



Jeff at the kitchen table

The funny ones 14/15

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by Jeff Burns

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Swizzle and Spit

I realise nobody feels sorry for a dentist in pain. I get it. But I'll tell you my story anyway. As part of his mid-life crisis, my partner in the clinic ran off with the Oral-B sales executive who looked a little like Scarlett Johansson. Even if she'd looked a lot like Scarlett Johansson, it was so out of character that it left me thinking you can never really know another person. His departure also left me with an unfinished \$650k extension to the dental clinic to finance - money I didn't have. Don't get me wrong, otherwise I'm doing okay. I still have all my teeth, I'm still married to my first wife and we live on the river in St Lucia. Our three kids all have braces and attend Brisbane Girls Grammar. You know, we own a Dyson.

One of the problems being a dentist is how to spend all the money without spoiling it for the profession. By that I mean if we all started flashing it around too much, people will start asking if a filling really costs \$250. Without giving it away completely, if you were to think of an amount under \$50 you'd probably still be too high. So I wear a Tissot rather than a Rolex. I drive a Benz, but not the AMG. For a while I collected European antique clocks and furniture. I suppose I was searching for accoutrements that complemented my inherent decency and slow prudence. Then, when I was 35 I tasted a glass of 1982 Chateau Petrus merlot. I was transported by its power and richness. It was complex, concentrated, with hints of chocolate, truffles, Asian spices and ripe, creamy, black fruits. For a dentist, this was the other world of swizzle and spit. In the following ten years my cellar grew to around 80 dozen, investment-grade fine wines.

I mentioned the clinic finance issues to my lawyer and he put into words what I'd been denying.

"What about the wine cellar?"

He referred me to Brooke Brousseau, a South African émigré whose business card said, *Confidential Fine Wine and Spirits Broker*.

Brooke had superb orthodontic work and professional whitening behind plump, red lips and wore no jewellery. As far as I could tell she was a natural blonde with eyes the colour of the surf at Jeffreys Bay. She might have been anywhere between 35 and 40 and she clearly spent time in the gym. She arranged to meet me at the *Paladar Fumior Salon* in South Brisbane.

"Do you like cigars?" I asked, indicating the surroundings as we sat down.

"Occasionally. *Paladar* is more of a networking place for me. In Brisbane it's my experience that people with spare cash and a taste for the finer things eventually find their way here."

Brooke ordered a mineral water.

"So tell me what you've got to offer, Simon".

"Well over the last 10 years I've invested heavily in the Grand Cru wines of Bordeaux, Burgundy and Toscana. The Bordeaux include Petrus, Lafleur and Margaux. I have a respectable quantity of Burgundy from Coche-Dury. My Italian portfolio is mostly Tuscan classics from Fattoria Poggio di Sotto and Casanova di Neri. I've added some colour to the cellar with Californians: Old Sparky and Mondavi's Opus One mostly. Local Aussies include The Armagh and Henschke's Hill of Grace." I handed her an itemised inventory and valuation.

"It's a substantial offering." Brooke licked her lips while she was thinking. "Right then, I recommend we try and move it as a single transaction. We find someone who wants an instant cellar with a respectable pedigree. We could even offer your services in an educational capacity; you know, 'tasting notes from the cellar master', or some such. I'll ask around and call you in a couple of days."

True to her word, Brooke called a few days later.

"Right, I've lined up a couple of potential buyers. The first one you're going to love. Gavin Tennyson made his fortune with a BBQ gas cylinder exchange business that he sold to BOC last year. I just

brokered a deal for him to buy a 1955 Glenfiddich Janet Sheed Roberts Reserve."

"I'm not familiar with whisky," I said.

"Well, confidentially it's worth \$85 grand."

"What, a cask?" I asked

"No, a bottle."

"Jesus!"

"I know, he bought it for a poker night!"

I went to meet Gavin Tennyson at his sprawling, 3-storey mansion on Sovereign Island, a gated canal estate on the Gold Coast. He had coffee-stained teeth with some lower left 2 and 3 crowding and 1970s amalgam fillings. He was in his late 40s, hair like Jack Kennedy and answered the door in bare feet. I suppose he was quite good looking in a retired, pro-surfer way; tall and well-muscled with a 2-day salt-and pepper beard covering his tanned face. He was wearing cargo shorts and a faded lime green polo shirt that showed off a small pot belly. He smelled like he'd recently been in the ocean.

"Hey man, welcome. Call me GT."

I took a visceral dislike to him.

"Can I call you Si?" he asked.

"Nobody else does," I replied.

"Great."

As he led me through his house a stunning brunette skipped past us on her way out to the horizon pool that overlooked the canal.

"Brazilian," observed Gavin casually as the woman stepped outside. I wasn't sure if he was commenting on her nationality, or

her wax job. By the cut of her swimsuit it might be both. I stumbled on the small step leading up to a bar area. As my eyes became accustomed to the darkness, I noted a handful of motor cars displayed behind the glass wall of a working garage. They were all Porsches including: a matte black Cayenne; a green mid-1980s 911 Turbo; a gaudy yellow 968 Club Sport; and a competition-ready 911 GT3 decorated with Gavin's name on the windshield and featuring the red and yellow "Gas 'n Blow" logo. The floor of the bar area was finished with slate and a large fireplace, completely unnecessary in this climate, dominated one wall. Gavin motioned for me to sit in one of the big Cuban leather armchairs while he walked behind the bar and started a large anodised red Gaggia espresso machine.

"Caffeine hit?" he asked.

"Sure, macchiato."

He ground the coffee beans and made a show of tamping the grounds *just-so*.

"*Wanker*," I thought. I looked around. The walls were decorated with framed sports memorabilia. Like a lot of self-made men, it seemed Gavin had simply accessorised with more expensive versions of the same things that interested him as an adolescent: cars, gadgets and women.

"So Brooke tells me you've got a serious Bordeaux stash," said Gavin as he delivered my coffee. "Biscotti?"

"Thanks, you know about wine?" I asked.

"Not much, but I'm a quick study. My motto has always been *suck it and see*."

I rang Brooke from my car on the way back.

"I'm not sure it's going to work out with Mr Tennyson," I said.

"Really? I thought you'd have a connection, both self-made businessmen and all."

I pictured Gavin Tennyson filling a bathtub with red wine.

"I think he'd drink my entire cellar over the course of a weekend," I said.

Brooke pointed out the obvious. "Simon, if you sold it to him it would no longer be your cellar."

"I know, I know. It's just, well, important to me who buys it."

"Right, well I do have someone else for you to meet," said Brooke. "He's a serious Hong Kong property developer who's just moved out here and wants exposure to wine."

I mouthed the words, 'exposure to wine' to myself.

Brooke arranged for me to meet Clement Fung at his French Provincial-inspired pile in Sunnybank. I suppose you could say he lived in a dream home, if your dream was never to mow the lawn. I approached his front door after crossing a yard that was paved to the fence line in all directions. A large, silver Range Rover with tinted windows dominated the driveway, license plate: FUNG 18. A small Chinese woman with ill-fitting plastic dentures answered the door.

"Mrs Fung?" I enquired. She gave me a startled look, shaking her head.

"I'm Simon Campbell. I'm here to see Mr Fung," I ventured.

The woman flashed me a loose smile and left the door slightly ajar as she hurried off inside. As I waited I noticed the doorway was crowded by discarded pairs of expensive shoes. There were also bulk grocery items stored randomly around the living room: 20kg rice bags, vegetable oil in 25 litre drums and a great wall of toilet paper. At first this struck me as odd, but then I supposed Clement Fung didn't get rich buying retail. The woman returned a moment later.

"He come," she said and I watched her walk to the formal dining area where she was assembling a large number of IKEA wine racks.

Clement Fung had high-end porcelain implants that gave his face the startling appearance of a weather-beaten house with a new picket fence. He was in his late 60's and dressed for golf with a Burberry sleeveless sweater. I was pretty confident nobody in the design department at Burberry had ever seen such a thing. He smelled of moth balls and Tiger Balm.

"Please call me Clem," he said in British public school English as he gestured grandly towards the Range Rover. "Let's go out for tea." We drove to the *Golden Leaf Tea House* in Fortitude Valley's Chinatown where he double parked. Clement led the way through a circular mahogany moon gate and into a private room. He was known to the staff. We sat at a low table carved from a single tree trunk. A young waitress with transparent braces and dressed in a black silk jacket with mandarin sleeves greeted us and asked Clement what kind of tea he would like.

"Kings Oolong 913," he said decisively. The waitress returned momentarily with a tin and began making the tea.

"This oolong tea is blended with ginseng leaves," said Clement. "It has significant health properties."

The waitress poured each of us a serving into a tall cylindrical cup. Clement demonstrated how to tip this into the regular teacup and then held the empty tall cup to his nose.

"It's called the aroma cup," he said. "It's for appreciating the smell of the tea before appreciating the taste."

"Not unlike wine," I observed following his lead.

"Unfortunately I'm not well acquainted with wine Mr Campbell. Brooke tells me your cellar is earning around 20% per annum. Is that true?"

"Well yes, but it's also a significant collection of wine that in five years will be perfect for drinking."

"That's a moot point I'm afraid. My doctor tells me to stay away from red wine; it plays havoc with my gout. Too much Johnnie Walker in my youth."

"Hard to pronounce," I quipped.

"Hah yes, but easy to drink! I'm interested in the cellar purely as an investment."

"I see."

"Mr Campbell." Clement leaned forward and spoke confidentially. "For tax purposes I propose to handle the transaction in cash. Is that acceptable to you?"

That evening my wife Heike Becker and I were flossing our teeth in front of the bathroom mirror. I discussed the two meetings with her.

"Neither of them, *sst*, have any interest, *stt*, in the actual *stt*, wine."

"Sweetie, *psst* I know how much of yourself you've *psst* put into the cellar over the years. But the *psst* clinic is the engine room of our *psst* finances. Maybe you could even *psst* buy it back off Mr Fung in a few years' time."

As usual Heike was right. I decided to sleep on it and rang Brooke in the morning to agree to the sale, wondering how big a suitcase I would need for the cash. Would I also need a security guard?

"Right, well Mr Fung is out I'm afraid. He's just bought a million dollars' worth of Manuka honey from New Zealand."

"What, since yesterday?"

"Yes, apparently it has significant health properties. And a 235% profit margin," Brook added.

"Any other ideas?" I asked.

"Listen, Simon I never told Gavin Tennyson you weren't interested in selling to him. I think I can still do the deal."

After the removalists cleaned out the cellar I moped around for most of the day. In the early afternoon I went looking for a bottle of something to drown my sorrows. I walked down the stairs to my beautiful bluestone basement with its bare, custom-made Tasmanian oak wine racks. The pickings were very slim. I found a single bottle of 2010 Jean Grivot Vosne-Romanee Pinot Noir I'd forgotten about under the bench. It promised dark cherry, a hint of Asian spices and a top note of violet - in about 10 years. But I thought, *what the hell*. When I walked into the kitchen with the bottle and my Laguiole Millesime corkscrew, Heike looked at me like I'd just pulled the pin on a hand grenade.

"Simon, are you okay" she asked cautiously.

"You know sweetie, I've just handed over something I spent ten years building. And I never got to drink a drop of it. Maybe we should live a little?"

"I'll make up a cheese plate," said Heike, smiling.

As I went to grab a couple of glasses, my phone rang.

"Si, is that you?"

I recognised the smooth voice of Gavin Tennyson.

"Is there something wrong?" I asked, annoyed.

"No, no nothing like that. Hey man, listen. I'm opening a couple of bottles tonight, do you want to come over? I need to know what goes with Brazilian."

June 2014

1:32 Scale

The first sign of trouble was when the *Six Million Dollar Man* appeared in Jason's cubicle at work.

"Is that the one with the bionic eye?"

This is Phil, Jason's best friend. Phil is still married.

"Yeah," said Jason.

Phil looked around. "Tell me bud, what the hell are you going to do with a *Six Million Dollar Man* doll? At work?"

Phil had a point; Jason was 41.

"I don't know. Mum had a clean out and sent me a box of stuff," replied Jason.

"What are you, twelve?"

"Let me show you something else that was in the box," said Jason. He produced a 1980's Scalextric toy catalogue.

"I remember this stuff. Slot cars right?" asked Phil.

"Yeah, but look at the pictures. Look at these kids. Look how happy they are. I never had any of this stuff."

"You realise that child is an actor? And this document is produced by the kind of people who work in our marketing department, right? You've met them, they make people want insurance."

"I know, but," said Jason.

