

A black streak screeches, jolts over the gutter onto the footpath. A door flings open and a bundle rolls out, dumped by disembodied hands. The door slams shut and the vehicle reverses onto the road. Growl of the engine as it accelerates away.

Earthiness hangs in the air and ketones hover. Blood stains on fabric. A white face moans.

I

FANTASY

What a wonderful world.

Blue ocean waves roll onto sun-soaked beaches. A patchwork of cliffs angle upwards towards a cloudless sky. Children gambol at the water's edge, splashing and building sandcastles. Adults laze and swim.

'The Church Justice & Healing Mission moved into palatial new premises today,' says a voice with exquisite diction.

An aerial camera drone sweeps slowly across the beach and transmits a 360-degree panoramic paradise. Zooms in on the top balcony of a glitzy 15-storey building.

'The High Court ruled that for the purposes of being sued by victims of clergy abuse, the church is *not* a legal entity,' the voice-over explains kindly. 'However, the church *is* a legal entity when it comes to an array of tax exemptions and deductions and,' the voice pauses for added emphasis, 'when purchasing the luxurious Widgie Conference Complex.'

The bird's eye view of the balcony reveals a man reclining on an ornate lounge and sipping from a crystal glass refracting the sunshine in a rainbow. He is sunbaking nude. A small area of not-at-this-hour TV vision is smudged to a grey fuzz. The man jumps up in his birthday-suited glory, gestures dramatically with one hand while the

other hand joins the blur of his genitals. He swats and mutely rants at the drone spying on his private Eden and his ugly indulgence. Swat. Slap. Swish. The man's face fills the screen, his profanities easily lip-read.

The narration continues, unhurried and calm, 'Sources suggest that a sum of \$95 million was the asking price for the luxurious Widgie Complex. The Church will neither confirm nor deny the price paid.'

Footage shows the naked man, now fully clothed and smiling, his maxi frock unsuccessfully vying for attention with a blackhead stigmata on his nose. Archbishop John Bell's bejewelled hands flit about to emphasise his most sacred words.

'We don't have to tell you that. *Secreta Continere!* This is God's work. God is answerable to no man. But I can say, the church really got a good bang for its buck with this one. Of course, the place did need a significant reno to bring it up to scratch. How much was the renovation? I'm not telling you that! This is God's work. God is answerable to no man. My new premises, er, God's new premises, include offices, restaurants, wine cellar, casino, go-karts, gaming arcade, pool tables, bowling alley, roof top tennis courts, a pool and golf course. All the things the beautiful boys like, to attract the next generation of God's servants. And my own top floor 220-square penthouse with four carat, gold-plated glass windows for my stunning gold carat views.'

The drooling man of God report ends and the soothing tones of the voice-over are revealed to belong to *The LoDown* news anchor, Genevieve Parker, sitting elegantly at her *LoDown* news anchor desk. With a hint of mischief in her violet eyes, Genevieve observes, 'Archbishop Bell seems to have forgotten a chapel, hmm.'

'And in related news, earlier today, the advocacy group for victims of clergy abuse, *Shame on Church Abusers & Racketeers*, widely known as SCAR, was evicted from its western suburbs premises and is currently homeless. Ms Jessica Beauvoir, SCAR CEO.'

With a graceful head tilt, Genevieve Parker cedes the limelight to a woman with frazzled ginger hair and wearing a *SCAR*-emblazoned t-shirt and the letters S, C, A, R dangling from each ear lobe. The woman's accessories perfectly match her agitated demeanour.

'Yeah-nah, most of our volunteers are victims of clergy abuse themselves, so they already know what it's like being homeless. We'll get through it like we always do.' Ms Beauvoir pulls her shoulders back with pride before they collapse under the strain of a simple honesty. 'Yeah-nah, not always. Lots of victims aren't with us anymore. Not all victims can be survivors – suicide, drugs, sh-*bleep*-t like that. The church – *f-bleep*-ing *f-bleep*-ers – are *f-bleep*-ing criminals and murderers. We just hope our homelessness doesn't stop us fighting for those victims being sued by the church for court costs. The church and them expensive silks against our one legal aid lawyer.' Ms Beauvoir looks about to cry, before she throws her fist in the air and yells, 'Shame on Church Abusers & Racketeers!'

Genevieve Parker resumes centre screen.

'Ms Beauvoir is asking for assistance to find *SCAR* another rundown house urgently,' Genevieve says so kindly that those viewers without a house to spare are already googling details about how to make a donation. 'You can contact *SCAR* with assistance, or *for* assistance,' Genevieve says as if she is delivering a kiss to her viewers' foreheads. Within the hour *SCAR* will be re-housed in bigger and better digs.

