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I couldn't believe it. Another one. What was it with these fur balls and me at the moment?

'Can I just make sure I understand you; I said to Mr Picozzi.

'You want us to get you an Apprehended Violence Order –'

'*Si*. Yes.'

'Against a cat?'

Mr Picozzi looked me squarely in the eye. '*Si*, correct,' he said firmly. 'And the evidence. I have got here.'

Law firms run businesses, from the very large with CEOs and chefs and dozens of eager young clerks, to one-person bands. The reason for their existence is the same throughout the capitalist world. The profit motive. Most people who have run a legal business for a while develop an aptitude for smelling cases where the aggravation is going to be higher than the reward. Put more simply, lawyers have acquired an acute sense for knowing when they mightn't get paid. People with problems in this category end up at legal aid, or a community legal centre. People like Mr Picozzi, who turned up at the Randwick South Legal Centre on my Thursday night.

My demise as a member of the Bar should have meant the end of my pro bono services to the RSLC, but I think Hannah – the solicitor in charge of my volunteer nights for years – saw that I needed Thursday nights more than they needed me. She said she would sign off on my advices in case there was ever an insurance problem, and she would square me staying on with the boss.

I did need Thursday nights. Twelve years as a lawyer had left its mark. Appearing in court, advising people, having them rely on my judgment – my self-esteem had become tied up in all that. Besides, the world needs human rights lawyers more than ever these days, disbarred or not. On Thursday nights I was briefly, once again, a professional. That counted for something, even if my professional opinion was sought about what remedies Mr Picozzi might have against a cat that had, allegedly, eaten at least two of his budgerigars.

'Evidence?'

'*Si*. Yes, sir. Evidence. I have photograph.'

'Of your budgie?'

'No, sir. Of cat.'

Ah, I thought. Clever. A photo of the alleged offender. Mr Picozzi handed me the mug shot. A long-haired breed – a stocky Himalayan, perhaps – cream with red shadings. *Attention all units*. I looked back at Mr Picozzi.

'Cat. See, sir?'

'Yes. Thank you.' I looked carefully at the photo. A touch of urban feral about it as well, but I didn't think I could tell Mr Picozzi it looked guilty enough to secure an AVO.

'You see, sir,' Mr Picozzi urged, pointing at the photo. 'You see the evidence. Proof!'

Mr Picozzi was excited about the photo, and I turned and looked at the law student who was sitting in on the interview with me to see if he understood what Mr Picozzi was on about.

He shrugged. Then again, this particular student, who had taken the initial instructions from Mr Picozzi on his own – as is the RSLC system – had written 'Possible Murder Case' on the client advice sheet. Some students take a very formal approach when describing a client's problem on the advice sheet, so I probably should have guessed that 'Possible Murder Case' wasn't necessarily going to involve the client facing mandatory life.

'I'm not sure what you're getting at, Mr Picozzi,' I finally said. He looked startled, like he was talking to a complete idiot. Had I missed all the clues?

'Look, sir. The killing. You see budgie. In cat mouth.'

I studied the photo again. Perhaps the cat did have something in its mouth. Its head was shaded, though, and its mouth pointed down, and I was bugged if I could see a budgie in it. 'You see anything?' I said to the student. He shook his head.

'Mr Picozzi, you say your budgie is in the cat's mouth in this photo?' I asked.

'Yes!' He clapped his hands together as if the case was proved. 'S! See. My budgie. He dead in cat mouth.'

I gave a pained smile and shook my head. This just wasn't going to get a conviction as Exhibit 1 at the cat's trial if this was all Mr Picozzi had. Naturally, it wasn't. The next photograph clearly depicted a budgie. An attractive buttercup lemon, it was lying prone on the ground. It appeared remarkably intact for a bird that had suffered at the claws of a savage member of the *felis* species, but I had to admit it was either deceased or capable of a highly convincing dead bird impersonation. In one corner of the frame was the rear end of the prime suspect, appearing to walk away from his victim in a somewhat disinterested fashion. The cold-blooded bastard. The only thing missing from the photo was a chalk outline around our budgie, but I figured that would be Exhibit 3.

'See!' Mr Picozzi nearly shouted. 'Budgie dead. Kill him.'