"I mean look at this," Phil indicated a page in the catalogue where a nuclear family was racing on an enormous slot car track, "nobody's mum ever played slot cars with her kids."

"Don't you ever think about childhood?" asked Jason.

"I have three kids under 10," replied Phil, "I'm *consumed* by childhood."

"I mean *your* childhood."

"It was the '70s, I'm not sure my parents put much thought into it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well they were drinking a lot of cask-wine as I recall. For example, my mum used to let me ride in the parcel shelf of her Volkswagen. Forget airbags, there weren't even seatbelts in that heap of shit."

"But do you think you missed out on anything?" asked Jason.

"Like a big train set?"

"Yeah. Why don't you get yourself one?"

Phil looked at him dubiously, "Because I didn't want to be one of *those guys*."

"Who cares?" said Jason, "if it makes you happy. You remember what Einstein said?"

"I can't recall the exact equation."

"About doing the same thing and expecting a different result."

"Oh yeah, insanity," recalled Phil. "I'll tell you one thing I remember though. I was crazy about Cherry Ripe."

"Isn't that more like a *ladies'* chocolate?" teased Jason.

"Whatever, I was a kid. Anyway, one Christmas, my mum bought me a box of 'em. A whole box, like 48 bars or something."

"That's pretty cool," Jason replied.

"It was like getting a suitcase full of cash. No, better." Phil was lost in thought for a moment. "I must do something like that for my kids."

Jason's dream was always the same - walking through a large shopping mall and stumbling upon a toy shop. It was a perfect toy shop full of everything he desired as a boy: the Corgi Batmobile with the circular saw; the Lego police headquarters; and the Cox PT-19 control line airplane with the

nitro engine. And look over there, an AT-AT Imperial Walker from *The Empire Strikes Back*, Tracy Island from the *Thunderbirds* and a range of enormous 1:32 scale Matchbox plastic model aeroplane kits. Hey, there's *Playboy* magazine as well. A wave of sadness rolls over him as he realises all of it is beyond his pocket money. But wait, "I'm a grown man on a salary now. Strange how I never noticed this place before. I should come back here now that I have the cash. Must remember where it is. Must remember. Must..."

"So how's the divorce going?"

This is Gillian, Jason's boss - early fifties, hard as nails. She jogs.

"Is this part of my performance appraisal?" asked Jason jokingly.

"No. But never let it be said that I don't care about my staff." Gillian re-crossed her athletic legs: *welcome to Cougartown*. Jason noted the quality hosiery. "Seriously, are you dating yet?"

"No I'm ahh - working through some things on my own."

"Not on your work computer I hope," replied Gillian dryly.

"No nothing like that," protested Jason.

"I don't judge," said Gillian. "But look. A word from experience, when the time comes use a *paid* dating website."

"Why's that?" asked Jason.

"Well, you're forty. Think of it like antique shopping. Sure, you might find a bargain at the flea market, but you'll have to sift through a lot of crap in cardboard boxes. Save yourself the trouble, pay for quality. And ask for exactly what you want."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Jason.

"Oh, and get rid of Steve Austin will you," said Gillian, "I can't take you seriously while the *Six Million Dollar Man* is eyeballing me."

It was an enviable battle order for either commander; the Afrika Corps combined with German Paratroops and Japanese Infantry were lined up against Ghurkas, British 8th Army and Australian Infantry. Jason took the 1:32 scale plastic soldiers from the box and lined them up on his kitchen table. As a boy he'd painted them and given them all names. After 30 years they were still ready for battle: fixing bayonets; pitching grenades; and charging the defences. Jason turned a machine gunner over in his hand. On the base was his boyhood handwriting - Dave the Aussie machine gunner. You could rely on Dave in a tight spot. There was a comforting simplicity in his form; at 3/8th of an inch to a foot he was just the right size - life on a manageable scale. Jason rummaged around in the box. He looked at the old Airfix packaging, yellowing with age. The artwork was so evocative; men leading the way, firing from the hip, observing the fall of shot, cutting through the jungle with a machete, wading ashore under cover of night. So evocative a boy might get the idea to run away and join an army.

"I'm worried about Dad."

This is Lauren, Jason's only daughter. She is nineteen, independent, practical.

"Yeah," said Phil, "he's been taking a lot of leave."

"You know him pretty well; do you think he's depressed?"

"We work in insurance so it's impossible to tell. But he is acting differently."

"Like what?"

"The other week he was talking about revisiting his childhood. He actually had an action figure on his desk at work."

"What?"

"Steve Austin." Lauren gave Phil a blank look. "Before your time. The boss noticed. Missed a promotion because of it I'd say."

"Can you go and see him? I offered to visit the other day and he made a lot of excuses about why I shouldn't come over *just now.*"

"Okay," said Phil.

"Oh Phil," Lauren looked him in the eye, "you don't think he's into drugs or anything?"

Phil walked up the path to the front door. He noted the lawn needed mowing, badly. He knocked and listened. There was no response.

"Jason it's Phil, you in there?" There was a strong smell of chemicals, solvent, paint. "I have beer," he added.

Eventually Jason came to the door dressed in jeans and an Astro Boy T-shirt. He was unshaven.

"Hey Phil, come on in!"

"Haven't seen you at work bud, thought I'd make sure everything was ... Jesus!" Phil stopped dead in the entry hall. His mouth hung open. He stared vacantly into what was once the living room - it had been gutted.

"Is that - is that - *Laguna Seca*?" asked Phil after a moment.

In place of the lounge suite and side table was a giant slot car layout that dominated three walls, complete with buildings, grandstands, track advertising and mountain scenery.

"Yeah," replied Jason. "Race ya?"

"Sure, as long as we can drink and drive. And I wanna drive the McQueen Porsche."

They raced for hours, laughing. The beer flowed. Plastic cars crashed. Pizza arrived. Occasionally, the red mist descended.

"Rubbin' is racin'," stated Phil pragmatically.

Phil did a victory lap, stood on a chair and sprayed his beer, podium-style. "How good is this lounge room?" shouted Phil, collapsing in an armchair. "Now I see."

"Anyway, so are you going to tell me about Sio-bahn or whatever her name is?"

This is Phil again. It's a few weeks later over coffee at work.

"It's pronounced *sha-vawn*," said Jason.

"She ahh, cool with Le Mans in the living room?"

"Totally, I can't believe the website matched us up."

"In a good way?"

"She's incredible. She likes to dress up."

"What, like lingerie?"

"No, more like, ahh," Jason looked around and leaned in, "more like comic book characters."

"No way! Did you videotape that shit?" asked Phil, suddenly alert.

"Nah, of course not."

"Seriously, I'm a married man. I would pay to see that."

November 2014

Champions of Breakfast

The lights came up. The producer counted them down.

"We're on in five, four, three..." He counted the last two silently with his fingers and then threw to Bud Carryman.

"Hi there food fans, welcome to round five of *World Series Buffet*, coming to you from the Cancun Grande Hotel in sunny Mexico. This is Montezuma's Revenge round and players will be looking to spice things up when they hit the breakfast buffet this morning."

Bud Carryman was a sports journalism major and former offensive tackle from Texas A&M University. He was a large man from a world of large men, and was now tightly packed into a suit and tie. He was holding a Cable Sports Network microphone and standing next to an attractive though wafer-thin woman. Both of them were wearing sports-caster headphones.

"With me as always is three-star executive chef Nadia Provelone. Good morning Nadia."

"Thanks Bud. That's right, for the first time the *World Series Buffet* heads south of the border."

"Tell me Nadia, as someone who's worked in hotels all over the world, what should we be looking for here this morning in Cancun?"

"Well Bud, the Cancun Grande Hotel breakfast buffet is pretty much your classic layout, but with a couple of twists. From the left you have your juice bar, cereals, a triple egg station - which is unusual - then around to a double waffle and pancake bench, bakery items and then the toasters. I think the temptation is going to be to load up on pancakes, but you

need to keep in mind there will be some extra elbow room at that egg station. So I think there are some real rewards for those players who get aggressive with the breakfast burritos."

The players took up their places on the weigh-in scale as Nadia and Bud ran through the starting line-up. Off to the side watching it all was Don Bundaberg, former hot dog eating world record holder and the fifty-five year old founder of *World Series Buffet*.

After the show wrapped, Don joined his star Nadia in the club lounge.

"You look a bit tired Don," she said.

"I don't sleep so well when we tour," he replied, sipping his virgin bloody mary.

"You ever been down to Haiti?" asked Nadia.

"Nah, this is my first trip other than Canada."

"You know I was having trouble sleeping after my divorce and a friend of mine recommended a private day spa in Port-au-Prince. They've got this voodoo fusion massage that knocked me out for two days."

"Didn't you wake up without your jewellery and dirt under your fingernails?"

"Sure, but wow, what a breakthrough. Now I sleep like the dead."

Don nodded. He liked Nadia. She was the face of his show. People say you should never trust a skinny chef, but he liked her a lot.

News of the acquisition of Cable Sports Network by Shanghai-based Pan Asia Cable and Satellite came as a surprise to Don, but he thought nothing of it. Unfortunately, PACS had a high-rating show called *Iron Gullet*. It toured hotels in Japan, South Korea and China. The format was broadly similar to *World Series Buffet* and it was only a matter of time before Jeremy Niven, the PACS Head of Programming was stroking his goatee and envisioning a global competition by amalgamating both shows; sponsored of course by a global hotel chain, and maybe even with spinoff travel and cooking segments.

"Oh yeah. TV and food, always the right combination," said Jeremy as he stood in his corner office looking out over the Shanghai Bund.

The brains behind *Iron Gullet* was Benny Yamashita. He'd got his start in food as a sumo apprentice where he and his stable mates would skip breakfast, eat a large lunch with beer and nap for most of the afternoon. Benny was moderately talented in the ring, but it was at the lunch table where he truly excelled. At his peak he weighed 253 pounds. To this day he still clapped his hands together, sumo style, whenever he made a decision. And although he no longer ate professionally, he currently held both world records for egg eating: raw and boiled.

"Why can't we just extend my show to North America?" asked Benny.

"What's your problem with Don anyway?" asked Jeremy.

Benny was silent for a moment. "He's a slob. I mean look at him, more chins than a Chinese phonebook. He's fatter now than when he was in competition."

Benny was proud of the fact that he was now half his sumo fighting weight.

"And I mean what has America contributed to world food culture apart from supersizing?"

Jeremy rang Don to discuss.

"I'm not working with that Jap bastard," said Don.

"That's funny, Yamashita said the same thing," replied Jeremy.

"He called me a Jap bastard?"

"Slob, if you must know. Well the long and short of it is he doesn't want to lose his show. He thinks it's better than *World Series Buffet*."

"Why does everything have to be global?" asked Don, "I mean really, why is global better?"

"It's the world we live in Don," replied Jeremy. "The Hilton is a global sponsor, they want a global show. And Benny has another point."

"What's that?"

"Well, how can you have a *World Series* that only involves North America?"

"The *World Series Buffet* is a better show. Pound for pound we'd out eat his guys any day."

"Which brings me to Benny's idea," said Jeremy. "An old fashioned showdown. East versus West. Your champions against his guys. Your commentary team. Winner gets to run the global show."

"Ha! DeShawn and Gareth will wipe the floor with them. When do we start?"

"Not so fast Don. It's not going to be all bacon and waffles."

"What do you mean?"

"It's an *international* breakfast menu. There'll be rice porridge, pho, salted fish, green papaya with chilli. Kimchi even."

"I don't even know what half that shit is," said Don. "And who the hell is Kim Chi? Are we inviting the Korean's now?"

"It's fermented cabbage and chilli and stuff. And yes the Koreans are already part of Benny's show. I want you to fly out to Shanghai and check out the venue for the showdown. The sponsors will be there. I assume you have a passport."

"Yeah, brand new," said Don.

For a man who'd never left North America, an afternoon in Shanghai left Don Bundaberg deeply shaken. He met Nadia for breakfast the next morning.

"I've seen the future," he said gravely, "and it doesn't involve us."

They cruised through the breakfast buffet and Don was struggling to find something he recognised.

"I can't believe the shit some people eat for breakfast," he said. "I mean what the hell is that?"

"Pickled daikon I'd say," replied Nadia as she tried a bite, "yup." She served herself a bowl of rice porridge and tasted each of the condiments like any good chef.

"And this?" said Don holding up a 12-inch deep-fried pastry at trouser level, "it looks like my Johnson."

"Give me that. It's a Chinese doughnut - goes with the porridge."

