

## The famous gnocchi incident

IT IMMEDIATELY became known as 'the famous gnocchi incident'. It was my first long lunch and I was wearing my first French-cuff shirt. I knew I should have cancelled the appointment I had later that afternoon with Mr Pestana, but Mr Pestana was not a man you cancelled on. It upset him too much and set his mental health back irreparably. These were the days when I cared about people. The days when I had a good side.

About halfway through lunch, after the third bottle of red, a piece of gnocchi slipped off my fork and fell into my napkin. At least I thought it had. When I checked though, the napkin was pristine and there was no sign of gnocchi on the floor. I gave it no further thought.

I met with Mr Pestana just on five. Even though I had been working only a few months, I had already seen him half a dozen times. He had a back injury. He kept me well informed about his condition. His back was never better than 'no so good'.

I thought I was doing a reasonable job of disguising that I was drunk. I made careful notes of everything he told me. His medical appointments. His physio appointments. His constant pain. His impotence. I wrote all this down on my pad, as neatly as I could, and expressed a reassuring level of sympathy throughout. Then the gnocchi reappeared.

It was like magic. Suddenly there it was, still well coated in napolitana sauce, sitting guiltily in the middle of my notes. It had been hiding in the cuff of my shirtsleeve, and midway through the conference had decided to dislodge itself. I will always be grateful to Mr Pestana for saying nothing. He looked curiously at the mysterious swelling on my notes, wondering what, the hell it was. Luckily, he was originally from Liguria, and after a few moments the penny dropped. I too examined the intruder, then looked at Mr Pestana, who looked up at me. I then asked him if he was still on his anti-inflammatory medication and he informed me that he was. While I inquired whether this was helping him, I casually dropped the roguish dumpling in the bin.

I saw Mr Pestana many times over the next two years and he never once mentioned the gnocchi. His kindness was ultimately rewarded with a large settlement in his favour. I worked damned hard on that case.

The partners thought it was hysterical. They were like that. They laughed and laughed the night I told them. None of them were the French-cuff type, so this made it even more amusing. Hugh's *famous gnocchi incident*.

The partners in my current firm would not be so amused. Components of Italian dishes are not allowed to fly out of solicitors' sleeves at the greatest law firm in the universe. No sir. This is expressly forbidden in the firm's manual. Most of the men who work there *are* the French-cuff type.

I had started to dream about my old firm and episodes like the gnocchi incident. I dreamt about Mr Pestana and his bad back. I dreamt about all my cases. I knew I was now dreaming about them again, but even though the dream had turned to nightmare, I didn't want it to stop because I knew how I would feel when I woke. I would not be feeling well. Again.

I tried to stay asleep but I could feel the world rushing up at me. Or maybe I was just falling towards it. The world and I were heading for collision. 'Oh no,' I moaned as I woke, 'here we go again.'

A surreal film washed through my mind in slow motion. I see myself spilling red wine in someone's lap. I am way too drunk to say sorry. I had meant only to clink glasses, but had smashed her glass instead. When it happens I am only able to utter a single word. 'Cheers.'

These were the first images I was conscious of that morning. It was 8.35. I gave my alarm an accusatory stare out of one eye, as if to ask it why it hadn't gone off. I knew it had though. Loud and incessant. Right on 5.45. After ten minutes, as programmed, it would have given up all attempts to revive me, leaving me open mouthed but motionless. Abandoned to an alcoholic swelter.

When I finally woke it was to an alarm of sorts. A rhythmic, pulsating beating at the front of my head. Some small beast had climbed into my brain and was proceeding to hack its way out with an axe.

I shook my focus off the shattered glass. I would return to that once I could swallow. My tongue felt like it had been in a toaster all night. I momentarily pondered whether that dry piece of meat could be living tissue. A groping hand clasped a glass that had a tablespoon of water in it. The water failed to penetrate the crystalline coating, rolling over it like mercury.

