

# COLIN & LESTER



BERNARD MICHAEL O'HANLON

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By  
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*For Fenny*





# I

In the beginning was the Mistake. It was a small mistake in a big universe. It was a mistake that anyone could have made. It was not even a slip of the finger, really. Everything, in retrospect, could have been different—absolutely everything from beginning to end. Instead everyone was left with memories, most of them unwanted, until the day they died. Blame it on fate or chance if you so prefer; that was the verdict once the dust had settled and the tabloids were hungrily publicising the affair as if it was a royal scandal involving the corgis.

Centre-stage was the late Sir Alfred Kennington, better known as Kanga to friends and foe alike. Notwithstanding his agonizing death at *Warm Fingers* (a brothel that reputedly offered something for everyone), the deceased commanded an obituary in newspapers across the country as a former Governor of the State and one of the last living recipients of the Victoria Cross. Further interest was fuelled by the fact that he was the father-in-law of the present Premier of Victoria, Gerard Hilton. Understandably enough, interest was more likely to be focused on the manner of his death than the many achievements of his life. Given his vice-regal standing, a state funeral was also inevitable.

That's where a flaw entered the design: a short-sighted secretary being asked to distinguish between two funeral directors with very similar surnames in the phone-book at the end of an arduous day: Downey and Downer.

Once Catherine Hilton (the daughter of the deceased) had disclosed the purpose of her call, Colin Downer leapt higher than the cow over the tip of the moon. It had been ten weeks since their last funeral where some decent money changed hands. With debt-collectors pounding at the door and rummaging through their garage on a weekly basis, Colin and his partner could well testify on oath that burying vagrants on government rates never made anyone rich.

“Excuse me for one moment!” Colin begged before racing across the room to turn down the telly. “Now, where’s the body?” he asked hungrily upon his return, anxious to close the deal while the prospective client was still rattled by her bereavement. “We’re always here to help so let’s have the details quick and fast, lady! You’ll feel a whole lot better afterwards.”

“My Father’s at the Freemason’s. The autopsy was conducted this morning from what I’ve been told. I spoke to the hospital at lunchtime myself; they’re now ready to release my Father’s body,” Catherine replied, stifling a sob. “I was told to ring you by the secretary at the Premier’s Department. I might as well tell you here and now—I am Catherine Hilton, the wife of the Premier. Sir Alfred Kennington was my father. You must know who he is. Evidently you’ve conducted many of these state funerals before.”

Colin was disconcerted by this last statement but not so much that he lost sight of the dollar signs dancing before his eyes.

“Spot on, Madame. Heaps of ‘em! We’re experts at this kind of heavy-duty stuff. Now lady, don’t you worry about a thing! Just leave everything to us! We’ll pick him up in the hearse once I get off the phone and my partner gets his underpants on and his arse into gear. We’ll race your old man back here to the funeral-parlour before the devil knows he’s on the way. The hospital-staff will handle all the paperwork. And by the way, you have my sympathies, Madame. I’ve been in plenty of embarrassing situations before so I know what it’s like. Those stress-relief sessions at *Warm Fingers* can be pretty rough stuff—*from what I hear, needless to say*. Our vehicle is also fast enough to outrun the reporters if they want to photograph your Old Man in the body-bag. Now, what’s the bugger’s—sorry, your Old Man’s—ummmh, full name again?” he asked shrilly.

“Sir Alfred Kennington,” she murmured, over the hills and far away in a happier time.

“Righto. Sounds real important. I might have heard of him from somewhere or other. Now he’s not over six-foot one is

he?” Colin said a silent prayer at this point. An answer in the affirmative would abort the opportunity here and now to the ultimate benefit of a competitor (a highly detestable group in Colin’s mind).

“Heavens no!” she replied. “Why do you ask?”

“Health regulations, so to speak. It’s all pretty complicated stuff. I won’t bore you with the shocking details.”

