

Joker

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The MCG was black except for the spotlight searing the stage, perfect for sneaking into late. An usher whitened the way with a Maglite. Everyone must've thought Guy was a little kid looking for his olds, his big, searching eyes said he was. Of course the usher was taller than Guy, everyone was. The usher shone the torch on the big girl, who reached out and punched him.

‘Get the light off me, retard.’ She couldn’t make her meaty voice quiet. No one was sitting behind her large head. ‘Good to see ya, matey.’

‘Sup Gai.’

Even in the black, Gail stood out, wide shoulders, head like a bucket. It looked as if she could be one person sitting on another’s lap. Guy had shown up a good quarter hour early, wearing his *2001: A Space Odyssey* t-shirt, but he’d been chain-smoking by a wet dumpster out back, shivering in short sleeves, wishing he’d brought his pipe, stalling, until he heard the first applause. He wasn’t here to see the guest comedian, a dude from a funny-talking country who was selling himself cheaply, emptying himself, doing bits about his culture, selling out.

The comedian on stage spoke more loudly into the mic, some bit about airport security now. Gail looked behind her, hoping the light would come on, the red one that looked like an eye, the light that told a comedian their time was up.

‘My beloved,’ Guy whispered, tugging a chair under his arse, ‘I’m late as. Just got here.’

‘I’m late too! Should I keep it?’

‘Who’s the father? Not my cocksucker brother I hope.’

Gail shunted her chair away from Guy.

‘Too far, sorry,’ Guy whispered.

‘You’re a joker.’

‘Oi, we gonna get up tonight? It’s Open Mic after Jasdeep’s been.’

‘I think... I dunno. We did last time. I feel dumb. Let’s just watch.’ Her short hair made her head look even huger. Her chin was wattled to her clavicle. Her eyes had heavy, unimpressed lids.

‘You got leave coming up.’

A man ahead of them turned around, tutted, turned away again.

‘Don’t you have leave saved up, Gai?’ His voice was thin, and his neck and wrists. His jaw was pointy. ‘We both do. We should do something, go somewhere. Camp-workshop-type thing, out in the forest y’know?’

The man ahead of them blew a *shush* over the top of his middle finger, double-insult.

‘Bro,’ Guy said firmly, trying not to squeal, ‘We honestly don’t know anywhere that sells 14 year old trannies at this time of night. Try the shop on the corner. Try Thailand.’

The crowd around them turned and snorted. They covered their mouths to keep their beer down. Their bodies faced the comic onstage; their ears were twisted back towards Guy and Gail. The professional, the one people had paid money for, had to stop his set. He stood there dabbing his brow with his Hawaiian shirt, keeping an eye on the red light at the rear of the theatre, above Guy’s and Gail’s heads, the light which said when a comedian’s time was up.

‘I am just waiting for young couple to agreeing on dowry,’ Jasdeep said in his tropical accent, and wholesome

couples chuckled and half-turned their tennis-heads back to the professional.

Gail said loudly, 'If we *were* together, Jasdeep, Guy'd be a frickin' lucky man. With me, he gets a free upsize to large.'

'Big Gail...' Jasdeep said, and peered into the twilight. 'Where your husband is?'

'He's not my husband.'

'Where your man is, Big Gail?'

'I know where mine is. Where's yours?'

There were clapping palms in the laughs this time, and they saw some people clean the steam off their glasses. Time slowed for Gail and Guy. They had been called off the bench. They sat up straight to let air into their lungs, as a second spotlight dipped into the audience and found them.

Then eyes settled on Guy, lured by his boy-voice. He was obviously putting the voice on.

'What was the joke Dad?' he pipped, 'Can you tell us at tuck-in time?!"

More claps, and spectators patted their clenching abs. Gail shook Guy's shoulders and whispered '*Keep going!*'

'Guy, namaste.' Jasdeep bowed with the mic squished between his palms. 'Lady and gentlemen, this little man, he is pervert, his chromosomes they are XXX!'

'JASDEEP. That's physically impossible. Watch out for red lights, eh.'

'Yeah, epic fail, bro,' Guy continued, 'Chromosomes only come in pairs. Basic biology. You're not funny. The accent kills, but the rest of you's not funny.'

'I am serious,' said Jasdeep, squinting into the darkness, 'I can see you have not Hal. Who you are bringing with you tonight, Gail?'

Gail couldn't shrink, so she put a big hand over her

eyes. 'He's just my friend....'

'Hi, Big Gail! I am speaking you! Biology is pair, should you not be with your fiancé?'

Each handclap was a slap.

'GO FUCK AN ELEPHANT!' Guy swatted the tea light off his table and stood.

'Speaking of elephant, lady and gentlemen,' Jasdeep continued, grinning and sweating, 'In my country, we are worshipping very big large—'

'DON'T YOU SAY IT, BRO.'

Some people were thumping the tabletop. Others were thumbing the Record button on their Samsung Galaxies.

'Gail, you are sitting there like college sweetheart. Hal, if he is finding out about this, he is not impressed. *Big Gail, hi!* Mr. Guy, he is driving you here?'

'Yeah, that's it,' Guy sighed, flailing his hands, urging the spotlight away from them like a wasp, 'I'm just the driver. Leave it, man.'

'Funny you are driver,' Jasdeep said, scratching his head, 'I did not know you are having your licence for forklift.'

*

'Fuck happened there?'

Her body and Guy's faced out from the balcony. They dumped themselves on their elbows and their knees sagged. In the rain, no one bothered them. It was half time and the dry parts of the balcony were shared with comrades who tried to quicken the dull expanses between sets with booze and smokes and speed. The jokers exposed themselves with skimpy t-shirts, low-cut tops, tattoos of Hanna-Barbera characters. They passed jests around like spliffs. Jasdeep was at the centre of a circle and Gail's big ears were trained on him. Jasdeep was giving his cellphone number out to everyone.

Guy's eyes were level with Gail's huge breasts. 'Fuck

you mean 'fuck happened there'? Jasdeep's set, not ours, dude can say what he likes. He didn't even mean it.'

Guy sucked a balloonful of wet, smoky air into his little lungs. 'Honestly, if I had a knife—'

'You're all talk, Guy, you're a joker. Rubber knife is all you should have on ya, little matey. You're like that little Nick-Nack guy from that James Bond one with Christopher Lee in it, when Roger Moore was getting real old. The sixtieth one with *Gold* in the title. *Golden Years*, or whatever.'

