

Wonder Woman

Michael Botur

1.

Mel drives alongside the shoplifter as he sprints north up Rust Ave. The kid darts out in front of her car, looks surprised, pauses, wondering why he hasn't been run over, and two women wearing LOSS PREVENTION caps almost catch up.

The boy resumes sprinting and Mel cruises behind him, drawing almost parallel, just a couple metres behind the boy – well, a young man, 16 maybe, or 18, but the way he flees towards Mel makes him seem a boy. Perhaps the security guards will congratulate Mel for tailing the boy when they finally catch him. Perhaps she'll help him flee. Mel doesn't know why she's tailing the shoplifter. She just doesn't like to see a child chased.

She expects the traffic lights to go red and the boy to sprint across the motorway and evaporate so she doesn't have

the opportunity to be a hero, but the light stays green for an unnaturally long time. Drive, the lights say, hurry, go get 'im. Mel and the security guards and the thief end up in a car park 40 metres from an underpass running beneath the motorway. She knows even at a gentle 30 kays an hour she can catch up to him and block his escape.

She toes her pedals till her car is doing 35, winds up her window for protection as she draws level with the human cheetah. He runs so fast that his shoes touch his own bum; she drives so slowly that she doesn't even watch the road. His white t-shirt is billowing behind him. She notices how expensive-looking the acid-washed jeans are that the kid has stolen, with embroidered patterns and artificial rips. She studies the baseball cap the kid has on his head. She can almost read the price tag flapping out of the back of the cap.

The car park ends and Mel draws her car up to the underpass 10 metres ahead of the boy. She blocks the escape. The boy slows his jog, rests his hands on the bonnet of her car, lets the fire out of his lungs.

The security guards arrive 18 seconds after the boy has paused to kick off the clothes he's stolen. The stolen jeans are inside-out around his ankles when the women reach him and stand over him. Mel can see a security beacon hanging down where the boy's diddle should be, and she wonders if that diddle has experienced freedom, wonders how much sex the boy has had. She wants him to have used his beautiful body before he's put away.

A police car arrives three minutes after the security ladies have surrounded the boy. The boy doesn't bother moving his feet as the police drag him. His high, fluffy basketball shoes get scraped, and Mel feels a pinch. His mother paid for those shoes, probably, and they're getting ruined, scuffed. Mel wants to take care of the poor boy's shoes.

When the police have the boy handcuffed in the back of their car and they've interviewed the security guards, they squeeze Mel's shoulders to say thanks. They couldn't have caught him without her help. The police tell news reporters about it. On the TV, the radio, local newspapers, they call Mel a hero.

2.

Mel folds some of the kindergarten laundry on her lap while she listens to the news on the car radio. Two days have passed quickly. The hero-thing is all she's thought about. The thief was denied bail swiftly, and the boy's second appearance, in which he is to enter a plea, has come up already. It's not even been a week.

Desmond Filipo Lani, 17, who was pursued by a good Samaritan who blocked his escape after the aggravated robbery of a sporting-goods store during which he is alleged to have attacked security guards, has entered a Not Guilty plea. Court Report understands Mrs Melanie Cordes, who Deputy Commissioner of Police Angus March called a hero for her part in an all-female apprehension of the offender, was not present at today's –

'Miss,' Mel mutters, 'Not Missus, it should be.'

Mrs Cordes told police she saw she a male fleeing after committing the aggravated robbery during rush hour on August Seven, and –

'THAT'S NOT WHAT I SAID. IT BETTER NOT'VE BEEN.' Mel headbutts the steering wheel. She is late to work and out of cat biscuits for Miss Kitty and this laundry should've been folded before she left the house, plus she still has to squeeze the police into her day.

Mel unlocks her cellphone, decides to call in sick.

'Just go,' her manager says, her voice stroking Mel's ears. 'Take the day. Take two. You've earned it.'

Mel parks a half mile from the police station. The long walk starts to burn off some of the guilt about getting the boy captured.

The person on reception says he recognises her from the news, says he's seriously stoked to meet a hero. He fetches a young policeman with a trim ginger beard and biceps like thick loaves of bread, who guides her into an interview room.

The police officer slaps a manila folder against the wall and doesn't close the door. He doesn't even sit down.

