

QUIT

By Aoife Clifford

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‘SUMMER OF THE SEVENTEEN POLL’ was the newspaper’s headline. The sub-editor had been shown the door and the job given to a stand-up comedian. Unfortunately the story below it was even worse. It wasn’t so much a punch line as a knock-out blow. A seventeen per cent primary vote means not even the Premier’s mother was prepared to vote Labor any more. We were reduced to the candidates themselves and idiots who didn’t understand the question. Still it wasn’t surprising considering it had been the Twelve Days of Political Nightmares leading up to Christmas. It started with twelve pollies boozing which led to five front page leaks; four harassment suits; three resignations; two apologies; and a Premier spending January expecting to get knifed.

Anyone working for a political party with those sort of numbers should start the New Year looking for a new job, but I wasn’t clicking on the classifieds yet. My problem wasn’t being unpopular. Quite the opposite.

You see, I'm a smokejumper. If there is a political firestorm or a complete cock up, I get the first call from the powers that be, even before they press 'S' for spin. To be able to spin, you need to know the truth. It's up to me to find that out. Then it's up to someone else to ensure the public never does.

Actually, I'm the second person they call.

First is my boss - Roland Gesink - known to everyone as 'Stainless' because, despite resembling an overgrown chipmunk with a face that looks slept in, he's the Man of Steel. An incorruptible political genius, which I don't need to tell you is highly unusual in Victorian Labor. I am a mere tarnished grasshopper by comparison. Don't know how I ended up in the job other than I look good in a skirt and can sing all six verses of 'Solidarity Forever'.

As I flicked past the cute animal stories and celebrities in bikinis, I was reminded that everyone was on holidays and could not care less about my problems. Even Stainless was having a well deserved break and in one more day I'd be heading for the coast to swelter in 40 degree heat waves or brave hailstones the size of golf balls. January in Victoria could be as brutal as the average voter.

The next morning I was woken by my mobile playing the theme from *Superman*. It was so early that while the

clock confirmed morning, my body was arguing it was still night. Anyway, I knew who was on the other end.

'Aren't you on holidays?' I croaked.

'Not any more and yours have just been cancelled,' said Stainless. 'Get ready, I'll there be in five. Wear denim.'

That meant we were heading for a crime site. Tip for the amateur sleuth, don't wear clothes that shed fibres when trying to get behind police tape. You don't want to end up as the accused. I found that out the hard way.

Stainless was parked outside my house before I had even changed out of my pyjamas. I knew it was serious because he shouldn't have been driving at all. Not after he had got picked up by the booze bus after the Caulfield Cup. I held my hand out for the car keys. A waft of Kool Mints hit me as I got into the driver's seat, which told me his New Year's Resolution was giving up cigarettes. Again. This would mean bouts of irritableness and floods of tears, and that was only me. Nicotine was the most human thing about Stainless.

'Good holiday?' I asked tentatively.

He gave me a look of the purest loathing and began chugging down mints by the handful. 'Head for the Peninsula,' was all I got out of him.

It wasn't until we had turned off the freeway at Rosebud that I felt brave enough to ask what this was all about.

'The body in the library.'

'What body?' I asked.

Stainless sighed deeply, 'As always you focus on the wrong thing. The question you should be asking is whose library.'

The sun hadn't risen yet and already this day felt long.

'Okay, whose library?'

'The library belongs to our Glorious Leader, the Right Honourable Jack Prendergast.'

Premier Prendergast might be a pig, but he was our pig, and it was part of my job description to get him out of the shit.

I mulled over this information. It wasn't the body that surprised me. I had broader horizons, lower expectations and looser morals since starting this job. It was the words Prendergast and library in the same sentence. Brothel, racetrack, TAB, pub and sexual harassment were all natural fits but library?

'Are you sure it was a library?'

Stainless hesitated, 'It might have been a home cinema, but the police said there were books in the room.'

'I didn't know he had a house at the beach. Doesn't 'the People's Premier' live in a modest Californian bungalow in Altona?'

Prendergast's public persona made much of being a knock-about bloke of modest means who still lived in the same suburb he was born in. It was convincing for anyone who had never met him.