Don eventually joined Nadia at her table. His plate had a stack of cold Peking duck pancakes and some honey.

"It's the best I could do."

"Pancakes with maple syrup?" asked Nadia.

Don nodded disconsolately. "I guess I'm a classic food pyramid guy."

In the lobby after breakfast the Hilton hotel translator caught Don's eye.

"Oh, Mr Don, I want you to meet Director Wei Shui of the Shanghai Special Committee for Development," said the translator.

"Hi Wei," said Don.

"Call me Shui," said the Director.

"Interesting town you have here Director."

"Thank you. We are working hard to make it better. China is still, ahh how you say?"

"Shithole?" offered Don.

"Developing," said the Director.

The Director ducked his head to hear the translator.

"What'd he say?" asked Don.

"He says you can blow it out your donkey."

The showdown was a three versus three team format with China, Japan and South Korea opposing USA, Canada and Britain.

Don had argued successfully for another Western nation to be represented and Jeremy Niven had found a British guy who happened to be filming another TV show locally.

Nadia Provelone and Bud Carryman were on hand to run through the rules and introduce the line-up. *Iron Gullet's* commentator Izzy Kaga was down in the buffet area for the sideline colour. Don, as usual, was off to one side watching.

"Obviously the major points are for total weight gain," said Nadia to camera, "but each round a player can nominate a wild carte menu item that plays to their strengths.

"Any refusal to eat a wild carte item means zero points for that round," added Bud.

"First up we have Kazu Kubota representing Japan," said Nadia.

The big screen rolled a slick NFL-style montage of Kubota's greatest hits and his vital statistics.

"You know Nadia he's one to watch. He's a five times wanko soba noodle champion. Two hundred and ninety five bowls in five minutes."

"That's a lot of wanko," replied Nadia, without missing a beat.

"And here is the British competitor, a *World's Strongest Man* participant, Alvin Binney," said Bud.

"I like his style," began Nadia, "as an Anglo-Indian I think he's a triple threat."

"How so?" asked Bud.

"Well with his Indian background he can handle the heat and his British upbringing means he can go to the deep fryer

as well. And don't be surprised to see him pull a blood sausage for his wild card."

"Ugh, I can't watch that," replied Bud.

"Next up is the Chinese competitor Zhu Ping," said Nadia. "As the only woman in the competition she's got something to prove."

"I saw her warming up at yum cha yesterday," said Bud, "that's a lot of woman. Watch her go to the chicken feet for a knockout blow."

"And here's a familiar face to us, the American DeShawn Marshall," enthused Nadia.

An enormous African American man took to the weigh-in scale and gave a military style salute.

"We've seen him clean his plate in the *World Series Buffet* back home," said Bud. "For those who aren't familiar, DeShawn is the only person to be discharged from the US Army because they couldn't keep the rations up to him in the field."

"Is it true he was awarded a Purple Heart for indigestion in Iraq?" asked Nadia.

"That's what I heard," said Bud, "but apparently the exact circumstances are still classified."

"And another *World Series Buffet* champ, Canadian Gareth Herring. He represented Canada in in the 2011 Rugby World Cup. He's also famous for eating a roast suckling pig in one sitting."

"Really, the whole thing?" asked Nadia.

"I've seen the video," confirmed Bud gravely.

"Finally another veteran representing South Korea, Lee Min-koo, a former Korean Army special forces soldier. Min-koo not only knows his way around the fermented foods, but he's also an expert in hand to hand combat. I'd give him some personal space around the hot plate."

"You have to watch the wiry ones," said Bud.

The first round of the showdown started sensibly enough. DeShawn Marshall took it on pancakes. Round two went to Alvin Binney when he pulled his wild card blood sausage and stopped and Kubota in his tracks. In round three the Korean Min-koo took exception to a Kubota move in the egg zone and it degenerated in to a food fight.

That afternoon Jeremy summoned Don and Benny to his hotel suite. Both men immediately started imploring Jeremy to listen to their side of the story.

"No, no, no!" shouted Jeremy holding up both his index fingers. "Sit down! Both you guys are going to watch this - this - tripe."

Jeremy hit the remote and some footage from the showdown appeared on the plasma screen.

Min-koo, the South Korean had Kubota from Japan in a headlock. He then manoeuvred a food processor onto Kubota's head, and with his free hand, Min-koo was frantically trying to reach the power socket to turn it on.

The American Marshall and was sitting on top of Alvin Binney from Britain and squirting hot English mustard up each of his nostrils.

"Yo, this is for the blood sausage," said Marshall sternly.

"So much for the special relationship," added Nadia dryly on the commentary.

Meanwhile, the Chinese competitor Zhu Ping and the Canadian Herring were the only ones still seated at the competition table. Zhu Ping was racking up bonus-points on her wild carte chicken feet, a glistening, scaly foot hanging from the corner of her mouth. Herring was watching her with a slack jaw, his face a shade of green. He looked down at the remaining chicken feet in his bamboo steamer and threw up his hands in surrender.

"That's why this is the Chinese century," conceded Bud grimly.

The final moments showed Don Bundaberg running onto the set screeching, "remember Pearl Harbour!" as he tackled Benny Yamashita onto the pancake grill. Sideline commentator Kaga tried to pull Don off Benny as Benny's polyester suit began to melt.

Jeremy snapped the television off.

"What kind of shit was that?" said Jeremy through gritted teeth. "There isn't a single minute of footage I can use in a PG timeslot. The Hilton is threatening to pull their sponsorship. And Don, what the hell did you say to the Director of Development?"

In the sushi bar that night, Don was drinking a beer with Nadia. She lit up as the chef served her a giant sashimi platter.

"How come you don't put on weight?" asked Don.

"Just lucky I suppose. Fast metabolism. Or maybe the tapeworm I got in Haiti?"

Don looked at her, startled.

"I'm kidding!" she said, "I got it on the internet. Hey, what's your problem with Benny Yamashita anyway?" asked Nadia.

"He took my hotdog world record a week after I retired," replied Don.

"Ouch," said Nadia, working on her sashimi.

"With the stomach ulcer and my cholesterol levels, I could never manage a comeback. It sticks in my craw, wherever that is." Don heaved a deep sigh. "Jeremy's given us an ultimatum: work together or he'll replace both of us. Maybe it's time I stepped aside."

"You're not talking about leaving?"

Don sipped his Budweiser thoughtfully. "If it means the show stays alive."

"But you're the founder. I left commercial kitchens to come and work for you. Do you remember?"

Don looked at his star. "Nobody cooks a rare steak like you Nadia."

"C'mon Don, you have to stay. You just need to open up your mind to new things."

Nadia took up a fresh pair of chopsticks, selected a piece of raw tuna and held it up to Don's mouth.

"Come on Don, it's almost rare," she said.

December 2014

Our Lady of Five Fires

He loved them all: Esmeralda from Panama, Medellin from Colombia, Merthi from India and Oaxaca from Mexico. He loved their individuality, their essence. He coaxed them into releasing their secrets, with fire. Even today their earthy aromas brought powerful memories - the tang of anticipation - the first taste - the intoxicating rush - the feeling of being alive. And then there were his women: ill-considered, incandescent, disastrous.

His passport was that of a journalist or secret agent: Rwanda, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Uganda. His quarry: single origin green coffee beans.

He stuck out like a sore thumb wherever he went - all 6 feet of His Royal Goofyness. If you watched him in some third-world market you'd pray to yourself, 'Jesus, I hope he doesn't start flashing money about'. And then you'd see him start flashing money about. You'd wonder how he survived, let alone ran a successful business. He was a man of contradictions. He was Austin Vawdrey, master coffee roaster, and proprietor of *Five Fires* café, Carlton.

Day 1

As Austin arrived at *Five Fires*, his head barista Jennifer Wu was in full flow behind the La Marzocco. Jennifer was a sinewy Singaporean exile with a pierced lower lip - she didn't do latte art. Her *irezumi*-style sleeve tattoos flashed as she worked the group heads. Grind, tamp, seat, pump. She knocked the used grounds from a group head.

THWOCK!

"Skinny Serpico Doobie!" she announced to the standing customers. "Americano, French Canadian and a Why Bother service up!" she called to the wait staff.

As Austin passed her she said, "and a Facemelter for the boss."

Austin offered her the shadow of a wave. "Thanks Jennifer, give me a moment," he said in a voice thick with sleep. He took the double ristretto to his perch at the end of the counter, inhaled the aroma, and seemed to grow an inch taller with each sip. The lights began to twinkle.

"Mmm, a holy 'spro, Jennifer," he said at last.

It was love at first sight. At 9.30 am a new customer entered *Five Fires* - a petite woman, stylishly dressed in a grey pencil skirt and white blouse under a black, tight, cashmere cardigan with a glimpse of lacy brassiere. Austin was taken - immediately so. He slid off his perch to take the order.

"Long macchiato," said The Woman, "to have here."

"Excellent," replied Austin, "wanna try a Colombian roast I've been working on?"

"Sure, why not?"

Austin was staring at her exquisite lips. And glimpsing her lacy brassiere. Jennifer was looking on and watching her boss heading for the rocks.

THWOCK!

The noise snapped Austin out of his reverie. The new customer, to be known as The Woman for now, retired to the table near the tall stained-glass window. The morning sun

illuminated her in a golden light. *Five Fires* occupied the building formerly known as *Our Lady of Victories* church. The Woman opened a hardback book: *Love in the Time of Cholera*.

"Macchiato," observed Jennifer, "not your usual type."

"The Woman has something I can't put my finger on," said Austin.

"At least," replied Jennifer.

"I must court her with single origin," declared Austin. "Jennifer, start on a Long Karate Kid while I consider the perfect accompaniment."

Austin delivered the coffee to The Woman accompanied by a single, prefect, fresh cherry.

"The acidity in the *prunus cerasus* offsets the sweetness in the Medellin bean," he said, lingering for an awkward second too long.

THWOCK!

Austin departed. The Woman sipped her coffee and read her novel. Austin watched her from the counter with Jennifer. The Woman checked her watch and left without looking up. The cherry was untouched.

"What are you thinking, boss?" asked Jennifer, both of them looking down at the solitary cherry.

"I'm thinking this needs a lot more thought," replied Austin.

"Then you'll need a coffee," declared Jennifer.

"Yeah, Depth Charge Latte, Fukushima.

Day 2

"The Woman is here!" announced Matt, the cook. Austin breezed through the kitchen to serve her.

"Pleased to see you again," said Austin, "long macchiato, right?"

"You remembered."

"Working around here?" he asked casually.

"Just started," said The Woman, gesturing towards the university, "English lit."

"Wonderful. I hope you will be my regular. I mean *our* regular," corrected Austin, fumbling.

"Oh gawd," said Jennifer under her breath.

THWOCK!

Austin recovered slightly, "may I propose a Guatemalan Hascienda Carmona - I travelled there myself - a honey aroma, medium body with a buttery finish?"

"Sounds like *Last Tango in Paris*," teased The English Teacher. "This is a coffee you're talking about?"

Austin smiled without quite getting the joke. The English Teacher went to sit at the table near the tall stained-glass window as before.

Austin delivered her long macchiato accompanied by a medjool date. "From the *phoenix dactylifera*," he said as he set it down.

"Okay, thanks," said The English Teacher looking up momentarily.

Austin was staring at her lively eyes. And again glimpsing her lacy brassiere.

THWOCK!

"Subtext Austin?" asked Jennifer as he returned to the counter. She filled a group head with fresh grounds.

"What?" replied Austin, lost in another world.

"First a cherry, now a date? Why don't you just tell her you want to roll off the pink and pot the brown?"

"Talk to your mother with that mouth?" asked Austin jovially. Then the dawn broke over him. "Oh shit! She's going to think I'm a sleazebag."

"At least," said Jennifer, "The English Teacher will be all over subtext."

Austin was found twenty minutes later in the dry store, sitting on a sack of green coffee beans, with his head in his hands. Jennifer showed him The English Teacher's used crockery, pointing to the seed from the date.

"Maybe she likes the brown," observed Jennifer as she departed.

Day 3

Austin arrived early. His frontline roasting machine was a 1950's vintage 12 kilogram Probat wired to a Macbook Pro. Today however, he was sitting on a bar stool at the gas range in the kitchen and using an antique pan roaster with a hand crank. His courtship of The English Teacher was going to another level. Matt was nearby plating up some omelettes.

"You know, she scares the shit out of me," confided Austin, turning the crank slowly.

"The English Teacher?" asked Matt.

"Jennifer," replied Austin.

"Sweet kid," said Matt. "Hell of a barista."

