

Problem Solver

By Kathy Childs

My shadow casts a silhouette, imitating a body prone across the steps that lead up to the office. I focus on the shadow, watching it expand, misshape, and reform as I pull open the door and enter the warmth. The office upstairs is full of early morning noises - the clatter of coffee cups competing with the voices of my colleagues as they attempt to gain kudos by reimagining their lives, truth spiced with inventiveness and wishful thinking. I place a booted foot on the bottom stair and begin my ascent; my bag jolting on my hip in time with the movement. My palm glides up the wooden handrail as I climb. I run my fingers back and forth across a hollow, a minor dent. I caress the wood.

‘Oh my God! Sue. We didn’t expect you in today.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘Oh Susan dear. How are you coping?’ The gossip vultures perch, waiting. Whatever I say, how I say it, what my face betrays; all will be swiftly devoured. I am newsworthy and they are after the scoop.

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ I inch away.

‘But Terry’s dead.’

‘I know.’ I drag my hands through my hair, pushing it off my face.

‘Oh, honey. It’s a shock to all of us, but you saw him fall. Were there when he died. It has to be hard to be back here at all.’

‘They said he tripped on his shoelace and fell head first.’ A steaming hot cup is pushed into my hand. I bring it to my nose and inhale the fragrance of freshly brewed coffee. No one has ever made me coffee before. I nod a thank you.

'Is that what happened?' Coffee giver wants something for her efforts.

'I saw him falling.' I close my eyes. Bow my head.

'And you ran down the stairs and got to him. What then?' Coffee Girl pauses.

'Did he say anything?' Breaths are collectively held.

'He said.' I look up. 'I can't move my legs.'

'That's because his neck was broken, wasn't it?' says Junior Gossip whose housemate is a nurse. 'Was the neck swollen at all? It's often a sign of a break, you know.'

'It's possible.'

'You probably shouldn't have moved him.'

'I was just trying to see if he was hurt.'

'And he was, wasn't he?' No sorrow, just malicious interest.

'Yes, he was.'

'And then?' The vultures lean forward, angling, necks craned so as not to miss a word.

'The guy from next door arrived and called an ambulance. While he was gone Terry died.' I move to sit at my desk, turn on my computer and sip my coffee as the system boots up.

'How awful.' From behind me the collective sighs.

I loved my job once. Under my old boss, Marcia, I had been challenged, encouraged and appreciated. But motherhood beckoned and Marcia deserted me. Terry, our new manager, was of a different ilk, part weasel, part snake. I'm sure he pictured himself as the stocky AFL ruck man he had been 15 years ago and not the reality of a

balding 35-year-old running to flab. He had no concept of personal space, standing way too close, his sweaty hands forever touching, caressing, stroking.

I'd been quite far down the line for his advances, given my small size and non-existent bust. Terry may have passed me by except for my long blond hair that seemed to intrigue him. He made a habit of running his damp fingers through my hair as he walked past my desk. He cornered me one afternoon in the tearoom; standing behind me he'd grabbed my breast, squeezing it like you would an avocado to see if it was ripe.

'Suppose more than a handful's a waste.'

'Piss off, Terry.' I pulled my elbow back hard, slamming into his stomach.

'Bitch.' He leant in close and I could feel his hot, salami tainted breath on my neck. 'Redundancies next week. Would be tough for you to lose your job. I know you need it.' And then he pushed his groin into my back, forcing me against the kitchen bench. 'Just a little fun and you might even get a raise. Any more of your smart alec talk and you're out.' He ground his hips hard against me. Pushing back wasn't an option; that would just encourage him. 'Think about it, but not for too long.' He patted my behind, chuckled and left. I placed both hands on the bench to steady myself, took a deep breath and shuddered.

I'm a solo Mum with a mortgage and part time positions are impossible to find. I need this job. I don't have the luxury of walking away like Hilary. Terry's one of the boys. Reporting him would find me in the queue at Centrelink like Chloe – redundant with no reference. I am not like Hilary or Chloe. I do not run and I do not confront.

Yesterday I'd been tied up in a teleconference in the meeting room. When I surfaced, it was late and the office was deserted. I made it to the landing at the top of the stairs before he caught up with me.

He'd grabbed a handful of my hair, yanked hard. His stale breath hissed as he leant in suggesting a detour to the storeroom on our way out – a little privacy. He ran his sweaty fingers through my hair, tugged at the strands forcing my head towards him; then smirked as he reminded me about the redundancies next week. He released my hair but then grabbed my backside, his large hands squeezing and kneading, his lips making disgusting smacking noises.

There was no real thought behind it – I simply stuck out my booted foot and tripped Terry as he went to take his first step down towards the seclusion of the storeroom.

I observed dispassionately as he tumbled down the stairs, his head striking the anti-slip edging, surprised at how little sound it made. I watched as he grabbed for the handrail, his pinky ring denting the soft wood as he missed his grip. I waited for a while after the final thud then I strolled down, step by slow deliberate step, boots clunking on the wood to where he had stopped, sprawled hard against the glass door.

'That was deliberate. You bitch.' He moaned and his body slumped. 'I'll have you for this.' I could hear the agony in his voice.

I watched the blood ooze from his battered nose, a river of red dripping from his flabby jowls, spreading across his white shirtfront.

'What's wrong with you? Call an ambulance.'

A rap on the glass door intruded into my stupor.

'Is he okay?' The tech head from next door peered in.

'Can you call an ambulance? You'll need to wait at the gate and direct them in. I'll stay with him.'

‘Okay.’ And off he ran, hitting triple zero on his phone as he faded into the darkness.

I knelt beside Terry’s prone body, cradling his oversized head in my lap. His breathing was labored.

‘Am I going to be made redundant next week?’

‘Redundant? Not likely. I’m going to sue you for assault. Redundancy will seem like a dream.’ Spittle flew from his lips.

I stroked his double chins, my fingers absently caressing the stubble.

‘Now the bitch gets friendly. You’ll have to do better than that to get out of this one.’

I positioned my hand under his clammy neck, seeking a place among the folds of flesh. He grimaced as I adjusted my position. My right hand firmly grasped his chin, my left moving higher up on the back of the head. It’s a gentle movement to the left and then a sharp one to the right. There was an almost indiscernible crack. I lay his head gently on the floor and moved towards his feet. After a sideways glance to confirm that the tech guy is still out of sight I yank hard on one lace. I perch on the bottom step, compose my face in sorrow. The paramedics find me there, sitting on the stairs, my head bowed and resting on my hands, a study in grief.

I sit at my desk this morning waiting for the obligatory emotions to hit. Instead of remorse, guilt and shame, I feel elation. I take a deep breath and the air that fills my lungs tastes of champagne and bubbles.

I silently toast my mother. It was she who told me the difference between who you are and who you want to be is in what you do. Hilary ran away, Chloe believed in fighting for what was right regardless of the cost. Me? I’m a problem solver.