'Don't you just love it how we kill when we're not even doing a set?'

Dew settled on their skin like flies. Guy sucked on his inhaler. 'We could've padded it out if we'd kept on talking, dropped our websites in and stuff, steada letting that dickbutt get the last laugh. Repartee, like those old Muppets up in the balcony.'

'What's the deal with them anyway, were they an item?'

'Brokebalcony Mountain,' Gail sniggered and wiped the moisture off her face with the sleeve of her towel-sized cardigan.

'Anyway, it wasn't our time,' Guy said, 'You done a joke, I done a joke. Back to—'

'—back to starin' at my tits again?' Gail produced a lighter, fished for her ciggies by herself, had to light it herself while Guy fidgeted.

'Your tits, I was, yeah.' He put his porcelain hands on the railing. 'The alley rang, by the way. They want their bowling balls back.'

'Rofl.'

'Oi, anyway, comedy camp: we should fully do it, just go for it. Get away from all this city junk.'

'Absolutely, all these hospitals and schools and infrastructure are just clutter.'

‘Don’t be a dick. Cities are, like, full of, I dunno... people judging you.’

‘You’re not serious.’

After a long silence, Guy said, ‘Okay then, I’m not. We’ll stay here. Do the same as we’ve been doin for, like, four years.’

Gail swept her handbag over her shoulder, stuck her cigarette in her mouth and bulldozed through the crowd, making sure the glowing tip of the smoke brushed Jasdeep’s face. Tall men stepped aside.

She rang her fiancé to pick her up. ‘Hurry,’ she said, ‘Flat tack... No, I’m not *joking*.’

Although it was after midnight, she slipped her sunglasses on as she got in the car.

‘What now?’ said her fiancé.

‘Just drive.’

At the lights, a man in a Hawaiian shirt sauntered across the road, and Gail gasped.

‘JESUS, GAIL – what?’

‘Ah... He stole my handbag!’

‘Him? That Currymuncher?’ Hal jerked the handbrake, cracked his door open. The car behind them honked.

‘You’re positive?’

Gail nodded.

Hal tore the shirt off his own chest and buttons tinkled on the shiny black road. He walked onto Jasdeep’s ankles then punched the man so hard his body switched off.

Jasdeep’s legs knotted and he landed on his elbow and face. His arms looked like shoelaces. Hal jumped on him once then threw his unbuttoned shirt at the honking car and got back in behind the wheel and took the handbrake off.

‘Sorry, my bad,’ Gail said, putting her sunglasses away, ‘My handbag’s right here.’

*

Gail sometimes sent emails reading a;slkgdfa;lksdjf;lkaj, because her fingertips were cucumbers on the keyboard, and it didn't matter what she wrote: Guy would never leave her hanging. Guy transferred all of her good emails, the ones with winking emoticons, to a reserved folder. The secret password for the folder was 16F. If Gail CC'd an email to anybody, Guy would delete it. Only the private ones were keepable. He was grateful that his bro, Hal, refused to use email. Hal was all about directness - people bought Fords off Hal because Hal cut out the bullpies. It said so on his business card.

Gail and Guy worked on different levels and never managed to find each other in the foyer so Guy practiced his comedy on customers. The plans he and his team sold over the phone changed every fifteen days, two exciting new plans per month, one business, one residential. Occasionally they couldn't hustle enough and were left with a target at the end of a fifteen day period, so then Guy didn't mind begging and pleading customers to accept his offer. They had no idea he was just bein' a joker. He exceeded his sales and service targets even though he didn't really mean to.

Guy, Team Leader, was the person they always saved a *Mornin'* for. All of his memos were gut-busters which would make heads rise out of cubicles and nod and show teeth. Good, dry humour, suitable for the company newsletter, his first writing gig. His salary warmed three bank accounts, just sitting there, no girls to spend it on.

This one webpage said there were camping grounds an hour outside the city, in the bush, where the trees outsized the buildings. Gail said she had some crabs she needed to release into the wild; Guy said his trouser snake needed to be let out. Guy wrote a bit about Adam and Eve,

fiddled with it, rewrote and rearranged it, practiced reading it aloud in the disabled toilet stall, scheduled it for sending, then deleted it, mashing his eyebrows between his thumb and forefinger.

They ignored their In Trays and exchanged comments about camp, back when they were 12, when Gail's Summer Holiday boobs had made her unable to win the cross country and gave Guy a staring problem, when they realised they were the only people in class brainy enough to enjoy movies about sharp people overcoming dumb computers that knew everything. Neither had set foot in mud since school and neither of them had any camping gear, which made things twice as hilarious. Gail said there was some bush in her pants to practice on, and Guy whistled at the email and said 'Crumbs,' and went to make a Milo, bubbly-headed, envisioning it.

While the Rheem boiled, some muted person in the kitchen asked about his day and he said, 'Pardon?' then clicked his fingers and scampered back to his keyboard.

- *We'll need to share a tent. Need a Superking tent for your big feet.*
- *I've never seen you pitch a tent before, Big Boy ;o)*
- *Serious – it'll be way cheaper 2 share a tent if dat kewl*
- *Ur a joker*

He saved her email, took his jersey off and placed it over his lap. He had to go out and chainsmoke three ciggies, lighting each fresh one with an orange cinder from the one before. He joked to some giggling girls that chainsmoking was sensible because it saved on lighters. They asked which floor he was on. They couldn't believe he was THE boy that wrote the newsletter, O-M-G, I have to add you!

He couldn't concentrate for the rest of the morning,

not even while interviewing a new workie, hair like shiny plastic tightened and moulded over her head, hard tits in white embroidered shirt, skin that glowed like it had been roasted. The new workie kept touching Guy's fingers when he popped his knuckles.

‘Your hands are so *cute!*’

*

Gail tunnelled through her nine hours arranging press releases and placing advertorials. She was in control of any telephone call, could get away with ringing executives in church, could remember their children's judo lessons and make the execs grin and chuckle and authorise. On the phone, she sounded like a mature woman, not an oversized girl.

Oh, totally, she told clients, I heart kids. I loooooooove the things that come outta their mouths. The clients would chuckle and say, ‘What’ve you got against kids?’