"Yeah I'm sure you can take her home to meet your folks. Provided she owns a long sleeve shirt. They'd probably think she's a heroin addict. Private girls' schools have a lot to answer for you know."

Austin turned the hand crank steadily. "I mean, that tattoo look of hers is such an absolute commitment - so irreversible - so young. It's like going straight to nukes."

"Well," said Matt, ringing the service bell, "if you didn't hire people with tats there'd be nobody working here." He showed Austin his HOLD-FAST knuckles.

"Yeah, but how could a man deliver with a chick like that?" asked Austin.

"You don't need to worry," said Matt, "she's a ladies' woman."

"Like I said, private girls' schools." said Austin.

"If we're being honest Austin," said Matt, "your selection of women to date has not been - shall we say - very selective."

"I just want somebody unique. Too much to ask?"

Jennifer stuck her head into the servery window, "Facemelter boss?"

"Yeah, Doobie me, I'm going up the street to the university bookshop."

"Oh, by the way," said Jennifer theatrically, "I asked around. The English Teacher has a name."

Austin was all ears.

"Marion."

"Really? Marion?" asked Austin, mouthing the name again.

"Like Mrs Cunningham in *Happy Days*," said Matt, all cheese.

"Or John Wayne," observed Jennifer.

In the university bookstore, Austin went hunting for and found a Colombian. He timed his departure to bump into Marion on his way back to *Five Fires*.

"Austin," she said.

Austin was taken aback.

"I asked around."

"Marion," he answered smiling, "Jennifer asked around."

"Jennifer?"

"Barista. Tatts, lip ring."

"Of course. Hey I'm headed to your café," she said.

"Me too," said Austin. "Oh, I got you this." He opened the bag and passed Marion a copy of Márquez's *Of Love and Other Demons*. "No subtext."

"On the love or the demons?" asked Marion.

"Oh it's nothing - Jennifer's big on subtext. I was in Colombia earlier this year. Márquez is a big deal there."

"He sure is. Thanks. I'm actually more of a Kerouac girl."

"Well I'm the Marion kind," said Austin suddenly, wishing immediately he hadn't. He winced.

Marion looked at him, taking in all six feet of His Royal Goofyness.

"How about a drink after work?" she said.

"Let's take the edge off with a G&T," declared Marion. "After all it *is* a school night."

"Good for malaria also," said Austin. They ordered at the bar and sat opposite each other in a booth.

"I made you a coffee," said Austin. He handed Marion a brown bag. "Or rather, I roasted you some beans."

"Get out of here!" she said, opening the bag gently and breathing in the aroma. "Gorgeous. Now this is definitely a first. You really *are* into coffee."

"I'm into all sorts of things. Anything a bit out of the ordinary," admitted Austin.

"You travel a lot?"

"Yep, always looking for the next little farm that's got something special."

"An adventurous man."

"It's funny though, when I'm home I mostly hang out at the apartment or *Five Fires*."

"So, what about a Significant Other?"

"Ever see *Air Crash Investigators*?"

Marion laughed.

"Matt tells me - he's the cook. Matt tells me I don't know what's good for me."

"Well, what kind of people do you admire?" asked Marion.

Austin thought for a moment, "I admire self-made people."

The drinks arrived.

"Cheers," he said.

"Here's to self-made people," said Marion.

Day 4

Marion came into *Five Fires* in the late afternoon. Austin was alone at the counter.

"Espresso?" he asked.

"Why not?"

Marion settled into her seat at the table near the tall stained-glass window. Austin brought the coffee over and sat down with her.

"I enjoyed our drink last night," she said.

"I'm really into you," said Austin.

"I want to talk to you about that," said Marion. "I like you too. But I want you to know what you're getting in for."

"I've never been more certain," said Austin, "I've been - transported by you."

Marion looked at him, judging the range, her tongue feeling for the edge of her exquisite lips.

"You said you admire self-made people."

Austin nodded.

"I completely understand if this isn't your thing," said Marion, holding his gaze.

Austin looked into her serious eyes.

"I haven't always been a woman," she said evenly.

Austin felt the heat fill his neck and scalp. He breathed in through his nose.

"Austin?" asked Marion.

Austin tasted the tang of anticipation - imagined the first taste.

"Austin?" asked Marion again.

Austin felt the intoxicating rush - the feeling of being alive. And he felt a surprising pressure building in his trousers.

"That's okay," he said eventually, "I haven't always been much of a man."

Relief flooded Marion's face. She smiled. Austin looked into her lively eyes.

"Wanna Doobie me?" she ventured.

"Yeah, Doobie me now," he said.

February 2015

Origin of Terms

Canadian = Decaf Americano

Depth Charge = Double Shot

Doobie = Take Away (from the song *Takin' it to the Streets* by the Doobie Brothers)

Facemelter = Double Ristretto

French Canadian = Double Shot Decaf Americano

Fukushima = Extra Hot

Karate Kid = Macchiato (from the movie starring Ralph Macchio)

Serpico = cappuccino (from the movie starring Al Pacino)

Why Bother = a Decaffeinated Café Latte with low-fat milk

Catwalk Empire

My heart sank, as it always did around great beauty.

Chloe Hellmann was without doubt the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. For the last 15 years there would have been security guards preventing me from getting within 100 feet of her. Now she was sitting across from me in my new office. At this point I need to tell you I am not an attractive man: I am 50, balding and smell of divorce.

I got my start in recruitment in 1989 with William Russell Staffing, the original and biggest New York employment agency. It was a charnel house, but it taught me the game: how to cold call; spot a vacancy before the client knew they had one; collect a commission; and never pay a refund. Ex-Russell employees went on to create some of the big-name staffing agencies in the city today: Harrison Anderson and Associates, Le Stat and Louis, Girl Tuesday and Roquefort & Labne. But not me, I was the loyal journeyman, a 60-hour-a-week veteran with a work ethic that put an end to my marriage. I thought I'd see out my career at Russell's as Vice President of Special Projects, but I should have known that job title has always meant Kiss of Death. Six months ago I was shown the writing on the wall, and shortly thereafter the door.

You might not know Chloe Hellmann's name. But you definitely know her face. She was the Ralph Lauren girl-next-door in the summer catalogue for each year 2006-2009. Summer was her thing, and tight riding pants. She was hardly the girl-next-door, unless you grew up in some mythic alpine, orthodontic, surfing village. She was a six foot natural blonde with a trademark lip curl, perfectly gapped incisors and legs famously insured for a million dollars each. She was on the cover of *GQ* in June 2008 entwined with Svea Sauvarin

and Brit Weatherley. And there were also those uplifting glossy shots by Helmut. It's fair to say I knew of her work. I also knew my mouth was moving but couldn't begin to tell you what was coming out of it.

I'd placed them all over the years. Sales Representatives became Account Executives and then Customer Acquisition Specialists. But they were all the same to me. There was a stage in the early 90's where it seemed everyone was some kind of Vice President: Associate, Assistant, Junior, Senior or Executive. In the late '90s we threw anyone with a heartbeat at the dot com boom like it was a Hindu funeral pyre, and when it all went pop we charged like wounded bulls for outplacement programs. Just recently it's got particularly weird. It started innocently enough with Web Producers and Customer Care Specialists. But before you could text WTF?, I was placing Software Evangelists, Accounting Ninjas, Chief Moneyballers and Graduate Wranglers. To me if there's no horse, it isn't wrangling. The harder business tried to jerk off about how different everything was, the more it looked the same to me: 20% commission based on first year salary, payable in full within 30 days of starting.

Eventually the autopilot on my mouth switched off and I heard Chloe Hellmann speak. My spirits lifted slightly when she said things weren't going so well for her. God bless the workplace, I thought. Where else would a woman like this breathe the same air as me?

"For most of us the magazine covers dry up when you turn 30," she said. "The catwalk scene gets younger every year. I even lost my H&M contract to some androgynous boy from Latvia. Before you know it you're 35 and being put forward for hand modelling on the Shopping Channel."

"I thought you were all millionaires, with your own lingerie and swimwear brands?" I asked.

"I'm not really the entrepreneurial type," replied Chloe.

"What about Swiss bankers, rock stars, tennis pros? Don't you all marry Swiss bankers?"

"Have you ever met a Swiss banker?"

I conceded I had not.

"Well," I said, "let me run you through some tests and then we'll chat."

When I was pink slipped from William Russell I descended into a deep funk. Depression is too strong a word for it. I'd spent 25 years helping other people find work and I didn't even have a CV. For six weeks I slept late, wore sweatpants and ate breakfast cereal at any time of the day. I grew a beard - I was surprised how much grey was in it. After a month Monty left me. My beloved bachelor cat walked out. You know the walk. He looked at the day-old Cheerios and milk in his food bowl and sauntered away with great dignity toward the cat flap, pausing only to pass wind. It was a turning point. I forced myself up off the futon and called Elliot Chandler, my late-father's psychiatrist.

"Look I've seen worse," said Elliot as he flicked through his iPad mini. "But I won't lie to you; we'll have to hit it with the hard stuff."

"Prozac? Zoloft?" I offered.

"No. What year were you born?"

"1964." He examined a chart on his tablet.

"What, are you thinking Xanax?" I suggested.

"No. I'm going to start you off with Springsteen, *Darkness on the Edge of Town*. If you show some signs of improvement in a week we'll move you on to *Human Touch* and then *Lucky Town*."

I'd heard about some fringe treatments in my time, but this was quackery. This was New York; I wanted what everyone else was having!

"Are you serious, Springsteen; the folk rock singer from 'Jersey?'"

"Steady George. The Boss is fifteen years older than you and he still tours. He does 30-song concerts. He still has a six-pack for God's sake - on his *stomach*. Take a look at yourself. Have you ever bought clothes anywhere other than Brooks Brothers? Your comb over has seen better days. And maybe Brut-33 was never a classic. This is about renovation, manhood, the Marathon of Life. This is a key moment in your life and we need to get it right. If I start you on drugs, well ..." He made a face like, "who knows where we'll end up?"

"You are serious," I observed.

"It's the latest thing - GMT - Generational Music Therapy. Haven't you wondered why everyone is walking around with headphones lately?"

He passed me an iPod music player with ear buds and suggested I pick up some dental floss at the drug store.

"Recruiter, recruit thyself!" he said cheerily as he showed me out.

Three weeks later I registered a business name and put down 6 months' rent on a serviced office on Broadway. Setting up a staffing agency is actually pretty easy. You just need a phone, a thick skin and a Herculean work ethic. You don't even

need to know that much about recruitment. You start by building a temporary staffing database, use it to build cash flow and then start winning the permanent placement work from your customers. Start small with a receptionist or file clerk and work your way to the corner office, simple. One of the most important things is a strong, trustworthy business name. I've noticed it helps if it's an interchangeable surname/first name thing. My birth name is Georgios Christopoulos so of course I went with *George Christopher Staffing*. I took out an ad on monster.com for entry-level clerical jobs and Chloe Hellmann was one of about 60 people who responded.

After two hours of aptitude and ability testing it was obvious Chloe Hellmann had almost no workplace skills. The result on her *Vorbach PF* showed some serious narcissism and entitlement, although she was also surprisingly high on altruism. Her *NR-C* result showed she could barely add up. On the *Hunt-Chapworth* verbal reasoning test the synonym she suggested for 'happy' was 'Larry'. And her handwriting included little hearts over the i's and j's. This stunning woman was 35 years old and a fifteen year career as a top catwalk model had taught her little more than how to order room service. At least she could use a telephone, I mused. And you must understand at this point I would have done anything to keep seeing her. I promised her I'd put her forward for a *Director of First Impressions* position (read Receptionist) at Rand Biotech, a permanent placement client I'd just landed. She gave me an air kiss and I watched her walk out. You know the walk.

The Rand Biotech people loved her. She was well presented, charming and they put her on the front desk at their new chrome and old wharf-timber headquarters in Battery Point. When their customers complained their phone calls never seemed to go to the same extension twice it was a minor blip

in the client relationship. Even when the bicycle couriers started eating their lunch in the lobby so they could gawk at her it was still recoverable. But when she tried to get one of them to take a temperature-controlled bio package across town it was like a fumbled catch in the NFL, on wheels. The ensuing fight spilled onto the sidewalk via a large pane of architectural glass. I'm told their skin blisters from whatever was in the package will clear up. Rand's lawyers demanded I pay the damage bill of 15 grand. And they also refused to pay Chloe's placement commission, the first time that had ever happened to me. At this point I didn't have 15 grand. Emotionally I was just hanging in there; I'd slipped back to *Human Touch*. I was massaging my temples when Chloe knocked on my office door.