I dropped the glass by the side of the bed, disturbing a cockroach that had been resting on one of my socks. Maybe it was one of the roach's friends that was playing around with the miniature axe? It nonchalantly ambled away, heading for bed, exhausted from tap dancing in my mouth all night long.

Cockroaches were a minor problem in my apartment. It was strategically infested rather than overrun. They were generally well behaved. More like co-tenants than intruders. They shared the bathroom, kitchen and lounge room with a casual proprietorial air. They had always minded their own' business. Invading my head with sharp implements, though, was a Declaration of War. I would fight back. Just not today.

I attempted to sit up. This placed some of the focus onto other parts of my body. My stomach and bowel had melded into one, and were conspiring on some foul concoction. I heard them negotiating on the exit route. Whatever was quickest seemed the compromise. Some other beast was now slithering through the poisoned mulch of my brain. It was attempting to escape by splitting my skull up the back. Meanwhile its friend kept working away at the Eastern Front.

At last I stood up. This did not please the beasts. They started power drilling in unison. Once upright I caught sight of myself in the mirror. I looked like I had silicon surgically implanted under my eyes. These implants were somewhere in between Pam Anderson and Demi Moore.

I surveyed my room. Yesterday's clothes were spread around. Boxer shorts, shoes, a shirt and tie and my suit had been flung to the four corners. I thought this odd I had no recollection of even getting home, let alone wildly removing articles of clothing.

Since waking my brain had only been able to deal with one thought process every fifteen seconds. The shattered glass My tongue. My stomach. Getting to the bathroom without falling over. Getting to the bathroom without being sick. These thoughts repeated in my head while I showered, separated by a few seconds synaptic breakdown before I could move on to the next. After I had turned off the taps, I stood stock still in the shower cubicle, water dripping off my shaky body, before a question rippled slowly through my head. It was one that had been posed at random times throughout my life. *What the fuck happened last night?*

I stepped delicately out of the shower and walked back to my room. I sat on the end of the bed. I re-wound my internal tape. It was the only way I could do it. One bit at a time, from the beginning.

I am at a function at work. I am drinking red wine. Lots of it. My glass is never empty. I see it emptying. Then someone fills it up. This process repeats, and repeats, and repeats. I run out of tape. Shit. *Surely there's more?*

I speak to some clients. The senior claims people at some insurers, a few underwriters, people in management at some of the corporate clients, and a banker or two. I don't say anything particularly stupid. It's all coming back to me. So far, so good.

The problem with drinking wine from a glass that won't empty is that by 9.30 you're pretty pissed. That's when you start doing things you wouldn't ordinarily do. Not sober. Like telling a group of clients that you could have handled a particular case a lot more expertly than one of the senior partners had. Like telling another client that he should stop sending work to a particular partner who is, in your opinion, a fool, and instead send work to you because you, in your opinion, are not.

Ordinarily, I wouldn't flirt quite so obviously with one of the female solicitors who was among the group that went to a nearby pub at about ten. Ordinarily I wouldn't flirt at all with Dianne, the firm's marketing manager. I examined my internal tape carefully. She has never looked so striking before. Until the same time next year, she is unlikely to look that way again.

Ordinarily I wouldn't start rubbing Dianne's thigh while having a conversation with her, if you could call it a conversation. I can see there was lots of giggling, interspersed with words that strangely now do not seem funny. Ordinarily I would be a little embarrassed if she started kissing me in the back of a taxi. I would ask her, politely, to stop. I would certainly stop her from undoing my fly. Luckily I didn't have to last night. Just after undoing my fly, and thrashing around inside my boxer shorts, she threw up - before she got either her hand or mouth on anything.

I remember giving the driver some money after he kicked us out of his cab. I'm not sure how much. I remember Dianne staggering down the road after that, with me following, swaying nearly as erratically as her. She threw up twice more on her trudge around wherever we were - somewhere east. Then she turned towards a house. She held the door open and looked at me. 'Coming in?'