‘The bumper of my car.’

‘Big Gai does it again. You’re gonna be huge.’

‘Already am, mate.’

When Guy’s emails plopped into her inbox, she received alerts on her phone. Her fiancé Hal’s last email had been a photo taken behind a cat’s raised tail with the word PUSSY. The Spam box caught it.

After he’d eaten, instead of watching while Hal threatened the weather girl, Gail wriggled her wrist out of his clasp and checked her email on the home PC, and yarned online to Guy, and took her dinner out of the microwave and scoffed it because Hal said she wasn’t allowed to eat in front of him, it was Revolting, gave him Crook Guts. After chatting, she deleted her chat history.

Her boss knocked on her cubicle and Gail flinched.

‘I’m in the shower, Dave.’

David chuckled. ‘Japan happy?’

‘Nippon is-a very prease-u, san.’
‘How’s Hal? Boys win on Saturday?’
‘I can’t remember.’

The boss took his hand off the partition and put it on his hip. Hal was a hero at Gail’s work. Hal’d filled a gap and within one season the social soccer team had come second. He made a good goalie – the ball stayed the fuck away from him.

‘Presumably you see him play all the time though? All becomes a blur, I imagine.’

Gail kept her left hand on the keyboard, half-invested, and said ‘Not really? I’m mostly busy writing gags in my jokebook. For the comedy?’ She saved a draft of the email she was composing. Her chair whined as she spun on it. ‘He’s been to my shows, like, twice and he takes bloody headphones so he can listen to the cricket.’

‘Shows?’

‘I’m a comedian.’

‘I thought you grew out of that?’

‘No, it pays too much, in fact I’ve bought this building, that’s the only reason I’m still here.’

The boss released some gas from his lungs. ‘D’you think you could put that in the newsletter somehow? It’d lighten up the junior pool meeting at—’

‘Yeah yup, absolutely, Dave. I love writing cheap giggles for the juniors when I’m busy.’ Gail’s chair groaned.

The boss looked at Gail’s back, almost said something, then flapped a print-out in front of Gail’s face. He stood there until Gail had read it.

‘What are you doing, Dave?’

‘Um, what this says, Gail—’

‘Says I have leave I’ve got to take,’ Gail nodded. ‘Dave, what are you doing? I’m afraid, Dave. Stop, Dave.’

‘Don’t you want a getaway?’

‘What about my emails, Dave?’
‘Can you not get Hal to check them?’
‘Right, Dave.’
The boss walked a metre away, then stopped.
‘Were you groaning at me a moment ago?’
‘No.’
‘Is there something the matter with your chair?’
‘No.’
‘Most people’s chairs don’t... Anyway, before I forget – it turns out there’s another humorist in the building, on level eight. The newsletter guy, actually. D’you know him at all?’

*

Guy did sets at the Melanoma Comedy Grotto on the following two Mondays, and the crowds were up, and some hotties had begun to worship him, just because he was elevated. He was relieved Gail didn’t see the first set, his jokes were about how you *have* to wear a wife beater, you can’t beat your wife in a suit, that’s just wrong. His tinny voice made it hilarious, but he wanted some feedback about the writing. He couldn’t see Gail in the audience at the next gig, or the one after that, and all the adrenaline in his system turned to spoiled milk when she didn’t show. That girl from work was always with her posse in the front row, but their bodies just blended in with everyone else’s, really.

He couldn’t catch Gail’s Tuesday night sets – he was stuck working late, getting time and a half for training the new girl. Her name was Daisy Dao and she insisted that only Guy train her, and squeezed his hand and told him she should, like, *SO* paint his nails, and she stood behind him when he wet his tea bags and whispered into his ear, and her lips brushed his ear lobes and he shivered.

Staff Drinks across the road on Fridays felt like he

was staying at work, not getting away and chilling out, he couldn't even listen to himself as the jokes came out of his mouth, bits he'd written for the next newsletter, bits Gail would have him discard without a second thought.

Everyone kept comparing him to Joe Pesci. He had to squeak even higher so they could hear him over their own guffaws. The adoring Daisy-eyes never blinked when Guy met them. His phone suddenly buzzed and he dropped it as he tried to answer it.

'Was that your girlfriend on the phone?' Her voice was her wet nose in his ear.

'What, Gail? I wish. Nah, just a stupid thing they want me to do. Telethon and some ads.'

When he excused himself to pee, Daisy followed Guy into the men's room and wrapped her hands over his eyes. Her kissing was hard and her ribs bumped his. It felt strange for Guy to lean down, he'd always practiced kissing upwards.

'My girlfriends totally wanna fuck you,' she gasped, tugging on his belt. It was a small, thin belt, half a dozen extra holes punched into it.

*

Hal only came up to the realtor's shoulder pads, but he kept staring at her with his burnt eyes until she looked down. Gail took over, made the real estate agent laugh discretely into her handkerchief, and then it was too easy, getting laughs from the agent was like yanking a roll of toilet paper until it spun. Hal said the kitchen was too wee for Gail, and she drew her feet closer together.

Hal's little bro joined them on the deck for a sunset beer. Guy nodded slowly as Hal worked himself into a standing rant about someone laughing at him on the car yard and thinking he's all that just 'cause the prick's built like a fuckin' slam-dunkin' fuckin' basketball fuckin' player,

while Gail's arm snaked behind her and fetched her jokebook and pen from her handbag.

They sat on the deck until the ice cubes had melted into the rum and they couldn't taste the alcohol any more. They flicked can tabs onto what would be Gail's flower bed and Hal pinched Gail's flab and told his Little Bro that he missed having him around. 'Who else am I supposed to clown around with?'

Gail stopped scribbling notes for a second, then lit a cigarette and inhaled hard. Hal yanked the packet of Rothmans out of her hands and rattled it. 'Good smokes, these are, cept for the girl germs on 'em. I gave that muck up a ways back, but Rothmans is what you want. They're the Ford of cigarettes, I swear to God. Have one, little bro.'

'I'm good, ta.' Guy pulled out a Marlboro Light and lit it delicately. Hal leaned over, slopping beer on the deck, and ripped it out of Guy's mouth, biffing it onto the deck and stomping it. He stuck a Rothman in Guy's lips and resumed sitting between them.

'Aw, and love, I forgot to tell ya – I jotted your name down for the social basketball, made you a Forward.'