'Cheers for coming in, don't needa take a seat. Congrats again on helping nail this boy. You're here to, what, ask about your witness statement or something?'

'I was thinking of changing a few things... '

'You lied to police? That what you're telling me?' He looks away, looks back. 'Look, the statement's good to go. You can sign it or don't but it doesn't make a difference to the words.'

'Oh. Um, on the radio just now, it said that I said that I saw him do an abrogated robbery? I just wanted to clear that up.'

'It's aggravated if you assault someone while you're robbing a place. Do you disagree?'

'But he only shoulder-barged the security people, I heard?'

'So you're an expert on what constitutes assault?'

'Sorry, I guess I'd just like to know what the little boy's facing. Someone said 10 years? On the news?'

The cop waggles the folder, opens it, tugs one piece of paper, peels off the Sign Here sticker, clicks the pen for her. 'More like 12 years is likely, on a second strike.'

'What was the first strike?'

'First strike's the aggrob, second strike's knocking the security guard down, which is an assault. Two strikes in one incident's not unusual. So: your autograph, if you don't mind.'

Mel pulls her handbag up her shoulder and grins apologetically. 'I'm confused... I need to do one of those lineups, I think.'

The policeman taps the Sign Here sticker. 'I can't afford to spend much more time discussing this.'

'I didn't see him assault those ladies.'

'Good thing the ladies saw it themselves then. Thanks for coming by.'

Mel peers around the door frame to check whether other people are as concerned as she is. There are a grandmother and granddaughter waiting at reception. Real crime victims. Non-time-wasters.

'I mean, if he hasn't entered a plea, they were saying on the radio that – I've – I'm on shift in 19 minutes, I think it'd be best if I was to... to do this later. I need to think, I think, ha ha.'

He takes a ten-second phone call, says he's on his way, walks Mel through the sliding doors out into the wind.

'We can still prosecute without your witness statement,' the policeman says, 'There was heroes before you came along and there'll be heroes after you fuck off. Have a nice day.'

3.

Mel tiptoes into the rear row of seats for the third court appearance of Desmond Filipino Lani. She admires the courtroom's woodwork and coats of arms. The paper said the boy has twice appeared and been denied bail. The paper also said the two security guards who gave chase, Mrs Jolisa Grimes and Mrs Sonia Mana, have become an internet sensation, septuagenarians who chased down a bank robber. The boy's a bank robber, now, apparently.

Mel asks a wrinkly, spotty Asian-ish woman in the row behind her what Corrections custody means. Department of Corrections custody is different to police custody, the woman

says in secondhand English. When you're remanded in Corrections custody, you go to a remand prison and they mix you with the general population because police cells are just for overnights and there's nowhere else to put you. They mix up the ages; youths and adults share cells. Doesn't matter if you're later found Not Guilty.

'Do they pay you compensation?'

The brown woman draws away.

'That's your son, though, if you don't mind me asking? The robber guy, I mean not that he robbed... Desmond? He's your baby boy?'

'Philip,' the old brown woman says with a proud smile. Filipino, Mel decides. Gotta be Filipino. 'Philly, he is my grandson,' the woman explains.

His name is called, a guard lifts a trapdoor in the floor and Desmond Filipino Lani steps up into the dock, blinking, tugging the collar of his black t-shirt toward his eyes.

There is 20 minutes of the prosecutor taking papers from the police administrator and handing the papers to old court staff, who mutter and jiggle their spectacles. They even spend a few minutes gossiping and laughing and squeezing each other's shoulders. Then a man in robes takes off his glasses and yawns and takes a 20-second gulp of coffee. Mel hears him swallow through the speakers.

The judge asks the young man what name he wants to be addressed by. Desmond Filipino Lani says 'Phil, sir.'

'Do you understand the charges presented against you?'

'Aw, nah, sir.'

'I suggest you have a word with your counsel, then, and return when you do. I'll know where to find you.' The judge closes the lid of his laptop. 'Hereby remanding Lani in Corrections custody. Everybody else remain, please.'

Philip strokes the box of polished wood he's standing in and makes eye contact with his lawyer, a very young, brown-

haired and freckled woman, well, girl, really. Mel asks Phil's mum who the lawyer is, gets her name, Bree Bielawski, and Googles her. The lawyer's mobile number has eight digits after the 027. The girl –tight skin, skinny neck - can't have had a mobile phone for more than a couple of years. She's half a child herself.