"I'm sorry about the bike thing George," she began. She used my name. An electric shock ran through my sternum. And other places. How could I stay angry at this Goddess?

"The damage bill is probably going to sink me. And I was also counting on your placement commission."

"Don't worry about that," she purred, "I have a little money set aside. I have a proposition for you. Come with me."

A dozen scenarios illuminated my imagination. None of them involved me saying 'no'.

I'd never had a makeover and it did wonders for my outlook. I'd also never considered shaving my head or wearing an oxblood velvet jacket by Burberry with Gant mustard corduroy trousers and Le Coq Sportif off-white canvas tennis shoes. But Chloe knew exactly what she was doing. The Pringle charcoal cashmere turtle neck and Tommy Bahama horn rimmed glasses were also a nice touch. While a guy named Guy completed my facial, Chloe leaned over and whispered in my ear, "we'll call it *George Hellmann Career Renovations*." I

thought George Hellmann would look good on a brass plaque outside the office; might even go okay on a passport. I inhaled deeply the scent of rosemary, clary sage and Brazilian rosewood.

Chloe estimated there were a couple of thousand fashion models tossed on the heap by the industry each year. They needed rapid re-skilling and placement in meaningful work. This was to be my contribution to the partnership, and indeed humanity. Chloe would take some of the thousands of late middle-aged men tossed on the heap by business each year, give them a mid-life refit and get them walking and talking like men again. We would work it from both ends. We couldn't miss!

The next morning I decided to up my dose to *Lucky Town* and strode to the office dressed in another of Chloe's outfits: a navy blazer by Ralph Lauren; powder blue Fred Perry polo; white Levis jeans; and adidas pool slides. I was feeling buoyant and smelling of Paco Rabanne, the first day of our new venture. When the lift doors opened there were five very tall women in the lobby. I assumed I had the wrong floor and went to press my number. I froze. I recognised them all: Helmi Jukannen, the former face (and body) of Calvin Klein underwear; Candice Foo, DKNY's 1990's poster girl for Greater China; Karin Stromberg, 10 years on top as YSL's ice queen; Mandi Mitchell every 15 year old boy's wet dream from the Victoria's Secret catalogue; and Seku Hara the Japanese-Hawaiian "girl on the motorcycle" from the Guess Jeans ads.

I shuffled through the lobby and into my office, nauseated. I suppose you're wondering what's wrong with me. Don't all men have a fantasy of being surrounded by beautiful women? Once I would have answered yes. After all, I grew up listening to my father sing Tommy Steele's *I'm the Only Man on the Island* while he shaved. I was familiar with the goings on at the Playboy Mansion. It's a compelling notion, until you

actually have to stand at the plate with your bat in hand. As I sat at my desk, the full horror of a waiting room of former catwalk models made me vomit generously into my wastepaper basket. The *Tic Tacs* could only do so much and I made a mental note to duck out to Walgreens. I gargled some water as Chloe struck her end-of-the-catwalk pose in my office doorway. You know the pose.

"What the hell is this? Are these friends of yours?"

She nodded, "your first clients." Her trademark smile began to curl at the corner of her mouth.

"But I'm not ready for this! Jesus, where's my Springsteen?" I fumbled around for my iPod.

"It's time to man up, George" she ordered, and called in Seku Hara.

March 2014

Grenade Fishing in The Andaman

Call me Al. I was drinking with Oliver in a bamboo hut on the beach at Crawford's Place and well into my second ice-cold Chang. It was late afternoon in July and the air was magically clean from the passing of one of the first storms of the wet season. I'd been in Thailand about a year, working as the sous chef at the new Andaman Pearl resort. Everything was right with the world.

"Secrets of the kitchen," I said, "you don't want to know!"

"Give me an example. I can handle it," said Oliver.

"Alright, I'll start you off easy. Bread and butter pudding," I offered.

"Okay," said Oliver.

"I've seen it made from yesterday's pastries."

"That's not so bad."

"Club sandwich."

"I've been known to eat them," said Oliver, "and I ain't even a member!"

"Leftover bacon from the breakfast buffet."

"Same day?"

"Not necessarily."

"Is that the best you got?"

"Okay," I said definitively, "everything on the specials menu contains leftovers. *Everything*. It's like a noble tradition. Secrets of the kitchen."

"Yeah, maybe I didn't want to know," said Oliver as Betty delivered our food.

Crawford's Place was about 500 yards south along the coast from the resort. He ran the place with his Malaysian-Chinese wife Betty. There was a bar and kitchen area with a BBQ pit in the centre, and eight bamboo and palm thatch huts placed just above the high tide mark, jungle behind. You sat on the floor of the hut and either dangled your legs over the side or leaned against one of the bamboo posts, as I was doing at the time.

Like most people, the first thing I'd noticed about Crawford Jensen-Smith was his stupid hat. It made me doubt I could ever take him seriously. But that turned out to be wrong. I'd met him on my first day in Thailand. It was early morning and he was walking towards me along the beach with a bag fashioned from fishing net. He was stopping occasionally to pick up the litter washed ashore overnight by the high tide: single shoes; soft drink bottles; jagged pieces of polystyrene; and fishing rope, that sort of thing. He was a lurching figure, well over 6 feet tall, 60 years old, with fair skin and a mop of white hair. And the stupid hat of course; it was a tattered panama with some kind of regimental striped hatband in dark green, red and black. He was British and over the previous forty years had fallen down through the expatriate archipelago of Hong Kong, Singapore, KL and now here.

By contrast, his friend, and my drinking companion Oliver Fisher had spent the first 25 years of his life looking at short grass prairie in Texas. On a family holiday to Galveston

he'd run away and joined the merchant navy and then spent the next thirty years looking at the sea. He now spent his time in a bamboo hut at Crawford's Place, mostly looking at people. He was mid-fifties, built like an old washing machine and had a grey crew cut and matching beard.

As Oliver started to eat his seafood special, a tall, young woman walked up from the beach and came over. She had a plain, Teutonic face and light brown hair cut short like a boy. But it was her athletic figure that caught my eye; maybe she was a volley-baller? She asked us if we knew anything about Ulrich. Crawford was behind the bar and gave me a worried look. Oliver looked her over briefly and then stared out to sea.

"How do you know Ulrich?" I asked, cautiously.

"I am his wife," she replied with a hard German accent *wife*. I also noted her use of present tense *am*. She extended her hand, "I'm Karin."

"Call me Al," I replied. Under different circumstances I would have definitely gone there - after all I was 29, she wasn't wearing a wedding band, and Ulrich, well Ulrich was quite dead. That he'd had a wife was one of the many things I didn't know about him. I'd seen him alive only a handful of times.

"How long since you've seen him?" I asked her.

"About two years."

"Let me buy you a drink," I said. I gave Crawford two fingers and he brought over a couple of Changs.

"Cheers."

It turned out Karin had made the trip out from Germany looking for psychological closure rather than Ulrich. For all

practical purposes their relationship had ended two years earlier while on holiday in Thailand. She went back, Ulrich stayed. Somewhere along the line he'd sold his passport and made himself effectively stateless. He was about to be declared dead *in absentia* by a German court.

On sunset, Crawford turned on the electric lights. The globes were strung between the huts and gave the place a festive feel as they swayed in the sea breeze that was also keeping the mosquitos from landing. Karin seemed a sweet person and part of me felt she deserved to know. I even toyed with the idea of telling her something *close* to the truth. I decided there was nothing good to come from it. I felt I decided this for her as much as I did for me.

"Look I hate to tell you this", I said finally, "but I heard Ulrich was taken by a shark." Oliver and I watched her reaction. She took the news pretty well. She spoke of the changes she'd noticed in Ulrich, the changes that had driven them apart. She spoke about the drugs, his growing anger and the sadness of it all. She finished her beer, squeezed my hand in thanks and left. We watched her walk back up the beach and disappear into the darkness.

"I think you did the right thing," said Oliver as we watched Crawford drift over from behind the bar.

"Yes," I replied.

"Yes, the right thing," concluded Crawford, offering me a fresh Chang and passing a glass of El Dorado Demerara to Oliver.

We were all tense from Karin's visit, reminded of the truth that bound us together as friends. Oliver broke the spell.

"Stranger things have happened at sea," he began.

This is what Oliver says when he is about to deliver one of his questionable seafaring stories. His delivery was so authentic I could never tell if he was lying, even with Google. And after a while I didn't care. I wanted to live in a world where Oliver's stories were true, even if they were a little made up.

"I once knew a French woman who used to smuggle baby lemurs on her personage," said Oliver. He sipped his rum.

"Baby lemurs you say?" asked Crawford, knowing the story.

"Yes," continued Oliver, "she'd tuck them in her armpits and at a glance their fur looked exactly like a European-style underarm."

Some beer came out of my nose.

"You have to ask him how many she smuggled each trip," said Crawford, smiling.

"Oh alright," I said, taking the bait, "was it two at a time, one under each arm?"

"No, it was three," said Oliver at length, "baby lemurs have the softest little hands, you know."

The laughter brought some relief. I'd become close with these two old friends. The three of us had the same values, proven by a shared experience. A shared secret really, a truth we alone knew. Like I said, Ulrich was quite dead - we were there when it happened. But not one of us was exactly responsible.

Let me explain. Ulrich was a bad character, and the world is better off without him. He'd come here in the mid-90s to train at the kickboxing school in Khao Lak. Back then Thailand was a popular steroid travel destination. Young white boys would come for a couple of months, live in a kickboxing school

and load up on cheap, veterinary testosterone. They'd go back home looking buffed and with some fighting skills. Some came back, like Ulrich and got into more nefarious dealings.

I'd been in Thailand about three months and was at Crawford's Place one afternoon when Ulrich had a savage argument with Crawford and threatened to kill him. I knew immediately that it was in him to do so; Ulrich's anger was visceral and frightening. I found out later that Ulrich supplied Crawford with seafood. Crawford had discovered Ulrich was catching his fish using stolen Royal Thai Army hand grenades. Crawford, an environmentalist at heart had refused to take any more fish.

When I arrived for work the next morning, Thai Police were at the Resort. I ran down to Crawford's Place to see what was happening. One of Crawford's beach huts was burned to the ground; it was a clear message from Ulrich. I found Crawford visibly upset with Betty consoling him.

"Locals say they heard an explosion," said Betty as I knelt down beside them in the sand.

"Like a hand grenade?" I asked. Nobody answered.

Unusual for a Thai, Inspector Pakpong of the Tourist Police was an officious prick. I hung around nearby as he was questioning Crawford. I thought he was unnecessarily hard on him.

"What can you tell me Mr Crawford? This is connected with your German friend I think?" said Inspector Pakpong, stating a fact.

"He's not a friend," said Crawford, deep in thought.

"I know a fragmentation grenade blast when I see one," said Inspector Pakpong. "And I notice you serve BBQ fish on

your menu. Perhaps you could help me find someone who's using stolen grenades to catch fish?"

"I don't think you know who you're dealing with, Inspector," replied Crawford.

"I wonder what is your wife's citizenship status?" he asked finally. "Perhaps you'll give it some thought?"

As the Inspector left I gave him a dirty look and went behind the bar to make Crawford a tonic water. He nodded in thanks and pushed his stupid hat back on his great snowy head. He was tired.

"I'm too old to pack up and move again," he said after a while.

"Then somebody should do something!" We both looked around to see Oliver walking in.

In the early afternoon we set off towards the reef in Oliver's fishing boat. I looked at my companions: Dad's Navy. I wasn't sure what the plan was but we were going to find Ulrich and confront him. I began to feel we were under gunned. After about an hour we heard the dull thump of an explosion. Oliver corrected our heading. Then we heard another explosion, a little louder. Eventually we spotted Ulrich's boat. He was netting the stunned fish from his last grenade and filling his crates. The coral reef where he'd dropped the grenade was destroyed. This was not a fishing ground that could ever be used again. I threw out a sand anchor and Oliver turned off the engine.

"How's business?" asked Ulrich when we were alongside.

"More sustainable than yours," said Crawford.

"Perhaps you've reconsidered our commercial arrangements?" said Ulrich.

"Inspector Pakpong is on to you," said Crawford.

"Am I looking at three men who would rat on me to the Inspector?" asked Ulrich with a sinister look.

I looked around. We were miles out to sea, no land in sight. The genuine folly of this adventure struck me. I was a sous chef on a fishing boat with two old men facing off against an angry German full of horse steroids - who also had a crate of stolen hand grenades. When I looked back the situation had deteriorated. I saw Ulrich pull the pin from a grenade and lob it into our boat. It clattered around on the fiberglass deck.