I nodded. 'Yes, I see that, Mr Picozzi. It looks that way.'

'Look?' he said. 'Is that way, sir!'

I nodded again.

Mr Picozzi hunched up his shoulders then raised both hands in exasperation and despair. 'Why he kill? Why he kill budgie but not eat. For fun?'

It did appear to have all the hallmarks of a thrill kill. I decided not to suggest this, but I wasn't sure what I could say. At this point, though, the student decided he could be helpful. 'It isn't so surprising that the cat didn't eat your bird,' he said to Mr Picozzi matter-of-factly. 'They're carnivores, of course - they can't really digest plant material efficiently - but they've been domesticated for so long, since before the Egyptians, that they're used to being fed by us. They may kill birds or mice, but rarely eat them. They, in fact, do do it for fun.'

Mr Picozzi looked at us like we had just defecated on his, mother's grave.

'You finished?' I said to the student. He nodded sagely, Future Partner, Mergers and Acquisitions, Very Big Firm, written all over him.

I returned to the grieving and now even more excited, client. 'Mr Picozzi I think your pictures are good evidence of what occurred. Very, very good. But I just don't think an Apprehended Violence Order is the way to go. My experience has been that generally magistrates will only grant them against people, not cats.'

Mr Picozzi olive leather face registered utter disbelief, but he was about to give up. 'What about damage?'

'Damages?'

'Yes sir, he said firmly. This budgie, my budgie I breed. Very rare breed. Dark-eyed-clear. Dark eyes - all yellow plume, no blemish. Expensive, sir.' I nodded. Plus, sir, I pay for cage, water fountain, seed tray, budgie seed - top quality. Plus more. Sawdust for cage. Who pay me this now?'

'Well, I said, 'you may be able to sue the owner of the cat for your losses, but unless it's a lot of money... perhaps we could draft a letter for you to give to the owner demanding some compensation'. This seemed a perfect way of dealing with the problem.

Mr Picozzi looked excited again. 'Who owner sir? You know? I no know owner. Never seen cat before or since.'

I shrugged. The student decided to be helpful again. 'Domestic cats are unlikely to stray far from their home I'd suggest -' I told the kid to shut up. I could see him turning Mr Picozzi into a vigilante.

'And what about other budgie? He disappear too. Spangle. Very colourful. Nice bird.'

'I'm sure it was, Mr Picozzi,' I said. 'By the way, 'I then asked, seeing a potential flaw in the plan to sue for damages, 'did the cat break into the birdcage? What happened?

I feed bird, on my hand, sir, like this. Cat pounce. From no-where.' Mr Picozzi then got up and demonstrated what I assume was either a Pina Bausch dance manoeuvre followed by a massive stroke, or a cat leaping on him. I knew the feeling.

Part of me wanted to help Mr Picozzi. An AVO against a cat. I would have liked to add a certain muscular little Burmese named Bushy to the complaint against the long-haired Himalayan. Make it a class action. You had to be practical on Thursday nights, though. In between the people who had been sacked, injured, discriminated against, arrested, caught up in a domestic or child custody crisis, or who had simply crashed a car or racked up debt way beyond their capacity to pay in this or numerous other life times, you had to deal as sympathetically as possible, with the occasional nutter who wanted to sue the world for reasons that could be described as idiosyncratic.

Over the course of the last decade, on my volunteer nights at the Randwick South Legal Centre I had advised clients who had wanted to sue judges, politicians, various police commissioners, every prime minister and premier, the CEO's of most major companies, Bill Gates, L. Ron Hubbard, several church leaders, and two who wanted to sue the Queen. Thinking back on that list, perhaps it's harsh to call them all nutters. The world is richer for those who march to the beat of a different drum.

No matter what the problem, you can only advise people, give them options. There aren't enough funding dollars to do much beyond that. Certainly the budget of the Randwick South Legal Centre didn't extend to opening a file to take on a case to seek an AVO against a cat. It would have been nice if it did, but the RSLC was my window to the real world, and in the real world there was no more I could do for Mr P. than draft a letter for him demanding damages from the cat's owner, and hope he would be able to track them both down. If he couldn't, I knew it wouldn't be from lack of trying. And if he did, and decided to take the law into his own hands, well ... I was sure the cat had it coming.