Gen's years in the hot seat as *The LoDown* news anchor, Genevieve Parker, is where she keeps her cool. No matter the pressures of being in the limelight, Gen is unflappable. She reports current affairs as if she has all the time in the world, the way a brilliant athlete slows down time to carry out feats, hypnotising to mere mortals.

Surrounded by the organised chaos of studio gadgetry and crew invisible to her audience, Gen is defined by a screen frame that is an intimate micro-world of soft polish and perfection. Genevieve Parker tops TV ratings and defies the wide world web's death knell

for TV viewing. *The LoDown*'s audience is happy. The shareholders and network bosses are happy. Everyone can trust Genevieve Parker to deliver. Genevieve is drop dead gorgeous.

Drop dead gorgeous, Gen rues, as an ad break races along like a game of tag. Maz taps on her desk with last minute copy edits and line-up changes. The work placement student tops up her water. Colwyn flutters a makeup brush across her forehead and upper lip. Gen is drop dead gorgeous thanks to makeup and camera angles and a challenging regimen with beauty and fitness experts. And where would she be without eye drops?

Gen's eyes blink rapidly. Is the lighting unusually bright tonight? An impertinent irritability needles and pricks a hole in the skin of her news anchor alter ego. Gen sighs through the hole, deflated. She is centre stage with the ugliest stories of the world, painting eyesore masterpieces of humanity. Does humanity exist? Gen tries to find it in herself and reveal it in the stories by radiating professional composure and warmth, and offering a smattering of carefully prepared, off-the-cuff comments. She hangs out for the one or two feel-good stories tacked on the end of the broadcast, if there is time: like a baby landing happily in its mother's arms while the rest of the world slides into the rising sea of melting ice caps.

The pinprick cracks and shivers along Gen's spine. Everything feels false and fucked up, she told Gael last night. But the curse was a disappointment to her. Gen said the F word so neatly that it lacked the casual harshness required to make the point. Gael wasn't listening anyway. He didn't notice. He has no interest in her career. What did he say the other night? She's nothing but a jumped-up show girl?

How insulting and cruel, Gen thinks now. But at the time? She apologised, of course, as if she had insulted and shamed him. As if she were a nuisance in his life and so desperately lucky to have found a man who would put up with her. No matter. Here she is centre stage as *The LoDown* anchor, adored and on top of her game. She is Genevieve Parker, in charge and at the controls.

‘What the fuck am I doing?’ Gen says aloud just as the vision cuts back to her. And she nails that ugly *fuck*.

The entire production team freezes. The control room director curses in her ear, then says, ‘That just went to air, Gen. Get it together, whatever it is.’ The floor manager contorts her face into a bright smile for Gen to copy.

For the first time in her career Gen watched, but failed to see, the floor manager’s perfectly formed fingers complete their perfectly formed count-down count-in. *Unusual and disgraceful*, thinks Gen. She should be shocked and overcome with shame.

But, who the fuck cares? Gen does, does she? Fuck it.

OutRageOnLine:

BOMBSHELL GENEVIEVE DROPS F-BOMB.

SEE News Anchor’s disgrace.

Parents furious and frantic about effect on kiddies.

GET FREE \$100 FOR FIRST THREE BETS ON BETCHA! WHEN YOU SIGN UP FOR PORN&POPCORN.

In the split second between *fuck* and realisation, Gen has welcomed viewers back with her dazzling smile and violet eyes. Her voice conveys authority and sexy sincerity. Genevieve Parker delivers. Genevieve cares. On with the show.

‘Ex-prime minister Julian Pope announced today that a Royal Commission into, quote, “the unconscionable practice of changing girls into boys and boys into girls” unquote, would commence next month. Country-wide protests, by those involved in gender-kindness health care, say the commission’s focus on religious views, rather than medical facts, causes untold distress to some of the most vulnerable members of our community. They want the enquiry *off* the table.’

In the brilliant spotlight of the nation’s gaze, Gen sweeps her arms in a breaststroke across the glass-topped desk. Two waves of

papers fly and flutter and fall like starburst. A digital notebook, pen and glass of water spill, bounce, roll and shatter. Off, all of it, *off the table*. Her desk, host to political sophistry, not-news-news and all the nastiness of the world, is wiped clean.

Gen blinks as she recognises her sweeping away as a mere fancy; an impulse played out in her imagination. The world's evils are still writ large on the pristine papers in front of her. Her other news-reading accoutrements sit aligned just so. With a quiet horror, she scrawls across her brain: *Focus!*

After the half dozen quick news items that follow her fuck up and fantasy dummy spit, Genevieve sparkles a smile that curves sublimely. She teases her viewers.