I thought about it. Not a great idea. Even when you're completely pissed you can spot something that's not a great idea if it's obvious enough. The piles of vomit were my biggest clue. I shook my head. Not a great idea. Very obviously.

I found another taxi. Once inside I couldn't remember the street I lived in, only the number of the apartment and the suburb. I told the driver to go to Oxford Street and I would direct him from there. We finally found the building. The street name did not sound familiar.

Next thing it was morning, and someone had drained all the fluids from my body.

These flashes of memory were not unlike being drunk itself. A kind of out-of-body experience where the sober you steps out of your being - or is pushed out by the drunk - and is forced to watch as the drunk takes control. Blurting out insults and opinions indiscreetly. Flirting insatiably. Increasingly violent in his gestures and movements. Argumentative and disagreeable, one moment, playful and giggly the next. Slurring the only semi-sane comments he makes. It's not a pretty picture. Push the stop button. Eject the tape.

I looked at the clock again: 9.15. I pulled on my suit pants. The same ones I had worn the night before. For a moment I considered that I should probably wear another suit, get this one dry cleaned, but I didn't have time. Then I panicked, feeling something lumpy in the pocket. It turned out only to be several packets of matches I'd taken from the hotel. Not quite the same as after the Christmas party last year when I found, through smell more than touch, the remains of some kind of take-away food. Without a full forensic evaluation, the food was unidentifiable.

This time my suit only smelt of alcohol and smoke. The smell of my stupidity.

The bus trip in was fun. It was humid, 30 degrees C, and I was 40 per cent proof. I was about to swoon at the stop when the bus arrived. I stood up, liquefied, and slid aboard. The bus took off like a Formula One car from the pits. We proceeded through the back streets of Paddington and Darlinghurst like we were on a German autobahn. *Mr Schumacher, Sydney bus driver, at your service.*

I scouted the grim faces of the passengers. Many were sitting on the aisle seats and some had their bags on the seat next to them. The message was clear. 'I'm late, it's hot, don't even fucking *think* of sitting next to me.' Usually this is enough to psych me out. Usually. I have a life and death exception.

I took a seat next to a rather large woman in stretch pants and a pink floral top who couldn't help but take up a substantial proportion of the space available. The smell of hair spray and perfume circling her was overpowering. I sneezed violently. The pain in my head varied between moderate and acute. Sneezing brought an entirely new sensation. Even the drillers were momentarily disrupted by the seismic wave. Once settled, they quickly started again.

Not only was I seated next to the most perfumed person on the bus, but the only one without an open window. Spores started sprouting under my arms as I heard my heart pumping in my head, pounding in my chest. The bus lurched around another corner, bounced over another speed hump. *Great driving, Schumacher. Fuck the passengers.* I couldn't take it anymore. I leant over the woman and reached for the window clip.

'You mind?'

'Just had my hair done. Sorry.' I examined the woman's head. It was coated with sufficient spray for her hair to have withstood both Fatman and Little Boy at ground zero.

'Maybe you can sit here and I can sit next to the window? She looked at me with an expression I recognised. The woman last night with her shattered glass. *'Cheers.'*

'I'm fine here, thanks,' she said.

The bus hopped over the speed humps through East Sydney, lurched into William Street, then headed up to Hyde Park and the city. Traffic was at a standstill. I was trapped in a vibrating, perfumed oven. Everyone was silent, oppressed by the heat. I closed my eyes. It was a mistake. The bus started to spin. I knew from experience what followed. I had to get off.

Quickly. 'Would you let me off here, please?' A pleading look. 'No can do. It's not a stop.'

'I realise it's not a stop. I have to get off, please.'

'There are rules, mate. Take a seat.'

'What do the rules say about throwing up in the bus?'

The doors opened and I got out.