“I see,” she replied softly in her highly cultured voice. “I suppose I’ll have to come over in the next day or so to select a coffin, Mister Downer, and discuss the arrangements for the state-funeral. My father was a very distinguished gentleman indeed by any measure. He had, for instance, a vast number of medals to his name, some from the War, others bestowed by various foreign governments and international organisations in light of his philanthropy. The family is hoping that their prominence at the funeral will help to dampen down some of the ribald stories that might surface in the days ahead. The mainstream media has shown a considerable degree of decorum in their reportage of our father’s passing; the same cannot be said of those vulgar radio-stations or the tabloids. For example, my dear father won the Victoria Cross. That fact was barely mentioned. The only thing those buffoons wanted to discuss was that disgusting brothel and the fact that he was wearing some sort of outlandish leather-suit at the time of his death. Given his recent bout of mental illness, I’m sure my father was completely oblivious to his whereabouts at the time. He probably thought he was in a restaurant of some kind. Perhaps he was taken there by his friends as some sort of sick joke.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s disgraceful I know,” Colin half-stammered, “I’m very angry about it myself. If I run into a reporter, I’ll beat the living crap out of him just for you!”

Colin then drew a deep breath that sucked the air into every nook and cranny of his tar-lined lungs.

“Now Madame, we’re kind of refurbishing the joint at the moment so it’s a bit of a mess. We can fix up everything over the phone right now if you want and I’ll get back to you

later in the week to sort out the finer details. I'll even send my partner around to collect the medals tomorrow morning. He'll scrub 'em up good and proper so they're looking all nice and flash for the cameras. His name is Lester Biggins. He's a bit of a Bronto-brainer but he's got a heart of gold. But first things first: what package are you after? Our firm offers a three-tiered range of services: the Deluxe, the Super and the Standard. In all honesty, most people ask for the Deluxe. There are plenty of freebies too, that come with the deal. That's what the Old Man deserves and nothing less if you ask me."

Catherine Hilton, it is fair to say, was taken aback by the undertaker's candour. As she was later to realise (much to her regret), more thought-power should have been expended at this point—but Colin's smooth sales-pitch, made all the more buttery by the bills on his kitchen-table, coaxed her mind to override her usual sense of caution.

"Well, without going overboard, Mister Downer, let's go with the Deluxe. I'm sure that the rest of the family will back me on this one (I have four siblings, after all), and the State Government has already agreed to defray half of the costs. As you say, Father deserves nothing less and we'll split the remainder of the bill between the four of us."

"Oh, you little beauty!" Colin crowed like a rooster. "The Deluxe! You've made the right decision! You won't regret it on the day, believe you me. When my mother got turned into a postage-stamp by a train last year, she got the same treatment 'cos I loved the old bag so much. And just to give you an example, about six weeks ago we buried a former wrestler. Just let me think what his name was!"

"That won't necessary, Mister Downer," Catherine Hilton replied. "I have got . . ."

"Maximo Harumpnavich," Colin hooted triumphantly. "That's it! The Ukrainian Sampson they used to call him down at the dog-track where he acted as a heavy for one of the Filipino betting syndicates. You might've heard of him."

"What on earth has this got to do with my father?" Catherine replied back with the hint of a stutter.

“Hang on, hear me out. If you saw him—not now of course—you’d recognise him. The poor bugger was even on television for a while trying to flog one of his bull-workers. Anyway, his main claim to fame is that he won a bronze medal at the Olympic Games in shady circumstances all round. He was beaten into third place by two guys from New Guinea who were pumped up on the jungle juice. His family had no option but to go for ‘the Standard’ because Maximo was into marital-aids in a big way after what the steroids had done to his fishing-tackle. As it turned out, everyone at the funeral thought it was a really classy send off—and that was only ‘the Standard’! Hell, we even buried him with one of his bull-workers! Imagine what their reaction would have been if they had forked out the extra hundred bucks and gone for ‘the Deluxe’!”

And so it was left at that. There was no attempt on the customer’s part to exorcise whatever devil lay in the detail, where Lucifer himself was hibernating away for the moment. For now everything was quiet on the front.

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Colin Downer has honest eyes in a dishonest face, a volcanic temper and a runaway tongue. One would not have to dig all that deep into his lineage to uncover pickpockets, smugglers and their like, transported to Australia in leg-irons nearly two centuries ago to colonise this gruff and misanthropic continent. His paternal grandfather bayoneted Turks by the dozen in the First World War. His father, twenty-five years dead, helped to quell Rommel in North Africa. History has not demanded any such heroism from our friend. Be an economically viable unit, the Media tells him constantly, and consume as many Mars Bars as possible. As for Colin’s particulars, his hair is unnaturally black for someone in their late-fifties (a story in itself); his eyesight remains as needle-sharp as ever (especially when a sixth ace is in circulation), and his weight

is uncontrollable at present given that Colin is doing his level best to prop up the Mars Bars industry. There is also a perennial redness to his face and its epicentre is his bulbous nose.