'Sensational footage of Barb and Angelica's public stoush, and the latest in sport, when we come back.'

The director and the floor manager both express concern about Genevieve's earlier impropriety. Consciously deciding to ignore them both, Gen maintains a pleasant, attentive face and nods occasionally. She doesn't hear them at all. This is a skill and a necessity in this job where worlds and words collide. In the blink of an eye, Gen must select what she tunes in to and out of. Words in her ears from the director. Words written on the tele-prompter and screen beneath her glass-topped desk. Words mouthed silently by the floor manager. Words in Gen's own mind. Words, words, words. Seconds tick as she makes big and small decisions within an exquisitely paced performance. But Gen does it perfectly. She always does. She prepares meticulously and then flies by the seat of her pants. It all appears so effortless and understated. Naturally perfect.

Except that time. How did Gen miss the count in? How did she curse on air? She never swears at work and never, never swears on air. That footage will already be going pandemic online. *Fuck*, she thinks, before angrily reminding herself that *fuck* is what got her into this mess. *Take a breath and concentrate*, she tells herself.

Gen sits at her news desk concentrating and readying for the

resumption of *The LoDown*, ignoring the fucked-up elephant in the room stampeding into the worldwide web. Make-up artist, Colwyn, is all silent attention as he dusts areas of shine on Gen's face and applies another layer of plumping gloss to her lips. An undisciplined eyebrow rises quizzically, but Colwyn reins it in with a frown and departs. With a blank expression, Maz places a rewrite and amended line-up on Gen's desktop with a cursory finger point.

'Is Toby's edit complete, Maz? The Facefreeze and Liquorice piece?' Gen asks.

The departing figure of Maz turns a thumb downwards. 'Bumped for a late footy scoop, Gen.'

Gen checks the changes, her mind meandering around the question of Facefreeze's toxicity. Approaching her 40th birthday, but not looking a day over 25, Facefreeze is an essential part of Gen's demanding beauty routine. It puts off the day she may need to take more extreme measures. Before that day, she'll probably be long gone. Her male on-air colleagues can amass grey hair, wrinkles and chub, but Gen and her female colleagues must be forever young and beautiful. Mother says so, too. On Gen's 30th birthday, two of the tiniest, teeniest lines appeared between her eyebrows. Her mother said so. How kind of Mother to give her a heads up, muses Gen as she scrawls across her brain a far too common reminder to herself: *Do not fall down the Mother rabbit hole.*

But what if Facefreeze is toxic? Gen wonders. What if that is the reason she is off her game? Maybe Facefreeze messes with your neural pathways. A brain orders a face to shape itself into whatever expression is meant to match an idea or emotion, and the Facefreeze-affected feedback signal responds. Negative. Lost connection. Over and out. Nerve endings may be dying. Pathways may be coalescing into the meaningless squiggles of dementia. In 20 years' time, when scientists finally recognise the damage, it will be called Facefreeze Fried Brain: a global female (with a smidge of men) epidemic. Gen will present an award-winning story about it, she decides

optimistically. But if she is to last that long, Gen definitely needs to maintain her regular Facefreeze treatment. Ha.

Gen thinks of such absurdities as a distraction from her grinding reality. No one appreciates the pressures of being so exposed and so beautiful. The years of hard slog and constantly having to exceed expectations. The upkeep and self-conscious surveillance in the face of trolls and stalkers. Gen shivers as she experiences a flashback to a particularly ugly troll-turned-stalker saga. She snaps herself out of that ghastly freeze-frame and back to her musings about her own face freeze-frame.

Gen's routine is unrelenting but, she has to admit, once started, Facefreeze is very hard to stop, rather like an addiction? Self-sabotage? It killed off Genevieve Parker's signature frown: a frown so beautiful, so full of pathos and gravitas, and Gen traded it for a cosmetic façade of early twenties beauty. So, she contrived a Facefreeze-contaminated sequence of movements to substitute for her adorable frown and to signal the serious business of tragic and preposterous segments and Breaking News! stories. *What does that even mean?* Gen puzzles. *Breaking News? What, you have to smash it into smithereens over the audience's heads? Or is it news that breaks your heart?*

Gen feels her heart crack a tiny bit and wonders if she is literally cracking up. First the glare of the lights, the hole that cracked open and now her heart? But Gen knows she's got to hold it together. There's so much she must keep underground. This is not the time for holes or cracks. *Breathe and focus*, Gen orders herself, and Genevieve Parker is back.

