turned to the girls.

“Frances, could I have a word in the kitchen, please?”

We left Piers and Andrea fidgeting in the lounge room. That could have been managed better. I realised I’d been as subtle as pork crackling at a Bar Mitzvah, but it was the only way I could do it at the time.

“Yes?” Frances pressed as soon as we’d reached the kitchen doorway. “What is it? Something about Andrea I gather? You could’ve warned me before. You could’ve told me that you’d involved Piers and that he had some information.” She was working up a head of steam. You don’t ever want to see a litigation lawyer genuinely angry. They feign it all the time for effect, but when it’s for real, you know it.

“I know, I know. Sorry. There wasn’t time. Look, given Andrea’s condition, there are probably some things she’d be better off not hearing at this stage. At least until we work out whether they’re relevant or prejudicial. Maybe we should take some of this discussion with Piers off-line and do it again some time while Andrea’s not within earshot?”

When we returned to the lounge room, Piers asked innocently, “Everything all right, ladies?” and recommenced talking about how he found the problem, keeping things strictly technical. We could tell that Andrea was only getting about every second sentence by this stage. Frances deferred any hairy questions to a later time and just listened for a change, instead of being a backseat driver to the conversation. The technical background would be relevant to know in any case.

Six Minutes
What we could decipher from Piers’ tech talk was that the camera had been somewhere in the level 26 main conference room. He had cobbled together a tracking device, which I referred to as an “antenna” for the benefit of the other ladies in the room. This was attached to some sort of black box, connected to his PDA-mini-personal-portable-computer thing. He had waved this antennae around to gauge in which direction the radio-wave signal was strongest. He had started on his level, level 22 and found that at a certain point he was pointing the antenna straight upwards to a floor above. He moved up one floor at a time until he found himself directly under Paul McClyne’s office. This was where the signal was going. A bit of rummaging around the adjoining conference room, and Piers had located the camera, which was secreted in a small crack in the ceiling register above the partners’ bar. He left it there to continue collecting surveillance on the surveiller, so as to compile a conclusive report rather than blowing the whistle on a senior partner before time or wrongly causing mayhem.

“Do you realize what a powerful position you hold, Piers?” I asked rhetorically.

Power didn’t suit him at all. He was so earthy and uninterested in power. Instead of smiling, he grimaced as if imagining pain. “I’m in a dangerous position, not a powerful one. I feel a bit like a medieval Pope who only lives by the grace of his ruthless King. And though I’m here to help you ladies, I’m not quite ready to die for the cause, if that’s okay with you. I’m here unofficially.”

“Understood,” I replied. “We don’t want you to take any unnecessary risks.”
Most women don’t get the “chase”. Men live and die for it. I, too, am partial to a bit of excitement, provided it’s only my professional skin on the line, no more. This case was giving me more hives than buzz. My phone kept ringing at all hours of the night. When I answered it, there’d be the same heavy breathing and then the caller would hang up. Paul was playing games with me. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Maybe I shouldn’t have assaulted him. That was supposed to teach him a lesson, not provoke him further. The worst thing was that I couldn’t discuss the mind games with the others; otherwise they’d cotton on to the fact that I wasn’t playing straight.

Anyway, a bunch of black roses arrived for me. The doorbell rang and there they were, delivered by the invisible florist. Did the Mafia have a florist I wondered? Who would be able to organise black roses in Brisbane? That would only be a Melbourne custom, surely? After the fact, I can be cool about it all, but at the time, I was not cool. I cried and cried. I locked all my windows and doors. I rang my mother and told her I loved her.

All I had to do was drop the case. That’s all. And this would all go away. So why didn’t I? I had to think about that long and hard and still I couldn’t come up with a satisfactory answer, other than that it just wasn’t my style to walk away from a challenge. I wasn’t going to make any money out of this case. I wasn’t going to improve my professional credentials because of it. But I imagined that I would feel a whole lot better if we could whip Paul and the firm. That would feel nice. Some people might call it revenge, I suppose. Others might call it “just desserts”. I just thought they were fair game. They punched first. They weren’t expecting anyone to hit back.
That night I had a date with Piers, to discuss the latest update on his surveillance operation. Maybe there would be more than just a meeting of the minds. I found myself thinking about him for more than the odd fleeting moment. His honesty. Vulnerability. Tenderness. Here was I, a devout white-bread eater (a glutton, in fact), contemplating a lifestyle change to wholemeal.

When I got home that night, Andrea was waiting for me. She was starting to obsess about her case—the motion to dismiss was being heard tomorrow. Over a cup of tea before bed, she asked me who was representing Paul and the firm. I replied, “Yummy Yeatmann.”