'Oh, I'm overjoyed, but why? You short on players, Hall? Too short, is that it?'

'Stuff off I am.' Hal stabbed his thumb at Guy, 'He is.' Hal seized Gail with his arm while he leaned back and said to Guy, 'She's gonna gimme some bleeding massive kids. Mum woulda bin disappointed in you. Can't ya get a missus?'

*

Each time she sank a three-pointer, or slam dunked, Hal pulled her neck down and headbutted her, grinning, and Gail winced. Hal punched a lot of people in the guts, everyone was always standing over him, they weren't playing fair. When men on the team asked Gail what she

did outside of playing basketball, Hal came over and told them, 'She hasn't a clue what she's up to.'

Hal told everybody Gail wouldn't move to the company's Gold Coast branch, to a six figure slot, because she was too tall for the plane.

'He's not joking,' Gail added without blinking, 'Last time they had to stand the plane on its tail so I could fit in there. Damn thing had to fly vertical like a space shuttle.'

The mouths of the basketball crew became yawning black holes and their teeth showed and they slapped their guts and knees. Hal folded his block-arms and snorted and wiped the maddening sweat out of his eyes.

Where'dya get this one? She's priceless! She's a joker! She's gonna be HUGE!

'Honestly though,' they said, swallowing their hiccups, wiping their eyes, 'How come you haven't moved?'

The night they bought the house, Hal slobbered into Gail's breasts like a dog with a trough of water. She gave in and devoured him and came quickly. She felt like a loose screw, pulled out and drilled back into its place. His hair made her nose tickle; his head only came up to her chin. 'I need you,' he growled into the side of her face as he sucked at it and she felt electricity surge into her extremities.

In the cold hours, he came back to dig her and eat her again and Gail lay there and thought about the house and longed for a cigarette. Gail was Wile E. Coyote, and the mortgage was a ten-tonne weight. There was a blackboard on the back of her eyelids and she wrote jokes on it.

*

'Sure you don't want a brandy? Guy-sy, Guysy, have a brandy, do... You're half thirsty for a taste of... uh.. Tullamore Dew... ?'

Guy laughed and said, 'Thanks but nah. Gotta drive.' He pulled back his sleeve and looked at his watch.

‘Tullamore Dew’s not... never mind.’

‘He can’t handle his piss,’ added Hal. ‘God it smells foul. Tip it out, Gail.’

‘Very well.’ She threw her head back and tossed the tea-coloured syrup down her throat then poured another glass.

The low sun drenched the dining table in yolk. Hal was Flippin Stoked With The Flippin Pad and he was wearing his best Bathurst shirt, the three collar buttons all done up, although the shirt didn’t match his red eyes. Gail just liked the balcony, with its pot plants to ditch cigarette butts in. Buying a place with a balcony got rid of the disgusting cash which stuck to her and made Hal open her bank statements.

Forks tinkled plates. Daisy licked her napkin and dabbed Guy’s lips for him. Guy kept his eyes out of Hal’s. Gail was beside Hal, but her chair was turned away from him.

‘You ain’t sat at the grown-ups’s table since we were tiny,’ Hal said, smashing the silence. ‘Oh – hang on! He still is!’

‘Every man was once a child,’ Guy muttered.

Hal wiped the sweat out of his eyes, jabbed his knife into his fish, held it aloft and jiggled it. ‘It’s easy to catch em when they’re small.’ He bit into the wobbling pink, swallowed without chewing and said, ‘So how long yous garn inna bush for?’

Gail’s fingers crushed her little glass of brandy. She was sitting nearest the balcony door, knees aimed outside. Her cigarettes sat on the tabletop and she fingered them.

‘I don’t know if we’re conclusively – ’

‘We need to write material, clear our heads. Practice. Please, Harold.’ Her spine was humped, her jaw gritted.

‘Don’t call us Harold. Sound like Mum, you do.’ His fists had no fingers. He took another bite of soft flesh. Guy

noticed that Hal didn't have a fork. 'You know you talk too much,' he said to Daisy, who was thumbing the phone on her lap, 'Anyone ever tell ya that?'

'I'm, er, forced to concur with her, Hal,' Guys said, 'It's hard to practice at home, what with our sets being—'

'What with ya what? Ya *sex* being?'

'Sets, I think he—'

'Gail: the bros are talking.' He shook his fish at her, flicking her with lemon juice. 'We're talking, eh Napoleon! You hearin' us down there?!"

The crunching of fish bones made everyone study the dresser, the ceiling, the ornamental plates. Hal sucked his mouthful down his throat and said, 'Well this is pretty average. Gai, I thought you said you'd cream your pants if he came over? That was another joke, I'm guessin?'

Guy went to take a piss and came back to table silent except for the sound of Hal sucking the marrow from his fish bones. 'You know you piss like a girl? That's ya fourth piss tonight, I bin counting. You're taking the piss!'

Guy was glad that he had to sneeze. His laughs were too expensive to spend on Hal.

'He's takin the piss, I said!' Under the table, he kicked Daisy's shin. 'You heard, eh?!"

'That's very clever,' Gail said into her glass. 'Boys and girls, did you know Hal usually eats ear wax for dinner?'

'Know what your problem is?' Hal turned his whole seat so that he faced Gail, and jiggled his fish at her. 'You take nothing seriously, not a one. You won't even buy proper gear for your little camping trip.'

Guy cleared his throat. 'With the camping, Harold, presumably Gail's told you, Hal, you're most welcome to—'

'I know I'm welcome, I know I'm welcome. Everyone knows I'm welcome, even a retard knows that. Should come out with my knives and .22 and show you Townies

what's what. Eh, you, oi! Whatcha reckon?"

Daisy didn't look up as she spoke. 'I don't want him alone with a woman, that's dodgy. Sorry, no offence.'

'None taken,' Hal said.

Gail excused herself, took the cinnamon rolls out of the oven and put them in the microwave and went onto the deck to smoke.

'Who'd wanna be stuck with her smokin' all day and night,' Hal went, and kicked Daisy's shin more softly this time.

'I'm goin outside for a smoke,' Guy went.