A guard barks at him and Phil retreats to the corner of the dock. They lift a trapdoor and push Phil into a pit of concrete painted white, stainless steel panels, dangling naked light bulbs. Mel hears the boy say, 'But I's supposed to phone- ' and then the metal trapdoor closes on him, *donning*.

Mel half gets out of her chair. She wants to pull Phil out of his hole.

The judge types slowly on a laptop with two fingers, squinting. 'Miss Bielawski, an observation: if your client's intending to plead Not Guilty, it signals to me that he hasn't been communicated the consequences of such a plea. Sentencing provisions for people who don't plead guilty early allow for 50 percent on top of the standard first sentence, taking time served on a typical aggro from four years up to six, maybe even seven, not to mention the mandatory extra five years which comes with a second strike. Food for thought, no?'

Bree Bielawski, teen lawyer, holsters her bag, shifts a piece of paper to one side. 'I will urge my client to consider his plea carefully. I do appreciate what the prosecution's put on the table for us.'

Bree Bielawski folds her briefcase up and locks it. 'We've had some issues with the Hospitality Licensing Board which, ah, won't testify that Derrick is an apprentice chef if he's not at training next week. I wish Probation would just accept the bail address with his mother that I - '

'Desmond, not Derrick.'

'- the bail address that Derrick put forward.'

‘Another week in remand won’t hurt him.’

Bree Bielawski is frowning at something on her cellphone screen. ‘Totally agree, your honour.’

‘I’ll pray for you,’ Mel blurts, half-standing. Her voice is weak and doesn’t reach the boy. She hardly hears herself.

4.

The kids Sellotape a Wonder Woman cape to Mel’s back. Mel wheels her chair into the centre of the rug, tells her it’sy teeny weeny cuddly kindergarten caterpillars she’s sorry she was away for a couple of hours. She had to clean up the mess a very naughty boy made, she tells them. ‘You’re a hero, Miss Mel,’ they tell her. Being a hero doesn’t feel any different to an ordinary day, Mel tells her class. She hasn’t become Captain Mel or anything, hee-hee. The children don’t laugh like they are meant to. Mel had been proud of ‘Captain Mel’ when she thought the name up. Mrs Gwizo interrupts Mel with her thick Zimbabwe accent and talks about cops and robbers and how Mel is pretty much an honorary police gal. Mel tries to say robber isn’t technically accurate, the police have made a mistake, but she can’t think of the right word to describe what the kid has done. The Business Association had been losing \$15,000 a month in thefts, the news said, an average of \$100 of merchandise stolen from each affected retailer in the CBD each month. Ten packs of Cokes stolen here, three t-shirts stolen there, and lots of mobile phones, and always baseball caps.

‘... This *umntwana*, he is face of evil, and boys and girls: our Wonder Woman, how do you say in English, she apprehend him,’ Mrs Gwizo tells the kids, ‘And he was privilege, this is what get me.’

Three boys stick up their hands together and say Hero! Hero! Wonder Woman!

Mel claps and tries to change the subject. 'No, oh God no, I'm not a hero, ha ha. Have you guys got any questions about, er, about stealing? 'Cause I've gotta heat up those cheese toasties, unless –'

'Was he scary, Miss Mel? The wobbler?'

Mel pinches the bridge of her nose. 'Firstly it shouldn't be a robbery charge, it should be theft, they didn't have to chase him, kids, and if you're ever in that situation, um...'

Mrs Gwizo squeezes Mel's thick, tense neck muscles. 'Ten year in prison, he will have. This streets will be safe.'

Dallas, the boy with the cow eyes, puts his hand up. Dallas says 10 years is aaages.

Maryjane, the office manager, approaches with two cups of frothy coffee, the good stuff, from the expensive Moccona jar. 'Did you see on the Grapevine? About the civic heroes parade? Mayor wants you there. You're famous, babe.'

5.