“Who?” she asked, genuinely perplexed. She didn’t know me well enough to know that I had a name for just about everyone, and that “Yummy Yeatmann” was one of my personal favourites.

“Have you seen him?” I asked by way of explanation. “He’s capital Y Yummy!”

He was indeed the eye candy of Brisbane’s Inns of Court. He was a QC (Queens Counsel), one of the very last appointed. Now there are no such appointments—the best title a barrister can hope for is “Senior Counsel”, which doesn’t have the same grandness to the title, nor the hourly rate.

Yeatmann’s physique and roguish charm were evident even beneath that pathetic wig that barristers have to wear in court and the black gown, which he swished practically like a modern-day caped Zorro. Except that this time he wasn’t going to be our hero—unfortunately, he was on the opposite end of the bar table. But I couldn’t let that worry Andrea.

“What’s going on?” Andrea’s voice was meek and nervous.

“He’s brilliant, but don’t worry. I’ve instructed him many times and know his tricks. Besides, I’ve shared camembert and crackers on his black leather couch in chambers. I don’t expect he’ll give me much cheek....” If Frances had overheard this conversation, she would have
reminded me that I was not the only one on the couch with Yeatmann that day, but that I had probably thwarted his seduction of the pretty little junior who was sitting in between us. The camembert, unfortunately, went three ways.
XXXIII

WHEN IN DOUBT...

"When in doubt, settle," is the litigation lawyer's creed. Embarrassment is something that happens to other people. Public humiliation is a quantifiable commodity to lawyers. They trade in it and make their livings out of it. It's something they'd rather not have happen to them.

Paul's motion to dismiss was on in fifteen minutes. Andrea, Frances and I were already in court, waiting. The court room was dark and gloomy. The wood-paneled walls with matching wood-paneled benches and balustrading were so overdone and old-fashioned, stuffy, like a gentlemen's smoking room. The clock ticking on the far wall was mesmerizing.

Yummy Yeatmann glided in, carefree, cushioned by the confidence of an impeccable winning streak that had lasted ten years—approximately the length of time since he had risen to prominence and been able to effectively pick and choose the most promising plum cases. He had an awkward smile on his face as he greeted us, as if he was half-apologetic for the slaughter that he imagined lay ahead. After all, it was never good form to crucify a colleague who could be the source of your next brief.

Frances and Andrea were poised and professional, but I could tell that they were nervous. Frances' eyes shot from place to place, while Andrea just stared into her lap. Andrea occupied the seating behind the bar table. Frances sat by my side. Neither of them knew the entire length and breadth of my plan. It probably wasn't fair to play alone, but I thought it would be the best way to protect Andrea's fragile feelings and also avoid the need to explain my own misdemeanors to any great extent. And if things didn't go to plan, at least I could attempt to isolate Frances and Andrea from the fallout.
The judge’s associate walked in through the door behind the bench and prepared himself for the proceedings. Yummy had placed his notes open in front of him and leaned back flamboyantly in his chair to talk to Paul and FBI, who were sitting behind him, at the opposite end of the bar table to Andrea. FBI and Yummy were chuckling in the restrained way that lawyers do, and Paul was doing his best to join in, but he wasn’t smiling. Ten minutes to go.

I stood and apologetically interrupted Yummy with a gentle touch of the shoulder. He turned to look at me and excused himself from the former conversation.

“Yes, Sandra, what may I do for you?” He looked me up and down and flirted with his eyes. He knew how to make a woman feel girlish. “Have you come to surrender? It’s your last chance.” He swished his gown off his arm to look at his gold, diamond-encrusted timepiece. “Not long now. Eight minutes by my watch.” He smiled some more. FBI and Paul looked stern as they craned their necks to overhear what I had to say.

I chuckled gently—no need to be smug. Smugness was the tripwire to the bomb that invariably blew up in your face when you least expected it.

“No, no surrender;” I said, smiling down at him. “I might suggest that this would be a good opportunity for you to advise your client to settle.”

Yummy raised his eyebrows, interested and humoured at the same time. He stood up and moved us a few paces forward, out of his clients’ range. I could see the questions running through his mind. “Settle?” He was thorough. What could he have missed that might have suggested a settlement would be in order? No lawyer likes surprises, ever.

“Why is that, my dear?” he asked, after due deliberation.

I passed him an A4 envelope of material. “Take a look,” is all I had to say.

He peered cautiously into the envelope, looking more displeased by the second. He was reluctant to take the material out into the open and persisted with fingering it inside the envelope.
That was enough to get a glimpse of the photos, but he had no choice except to pull out the written submissions to read them. He cleared his throat as he did so. His brow became deeply furrowed.

"The allegations are serious," he said to me quietly and sternly, as if he were warning me against making them.