In his younger days, Colin had lived the life of a human tom-cat. Scuffles and frenzied conquests had been a normal part of his weekly routine. Like Don Juan, it had not mattered whether his conquests were seasoned campaigners from *Warm Fingers* or vestal virgins; his sole criterion had been a willingness on their part to alleviate his supercharged sex-drive in any form or manner. The mere whiff of availability, whatever the marital status of the woman concerned, had once prompted him to undertake risks that would have made Errol Flynn tremble in his long-johns. All too often, however, Colin's rutting violated the interests of other males, many of whom were quick to demarcate their conjugal rights by threats, bluster and violence.

Sticks and stones may break bones and more, but procreation is nothing less than a rip-tide.

Some three and a half years ago, a southpaw at a public-bar changed Colin's life forever by knocking-out most of his teeth. Colin ended up on the ground as a result. The aggrieved husband had then kicked him in the groin, thereby rupturing his testicles—and by all reports it didn't do his willy-wagtail much good either. It took a full two years for the pain to subside, leaving Colin reluctant to return to the gung-ho lifestyle of old. The drink has also done much to sap his once measureless libido. Nowadays, Colin is a confirmed bachelor. Marriage has been successfully avoided to date, notwithstanding the many bastards (twelve at last count) who plague him with paternity suits. Formerly a lady-killer, now sexually in abeyance, the Colin of the present-day is never happier than when he loses himself in the vocalise of his beloved Elvis.

To speak harshly, Colin does not predicate eternity; he is too much a creature of the present and tomorrow to worry

about his placement in the Divine Comedy. Perhaps he has been sent into the world in order to refute the claims of metaphysics and theologies of whatever kind. All in all, he is an archetypal Australian; beholden to no god or devil, devoid of all ideologies except an ingrained lethargy and unlikely to be commemorated for deeds great or small in the years to come.

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There was no time to waste. Ten minutes later Colin drove into a car-park outside “Paradise Gardens”, a block of flats that the local council is planning to demolish before the end of the year in the interests of public-safety. Lester has lived on the eighth floor of this rickety edifice for the past year or so, perched above the smoky chimney-stacks of the neighbouring asbestos factory. Panorama-wise, there is a sliver of the polluted bay to the south if you stand on the toilet-seat and look out the window on a clear day. God alone knows how Lester keeps himself busy, especially on those lonely nights when his black and white television is on the blink and there is nothing else to do.

One of the small triumphs of Colin’s life occurred last winter when he finally persuaded Lester to sign a lease for his very own flat. To facilitate this exodus, Colin donated two bean-bags to his protégé, together with a home-brew kit and a single mattress with plenty of character to its name. Prior to this momentous decision, Lester had squatted for nearly four years in Colin’s spare room after emigrating from Auckland in New Zealand. Just ask Colin: even now, some twelve months after his departure, the room still smells like buggery.

Reaching down to a panel below the steering-wheel, Colin pushed a red button. True to its design, the Dixie-horn under the hood of the turbo-hearse immediately blared out its refrain with plenty of decibels to spare. Five minutes later,

it was still deafening the neighbourhood as Lester tarried in his flat above.