*

At nights, Guy put his mouth to the unjudging lips of his bong, and his belly whined and he scoffed sugar, but apart from that, he didn't eat. He sucked cigarettes down to the filter and tried to re-light them. He had to stay addicted. There'd been the Telethon and those adverts, sure, but his pay hadn't gone up in a while, and Daisy's probationary period had ended and her salary was nudging Guy's. He kept recommending her for promotions which would take her to a different level, tried to get her and Gail to switch roles. He told her he'd been offered a residential gig at a casino in Australia. Daisy should go ahead, he said, take that role at the Perth branch, he'd follow her over in a month or two.

Because he had nothing in his guts, the beers before the Monday set fizzed up into his lobes and trickled down the back of his throat to make his words ripple and warp and run freely, like they did when he fell asleep with his face on the keyboard, chatting to Gail on Facebook. He told Daisy he had to be ready backstage twelve hours before the show, so she'd better not contact him the whole day. Daisy waited in the front row, hands neatly coupled on her lap.

Outside, the nude trees shivered in the darkness and

the door of the MCG kept slamming. Everyone's necks were scarved or bearded and they started sweating inside. The stage was a bonfire. Up on the catwalk, as the MC adjusted the lighting, he told Guy to make the audience forget it was winter outside, and winked.

'And, listen, hey, tell Big Gail there's a couple producers wanna have a word with her. They're doing a ladies' comedy show.'

Guy burped and played with his Marlboro Lights and said, 'Well, she *has* been doing this for a while... '

'Nah nah,' the MC said, waving his hands, 'Nah you don't wanna put her on screen, God no. Writing role, more like.'

Guy lurched, met his toes halfway down the stairs, spilling beer from his bottle.

'Oh, and d'you see Jaz on TV?'

'What?'

'Jasdeep – y'know, Indian fulla – got his own show. Man's here tonight, you should meet him. D'you not watch TV?'

'Nah. Don't wanna see myself again.'

'Just be sure to tell Big Gai about the thing.'

The MC hefted a podium along the stage. Li'l Guy was introduced as one of the MCG Mondays Rising Stars, and the MC also introduced Guy's girlfriend, spotlighting her, making her official, sealing them together in a hot sandwich maker. 'You've seen him on the Bright Sparks Telethon 4 Life!' the MC said, and heads nodded, then the MC made a joke about how Guy was here to stand up for the little guy. Guy trudged across the stage, dribbling beer foam, took a long time to lower the microphone to his level, and people chuckled. They shrieked and wiped away tears when he twisted the mic stand and it dropped all the way to the ground.

Then he booted the stand over and it fell off the stage and hit the carpet hard. With the spotlight in his eyes, he could only see their flashing cameras. He paced until he stepped on the landmine, and had to stay there. He pulled out his notebook, crushed it in his cute hand. ‘I haven’t been sucking helium,’ he squealed. ‘This here’s just how I sound.’ Everyone laughed. ‘ZIP IT, THE LOT OF YA’S. I ain’t started.’

Someone walked out.

‘Like, so there’s this girl I sorta dig,’ he sighed, ‘She with us tonight? You in the audience? She probably can’t hear me, she’ll be in the bathrooms, right, she snuck in a little something from home: a dirty casserole pan and a hip flask of dishwashing liquid.’ A tide of laughter swept through the black sea. A voice in the front row squeaked, ‘Hi! Hi baby!'

‘I'M NOT A BABY.’ Guy could see sparks of light reflecting off of Daisy’s lacquered fingernails. ‘So, no sign of the girl I love out there?’

A few orphan laughs. He eyeballed the end of the room, where the red light, the eye, could come on at any time.

‘Good.’ A hiccup of regurgitated booze stung his nostrils. ‘This girl, bro, she’s *taall*. Oi, British people call girls birds, but if this girl’s a bird, she’s an ELEPHANT BIRD, man. We’re talking a girl so tall she sleeps on a double bed – it’s *two singles laid together*, end to end.’ Heartier laughter now. ‘Serious, people, this one’s *big*. Whiiich means she’s pret-tyyy fucking *big* where it *counts*. And by where it *counts*, I of course mean her *fridge*.’ Guy was pacing back and forth. ‘Honest to God folks, you gotta see this shit, tall girls eat a *lot*, know what I’m sayin, this fridge doesn’t have shelves, it’s got *aisles*, know what I’m saying? Clean up in Aisle 5 yo! It’s got a, it’s... she’s so fucking

byuda—'

His left foot stuck to the sticky stage and his right foot went over it. When he fell, his hands took the weight. It was funny to suddenly have heavy limbs. People said '*Dude*,' and someone said 'He's not...' and the spotlight roasted him. His legs were underwater. Some of the polish had chipped off the fingernails Daisy had made him grow.

When the MC helped him to his feet, and Jasdeep offered his crutches, Guy shrugged them off and told Daisy to fuggoff to her seat. He sat down on the edge of the stage and faces appeared in the audience. His lower back dripped sweat into his Wonder Woman boxer shorts. The red eye of the Overtime light was on him.

After he'd told them about the girl, they stood and clapped and whistled, and a big man-shape with heavy footsteps thudded outside, sobbing or giggling, and where Daisy had been sitting there was even a free seat, and he was surprised he hadn't noticed that. Would've been perfect if Gai had showed up then. There was something he was supposed to tell her, plus she could've taken the spare seat.

*

The comedian before Gail had prissy posture. Hal flicked coasters at him. Hal's short, thick, hairless arms made the tabletop slant towards him. Gail's posters around town, beside the Ladies Night posters, called her Big News and the MCG was packed tonight. Hal's feet were perched on the stage, armoured with dirty work boots with paint spattered across the steel caps. When Gail strode on, stomping, a pretend-Godzilla, Hal folded his arms and yawned.

'Bring the pouff back on!' Hal turned to the couple behind him, blinking his pink eyes. '*Blimmin' freakshow at his place*.' The couple fluttered their fingers in front of their

noses; Hal breathed into his cupped palm and sniffed it.

‘Top o’ the mernin to ya!’ Gail squeaked like a leprechaun, and they laughed because she had to hoist the mic so high.

‘*They’re obviously platforms*,’ someone whispered.

‘Any minorities in the audience tonight? How ‘bout disabled, any handicaps out there? What about vertically challenged people, any midgets? I was thinking of going there but I didn’t wanna stoop to that level.’

Hal laughed like something had bit him, spraying rum on the stage.