"Jesus!" shouted Oliver, grabbing me by my belt and shanghaiing me into the wheel house. "Get down man!" he called out.

We both watched in astonishment as Crawford calmly picked up the loose grenade and threw it sidearm like a cricketer, hitting Ulrich squarely in the forehead *thwock*, and knocking him unconscious and out of his boat. The grenade plopped into the sea beside Ulrich's limp body and began to sink. After what seemed an eternity it exploded, producing a loud *whomp*, a water-jet and a circular shockwave. We looked at Ulrich, floating face down in the water. Gradually he was joined by a school of stunned reef fish as they bobbed to the surface.

"I should turn him over," said Crawford. "He might be alive."

Oliver touched Crawford on the arm, "strange things happen at sea."

"Yes, I suppose they do," replied Crawford in a soft voice.

We watched Ulrich's body for long enough. Again, Oliver broke the silence.

"Seems a shame to waste the fish," he said and set about netting them into our boat.

Meanwhile, I was having a quiet breakdown, the adrenaline still coursing through my body. I was taken aback by how matter-of-fact Crawford and Oliver were; like two old Sergeants picking through the debris of the battlefield. As if this was just standing operating procedure or something. Crawford noticed me and came over.

"You're going to be okay," he said firmly. "A lot of people will be grateful for what's happened here today."

"Nobody is going to believe what just happened here!" I screeched. "Try explaining *this*." I gestured to Ulrich's floating body and Oliver nonchalantly scooping up the fish. "I don't want to go to prison!"

"Nothing just happened here," said Crawford calmly, "but you might want to look away for a minute."

It was wise counsel. When I turned back Ulrich's body was still in the water, but it was secured to our boat by a stern line tied to a gaff that was hooked through his ribcage. Crawford was busy hacking some sizeable gashes in the body with a knife shaped like a curved machete. He washed the blade in the water and gave Oliver the nod and we set off trolling Ulrich's body at about 10 knots along the reef. The first sharks were tentative but within twenty minutes there wasn't much left of the German. Oliver set a course for home with the setting sun on our backs. Whether I liked it or not I'd just joined a secret society.

As our boat pulled up at Crawford's Place we saw Inspector Pakpong and six of his fellow police officers watching us, smiling.

"We're screwed," I said, looking at the stern line and gaff and what was left of Ulrich. I began to cry; I'd heard about Thai prisons.

"Hold your nerve, lad," said Oliver as he throttled down and let Crawford off in the shallows. Crawford waded in and went to talk to the police. We watched as he directed the officers to one of the huts and served them some beers. He waded back to us.

"The Inspector and his men will be joining us for a celebration BBQ," said Crawford, trying hard to suppress a smile.

"The Royal Thai Navy found Ulrich's abandoned boat with a sizeable stash of M67s. They've declared victory in the search for the grenade fisherman."

"Strange things happen at sea," said Oliver, taking his baseball cap off and using it to wipe the sweat from his brow.

"Oh, I've told them I'm serving a BBQ pork rib special," said Crawford, "would you give me a hand on the grill Al?"

They both looked at me, as if to say, "*do we have an understanding?*"

I looked over to the huts where the police were celebrating, the setting sun illuminating my beloved beachfront paradise. I looked back to Crawford and Oliver.

"Secrets of the kitchen," I replied.

July 2014

Nixon, Mao and the Harbin Globetrotters

"The greatest game of basketball ever played". At least that's what Henry let slip at *The Godfather* premiere. It's taken me more than 40 years to piece it all together. At first I dismissed it as an impossibility. I mean really, a Top-Secret, USA v China basketball game in front of Nixon and Mao, in Beijing, during the historic visit in '72. When I pressed Henry on it he went all *national security* on me. But there was a glint in his eye. I'm a sports writer and basketball nut, so the tantalising possibility of such a game has kept me intrigued for four decades. And when I thought about it, Henry certainly had the connections to pull it off. I'm not just talking about the trips to China, significant though they were. There was no doubt Henry was a world-class diplomat, but he was also a first-class schmoozer with impeccable showbiz connections. If anyone could arrange the Harlem Globetrotters, it was he. Henry's second slip came in 1985 when he conceded Ron might have some Super 8 footage. I tried for years to get in to see the former Press Secretary, but with Watergate and all, Ron wasn't returning calls.

The third breakthrough came in 2003 after Ron died and I received a call from his wife Nancy (what are the odds, another Ron and Nancy from the White House?). Anyway, she said she had a small parcel marked to my attention. I could hardly contain myself and drove over to San Diego in a 13-hour cannonball. I opened the manila routing envelope and there they were: four reels of Super 8 marked simply 'Capital Gymnasium, Peking '72'. Of course the film stock is only 8mm wide and there was no chance of telling what was on the reels

without a projector. Who has a Super 8 projector these days, I ask? So I waited anxiously outside a shop on Camino del Rio while they were converted to DVD. I sat in my car and loaded the DVD into my laptop with a shaking hand. Boom! Glorious Kodachrome! The colour hit me like chemically-induced nostalgia. For those born post-Kodak, try the 'Toaster' filter next time you're on Instagram (I'm no longer on it by the way, I mean how many cupcakes can a man look at?).

The movie begins with: shots of the crowd, mostly People's Liberation Army senior officers; Dick and Pat and Henry; the presidential entourage; Chairman Mao standing up announcing something; and then his young female interpreter getting a laugh with the translation. Then two basketball teams take the court; a blue team and a red team. The blue team sure look like the Harlem Globetrotters but it's impossible to tell from the grainy film and they are without their distinctive uniforms. The Chinese team were mostly very tall men with crew cuts, but there were two bald players of average height who were simply supreme acrobats. There's a moment early in the first quarter when the Americans realise the Chinese aren't the usual team of stooges. It was like duelling banjos on the basketball court: punch and counterpunch; ally-oop and, well, counter-oop. Two trick teams trying to play a straight game of basketball and then reverting to their natural style. The two bald Chinese players were dropping 3-pointers by hitting the ball with their palm, kung-fu style. One would set the ball like volleyball forward and the other would punch it into the hoop with nothing but net. Both teams left the back court largely undefended as they tried to out-do each other in getting the ball into the hoop in the most inventive manner. I've truly never seen anything like it. At this point I need to tell you I covered the Pistons v Nuggets game in 1983, but here I was looking at 20 minutes of highlights from easily the greatest game of

basketball ever played. Perhaps even the greatest game of any sport. I rang Henry and told him I had the film. He said I'd better come over.

"What was the final score?" I asked him urgently, "it must have been a 300 point game?"

He gave a short laugh, "yes it was. But the final score wasn't the most interesting thing about that game."

Henry gave me nothing on the record, after all he's a pro. But he suggested some leads. I tracked down Mao's former translator Mrs Ji, on Hainan Island. She spoke impeccable English with her husky voice, offset by some decidedly peccable idioms.

"When your Secretary of State secretly visited the Chairman in July of 1971 he was surprised to find Mao read *Life* magazine. Of course the Chairman couldn't read a stick of English so he just looked at the photographs. You know, the opposite of *Playboy*! I remember they discussed an article about the so called 'unbeatable' (she did air-quotes) Harlem Globetrotters. Mao asked if it might be possible for a game against a Chinese team when the President visited in February of 1972. I think the Secretary saw an opportunity to hump the Chairman's leg in the right way."

I asked Mrs Ji if Mao understood the Harlem Globetrotters weren't a real basketball team.

"It's impossible to say. The Chairman's accent was as thick as a brick and I often struggled to understand him." Then she added, "it's also impossible to say whether it came as a surprise to the Chairman that China hadn't had a national basketball team since the 1948 Olympics! The shit really hit the blanket on that one."

She doubled over with laughter and coughed like she was kick-starting a motorcycle.

"I'm so sorry," she said eventually. "I took up smoking after I stopped working for the Chairman. He was a chain-smoker and it wasn't until he died I realised I had a 20-a-day habit. As I was saying it was a miracle we were able to get any basketball team on the court in such a short time, let alone a team that did so well. By the way, do you know whatever happened to the coach?"

I was dumbfounded. I'd watched the 20 minutes of Super 8 footage maybe a dozen times and failed to notice the Chinese team coach was European. He is a tall, athletic figure with blonde hair, late 20's or early 30's. In the final frames, the players on both sides respond to the final buzzer and collapse to the court in exhaustion, the coach briefly drops his head and allows himself to be escorted from the gymnasium by two PLA soldiers.

As you know, I don't have a Super 8 projector, but I do have a fax machine. Call me sentimental. Just when I was sure the trail had gone cold again, one afternoon earlier this year two grainy pages curled out of my old Ricoh. They were heavily redacted passenger manifests for Air Force One, sent from the kind of fax machine that doesn't display its number. The first dated February 21, 1972 and the second February 28 - the dates of Nixon's trip to China. Both flights list 6 'Cultural Advisers' (names redacted) who I assume are the American basketball players, but the return flight lists 'Capt. M. McCowper, Chaplain'. I searched the US Air Force archives to no avail. I eventually found him in a Presbyterian retirement village in Coco Beach. He was sprightly and alert, up to date with current affairs and delighted to watch the DVD of the game.

"Thank you," he said at the end, "I never knew there was any record of that amazing game. Twelve fine exponents of the basketball arts wouldn't you say? And to think, 6 months before my players had never even seen a basketball!"

I asked him how he came to coach the Chinese team.

"One day in August '71 some senior Party officials came to visit me in Qincheng Prison. It's a couple of hours north of Peking. That's where they sent most of us westerners who inevitably fell afoul of Mao. I think they're going to send Bo Xilai there shortly. There was a surprising number of Americans living in Peking during the Cultural Revolution you know?"

I asked Fr McCowper what he was doing in China to begin with.

"I was born there. My folks were missionaries. I was in the family business, if you like. In fact I was born in a prison, the Wei Hsien Internment Camp in 1943. Anyway, these Party apparatchiks had a problem. They said the Chairman needed a basketball team for an important demonstration game. They glossed over the fact that sometime during the Cultural Revolution somebody in the Party had declared it a running dog sport or some such and nobody had played it competitively for nearly a decade. You know China actually had some reasonable basketball pedigree. YMCA missionaries introduced the game to China not long after it was invented in 1891. The Red Army even took it on as an official sport. My dad taught me to play. I'd even been in a Chinese newsreel once coaching some boys from our mission. I spoke Putonghua. They figured I was the guy to help them win one for the Gipper. So they made me an offer: coach a team, win whatever game they had in mind and they'd let me out of jail. I turned them down flat."

I couldn't believe it. Why didn't he jump at the chance to play in front of Nixon? Play against the Americans? Get out of prison? His answer was simple.

"At that point I had no idea the game was for Nixon's visit. Nobody in the world suspected something like Nixon's visit was even possible. And the other thing, I was being asked to make the guy who'd sent me to prison look good. I know everyone is all warm and fuzzy about Mao these days. But let's not forget that bastard and the nuts that followed him killed 30 million of their own people. Thirty million. Of their own people."

But he did end up agreeing to coach the Chinese team. I asked him what changed his mind.

"A day later I was dragged from my cell before dawn and driven south for a couple of hours. This is it, I thought, I'm going to be a martyr. There's nothing like an impending execution to make you re-think your stubbornness. Maybe I was being too self-righteous? Maybe the chance to coach the team was a sign from God? After all I couldn't continue His work if I was dead. I didn't want to be like the good Christian who dies in the flood waiting for God to save him."

I asked him what he meant.

"It's an old joke. There's a good Christian whose house is getting flooded. On the first day his neighbour offers him a ride out in his SUV. No thanks he says, God will save me. The second day the water is up to his veranda and he turns down a rescue by the Coast Guard. No thanks, God will save me. On the third day he's sitting on his roof and turns away a rescue helicopter. No thanks, he shouts, God will save me. He drowns of course and when he meets God in heaven he's indignant. I thought you would save me, he says to God. God replies, well I sent you an SUV, a boat and a helicopter."

When the truck arrived in Beijing there was a surprise awaiting Fr McCowper.