Desmond Filipo Lani is brought up from the dungeon. He looks around the courtroom to find his lawyer and tries to get her attention, but she's trying to get a phone call out of her ear. There is new muscle around Philly's neck. Yannick had muscle like that. Yannick told Mel he scaled mountains and herded sheep all the time in Switzerland. He said he had a Masters in Business Administration and Diploma in ICT, yet he stole patio tables and planks of fancy deck timber and stockpiled it in her garage and sold it for a few hundred dollars a month and didn't pay any board money to Mel. Yannick told her it was ridiculous that he was just using her to get a passport. Yannick hadn't got Mel pregnant just to secure citizenship, he said. Yannick tipped backwards on the bed, crushed Mel's shoulders with his hardwood fingers and did that thing boys do at the gym, bench-pressing, raising Mel's

feathery body then bringing her down. Yannick needed to spend four hours a day at the gym, he used to tell her. It was impossible for him to have a day job, considering his schedule. How could she even ask such a thing?

As soon as the passport-shaped courier bag arrived on the doorstep, Yannick left. He didn't even open it to double-check that it was his passport. He kissed the passport-shaped rectangle and just left. He didn't kiss Mel.

Mel pinches herself awake. The value of the items Desmond Filipo Lani stole are being read to the court by an Indian prosecutor with an English accent. The jeans the young man stole are worth \$69. The cap was \$39.99.

Bree Bielawski doesn't dispute the aggravated robbery charge, the value of the items or the refusal to bail Phil out of his cold cell where he does endless push-ups. She doesn't contradict the prosecution, but she does find some commendations she's noted on her phone, some positive things about the boy. 'He's extremely talented at something called beatboxing, also snooker,' Bree Bielawski is saying from her little desk behind a low wooden rail around her, separating her from the boy she's meant to save. 'What I'd like to ask for is a sentence taking into account that this is a first offence—'

'It's NOT his first offence, you know that as well as I do, Ms Beerliski. A second strike is a second strike, whether one is 15 or 55.' This judge is different – it's now a woman-judge, an old, sharp woman with caramel skin and bright pink lipstick. 'As for this "beatboxing," I can't say I'm impressed with boxing as a choice of sport for someone facing violent charges.'

'– first offence my client is pleading not guilty to, your honour, although we're extremely keen to negotiate a sentence, were my client to plead guilty. And beatboxing isn't boxing, it's... music, or something? I don't know.'

Mel shuffles along her bench and asks two old unshaven men wearing hoodies what happened to the other judge who was ruling on Phil's case.

'Judges work shifts, man.'

'YOU THREE.' The judge – and prosecutor, and defence, and three uniformed police, and six security guards – are staring at her. 'DON'T TALK OVER ME. NOR UNDER ME, FOR THAT MATTER.'

'I beg your pardon,' Mel says, 'I was just sorta wondering, your honour, like, what happened to Phil's last judge?'

'Phil?'

'The defendant, I mean.'

Bree the defence lawyer is squinting at Mel, trying to figure out how and why someone is pretending to care for her client.

'Sorry again, it's just his grandma's not even here, it's just something to consider when you're, y'know, doing your thing. Sorry, it's just, your honour, I'm, like, a witness? My name's Mel Cordes. I think I'm on the list?'

The judge nods and pats her bench impatiently. 'You're likely not a witness because there's probably not going to be any trial if Mr Lani places a sensible plea and speeds this whole process up. Now, what you did in apprehending the offender was really commendable, Ms Cordes, and I'm glad you're here. But you must let me proceed.'

When the session is ending without progress and Desmond Filipo Lani is being remanded back into the dungeon for the fourth time, he gives his lawyer a thumbs-up, and Bree Bielawski calls out, 'Hold up! We're going guilty, your honour. I have the signal.'

'I believe that'll save a lot of people a lot of work,' says the judge. She glances at Phil, hovering beside his guard. 'We don't need you for this part, Derrick.'

The trapdoor clangs shut.

6.

Phil has a father named Cody Carmel. It was hard to find the Carmels on Facebook, but Mel was determined. She'd lost Yannick, but she wouldn't lose this boy.

The bus stops metres from the Carmel family home. Mel hugs her packet of grocery vouchers to her bosom and tiptoes through the Carmels' lawn. In the waist-high grass there's an empty bourbon bottle touching a little girl's bicycle.

'I've got something really important I want to tell your family,' she says to a 14-year-old wearing Bob Marley boxer shorts who answers the door. 'Is this the home of Desmond Lani?'

'The fuck?'