Gail visored her brow with her hand. ‘Is my man in the audience tonight? Where’s my guy?’

‘You’re a joker! I’m right here! At ya feet, Big Girl!’ Hal hiccupped then punched his mouth to knock the puke back down his throat.

‘Lots of, um, lots of garbage in the news these days, boys and girls, yussir, let me tell you about—’

‘GAY-*ALL*’ Hal stomped his boot on the stage. His rum glass and his handle were empty and he banged them on the tabletop. ‘Ya guy’s right here. You garna innaduce us or not?’

A smudge of laughter; snorting nostrils.

‘Dear Readers,’ Gail said, taking the mic and kicking the mic stand over, ‘My Mack Daddy, Harold!’

Slaps of laughter like hands on cheeks.

‘Pimping’s moved with the times though. He uses an app to slap me. It’s called Slapp. Two pees.’

‘*I won’t!*’ Hal roared, ‘I’ll slap you with my... bloody... boot.’

‘Your teeny tiny size eight slipper, ooh, ouch Harold! I think your little slipper would come off worse.’ She pulled her notebook from her back pocket and cleared her throat.

‘You oughta tell em about that girlfriend a yours,’ Hal

said, 'That pipsqueak comedy clown.'

Nervous laughter.

'From the mouths of babes, eh?'

'You're rubbish, you.'

'Thanks for the unlimited support, darling. Still: on with the show, no shortage of material up here, oh no, I've got some TERRIFIC bits about my short-tempered husband. The temper's short, he's got short hands and short pockets. He wears shorts every day. Short short short short SHORT!'

Hal put his hands on the table, rose. A young usher rushed forwards to pick up Hal's spilled beer; Hal shoved the usher, who fell into a table of students.

He clamped his hard-tipped paws on the shoulders of random people as he stood, trying not to sway.

'I'm serious, love. Tell these gents what paid their ten bucks to come see your fat behind, your ten foot tall flippin—'

'— it was a *film*, sweetheart, *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*. Daryl Hannah.'

There was only the sound of hearts knocking on rib cages until Hal said, 'No one's laughin atcha jokes. Let me up there, I'll laugh 'em.'

'Hal, sweetheart, I've told you, it's called a *stage*, mmkay? Makes MOST people taller, mmkay?'

'Makes your little boyfriend taller, that's for sure. You telled these knife – NICE public... he wants to root his brother's missus?'

They could all hear the click of videos captured on phones. Gail's arms had become logs, her hips had become too wide to move, but she jumped down onto the carpet and thudded out of the club. The red light hadn't even come on yet.

The MC righted the knocked-over mic and cleared

his throat. 'Sooo... next up... '

'Give it 'ere,' Hal said, tripping over the stairs, falling onto the stage, pulling himself upright, dropping the mic as low as it could go. Gail had left a shoe on stage and Hal held it up. 'Lookit the size of the thing! It's not hardly Cinderella is it?! I'll bet a old lady lives in here! Hell-OOO? OPEN UP OLD LADY!'

Hal had a whole hour of material about Big Bitches and Li'l Midges, everyone could relate to that, and a gut-buster about a bloke he knew who kept taking the piss. They booked him in for the Saturday night, and begged him to do the Saturday after that.

*

'What's ya missus gunna do while you're out in the woods crackin' funnies?'

'I haven't a clue. She's a modern independent woman.' Guy leaned down and rummaged under the seat until the knife touched his finger and he sat up again.

'I'd better go round there and service her.'

'Please do.'

Hal's nostrils puffed and he red-eyeballed Guy until Guy turned away blinking.

'You forgot Mum's birthday,' Hal concluded.

'WTF? No I didn't.'

'You callin' me a fibber?'

'When did I forget her birthday? You tell me.'

'When you were ten. You forgot her birthday, 'member that? Now who's the fibber?'

Gail opened the passenger door and plopped her bum into the seat. The car dipped. She fumbled under the seat then pushed the seat back as far as it would go, and reclined it. 'Sure you don't wanna come, Hal? You scared of poachers?'

'Nah... got a show on tonight. Oi, little man, listen:

what's your bird's digits? Case I need her. In a emergency.'

Guy wrote Daisy's phone number on a page of the map book, tore it out and folded it.

'You don't need this page?'

'Hope not.'

Hal took his forearms off the driver door and followed them onto the road. 'I'll pick you up if you want, just yell.' Guy began reversing, 'Any problems with the little man, you just text us.'

'Any problems with the little man,' Gail replied, pulling her sunglasses down, 'I recommend Viagra.'

Hal chased the car for a bit, then walked, then stopped. 'Take care of her, bro. I'll miss the lot of yas.'

*

Gail stopped checking the rear view mirror, and they stopped for petrol and Guy returned to the car with cigarettes.

'There.' He tossed the Rothmans to Gail. She turned them in her hands, then said, 'Eew,' and tossed them out the window. She went inside herself and returned with a box of Marlboro Lights and a fresh lighter and a smirk. They shared a Coke with one straw, chanted along to the drums and brass of the *2001* soundtrack, gossiped about dicks from high school who probably sold used cars now. Gail licked the tip of her finger and dabbed up the last pastry flakes of Guy's pie.

'I'm not allowed to eat in front of him.'

One of Guy's adverts came on the radio and Gail turned the volume all the way up, and Guy covered his ears. When the ad finished, she said, 'Hope you haven't quit your day job.'

Lawns became unmowed; sections quadrupled in size, silos and warehouses bloomed, and fruit appeared in the trees and there were chickens in the culverts, now, and

huge car yards full of haymakers and tractors, and then the city gave up and everything greened. Cows, clouds, roadkill.

Guy had to relinquish the driver's seat halfway there because Gail said he was taking bends too slowly. It was Gail's car anyway. Hal still had the ute if he got called out.

'No need to rush,' Guy said as Gail drove harder.

'Shouldn't've come if you didn't want to get hurt, mate.'

Guy scribbled jokes in his notebook as neatly as he could. Potholes every few minutes shook his hands.

'Whatcha writing?'

'Gags.'

'Tell me.'

'Nah... it's gay.'

'Tell me.'

Guy reached under the seat and brought out the knife.
'I stole this from him. To cut the tension.'

'That's not real,' Gail decided.

The road became smooth as they passed through a town built around a clock tower, and Guy slipped into sleep. When he awoke, his lips were drooling into Gail's lap.