"They took me from the truck into a small room with a PLA soldier standing guard. Next thing Premier Zhou En Lai walks in and we are served tea. Zhou was a very different creature to Mao. Mao was a philosophical bully. Zhou was a pragmatist, a hard-headed intellectual. He was also a negotiator. As Kissinger said, 'Mao was eager to accelerate history; Zhou was content to exploit its currents.' Sipping his tea, Zhou said he needed a result. And he was prepared to sweeten the deal. He asked me what I wanted. I couldn't believe my luck, but I didn't want to push it! I said I wanted a full pardon from the Chairman. And a razor. I hadn't shaved for two years! A week later I was billeted in a PLA gymnasium in Harbin with a coaching staff and fifty, 7-foot PLA soldiers to make up my team. It was classic Chinese overkill. These soldiers were tall enough for sure, they were great at following orders, learnt the rules by rote, but lacked any creativity. It's the Confucian education mentality that is still China's major limitation today. We trained for 3 months in Harbin and we weren't making progress. I needed players who could think on their feet. One of the coaching staff knew of some monks at Shaolin that were famous for their use of a basketball-sized martial arts weapon, called the *dà shítou*. We sent him over and he came back with two monks. They were the key; disciplined, fit, lightening reflexes, and able to deploy their skills in a dynamic environment."

One thing was bugging me. Why Harbin? It's a frozen industrial city in the north east. Surely Beijing had suitable facilities? Fr McCowper said it troubled him initially, and he suspected there were a number of teams practicing across China. Perhaps the best team would get the chance to play for Mao.

"When the team uniforms arrived it became clear. It was a red uniform with 'Harbin Globetrotters' across the front. Apparently it was Mao's idea of a pun. He was famous for his elegant handwriting, but less so for his puns. It got me thinking, could it be a game against an American team? Could it be *the* Harlem Globetrotters? Nobody has ever confirmed it, but I'm pretty sure it was them."

Why was the game a secret? Fr McCowper had a theory.

"I suspect the whole thing was a serendipitous misunderstanding. After agreeing to the game, both sides then panicked about losing it. So they agreed to keep the game, and the result a secret. As if it was a treaty negotiation or something. Notice there was only official delegates in the crowd; there were no US reporters, nobody who couldn't be had by the *Internal Security Act*."

I asked him what happened after the game when he was taken away by the soldiers.

"Well the deal with Zhou was for a win. I couldn't believe my misfortune. For three days I was back in Qincheng Prison, and back to the old routine. Get up in the morning and bathe myself with a bucket of cold water and cheap sandalwood soap. They even took my razor off me. Then off to the classroom for self-criticism. On the third day I was hauled out of my cell again. Another dawn departure and another truck ride down to Peking. Another small room with an armed guard. But this time it was guarded by a US Marine. On the table was a US Air Force uniform for me to put on. Somebody had even made up some chaplain crosses for it! Next thing I'm on the tarmac at Peking International Airport and General Scowcroft is shaking my hand and showing me up the stairs. I look back and see Dick and Pat saying their farewells to Zhou and Yingchao. On the flight home the President came down to meet

me and I got the full story. He'd noticed me at the game. He'd negotiated with Zhou to hand me over as a gesture of rapprochement. Not bad for a Quaker."

So I guess like me you're wondering about the final score? It was a tie: 188 points each, the highest-scoring international basketball game. What about overtime I hear you say? It was also one of my first questions to Fr McCowper. He is a very wise man. So I'll tell you his answer.

"Don't you think a tie was the perfect result for restarting the Sino-American relationship? Two worthy adversaries. None of this triple overtime, wildcard, playoff baloney. There was a game, it was a tie. Deal with it. China exists, deal with it. We must ask ourselves what is behind the American obsession with a result for everything. Wouldn't it be better if we had a relationship?"

February 2014

Good Help

"Kelly, it's your poster-boy Mohammed."

This is Neil, the human resources manager - a competent smartass.

"Jesus," I said.

"No, Mohammed," Neil replied dryly.

"How did you ever get a job in HR with your complete lack of interest in people?" I asked.

He ignored the question. "What do you want to do?"

I looked at the time, 8:50 a.m. "I'll meet you down there. Let Tori know I'm coming."

"I'm going to have to notify WorkSafe. Plant overturning."

This is Tori, the newly-minted safety adviser still finding her voice - a Cook Islander who looked out of place in the cold. I looked at the forklift truck. It was cantered over on two wheels.

"But it's not completely overturned," Neil argued. "It's still leaning on the racking." Fog came out of his mouth.

"I think you're being pedantic," said Tori. The last word came out as *pedentuk*.

Good girl, I thought. My phone rang. I declined the call and switched it to silent.

"Where's Mo?" I asked.

"Gone to his car," said Neil. "Glenn is in the warming room with the first aider. Broken nose."

"Okay," I said. "Neil, I need you to interview them. Separately of course. Then stand them both down to give us some time to think. Dick's on holiday right?"

"Yep," said Neil. "He's due back in time for the EBA meeting next week."

"This is all I need." I looked at my phone - three missed calls from reception. "Shit, I gotta go up and kick off the Safety Awareness Day."

I looked again at the scene. The forklift truck was leaning on the 6-high racking and blocking the main aisle.

"Tori, can we move the fork so I can at least get some product out for the eleven a.m. run?"

"Sorry Kel, can't touch it until WorkSafe get here."

"Jesus," I said.

Neil looked at me.

"Don't say it."

I went up to the conference room for the Safety Awareness Day. The guest speaker wasn't there. Employees were mingling at the catering table. I realised I still had my hi-viz parka, beanie and gloves on. When I took the beanie off, my hair frizzed up with the static.

"Kellie, I've been calling you. They're carrying him up now."

This is Lorna, the receptionist - what Barbie would look like at fifty, if divorced from Ken.

"Carrying?" I asked, as I shrugged out of my parka. "Carrying who?"

"Steven? The work-injury guest speaker? He went to the wrong entrance."

I darted over to the window and saw two warehouse employees carrying Steven in his wheel chair up the side stairs.

"Oh for God's sake," I said under my breath.

"Do you want me to loan you a hairbrush, sweetheart?" asked Lorna.

Around lunchtime my phone rang.

"Kel, I'd like to come over and see you."

This is Dick, the union organiser - crusty, wise, bad knees. As the cattle farmers say he was 'carrying some condition'.

"I thought you were on annual leave?" I said.

"Good help is hard to find," he replied. He was in my office within the hour.

"You're not setting a very good example." I joked. "Work-life balance?"

"My shop steward has a broken nose."

"Neil's still doing the investigation," I said. "Looks like Glenn and Mo had a swing at each other after Mo stacked his fork. Right now I can't see either of them keeping their jobs."

"Mo's the Pakistani CPA with the moustache, right?"

"Yeah. I swear those fork drivers hold the place to ransom some days," I said.

"Well," said Dick, "every industry has their Pavarottis."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, there's no opera without the fat man. Without your fork drivers your ice cream melts."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"For the airlines it's baggage handlers. Hotels have the housekeepers. Wharfies, garbos, crane drivers, you get the picture."

"Right."

"This game used to be easier," confided Dick. "But now there're hardly any Pavarotti jobs left. Even IT can be done by someone else."

"I'll call you when the investigation is done."

"I appreciate it Kel," said Dick as he shook my hand.
"Try and look at the bigger picture."

"You're not going to believe this," said Tori on the phone. The last word came out like *thus*.

"Don't try me today Tori," I said.

"The WorkSafe Inspector slipped over on the ice. Might be a broken elbow. An ambulance is on the way."

At this point I was very close to throwing my phone deep into the plasterboard wall.

"This is too stupid to be a conspiracy," I said.

"Are you okay, Kel?" asked Tori.

"Every time I look around I'm undermined by stupidity," I said. "Every. Effing. Time."

"One day you might look back on this and laugh," offered Tori.

The next day my phone rang just after 10.30 a.m.

"Alright Neil, what's the story?" I asked.

"Short version?" he asked.

"Why don't we start there?"

"You sitting down? Well, after the accident Glenn told Mo it was because he drives like a suicide bomber. Mo's told him to f-off. Glenn's had a swing at him and clipped him on the side of the head. Mo's whacked Glenn in the nose - says it was self-defence. Mo also says he only crashed because of ice on the floor. Says he's reported the ice three times to the OHS rep who did nothing about it. He has the Take-5 booklet to prove it."

"Who's the OHS rep for that area?"

"Glenn."

"Great. Alright, I'll call Dick."

"The bottom line Dick is they're both going," I said. "We just can't have violence in the workplace - gotta draw the line. Glenn didn't address a safety issue that resulted in a notifiable incident - on Safety Awareness day for God's sake."

"I'm disappointed," said Dick.

"I know. Look, I feel sorry for Mo. I know he's just bought a house."

"Alright. Can you sweeten it?"

"Two weeks' in lieu of notice," I offered.

"He needs a job Kel," said Dick.

"Four weeks. And I can throw in a positive statement of service."

"No offence but that's not worth the paper it's written on."

"What about I talk to our temp agency? See if they can get him onto their books."

"I'll put it to him," said Dick, non-committal.

In the early afternoon, Dick called back.

"Look I tried my best. But Mo's set on going for unfair dismissal."

"That's nuts," I said. "It'll be a couple of months before he sees any money. And then probably only six weeks."

"I know. But some lawyer from Morris-Cockburn has got in his ear and told him he has a great case."

"And you wonder why my boss prefers casuals," I said.

"Mo wants his job back," said Dick.

"You'd have to wonder about any lawyer who thought there was a case here. Let alone any money to be had. Don't they know only 3% of unfair dismissals get reinstated? And almost never after physical violence."

"Well it might not just be unfair dismissal," said Dick. "Try adverse action."

"What adverse action is there?"

"Mo says he reported the ice three times and the company did nothing about it."

"He reported it to Glenn!" I said, "your shop steward!" I was a little *agitato*.

"I'm not saying I've got the best helpers," conceded Dick. "But this is out of my hands. They'll argue you denied his workplace right to be heard on a safety issue."

"That's such bullshit!"

"And then there's the racial vilification."

"What racial vilification? Mo's our poster-boy for diversity for God's sake!" At this point I was standing and gesturing to the Diversity @ Work poster on my office wall, featuring Mohammed and some other diverse workers. "He's literally on the goddam poster!"

"You know what his nickname is?" asked Dick.

"Magnum?"

"Do you know why?"

"I assumed it was the Tom Selleck moustache?"

"No, apparently it's because he's brown and you'll find him in the freezer."

"Jesus."

The next morning my phone rang.

"Mohammed has had a coming to Jesus," said Neil.

"How so?" I asked.

"His wife has talked some sense into him. He wants to know if the deal is still on."

"If he sends me a signed deed I'll pay the four weeks' and give him a referral to the temp agency."

"Done," said Neil.

A few weeks later Neil and I were going through some resumes for forklift truck drivers - Mohammed and Glenn's replacements.

"So this one's a no," I said. I placed a resume on the sizeable 'no' pile.

"What about this one?" I asked. "Cold storage experience."

Neil looked over the resume. "Nah," he said, "he's been casual for the last four years. If he was any good they would have put him on the books."

"I guess."

July 2015

The Year of West Indian Lime

There was The Year of Nivea for Men, The Year of Joop and sadly, The Year of Blue Stratos (and I didn't even own a hang glider). This last January I turned forty-five. For my previous three birthdays the twins walked to the local pharmacy and bought me some kind of fragrance gift pack. This year it was to be The Year of West Indian Lime.

"Bit of an old man's fragrance?" said Suzanne (in jest, I hoped).

"Cheeky cow!" I replied in jest.

The two girls were piled on top of us in bed amid the torn wrapping paper.

"Ready for breakfast in bed Daddy-o?" asked Pip.

"Will it be served on a plate?" I asked.

"What?"

"Well I don't want to eat it off the bed!" I said.

"You silly old man, of course it will be!" said Charlotte.

The girls scuttled out to the kitchen. As we listened to various clinking and crashing, Suzanne ran her warm hand under my t-shirt. "Date tonight old man?"

"I won't say no."

The other fragrances I recall from that January were new shoe leather, sunscreen, pencil shavings and "rotten banana in schoolbag" as the twins returned to school at St Matthews.

In February, I arrived home from work one night to find Pip and Charlotte singing:

"Hearts on fire for the love of Jesus

Hearts on fire for the love of the Lord"

It was pretty harmless stuff, but it struck me I'd neglected to introduce them to rock and roll. That weekend we had a couple of hours to spare and I suggested they watch the musical *Grease*.

"It's got some great songs," I said. The girls weren't so sure. "It's mum's favourite," I offered.

"What's *Grease*?" asked Charlotte.

"Ahh, a bit like hair mousse," I said moving things along and loading the DVD.