I stepped through the traffic and negotiated my way to the footpath. I walked up some steps into the shaded oasis of the park, and gingerly sloped towards work. I passed a couple of homeless men stretched out on benches and briefly contemplated joining them. One of the men sat up as I walked by. 'Spare some change?'

I shook my pocket. I eased over and gave him what I had in coins. He reeked of alcohol, urine and sweat. It occurred to me that we probably had about the same blood-alcohol content. Considering what I spent on booze last night, we now also had about the same net worth.

Finally I made it to the gleaming tower where the offices of Rottman Maughan and Nash, the greatest law firm in the universe, are located. The smell of food wafted around me from the food halls below. I was not tempted. In a few hours I would be dreaming of a whole fried pig, but for now not even words could safely pass my lips.

The foyer was nearly empty, and seemed more cavernous and austere than usual. The kind of space designed to impress, to tell people you're a success, to tell them you won't come cheaply. For Rottmans' clients this impression is overwhelmingly

reinforced when they are lured into the panorama of Sydney Harbour once the lift doors open all those floors above. Receiving their legal bills does the trick too.

I arrived at my floor, many miles above the planet. As silently as I could I walked down the corridor, I did not want to talk to anyone. Luckily, only my secretary Anne, whose desk was right outside my office, spotted me.

'You look good, blossom.'

I shrugged and gave a helpless, forlorn look before retreating, shutting the door behind me. She had seen that look before. 'Do not disturb,' it said. Wordless, but loud and clear all the same.

## The 24.3-hour day

The WESTERN suburbs. A vast sprawl ending in a distant horizon of smog. My senior associate view. View No. 3.

Window office, good size, but looking out west where the sun shines in every afternoon and you have to shut your blinds until sunset.

You don't have this problem if you're a partner. Not if your office is overlooking the harbour. At night, it's a carnival of lights stretching from the city, wrapping around both sides of the dark water to the tip of South Head.

A postcard of a view. View No. 1.

Some of the partners can pick out their houses if they have View No. 1. This is one of their favourite pastimes. Investment properties are occasionally mentioned too, but the matrimonial home is generally first port of call. Other partners get the north view. View No. 2. The buildings and the undulations of the suburbs prevent them from pointing out their houses, although, regrettably, not necessarily investment properties.

View No. 4 is a southern view, which, despite taking in the oval cut of Botany Bay rather than the harbour, does at least have the bonus of the airport, so you can watch planes land and take off all day if you want to. This activity is invariably charged to a file, and recorded on the time sheet as 'perusal'.

I was in no condition to take advantage of View No. 3.

I could sit. I could stare in front of me. That was all. I soon found myself staring at my time sheet. Zero units so far. A loose approach to time costing would need to be taken to get anywhere near budget. Luckily, Rottmans possessed several partners who had PhDs in loose time costing, and I had been well trained.

Tim Sullivan, world record fee earner and my personal trainer on all billing matters, had a creative approach to time costing. An approach recently raised at a partners meeting by another young partner who was trampling over bodies just as ruthlessly as Sullivan did. His analysis of the various litigation groups' productivity over the Christmas/New Year period had exposed an anomaly. Based on the number of units Tim Sullivan recorded in January, he would have to have worked seven days a week for the whole month, 20.2 hours per day. This did not, as was obvious to all, leave much time for sleep. Thus Tim 'No Doze' Sullivan was christened.

A Herculean performance. This was agreed. Sullivan's supporters in the partnership explained it away as an aberration caused by the tremendous number of hours he had been working on the WIT matter, a colossal piece of litigation I was also involved in. This defence was mounted against the additional evidence that Sullivan had spent the last week of December and the first week in January at the Four Seasons resort in Bali. This took his average billable time for the month, including weekends, to 24.3 hours per day. With this feat No Doze assumed the

status of legend. He gave a lot of thought to WIT and other matters while e was stretching out on some Balinese beach or walking through the monkey forest at Ubud.