Soon they hit bigger potholes and strange humps and egg-sized rocks and the surface began disintegrating. Wet dust peppered the windscreen. Clouds cooled the sun. The land had been drenched and there was a rainbow, and steam rising above the hides of cows. There was gold in the wet hay bales, charcoal in the rained-out road, purple in the dripping foxgloves.

'Gorgeous,' Guy said, staring at Gail in the rearview mirror.

'It's almost spring,' she said. 'Shagging season.'

They passed beneath a bridge with a height restriction for trucks, two metres sixty. Gail flapped her hand.

'Find my jokebook, jot down a bit about the height

restriction for me going under bridges.'

'Fuck off, Gai.'

'Do it, it'll get laughs.'

'I'm not writing that.'

The sealant ran out and the car swerved on the mud. A sign urged Gail to slow down to 25kmh. They passed billboards advising them that the campground was approaching and Guy's bladder bulged.

'So did you mean that?' Guy shouted over the rattling gravel, 'About my ad?'

'Guess not. Go ahead, quit your day job.'

Guy's tongue rummaged around inside his mouth but couldn't find any words. The road went quiet again, as if it had stopped clapping.

'I guess your manager would be all *2001*, like 'Dave, what are you doing, Dave, don't quit me.''

'Your HAL 9000 voice sucks.'

'Fine, you do it.'

'My voice doesn't go that deep.'

A stone flicked against the windscreen.

'How's the girlfriend,' Gail said, 'How's Dandelion? Or was it Ragwort?'

'*Daisy*. She flushed my stash down the toilet.'

'You two are still on, right?'

'The tumour's inoperable.'

'You texted her today?'

'Nope.'

'Emailed her?'

'I don't waste my email on her.'

'You're not sounding like a happy camper. You gonna ship her back to Russia?'

'Shut up.' Guy folded his arms, pulled his sunnies down over his eyes. Then he said, 'Uzbekistan, actually,' and Gail chuckled and lost control of the wheel. They lurched into a

pothole the size of a bath tub. The car nearly tipped on its side, but Gail wrenched the steering wheel back toward Guy. They skidded, shaving a puddle, squirting rocks. Guy fumbled in his pocket and managed to locate his inhaler and sucked on it like a bong. Gail rested her brow on the steering wheel.

‘If we’d’ve kept going—’

‘—I know, I know.’

They each lit cigarettes, and Guy sucked his inhaler with his free hand.

‘We gotta tell somebody about this.’

‘About what we’re doing? Or the pothole?’

Gail got out of the driver’s seat and the car rose an inch. She inspected the underbelly of the car. She got back inside and the car sank. ‘Not much dents. Already had a couple dents, I don’t think there’s anything new. Serious though, that pothole’s going to kill someone, they go over it fast enough.’

‘We should tell someone. About the hole, I mean.’

‘Let’s just get to the campground. It’s only a few kays. There’s already a sign.’

‘Don’t lose the map book. Might not find our way back.’

A sign above the pothole read
ROAD PRONE TO FLOODS SURFACE
UNSTABLE TAKE EXTREME CAUTION.

‘I didn’t see that.’ As they launched, Gail said, ‘If this was night time, that hole’d fuck us up.’

‘It’s not night. Sun’s out.’

‘Gee, well-spotted, Hal.’

*

The hedges opened up to let driveways in and out and then the campground was announced with an arch made of bolted logs, and running children and boulders

and picnic tables and Norfolk pines and muddy knolls and seagulls. ‘Urgh, you’re joking,’ Gail groaned as she pulled into the caravan park. ‘Who’s been making babies?’

‘Oh, yah. My bad.’

‘You and Kudzu make some babies did you?’

‘You sound jealous.’

‘Whatevs. I hate kids.’

‘You like making them though.’

They parked in a puddle. Children on bikes pointed at their car.

‘I said, you like making babies, Gai.’

Gail got out of the car and slammed the door.

‘Anyone other than Hal know you’re out here?’ he said, running after her.

‘No. Does she?’

‘Daisy? Nah. Hey, listen, anyone makes fun of you, tell them I know MMA.’

A giggle exploded out of Gail’s mouth, and she stopped and wiped her lips and said, ‘Excuse me.’ She tried to walk a few more metres towards Reception, but doubled over, laughing. The grin had already faded from Guy’s face, and when Gail turned away, he mimed a stabbing motion, right into the centre of her big loud back, where her lungs would be. ‘That a new bit?’

The moustached woman who took their money, tucking it into her bumbag, asked how long they’d been together, and where were their kids, and—

‘I know karate,’ Guy blurted.

‘Let’s boost.’ Gail snatched the keytag out of the woman’s hand. ‘Our camping space is GG.’ She jabbed Guy with the keytag. ‘Check it out, hey Guy, look, that G’s humping the other G! You’re not looking, Guy?’

*

The kitchen sounded like it was full of birds. As she

paused in the doorway, a brat squeezed between Gail's legs; others hid behind her until they were tagged by their little brat-friends. She slipped sunglasses over her eyes and stepped inside. Kids and thermos mugs and plastic cutlery everywhere.

While he was scraping the burnt skin from a skillet, an Indian child with big eyes tugged on Guy's shirt and said to him, 'Come play.' The child was struggling to hold a tennis ball with both of his hands.

'I'd love to, matey,' Guy said, loud enough for Gail's big ears to pick up, 'But I'm sposda be cooking. There's years of misogynist kitchen dynamics to rectify.'

'Why this big lady is wearing funny glasses?'

'Uh...' Guy scratched his head. "cause she's chopping onions.'

The child said, after a pause, 'How old are you? Are you twelve?' and the child's father gave a snigger under his moustache.

Gail whirled around, foam on her fists, taking a step forward. 'FUCKIN JAS FUCKIN DEEP!'

The father called for his son to come.

'HE TOLD ON US!'

'Calm down, Gai—'

'Where's my phone, Guy? Where the fuck's my phone?!"

Guy sprinted to the car and came back with Gail's mobile, panting. Gail's hands were crushing the bench. She was destroying the wall with her stare, keeping her back to the other campers in the hall. Soft rain tapping the window sounded like applause.

Guy sucked on his inhaler, stabbed an onion and tore it apart. 'What do you need your phone for?'