'On paper the mansion is owned by some off-the-shelf tax dodging entity operating out of the Bahamas, and may no media outlet ever think otherwise,' answered Stainless. 'Bad enough we've got a Labor Premier with a library-slash-home cinema at his beach house but even worse the room's main feature is the body of a dead teenage girl. Take the next right, I think we're close by.'

I slowly crawled up the street until we saw the police cars parked in front of a yellow stone fortress. In this case a man's home was his sandcastle, a giant one. The only thing missing was the clumps of seaweed for decoration.

'Is that the right one?' I asked unnecessarily.

'Who else would have been able to get planning permission,' Stainless said in disgust and got out of the car.

As I sat there counting the turrets, I suddenly remembered how decomposing bodies made me feel faint, and decided that perhaps I should stay in the car. I began deep breathing, focusing on the 'I Hunt,

I Vote' sticker peeling off the back of the battered silver Ford Falcon parked front of us. It wasn't quite 'warm blue ocean' but beggars can't be choosers. I sat there hyperventilating until Stainless knocked on my window and told me to stop buggerising around.

'No media at least,' I said, getting out reluctantly.

'They'll get here eventually, like flies to a...' He was interrupted by a heavy-set guy in a cheap suit and surgical gloves.

'Hope you didn't speed Stainless, because we've got more cameras on that freeway than you've got legitimate members.'

'Johnno, this is my offsider, Ms Callan Valient. Cal, this is Detective Sergeant Johansson.'

Johnno ignored me.

'Can't have you disturbing the crime scene. You can take a sticky beak when they bring out the body bag.'

Stainless declined and I decided I could get through the morning without vomiting.

'How long has she been here for?' asked Stainless.

'At a guess, since October 12th.'

'You a cadaver whisperer these days?'

'A ticket in her pocket, last train from the city to Frankston.'

'Frankston station,' repeated Stainless slowly.

'I know,' said Johnno, wisecracks forgotten. 'Takes you back.'

Stainless gazed thoughtfully into the middle distance before asking, 'Anything else?'

'Nothing so far. We found her neatly tucked up in a blanket like Goldilocks so we're putting out an arrest warrant on three bears.'

With a sense of humour like that he could be a sub-editor.

'The real estate agent who discovered the body is sitting on the nature strip having a smoke.'

A look of deep pain crossed Stainless' face, so I decided I should talk to her. Purely to shield Stainless from the temptation of passive smoking and nothing to do with getting away from the smell of a putrefying corpse.

Drawing on a cigarette like it was an asthma inhaler, was a woman in a velour tracksuit with makeup as thick as a kabuki mask. Next to her, someone in a dressing gown, was being violently ill into a shrub.

'She all right?' I asked sympathetically.

'Patsy? She'll be fine.'

Patsy squinted in my direction.

'Want me to get a water, Pats?' Kabuki asked.

'I think I'll go lie down,' she gasped and shuffled quickly through the gate of a nearby bungalow.

'Dead bodies make me feel queasy,' I said.

Kabuki hovered in a lungful of tar, 'Memories can make you as sick as a dog.'

'Mind if I ask you a few questions?' I asked.

'You a cop?'

'An interested party.'

She shrugged. 'Ask away.'

'What were you doing here?'

'Got word yesterday that the owners were thinking about selling and wanted a valuation. If I didn't move quickly that stuck up bitch Alison Dickey over at Murray Real Estate would be onto this like a shot. Picked up the key from Patsy Wakelin. She cleans all the houses on our books.' She gestured towards the house the lady had scuttled into. 'Of course I recognised that smell when I opened the door.'

There was an odd note of pride.

'You find a lot of dead bodies?'

'All the bloody time.'

'We need to keep this quiet,' I said.

She laughed derisively, pointedly looking at the police tape and blue flashing lights, 'Hush-hush is it? Guarantee me the sale and I won't breath a word.'

'Would someone dead in it make a difference to the price?' I asked.