"I haven't made any allegations. What you have is some of the evidence that would support not only allegations, but criminal convictions. I don't think Paul would like jail much, and the firm's reputation would never recover either."

"Some of this material is seriously prejudicial. In fact, if I didn't know you better, I would say that it amounted to blackmail. Your client isn't in any of these photos. In effect, that would make them irrelevant to these proceedings. You know I can still win this motion to dismiss." He shifted ever so slightly under his gown. If I could leave his ego intact, he would be more likely to cooperate with me.

"That I do. But I also know that it wouldn't be in anyone's interests for these proceedings to continue. Sure, some of these matters fall outside the purview of today's proceedings, but they do potentially give rise to other proceedings, both civil and criminal. We could keep Paul and the firm tied up for quite some time. And if your fee is still $7,000 a day, they might be better off settling anyway." I smiled gently, empathetically. Yummy didn't smile back. It was professional rudeness to mention money. "Speak with your clients," I prompted. He returned the material to the envelope and approached his clients in a slightly stooped and formal way. The casualness of his demeanor had gone. Paul's face became panicked and then angry. He looked towards us with intense hatred. He was cracking. I made sure Paul could see me looking at my watch. Five minutes to go.

I returned to Frances and Andrea. They could barely contain their questions.
“What did you say?” asked one.

“What did they say?” asked the other.

“What’s he going to recommend?” asked Frances.

“What are we going to ask for?” asked Andrea.

I let the questions wash over me. I didn’t have satisfactory answers for any of them. “Give it a minute,” I said, seeking a reprieve from their inquiries. I wanted to absorb the significance of the moment. I could feel our luck changing, like a small shift in tectonic plates. Frances and Andrea backed off, knowing better than to distract me now. I silently willed the judge to come in early—to panic Paul and his team into a stupid move.

Yummy gave Paul the envelope after what appeared to be a courteous but insistent demand from Paul to have it. Paul pulled the documents out in a flurry sending one sailing across the room. All eyes were on it as it landed photo-side up, under my chair. I took my time picking it up, while Paul looked on, frozen in horror. All the colour drained from his face and he appeared to stop breathing momentarily. Andrea and Frances leaned forward to see what I was picking up, ever so slowly. I gave them enough time to have a good look, but then, as a nod and wink to courtesy, turned it over upside-down as I handed it to Yummy, who was sitting closer to me than Paul. Paul’s wife, who had been perched obediently in the gallery, suddenly stood up and demanded to know from FBI what the agitation was about. He sat silently, staring at me, like I was the most loathsome creature he had ever seen. The courtroom was silent, but for the panicked ranting of Paul’s wife.

The photo that Paul had dropped was only one of many, and it wasn’t the worst one. There were photos like this one of bare and now embarrassed flesh, there were photos of clandestine handshakes, and there were pages and pages of typed transcript from the hours of interesting footage that Piers had managed to capture from Paul’s own surveillance device. Then
there was the police statement, which found that Paul probably had a case to answer over the brake fluid on my ear, and then there was the stalking and intimidation and the death threats. This was a catalogue of irreversible errors by a man who was going down. He wouldn’t want his wife to see the contents of the envelope, let alone the rest of the spectator public. In fact, if his wife found out even a tenth of Paul’s secret life, she would be calling her lawyers and referring to the prenuptial agreement to the letter. Paul would be completely ruined: financially and by reputation.

Best of all, the envelope contained material that would show that the only person who could have wittingly or unwittingly leaked the details of the confidential Dover Industries report, for which we had all been sacked, was none other than Paul. The transmissions from his little surveillance operation were being picked up in the neighbouring building, which contained the office of a well-known, high-tech investigative journalist in possession of a YAGI antenna, which improves transmission of such data, and WEP cracking gear to decode it. He had just started work on a major piece about life in law firms when Piers tracked him down with his own sniffing equipment and tech contacts. Our skins would now be clean again.

Andrea, Frances and I sat calmly, in contrast to the messy activity at the other end of the bar table. There was finger pointing, emphatic head shaking, head holding, eye rubbing and grunting, which seemed to work itself into a loud lather right before the associate bellowed, “All rise!”

The judge arrived and sat down heavily. Paul resumed his seat, deflated and devastated. Matters were no longer in his hands. His secret life was no longer secret. He had to do what the firm told him to do.

There’s nothing more pitiful than the sight of a crushed man. It’s not something I had truly wished upon Paul, but he had asked for it. A man without his ego is nothing. I’ve seen many
a woman warped and distorted by the pressures exerted upon her in life, but I've never seen one completely crushed. Women seem to have a quiet, unassuming resilience, which they can call upon in times of need.