'Excuse me,' she says, holding her hand to her ear and her alluring gaze on her audience. 'Breaking news just in, ex-prime minister Mr Julian Pope has become the nation's prime minister – again.'



In the kitchen of The Dodge, the official residence of the prime minister, *The LoDown* is a murmur in the background as an ignored television prattles on in the lounge room.

At the kitchen sink, Prime Minister Julian Pope moans, 'I'm just not feeling myself, Nance.' He clasps a sudsy dinner plate from his wife, who is washing the dishes, and wipes it with a golden-laced tea towel, presented to him by an oil-rich prince. Dried and gleaming, Jules carefully places the plate into a packing box, one of many scattered throughout The Dodge.

'Well, dear, it takes a bit to recover after a cholecystectomy. And you did have complications,' says his wife with a sigh as she passes him another dripping plate. 'It was recurrent gall stones or' – she exclaims like a cut-throat regent – 'out with your gall bladder! You know, dear, I've heard people say you have rocks in your head. Really, though, it was rocks in your gut. But they do say that our gut is another type of brain, and so...'

As Jules returns from depositing the dried plate in the box, he recognises that Nance's sentence has trailed off and she's gazing out the kitchen window in front of her. The swirl of the dish-washing mop has stopped still in her hand, its tendrils floating in the cloudy space of sink water as tiny soap bubbles pop out of existence, one by one. Jules leans in and peers out the window too at the magnificent gardens of The Dodge: manicured lawn, pruned sticks of the rose garden, abundant azaleas and towering magnolia, crepe myrtle and jacaranda. *Here she goes again*, Jules thinks as he resumes his dish-wiper stance. Nance is not actually looking at anything.

Whenever he can, PM Julian Pope indulges in this delightful post dinner ritual at The Dodge. It is a good old-fashioned husband and wife wash-up and natter. He owes her that much, he reckons. But the PM never likes these ponderous moments his wife is prone to. She does his head in sometimes. They remind Jules that she is in fact a brainiac and was a post-doc fellow in some bio-science or other. He

swept her off her feet at an awards night, discovered she was the fuck of his life, and that was that.

Nance was head-strong and heading headlong and head-on to heady heights. But she fell head over heels for Jules and lost her head. She was headed for the head job and ended up with Jules and a different type of head job! Jules grins at his sophisticated wordplay on the word *head*, a little habit he developed when he first entered *parleyment* and sat on the back benches. A man with such a superior brain as himself needs a stimulating brain game when things become boring.

Jules waits out his wife's absence. Caused by girlie germs, Jules decided years ago. But he has to hand it to Nance, other stay-at-home mums have nothing on her. She produced precious child after precious child, although a boy never eventuated. Jules will probably never forgive her for that. Five girls. Girls, girls, girls. Surrounded by 'em all his life: girls, one sister, a mother, five daughters, a wife. Surrounded by all those girlie germs. Jules shudders all over, like he's being electrocuted.

She is a faarking good little wife though. Faarking! Get it? Jules chuckles. Oh, he is in fine form today despite his health doldrums. But ingenious wit or no, Jules feels suddenly miffed, puffs his cheeks out, sighs long and loud and finishes with a lethargic lip-trumpeting raspberry. He really hates to see a woman with a cogitating mind. A woman's body is complex enough. But a woman's brain? Now that is faarking terrifying. God really shouldn't have bothered with brains for women.

He straightens the bib on his floral apron and realises with relief that the dish mop is again sloshing about the plates. His wife hands him a piece of wet crockery with a final regal judgment. 'The gall bladder is out and good riddance.'

As Jules dries and stores a bowl in a box, his annoyance builds. He returns to his dish-drying position beside his wife and whines, 'But it's been almost four months, Nance. I've been taking my meds and

seeing the doc. I've been doing everything right, but this belly is so swollen. Hangs over the boxers when I powerwalk. Gets my spandex all out of shape when I cycle. I swear this gut is getting bigger, not smaller.'

'Impossible, Jules,' Nance harrumphs, scrubbing furiously. 'You men are hopeless patients. You have no idea what real pain and a real swelling stomach is. Your suffering is nothing compared with what we women go through. I'll give you swollen. Remember when I was pregnant with Chastity? I couldn't get up out of a chair and I had to wear your triple E runners and have someone else lace them up for me.'

'I guess my belly is quite small – in comparison,' Jules concedes. 'But I've still got nausea, Nance—'

'Nausea! I vomited every day I was pregnant with Virtue and I wasn't much better with Prudence, remember? You really need to get things in perspective, Jules, and stop moaning.'