'Get the blood out of the carpet in the home cinema and no one will be the wiser. It's got a spa, four bedrooms, three bathrooms, double garage and Smeg appliances. We're talking Sorrento money here.' She smiled the satisfied smile of sharks and salesmen.

Stainless and I got pies from a servo and drove down to Rye pier, while dawn broke as gently as a politician's promise.

'I've got a bad feeling about this one,' he muttered.

'You don't think the Premier's involved?' I said.

'No, thank Christ. Overseas junket prostituting Victoria until November, remember.' The actual slogan had been 'Victoria - open for business'. It could have doubled as an escort agency ad and perhaps explained the unexpected spike in single male tourists to Melbourne.

I had forgotten. At the start of the trip the tabloids had christened him, 'TRENDY PRENDY' as he paraded in Italian suits and went to bunga-bunga parties with Silvio Berlusconi. By the end he was 'PRENDERGHASTLY' having offended people in three different time zones. Still, as far as alibis went it was a winner.

Unfortunately, I was also reminded of an imbroglio we had been involved in at the same time. Anthony Prendergast, the Premier's son, as thick as two planks

and therefore a shoo-in for a safe Labor seat in the future, had been caught drink driving opposite Frankston Hotel on Saturday October 13th. It's the ALP equivalent of a bah mitzvah. I had spent my birthday successfully bailing out and unsuccessfully sobering up Tony the Human Octopus.

'That dickhead again,' Stainless sighed after I told him. Tony was in the right place at exactly the wrong time.

Silence descended as we wrestled with lava-hot meat erupting from slightly frozen pastry cases. He didn't start talking until he'd finished spraying crumbs all over the dash.

'And as if this isn't bad enough, it's going to remind everyone of the little Sally Wakelin case from twenty years ago.' He looked as depressed as a bloodhound.

That name conjured memories that I had forgotten existed. My mother sobbing into a dishcloth in the kitchen, with the radio saying at last Sally Wakelin had been found, murdered by an unknown killer. Standing in the playground chanting 'Wakey-Wakey Wakelin' while a kid lay down pretending to be dead. It was a name repeated by worried parents to a generation of errant school kids. But it also triggered something more recent.

'Any relation to Patsy Wakelin?'

'That's Sally's mother.'

'She cleans that house.'

Stainless gazed through the windscreen out at the bay. Grey clouds covered the horizon giving the impression that the sun had already called in sick. As I turned the key in the ignition, Stainless said, 'The police want to keep the investigation low key. No one wants the press sniffing round. You go see Patsy and make sure she doesn't talk to the media.' I rolled my eyes. 'Women handle these things better,' he continued. 'The gentler sex and all that.'

Complete rubbish of course as was demonstrated two days later. You don't become the Police Commissioner of Victoria by being gentle. We had received a summons to appear before Ma'am, and you don't ignore a woman who could lock you up for the term of your natural life and crush walnuts between her breasts.

'Mr Gesink and Ms Valient, pleasure as always.' She gestured for us to sit down. It wasn't a command but it was safer to treat everything she said as one. She was powerful, by which I mean that not only could she order big burly blokes in blue to knee-cap you, if she wanted to she could do it herself. There was a long history between her and Stainless filled with heated arguments, heinous crimes and traffic infringements.

‘Good holiday Commissioner?’ Stainless asked. He had stuck on double the amount of nicotine patches in a bid to keep his temper.

‘I don’t take holidays Mr Gesink. In this job, you can’t even have a haircut without it being on the front page.’

She walked around her desk to the type of leather chair that screamed ‘The Boss’, especially when she sat in it.

‘The fact that the media haven’t discovered the link between the Premier and the crime scene, has bought us both some time before this particular political tsunami hits,’ she said.

‘Dedman’s off until the end of January,’ Stainless answered. ‘We need it fixed before then.’

Andy Dedman was the State’s senior crime reporter. Our problem was this Dedman told tales and knew even more. He’d discover the link before morning tea.

Ma’am nodded her agreement, ‘As much as I dislike this, I am suggesting a course of cooperation for mutual benefit.’

‘You scratch my back...’ Stainless began to wheeze but then thought better of it. The nearest approximation to physical contact he would receive from Ma’am would be her holding a police issued semi-automatic to his nether regions and pulling the trigger.