In March, Pip and Charlotte were invited to a classmate's party and I witnessed the arms race that is girl's birthday parties rise to a new level. We headed out empty handed because instead of a present we were asked to make a donation to the *Royal Children's Hospital*. I was okay with this because it saved me a trip to the shops to buy some crappy toys. Walking up to the party house we saw a small herd of Shetland ponies being groomed on the footpath.

"A bit early in the year to go straight to nukes," I said to Albert, father of one of the Kiaras (there were two in the class).

"I thought the donation was a nice touch," he said, "but this equine extravaganza? I'm not sure what it says?"

"It says, *we don't need any of your crappy toys thanks very much*," I replied.

In April, Anthony Browne caused me a Grade-3 hamstring tear (the bastard). It happened in the father's race at the St Matthew's sports carnival.

"Are you sure?" asked Suzanne.

The main problem with being forty-five is *all* of your prime athletic memories are well over twenty years old.

"No worries," I replied, as I trotted down to the start line on my forty-five year old feet.

I lined up with the other fathers. I got a reasonable false start but was immediately surprised by the pace. I remember thinking, *I better put my foot down if I'm going to win this thing*. Anthony Browne wasn't in the race, or course, but as the author of the children's book *My Dad* (I'd been reading it to the girls for the best part of ten years) he had subconsciously led me to this place and time (for those unfamiliar with the text, it features a dad who wins the father's race at sports day, *easily*).

At the forty-five metre mark there was an audible pop as my right hamstring let go. In the next stride I went down, heavily.

"Why did Daddy-o fall down?" Charlotte kept asking as I limped to the car carrying the picnic rug and fold-up chairs - agony on so many levels. Fortunately St Matthew's is a small school and this happened in front of only four hundred people.

In May, we drove over to my mother-in-law's house for lunch.

"Eye spy with my little eye, something beginning with W," said Pip.

"Window?"

"No."

"Wrapper?"

"Give us a clue," demanded Charlotte.

"I already gave you a clue, it starts with W," giggled Pip.

"Good one Pip," I said.

"Don't egg her on," said Suzanne, stifling a grin.

"No! You need to give us real clue," protested Charlotte.

"Alright. It's outside the car," replied Pip.

"Weather?"

"No."

"Wind?"

"Windscreen?"

"No."

"No."

"Wipers?"

"No."

"Give up?" asked Pip.

"Alright."

"World!" declared Pip triumphantly.

You can't argue with that, I thought. Our silence was broken by the rumbling of some old 'fifties cars as we pulled up at the traffic lights.

"Check it out girls, hot rods," I said.

"Cool," said Charlotte.

"They're shiny," said Pip.

"They look like the cars in *Grease*," said Charlotte.

"That's right honey," I said. "*Go greased lightning you're burning up the quarter mile*," I sang.

"Oh please," said Suzanne. "Travolta is rolling over in his grave."

"I don't think he's dead yet," I offered.

As we pulled away from the lights I kept pace with a 1955 Pontiac, open top.

"Daddy-o?" asked Pip.

"Yes honey?"

"Is it a real pussy wagon?" she asked (innocently, it seemed).

I made that snorting noise you make at times like this.

"Maybe a bit too young for *Grease*?" said Suzanne.

"Oh look," I said, "we're nearly at Grandma's."

In June, supercouple Albert and Li An separated. It came as a shock to everyone except Albert. I was standing on the sideline watching the girls play soccer against St Cecilia's. It was about what you expect from Under-10 soccer: a knot of

twenty kids in the centre of the pitch kicking each other in the shins, in light rain.

"Hey Jeff," said Albert. He joined me under my golf umbrella.

"Hey Albert," I said, "that woman still giving you grief?"

Albert owns a medical clinic and is always bending my ear about his personnel issues. I'm a psychologist so I try to be helpful. One day I might get really sick.

"Why, what did you hear?" asked Albert.

"Your practice manager?" I asked.

"Oh, that." He looked crestfallen. "No. Look I suppose I should tell you Li An and I aren't quite together."

"None of us have it quite together, mate," I said, "that's the first thing you need to know about marriage."

"I've moved out," he said.

"Shit, mate. I don't know what to say," I said.

"Albert and Li An have separated," I said to Suzanne the minute we got back from soccer.

"What? Are you sure?"

"Albert just told me."

Suzanne and Li An had been on the Saint Matthew's fundraising committee together. Suzanne had found Li An formidable of intelligence, superior of stamina and flatter of stomach. *I don't know how she does it, married to a doctor blah, blah.*

"They seemed to have it sorted," said Suzanne in amazement. "She's got this whole *perfection* thing going."

I couldn't be sure, but I think I saw a glimmer of triumph in Suzanne's eyes. She shook her head immediately as if shaking off the thought.

"No, you don't wish that on anyone," she said solemnly to herself.

I had the strangest image in my head at that moment; our scruffy family mutt had just beaten Albert and Li An's miniature schnauzer in a dog show.

"No, of course not," I replied.

But it did make me think how often we threatened to throw our marriage out in the heat of an argument - as if it wasn't the most important thing in each of our lives - as if we could recreate anything like this whole from the sum of other parts.

In July, what with one thing and another, Suzanne and I failed to get together in any intimate way. The root cause was a Channel Ten programmer who shifted Hawaii Five-0 to Thursday night. Thursday night was no good.

"Bastard!" I said (once I realised).

"What's up sweetie?" asked Suzanne.

"Hawaii Five-0," I said. "It's always been on Wednesday."

The girls looked up from their homework, bemused (what with Daddy-o swearing and all).

"Any chance you could role model how an adult deals with something that's not the end of the word?" said Suzanne (only slightly sarcastically).

"You don't understand," I said.

What Suzanne didn't understand (yet) was Hawaii Five-0 was positively correlated with our sex life. Let me explain. Suzanne mostly watches home renovation and reality cooking shows. Some nights it made me wonder what we had in common. I, on the other hand couldn't bring myself to watch another bathroom makeover (I'd done three real ones with my own hands, which is sufficient for one lifetime). The only TV show we watched together was Hawaii Five-0, on Wednesday, on the couch, together. Not Monday when Pip has karate. Not Tuesday when Charlotte has swimming. Not Thursday when Suzanne has Pilates. And not Friday when we're all too tired for anything. I explained this to Suzanne. If I'd had a whiteboard marker handy I probably would have drawn a diagram.

She looked at me for a long moment.

"We can still have date night on Wednesday," she said (non-sarcastically, it seemed).

"Are you sure?"

"I'll put it on the schedule," she said.

I was about to say, *you mean it's not on your f-ing schedule already?* (but thought better of it, of course).

In August, I met Albert for breakfast at *The Resident*. It was probably more of a beer meeting, but I didn't know anyone who went out to the pub anymore. Besides, early morning was the only part of *my* schedule I had any flexibility over, provided I got up early enough.

"Did you know divorcees are more likely to die of heart disease than married couples?" he began.

"On that cheery note," I said, shaking his hand. I looked at the menu. "You going to have something?" I asked.

"Nah, just coffee."

He looked gaunt.

"So, no chance of you getting back together?" I asked eventually.

"No. And actually I'm getting used to the idea."

"Right."

"You know what they say about the truth, mate?"

"I will set you free?" I said.

"Yeah but first it will piss you off."

"I gotta say Albert, it used to piss *me* off a bit when Suzanne held you up to me as an example. You know, pointing out some shortcoming of mine."

"I got sick of having *myself* pointed out as an example," said Albert. "Wasn't it enough that I was holding down a good job as a GP? No, Li An wanted me to open my own clinic, which I did. And which made me miserable. I just wanted to treat the

patients I enjoyed treating. I didn't want to be a businessman. Then it's the big house. Then she wants an Audi Q7."

The coffees arrived. I nodded.

"Yeah," I said trying to make a joke, "what is it with small Asian women and large German luxu-barges? Don't they know how much it costs to change a timing belt?"

"I'm also an Audi," said Albert meaningfully.

"What?"

"I'm also an Audi. An accoutrement. Another box to be ticked. She started with the doctor husband, tick. Then she wants the successful businessman, tick. Then the big house. You get it?"

"How did it come to a head?" I asked.

"One night I arrived home and she was off to some school committee meeting. You know, breezes past me in the doorway looking fantastic. I looked at her going out the door and thought, *who is this person who I don't have sex with anymore?*"

"I see."

Albert looked reflective as he stirred his coffee. "How do you keep it fresh?" he asked, almost as an afterthought.

I wasn't sure I had an answer. The truth was I'd made love to the same woman for thirteen years and sometimes I wasn't sure if we were getting any better at it. Suzanne did call me Mr Reliable (but maybe that meant Mr Predictable). Some days I worried I was losing the knack.

"Um, well, Suzanne still likes doing it in the shower," I offered.

"And you don't?"

(Lately I found myself worrying about slipping). "I'm not as flexible as I used to be."

"Right."

"And my knees hurt after a while."

"I see."

"And my right ear keeps filling up with water."

In September, we went to lunch at *The Langham* for Father's Day. Pip and Charlotte left the table to browse the deserts.

"How's Daddy-o enjoying his Father's Day?" asked Suzanne.

"Please call me Jeff," I said (something bugged me about my wife calling me by the same name the kids used).

"Okay Jeff," she said (mildly annoyed, it seemed).

"I don't want to stuff this up," I said.

"Lunch?"

"No, us. This Albert and Li An thing. He *looks* shocking. He's not going to be right for years. I don't want to stuff up what we have."

"Is that a clinical term? It *would* be ironic if the psychologist *stuffed up* his primary relationship."

"It's not funny," I said. "Are we going to make it?"

Suzanne took my hand, "I promise not to stuff it up. How about you?"

"I do," I replied.

In October, I watched a middle aged Chinese woman pay \$1.4 million at auction for a modest house in our neighbourhood. It was something to behold. She didn't speak English so there was an Asian realtor standing next to her telling her how much she was spending. Also standing next to her was her husband holding a large Louis Vuitton handbag (presumably not his). I remember thinking *henpecked* was probably a word found in every language. It was a record sale for the neighbourhood and afterwards the neighbours gathered to discuss the significance.

"Where is all this money coming from?" asked Helen, our Greek neighbour. "I thought the Chinese were only allowed to take fifty thousand dollars out of the country."

Roy, the local *Jim's Mowing* franchisee, chimed in, "it's globalisation. You can't keep buying all your stuff from China and not expect some of them to get rich eventually. That's what globalisation really means, if you live in a nice part of the first world, eventually the river of Chinese cash floods your neighbourhood."

"I suppose it's okay if you already own a house," said Helen, "keeps the property value up. But first home buyers haven't got a chance."

"The only retirement strategy I can see," said Roy, "is you hold your property until you're ready to retire and cash in to some overseas investor to buy yourself a nursing home spot."

I watched the husband follow his wife into the house to sign the paperwork. He was still carrying the handbag.

In November, Pip was admitted to hospital. There was bleeding on her little brain. She'd fallen from the monkey bars at school (it's a wonder it doesn't happen more often). At first the teacher thought both girls were hurt, but Charlotte was simply lying down with twin empathy. I prayed for the first time since Suzanne's dad was dying - I mean I really prayed. It was the simplest prayer a father can make; *please let us be together for as long as possible.*

Afterwards we were all in Pip's hospital room. She was bandaged up, absolutely still, angelic. Charlotte was cuddled up next to her, they were both sleeping. Suzanne was sitting on my lap in the visitor chair with her head against my neck.

"Should we take Charlotte home?" I asked.

"No. We're all here," said Suzanne.

In December, we slept in on a Friday morning. It was near the end of the school year and we were all going to fall over the finish line. Suzanne and I had tried an unscheduled

Thursday night date after Hawaii Five-0, making it two date nights on one week. I looked at the clock: 8.10 am, twenty minutes to get ready for school.

"Shit, we're late," I said.

"Argh, the girls have an excursion," said Suzanne from the depths of sleep. "I haven't got their back packs down from the attic yet."

"Let's just take them in late," I said rolling over.

"No, they'll miss the excursion bus."

Suzanne was up now, hair falling down over her face. She pulled on a pair of jeans over her slim brown legs.

"Come on," she said, "we know how to do this."

September 2015

END

About Jeff Burns



Jeff Burns lives in Melbourne and writes at, you guessed it, the kitchen table.

He writes stories in a three-act screen structure exploring modern issues and themes of manhood, mortality and misunderstanding. His stories are meant to be funny, usually.

In his day job, Jeff works for a British multinational.

Jeff has attended a number of universities where he studied arts and business. He is also a graduate of the School of Artillery (now there's a story).

His literary heroes are TC Boyle, Tom Wolf and Simon Winchester.

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