Jules feels his wife's impatience like a sling shot striking him flush on his nose. He pointedly refuses to take the plate Nance is holding in his direction and she places it in the draining rack instead. He really expects a little more sympathy from his wife of 22 years. He must make her realise how serious it is.

Jules makes a concerted effort at control and consciously dons his deep and authoritative PM-in-the-House voice. 'Now, Nance, I really think you should take this more seriously. You know how I sometimes pretend to nod off in the House as a *faark you* when an opposition member has the floor? Well, the other day, I nodded off for real. I nodded off while a vote was taken on the new budget. No one even realised I'd slid off my seat and without my vote it didn't get over the line, Nance. The headlines were shockers, *You Snooze You Lose, Pope Dreams Dashed, Pope's Budget BluezzzzZZZ*. They had such fun with it all, at my expense, Nance.'

'You have to admit, some of those journos and bloggers are very clever,' says Nance with a smile and far too much pleasure, as far

as Jules is concerned. To add injury to insult, Nance then gleefully flicks the dish mop with extra exuberance and a spray of dirty water hits him full in the face. Then a high-pitched yelp almost blows his eardrums and gives him such a fright.

Good god, that girlie-girlie squawk was him, Jules realises. How humiliating. He mops his face with the damp tea towel and decides it has all become too much. That woman, his woman, has stepped over the line.

‘It’s not funny, woman. Whatever this lethargy is, it’s not normal and it’s not fair. It’s killing me, Nance. You’re killing me. And you’re meant to be on my side, Nance. *My side.*’

Nance ignores the dishwashing, turns to Jules and says tenderly, ‘Look, dear, my little schnookems sweetie pie. The specialist is very pleased with your progress, isn’t she? It’s probably just a bit of normal post-op inflammation, or gas, or a touch of male hysteria and neuroticism, dear. Apparently that’s rampant these days.’

Choosing a doctor is always so fraught for Jules. Should he go for a man who obviously is an expert, worked hard for his position, got there on merit, and doesn’t mince words or action? Bu-ut whose touchy-feely prods and pokes are a bit too, well, to be straight up about it, just a bit too homo-sex-su-al for Jules’ liking.

Alternatively, does he go for a woman who has got there on the shirt-tails of a man, as part of some radical feminist affirmative action quota, blah, blah blah. Bu-ut whose touchy-feely prods and pokes are really quite delightful and always stoke the macho in him so that he feels so-o good. Hmm, such a dilemma.

This time, he let Nance make the decision.

‘I know exactly who you’re going to,’ she announced. ‘Dr Roberta Roberts is the best in her field.’

So that was that. Jules consulted the woman, was operated on by the woman, and continues to consult the woman. And now look where it’s got him. Faarking hell, she removes his gall bladder and he ends up with a belly like an obese pig!

‘You know how I like to look good, Nance. The People expect me to look good. I must be the fit, youthful PM with the strong, hunky bod. The marketing guys say my body and active lifestyle are pivotal, *pivotal*, Nance, in winning the men’s and the women’s vote. The men want to *be* me, and the women want to be *with* me,’ Jules smirks. ‘The men want to be in my *shoes* and the women want to be in my *pants*.’

‘Julian!’ rebukes Nance before laughing flirtatiously and returning her attention to the sink. ‘You are shameless. But are you the PM at the moment? I thought you were the ex. I’ve rather lost track.’

Jules automatically takes a dripping saucepan from Nance, as his mind shifts momentarily to sex. For the first time in his life, Jules’ libido fades in and out, rather than being his constant luscious companion.

‘Yes, well, I’m back to my cycling and powerwalking, but this faarking post-op belly blubber is killing me in the polls. I’m the team captain, coach, and star player of the nation, Nance—’

‘Jules, you’ve never played a team sport in your life.’

‘Well, maybe not,’ Jules concedes, his hands circling the tea towel about the saucepan. ‘But I’m the quintessential sporting champion and hero to the whole faarking country, Nance. But what about now?’ Jules’ face crumples and he relinquishes the saucepan and tea towel to the kitchen bench. His hands hang loose and helpless. A child’s stuffed clown. ‘I don’t feel like me, Nance. I feel like one of Them, not Me. A Loser, not a Winner.’

Nance runs her pink plastic gloves down the sides of her pinny to dry them and pats his shoulder gently.

‘Oh, my little schnookems sweetie pie, it will all be all right. You just need a bit of time, dear, a bit of rest. It will all be okay.’

Her words touch him in a way that reminds him of the time he did the dirty deed with those centrefold twins and they rained down rose petals and kisses all over his naked body. Jules feels a slight stirring down below, nestles his head in his wife’s arms and snuffles. Nance pats his back and rocks him back and forth.