He tried again with, ‘What have you got?’

‘Ashleigh Siddle was a fourteen year old from a family known to Social Services. Evidence of a recent sexual assault. She was cleaned up so no DNA evidence. Death due to a drug overdose, not self-administered.

‘At 11.20pm on October 12th security camera footage has her alone on the platform of Frankston Station but nothing after that. A group of enterprising young locals had smashed several of the external station cameras the day before. She wasn’t reported missing for two days by which time she was already dead.’

‘Parents involved?’ asked Stainless.

She shook her head. ‘No great shakes as parents but we can’t pin this on them.’

‘Is the Premier or his family being investigated?’ I interrupted. It was political problem number one.

Ma’am didn’t like being interrupted, but the question amused her.

‘The Premier might be suffering a political death but I don’t think we can tie him to this one. Nor his lovely wife,’ a ghost of a smile crossing her face. Elaine Prendergast had all the charisma of pit bull crossed with an accountant. ‘But we’ll be talking to Tony.’

Stainless gave me a look which would mean trawling around nightclubs in the shortest skirt I owned, to find

a man whose social skills made inebriated footballers seem keen students of *Debrett's Guide for the Modern Gentleman*.

'Now for the mutual cooperation,' she said. 'Any political whispering? Who hates the Premier so much that they'd put a dead body in his house?'

Stainless wasn't one to lag on a comrade, even in a murder investigation, so he tried a diversion. 'The Libs?' he ventured hopefully. He had dismissed the idea when I had thought of it: 'Their idea of a sex scandal is being disciplined by someone called 'Nanny'.'

The Commissioner gave a mirthless laugh. 'I don't think we need to look so far afield, not when we have a veritable conga line of possible suspects amongst the party faithful.'

Stainless tried to look surprised and failed abjectly.

'I expect a phone call if you hear anything.' Ma'am gave Stainless the evil eye.

'Is there any connection to the Wakelin case?' I asked.

The Commissioner's starched exterior wilted slightly. 'This is almost a rerun of the Wakelin case. Runaway girl with lousy parents last seen alive at Frankston train station, drugged and raped by person unknown and body found months later. This time we'll catch whoever did it.'

'Was there a strong suspect for Sally's death?' Gesink questioned.

The Commissioner shook her head. 'Look, the investigation wasn't the best. Spent a lot of time focused on the father. He's a nasty bit of work but in the end his alibi was water-tight. Too late they began looking at other suspects. A well known pedophile was operating in the Peninsula at the time. Until now I'd have said it was him.'

'Could he have killed Ashleigh?' I asked.

'He died in jail last year. We couldn't link him to Sally but there were plenty of others before we caught up with him.'

Stainless stared out the window at Ma'am's views. On a clear day you could see the cranes at Docklands. 'Twenty years is a long time between bodies.'

Ma'am nodded. 'Makes you think that there might be some others we don't know about yet.'

* * *

I found Tony in the fourth nightclub I tried. The music was loud, the lights were dim, but then so was Tony. He was propped up against the bar, telling everyone his dad ran the State.

'Let me buy you a drink,' I said sourly.

He gaped at my chest as if I was a shimmering mirage or more likely a triple-breasted drunken blur, 'Naw little lady...I'm...buying,' he slurred, right before he slipped unconscious onto the floor.

'Has he got a tab?' I asked the jaded barman. He nodded. 'I'll have the most expensive cocktail you've got.' After drinking another for the road, I paid up with the contents from Tony's wallet, giving the barman an exorbitant tip after he promised to vote Labor next election if I made sure Tony never darkened their doors again.

I took Tony home in a taxi and sobered him up as he lay face down on the lawn by blasting him with the garden hose. It's important to cherish the little things in life.

Much later Tony was conscious, shivering in a blanket.

'I don't feel so well,' he moaned.

'Make it to the toilet or I'll rub your nose in it. We need to talk about last October.'