*

Guy stood on top of the wet picnic table to see the sun

going away for the last time. She stared at his skinny bum. 'You wanna hear about him? Hal's hilarious, I got some new Hal stories, I think. Ones you haven't heard.'

'Is this you doing your set, or... ?'

'In the kitchen. That was classic.'

'What do you mean? The kitchen just now? It wasn't funny, that dick was, I mean, he—'

'I'm a joke, Guy. Look at me, c'mere, gimme your hand. Look.'

Gail placed Guy's hand over hers. Gail's hand ended in long pink sausages; Guy's ended in slim, graceful claws.

'You oughta model watches, mate.'

'Dunno if I wanna be your mate anymore.'

'C'mon, mate, mate with me. Mate me already.'

The sun pulled the mountains over itself and the lights went out.

'Funny.'

'What, you're too much of a bigshot to model watches now?'

'You're talking about the Telethon.'

'And the ads. And I know they're letting you headline at the Mel.'

'Only when Hal can't do it.'

'They're giving him a lot of slots, huh. Didn't see that one coming.'

'Like-minded audiences, obviously.'

They were both surprised to find their teeth chattering. They tried to keep warm practicing bits and gags and improv and couldn't prevent giggling fits and Gail wrapped her hot, pink arm around Guy's back. There was no difference in Gail's big lungs between chuckling and sobbing, it was the same shuddering hiccuping. He felt the warm thump of her blood pressing against his skin.

The bonfire burned through all the wood Guy could

carry and they tossed plastic on and the flames became limp and green. Still they practised jokes and shivered. Guy's jokes were about his Daisy-chain – get it, Gai? 'Cause she's a chain around my ankles, right? She had stormed back into their relationship, ordering him to take him back, shoving him, pinching him. Firing her from work hadn't helped. Daisy had seen Guy's adverts on TV, seen his five minute spot on the telethon, found the plane tickets in the courier bag when she'd stopped round to collect her mail.

'You can practice some of your Hal shit now?'

'It's not that funny.'

'That pothole was mega,' one of them said, ripping out pages of the map book and dipping them into the fire. The remark faded into the dark blue.

'Rain must've hollowed it out. It's totally gonna waste someone.'

'You'd have to be driving flat-tack. Spose it's the country though, everyone's doin a hundred.'

'A hundred cousins?'

'Lol.'

They poured wine on the fire but it wouldn't go out. The embers were eyes, watching them retreat inside the tent. Her hands were strong enough to get to the root of his tension as she crushed his shoulders and he shivered in ecstasy. Then it was Gail's turn for a massage.

Guy barely had to bend as he stood. He was no threat to the tent structure. He jostled round behind Gail, and she grabbed his ankle and Guy collapsed, giggling, onto the jumble of blankets and duvets and tarpaulin. Neither of them had sleeping bags and they had both forgotten to bring pillows.

On his knees, Guy pushed his fingernails into Gail's shoulder. The t-shirt concealed thick, hard skin. He said,

‘You must wash your hair heaps, it smells yum,’ and there was an abyss before Gail laughed, and Guy’s heart resumed beating.

‘You stalker. How go the diamond nipples?’

Guy suppressed a shiver, sloshed the bottle of moisturiser and said, ‘You ready?’

Gail grabbed the flab at her sides, found the hem of the t-shirt Guy had given her and raised it above her head like a trophy. Guy cleared his throat and squirted the oil over her vast back. He found her flesh to be bumpy, pocked around some pimply hair follicles, and realised she was covered in goose bumps.

‘Put your shirt back on, dopey,’ Guy said, and put the cap back on the lube, ‘You’re chilly.’

‘You’re a joker.’

‘Oi, honest, you don’t wanna catch a cold.’

‘OOH! Big deal. Hurry up and massage me.’

‘I’m not doing this. This is stupid. At least bring ya legs in and zip up the tent.’ Guy scrabbled for his inhaler and fellated it.

‘Your inhaler sounds like Darth Vader.’

‘Hilarious. Oi, you’ll die if you get hypothermia.’

‘I don’t give a shit.’

Gail rolled onto her knees, shunted around and faced Guy, big breasts sloshing, her shorts stretched by her thighs.

‘No one said I was joking.’

‘Fuck this.’

‘What, you don’t wanna see my talent?’

‘I’m getting out of here,’ Guy said and shuffled backwards.

‘You can’t get past me. Hal’s right, you ARE a pouff.’

‘Your tits are 18-FFs, I’ve seen your bras on the washing line.’

‘He can hear you, mate.’

‘Up yours, Gail. You’re a fucking cock-tease.’ Guy found the rear flap of the tent, unzipped and slipped out. ‘Ha! Secret ninja exit!’ Under the moon, smoking and shivering shirtless, he added, ‘You’re mental in the head. Who knows what your problem is. You’re just a joker.’

Guy saw a blue light come on inside the tent. There were irritating little beeps as Gail dialled. Guy strutted to the car, failed to dent it with his hardest kick, hauled the door open, reached into the glovebox and rang his agent. Gai wasn’t the only one who could fuck about with phones.

‘Nah nah nah,’ he began, ‘No, thank *YOU*, yeah man, course I received the plane tickets, I meant to phone you earlier.’

Then he reached under the seat, fiddled around, and his fingers found the knife.

He couldn’t hear her breathing as he unzipped the mosquito net, went in on his knees and squatted over her. She’d dropped off to sleep nicely.

‘We could burn my blubber for heat?’ Gail said from out of nowhere, eyes still shut, ‘Like whale oil?’

‘*YOU SPOOKED ME!*’ After a black space, Guy said ‘Don’t joke about that.’

‘I told him to hurry,’ Gail said, sitting up, and that was enough to make Guy turn away and bury his head and try and think about Daisy and his job and his telethons and gigs in the Champagne Room at the casino, just enough to get his head above everyone else’s, and interviews with teachers of the kids he was going to have, and matching curtains and crockery and all those cold, dull stones.

She lit the last cigarette and passed it. It was a glowing red eye.

'I said it's an emergency. I told him to drive hard. Said there'll be a pothole or two, but nothing major. Told him to drive flat-tack.'

After a silence, Guy sat on his butt. His voice resonated in the night. It had become deep and slow and manly. 'Daaaisy, Daaaisy, give me your aaanswer doooooo...'