'Isn't he Cody Carmel's son?'

'Awww.' The 14-year-old scratches a stick-on tattoo on his neck. Or maybe it's not a stick-on. 'Philly, you mean. Nah, he's doin a lag.'

'But that's what I'm trying to prevent. Look, is he here, the boy's father?'

'Heapsa niggas is here. They're all out back.'

The boy saunters down the dark hallway. Tip-toeing after him, pressing the strap of her handbag into her shoulder, Mel detects the mouthwashy smell of bathroom and goes in. She takes out her lipstick and eyebrow pencil and makes her face good enough for this family.

The deck out back is half-shaded by an umbrella of brittle canvas. There's a sagging carport, sheets of corrugated iron, a pile of broken windscreen glass, puddles. There are 12 people sitting around a barbecue perched on a stack of tyres. They're cooking bundles of tin foil. It stinks of seafood.

There's a man in a white singlet with a silver ponytail, several women in black jeans and bikini tops, two beefy twin

teens with arms as thick and shapeless as dog roll. Everyone has a black can and a cigarette.

Mel is here to spread a gentle balm on the wounded family.

‘Guys, hey, I’m Mel. From court. I looked after – well, I tried to look after, um... Phil, if that’s how you call him?’

‘Have a seat, girl.’ The silver ponytail man leans as far as he can across the barbecue pit, and extends a yellow packet and a lighter. ‘Smoke?’

‘No, I can’t stay, look – ’

‘Drink?’ A teen tosses a black can at Mel.

‘Y’know I’m gonna sue? The police. I have to explain, look, sorry, I’m Melanie Cordes, I’m not a witness, I want to make that clear, I saw everything that happened to Desmond, the cops wanted me to sign a witness statement but I said no, look this whole thing is – ’

‘Sit, girl, sit. We’re havin us a celebration.’ Cody Carmel, the silver ponytailed elder, kicks a beer crate at Mel. Her back creaks as she lowers herself onto it. She plays with the can of alcohol that’s clearly important to the culture of these people.

‘Celebration? I don’t understand.’

‘It’s not a bad lag, eh. Pretty fuckin lucky. Might buy me a Lotto this arvo.’

‘Lag? In prison? He hasn’t been sentenced yet, though.’

‘Half an hour ago he got sent up. Thought you’d a been there burning your bra or something.’ Everyone laughs and some of them spit and suck their cigarettes. ‘Philly’s lawyer didn’t even know, eh. She was like a whole hour late to court ’cause they notified the wrong email address or some computer cock-up.’

‘But this’ll ruin him...?’

‘Nah, he texted me. Said not to sell his Hot Wheels cars. Said it’s all good with the lag. Out in six years, maybe.’

‘Shot for your effort anyway, lady,’ says a child in a wheelchair. ‘Did he tell you to come see his fams?’

‘He didn’t, no.’ She reaches inside her handbag, checks that the grocery vouchers are still in there. ‘I just assumed...’

‘He got starred up, it’s all G, he’s doin awesome,’ says a thuggish fat girl wearing a bandana like a party hat. ‘Shot for gettin him that.’

‘Starred up? What’s that?’

‘They promote you if you kick up enough ruckus.’

‘Oh thank heavens, a promotion.’ Mel drops her handbag to the glassy, sticky earth and slumps. ‘I’m relieved. So he’s got a better cell or...?’

‘Nah, pro-mote-ed, G. Got sent to adult prison, y’know, proper prizz. Got patched, too, he’s mobbed up all the way now. You should see the ink on ’im.’

‘He’s gonna look fuckin AWESome, time he gets out,’ says one of the beefy twins. ‘I wish I had me a patch.’

Mel opens her handbag and dumps the grocery vouchers out and says Thanks for the drink and clutches her handbag tightly as she scurries off the deck and marches down the cloudy hallway, reeking of smoke, its ceiling black with mould.

Bob Marley Boxers sticks his head out of the door of his bedroom. ‘Hold up, miss.’

‘WHAT IS IT?’ Mel snorts snot and tears back inside her face. ‘I don’t know why I bothered coming. I – I thought you people would be grateful.’

The boy squints at her in puzzlement as he guides her down the steps, off the front porch. ‘Just wanted to say, miss: I’ll pray for ya.’

He closes the door behind her.