Most of the interrogation occurred with a bathroom door between us, but eventually I got what I wanted. Tony wasn't supposed to use the beach house in case the media found out that working-class Jack owned a citadel with ocean views, but, annoyed about missing out on an overseas junket, he decided, while Mum and Dad were

away, to play up. He'd even rung the real estate agent to get it ready for him, but he never made it. All night boozing at the Casino had made him an easy target for the police when he drove down the next morning. I checked with the Casino who kindly showed me footage of Tony sexually harassing female croupiers into the wee small hours. I got the impression they had it on high rotation for when they wanted a laugh or it was time to renegotiate their licence with the Premier. Still, as far as alibis went it was a winner. A family tradition I guess. That and being a wanker.

Stainless' relief when I told him was tempered with the realisation we were back at square one. There hadn't even been a whisper about it in Labor ranks. No one had made the connection. It seemed unbelievable that a mansion so large that it probably could be seen from outer space hadn't been picked up on any left-leaning political radar.

'I guess we've been lucky that it's summer holidays for the press,' I said.

'Summer time is the worst time of year,' Stainless glowered at me while he chewed doggedly on nicotine gum. 'All we need is some young Jimmy Olsen who wants his first front page to start digging around. You go see the Wakelins and make sure no journo has been visiting.'

Stainless looked grumpily at the calendar. Dedman was home from holidays in a week.

‘First Tony, now grieving mothers,’ I complained. ‘What are you doing?’

‘I am sullyng my reputation by having to go cap in hand to the Military & Naval Club,’ he shouted. I knew what that meant. Stainless was desperate enough to consult his opposite number in the Liberal Party. It was the code of the smokejumpers to ‘fess up if requested, even if this particular one was a white haired patrician type who would salute the flag, pay homage to the Queen and speak of sacrifice for the country, all while ensuring he never paid a cent in taxes. It was humiliating asking the dark side for help, but this was what we were reduced to.

‘I don’t want to talk to Patsy. I’m not good with tears,’ I whined.

‘Just see them and get it fixed. That’s an order,’ Stainless snarled.

There was only one thing I could think to say.

‘When are you going to give up giving up smoking?’

‘What are you talking about, I’ve nearly beaten it,’ he said, his hands shaking as he picked up a biro and stuck it in his mouth.

* * *

A barrel shaped man was coming out of Patsy’s house as I walked up the street, several hours later. His grey wispy hair was the only soft thing about him. Years of door knocking has given me a second sense for trouble and I waited until he had driven off in his ‘I Hunt, I Vote’ Falcon before I walked through their gate.

Patsy answered the door. Small and brittle, she resembled a broken bird.

She stared nervously, ‘You’re the girl from that night.’ ‘I was wondering if we could talk.’

‘Terry’s just left.’

‘It was you I wanted to chat to.’

Inside was neat but shabby. The faded carpet, old lino, peeling paint on cupboards and sideboards gave the impression that time had stopped for this family twenty years earlier.

‘Don’t get many visitors,’ she said flatly.

‘Any journalists been in touch?’ I asked, trying to sound off hand.

‘What would they want with me?’ she seemed startled.

‘I just thought with your...daughter?’ I couldn’t finish the sentence, ashamed I was trampling over traumatic events for a Premier who scarcely deserved it.

She sniffed, ‘Wouldn’t talk to those vultures even if they did. But the police have been, pretending they care

about missing girls now. Bit different twenty years ago. Can't chase after every runaway they told me when I reported Sally hadn't come home. Now, its all offers of tea and sympathy and 'would you like to talk to someone,' but they couldn't wait to leave just like everyone else.'

She looked at me as if she knew that was exactly what I wanted to do, now that I knew she wouldn't talk to media. I felt stuck and began wittering inanely about how sorry I was that Sally had died. Patsy sat there silent until my compassion petered out and I shut up.

'Who'd you say you worked for?'

I weighed up all the different lies I could tell her, but then thought that if I told her truth she might show me the door of her own accord. It had worked in the past.

'The Labor Party.'

She said nothing, waiting for me to continue.

'I shouldn't be telling you this, but the Premier owns that house.'