We identified ourselves to the court and I took my seat while Yummy remained standing. He shifted from foot to foot and adjusted his notes with the tips of his long, white fingers. They were quivering. “If it would so please the court, some material has just come to hand which my client requests an adjournment to consider.”

“Denied,” the judge replied in a firm, grumpy tone. We had a “hanging judge” today and so far it was working in our favour. “Your client requested this motion to dismiss, so let's proceed. Is your client ready, Miss Jeeves?” I nodded. “Good, then....”

Yummy was still standing. He was not at all comfortable with the way things were going. “Your Honour,” he interrupted. “Your Honour, if I could confer momentarily with my client, I think that we may be able to settle this matter.” The judge looked at him sternly down his nose, over the top of his bifocal glasses.

“Very well, then. Fifteen minutes. We’ll be back at 9:15 sharp. No further delays.” He stood and made his way to his private exit door while the associate rushed his “All rise!” and followed him out.

The people in the courtroom started breathing again. Paul could be heard saying, “Why did you do that!” while FBI quickly muted him with a hand gripped on the shoulder. He was being handled now. Managed. Subdued.

After nine minutes, Yummy came to me. He was my friend now—apologetic, helpful, respectful. “Did your client have anything in mind that would make this all go away for my client?” It was an unusual and broad sweeping invitation from a lawyer. Of course, I knew the
first rule of negotiation was never to be the first to make an offer, and I didn’t for a minute confuse the question with generosity. It was desperation.

“What’s the ambit of your client’s invitation?” I countered.

“I have no instructions on that presently.”

Sure, I thought. “How about you confer once more with your client and come back to me with something concrete that I can take to my client?” I looked at my watch. He looked at his watch. He returned to his client. FBI pushed Paul to the back and conferred directly with Yummy for another three minutes. Ordinarily, they would have gone to a conference room, and the negotiations to-ing and fro-ing would have stretched to encompass all available time. On this occasion, there was no room for grandstanding. Pragmatism overruled politeness. There were only three minutes left. Yummy was coming back to me, more serious-looking.

Andrea and Frances had remained in their seats. They were playing it cool. We had discussed this part.

I leaned back to them and said quietly, “Look sharp, ladies. Now we’re writing the rules.” Their backs straightened, their chins moved away from their chests, their eyes glistened. They were proud again.

I unbuttoned my black jacket and opened it up to reveal, to the fullest extent possible, my frilly flame-red blouse beneath. Any trial lawyer or judge would baulk at such a show of colour in court. It was professional impertinence in the legal world which begrudgingly disclosed only aspects of itself in black and white.

Ω

Six Minutes
As we were walking out of the courtroom, Frances whispered to me. “Should I ask what you put in that envelope?”

“It would be more judicious if you didn’t,” I suggested with a wry grin.
EPILOGUE

Brisbane. On the banks of a broad solitary river stands the city, one of the administrative centres of Australia; west of the city there is a fortress, in the fortress there is a prison. In the prison, the low-risk convict Paul McClyne has been confined for nine months. He misses the birth of his wife’s child. The child’s name is Edward. He misses the birth of the daughter he produced with his former mistress. That child’s name is Alexandra. The infants are both healthy, but fatherless. Just as the father is healthy, despite the prison food, but now peerless.

There had been little difficulty about Paul’s trial. The insurance company for Dover Industries, and the firm’s own insurance company, in beautiful synchronicity, made out the case for criminal fraud. The facts were clear, and Paul was remorseless. The firm refused to support him, or defend him. Or forgive him. He was alone. Alone, with several thousand other inmates who were mostly less alone than he was. He would be out soon; but he would be even more alone then. For what he had hoped for us—the destruction of our careers and our employability, as well as the crushing of our spirits—he had achieved ever so competently for himself. We, on the other hand, were resilient, and had each other.

Andrea was still living with me after the birth of her baby. The baby would call me “Auntie Sandra” when she could speak. I was the family when there was no other. Frances, similarly, became honorary auntie, and carried it off with aplomb. Her inner graciousness and style always shone through—something I admired while wiping apple sauce from the front of my blouse. Alexandra, or “Alex”, as we’d come to call her, was happy. She had carved out her little place in the world, and taken up a big part of our hearts.

Andrea’s out-of-court settlement with the firm had secured us financially for at least two years. In that time, we would be frugal, but not hungry. And we each knew what to do about
securing our professional and financial futures. They were now cemented together, in a symbiotic companionship.

"Move the shingle a bit to the left," Frances said to me as I teetered atop dad's old timber ladder. "That's it. Hold it there!" She took a photo, before I hung it from the eaves of our new establishment.

*JMT Lawyers*, short for Jeeves, Mackay & Toohey.

Previously, every six minutes of our working lives were accounted for. Now, we had the freedom to make them count for something. Together, we would make a difference.