Her face barely registered that she was listening. Instead she leant across the table and put her hand on mine. 'You know, I see girls like you and I wonder what my Sally would have looked like grownup. She was smart and could have made something of herself. She's

the first thing I see when I wake up and the last thing I see when I shut my eyes, but she always looks like the final time I saw her. Never gets older.'

I was floundering for what passes for polite conversation in these circumstances, 'I guess it will be the same for Ashleigh's parents,' was what I came up with.

The look she gave me was of shock and she pulled back her hand quickly. It was as if something had hit home. I wondered if I been insensitive and began to apologise, but she cut across me.

'Terry still goes looking for Sally, pretending to himself that she isn't dead. He's spent hours at that train station hoping he'll see her get off the train.'

Her eyes darted to my face as if to make sure that I was understanding her.

'Frankston Station?' I asked. 'Where Ashleigh went missing from?'

The words hung there between us, severing time into two, a before and after.

'Did he see Ashleigh?' My mouth was well ahead of my brain, which was desperately trying to make sense of what she was saying.

'I shouldn't be telling you this,' and staring straight in front of her, she spoke so matter-of-factly it was as

if we were discussing the weather. There had been a last minute cleaning job and not being able to find her vacuum cleaner or her disinfectant, eventually she tried the garage. The garage where Terry kept his weapons for hunting, the place he had told her never to go, and that's then she heard noises coming the boot of his car.

'I pretended I didn't know anything about it for years. And when I couldn't fool myself I told myself it was vengeance, an eye for an eye. Let others feel what I feel. But that changed once I saw that girl. She was in terrible shape, barely conscious. I took her to that fancy house because she'd be safe from him and it would give me time to think about what to do. I decided to leave her there because I knew that whoever was coming to stay would find her. I made her comfortable. How was I to know they weren't going to turn up? By the time I realised that it was too late. She was dead.'

'But why didn't you ring the police? Tell them what Terry had done.'

For one moment the facade cracked, and I glimpsed the bleakness of her world.

'I couldn't do that. He's the only person who remembers Sally like I do.'

'Did he kill her as well?'

She shook her head, 'Oh no. Her death was what started all of this. He loved Sally. Too much if you want the whole truth. That's why she ran away that day. He couldn't keep his hands off her when he drank. He wasn't much of a dad - but then I wasn't much of a mum.'

The room was so still all I could hear was the blood pounding in my ears so I didn't hear the car pull up. It was when we heard the gate creak that Patsy said quietly, 'That'll be Terry.' I sat there petrified, trying desperately to think of a convincing excuse for why I was there.

There was a loud banging on the front door and suddenly it burst open, large figures coming through, yelling about not moving. Large figures in blue.

It was the police.

Behind them, waiting outside the gate was Stainless, smoking a cigarette.

He explained it all to me later. While sitting at Tory Central, drinking port and smoking a cigar ('One meeting with those bastards and you lose all your principles'), Stainless got a call from Ma'am with a breakthrough. Video footage had Terry sitting in the station's car park the day before Ashleigh disappeared, pointing out the security cameras to a couple of skateboarding hoodies.

* * *

We didn't save the Premier. Dedman came back from holidays and by the next day Jack was on a permanent one, which seemed a little unfair as his only crimes were against good taste and architecture. So even though we had uncovered a serial killer, in political terms, we had failed. Everyone was cross except Stainless whose idea of happiness is a lit cigarette. I'm almost tempted to take up smoking myself.

There is some talk of shutting us down but the powers that be keep on getting distracted by the polling which is woeful and the headlines which are worse. Ma'am likes to read them out to us when she phones up. Her personal favourite was about the Prendergasts' divorce settlement. Elaine had enough dirt on Jack so she ended up with the 'SHACK OF SHAME' which she sold for a fortune, and all Jack got was the Altona weatherboard and even worse Tony.

The real reason Ma'am is keeping in touch is to let us know about the investigation.

Makeshift graves have been found in hunting grounds all over the state.

There's nineteen of them.

One for each year Sally has been dead.

Aoife Clifford

Aoife Clifford is the author of the best-selling novel *All These Perfect Strangers*. Her next novel *Second Sight* will be published in July 2018.

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