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Lester Dudley Biggins, to give his full name as known to Interpol, is not the most imposing of individuals to have stridden forth onto the stage of the world. Currently, he is 266,578,983<sup>rd</sup> in line for the British throne. Illiterate, slothful, and none too fond of soap, our anti-hero has been banned from municipal pools far and wide for conduct unbecoming and nigh on unprintable in any decent publication. With rougher edges to him than the Wild Man of Borneo, it could be argued with some conviction that Lester is an evolutionary throwback: his eyes, both permanently bloodshot, are badly in need of a realignment; his jaw-line is non-existent and looking at his bow-legs and stooped-back makes one glad that Lester wasn't around when the freak-shows of legend were still in existence and out to make a buck. Lester has few firm friends and many casual enemies. Instinctively, most people regard him as a pariah. If someone were to write his sexual history (hopefully unaccompanied by photographs or pop-up figures), it would make for very brief reading indeed except for the weighty chapter on self-molestation. Five days short of his nineteenth birthday, Lester crossed the Tasman Sea with a one-way ticket and a toupee to conceal his congenital baldness. Just as the boat was about to leave the jetty, a distant cousin had given him Colin's name and address on a slip of paper in the hope that there would never be a return of the native. Against long odds, the two soon became the best of friends, with Lester happy enough to play the role of Robin to Colin's Batman in the Gotham City of his dreams. Despite the occasional influx of money, however, Lester's bold decision to move to Australia has not been particularly successful—far from it, in fact. His notoriety in certain circles aside, he has nothing to show for all the cabals and schemes of the past four years. Tired of living in

a state of near-poverty, unwanted and unloved by Australians in general, Lester might be back in Auckland by Christmas with his black and white television if the funeral business continues to falter and the new semi-greyhound—Brutus—proves to be, as expected, a dud.

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“What took you so bloody long?” drawled Colin as Comet clunked into second gear.

Lester wiped some snot onto his sleeve before speaking.

“You remember how I bought that Ant-Farm last Christmas, don’t you, with my dole cheque? Well, they’re bloody good pets but the little critters have been getting too fat lately; so instead of sugar, I began feedin’ them with some saccharine I flogged from the local supermarket—good stuff, eh? Then the little buggers went and died on me. Even the big angry ones! When you rolled-up, I was busy restocking the whole thing with some soldier-ants I ant-napped from the local playground in the middle of the night. I must have collected about fifty of them. Some of them look and act like real Nazis; in fact, I’ve called the biggest bugger Adolf. If they manage to break out and start breeding in the flat, I might be a real goner!”

“I thought I told you to throw that kid’s stuff out the window! Gees you’re a bloody loser!” Colin exclaimed good-naturedly. “Everyone gave up on ant-farms back in the Seventies as soon as they came out. And imagine putting Nazi ants on a diet! Sometimes, Lester, not even I know where your dumb ideas come from.”

In response, Lester began to pick his nose, both nostrils at once. Then he reached under his seat and pulled out a much-loved copy of ‘Playboy’. After switching on the hearse’s interior light, he began flicking through its pages with an air of urgency.

“Anyway,” Colin resumed after a furtive glance at Miss Mega Boobs, “have I got news for you! We’ve just hit the

jackpot big-time. I got a call just after dinner. We've been commissioned to give the royal send-off to a former state governor! Looks like 'Downer and Associate' have got a big funeral and even bigger bucks comin' their way mighty soon! Even the television cameras will be there! You and me are going to be TV stars for a day and zillionaires for the rest of our lives—and you can bank on that! Monte Carlo and Princess Stephanie, here we come! Hell, I might even end up being one of her bodyguards with all the perks thrown in!"

"You're jokin'!" exclaimed Lester, who nevertheless ignored the surge of adrenaline to keep his eyes on the bunny.

"I kid you not. The daughter has already agreed to our terms over the phone. As they say, the chicken is in the pot and ready to be cooked good and proper! The funeral's going to be on Thursday morning, probably at eleven, in the Anglican cathedral in the city; you know, the one near the bridge with the steeple. The daughter sounded rich so I bumped up the price a fair bit. Believe it or not, she swallowed the entire sales-pitch—hook, line and sinker—and she bit off most of the pier as well! In fact, she's the very first person in the history of our firm to opt for 'the Deluxe'! What do you reckon about that, eh! Our lives are about to change forever. This is the lucky strike we've been waiting for since day one. Lester, believe you me, we are going to take these people to the cleaners in the nicest possible way. We'll get away with using a cheapie coffin straight from the lumber-yard if I give it a few coats of French-polish between now and then."

Lester grunted in response and adjusted his crotch.

"Now listen up, buddy," Colin continued, "and don't argue or else you'll get your first knuckle-sandwich for the night: it's your turn to scrub the old fella and seal up his cake-hole when we get home—and from what I read in the paper this morning, you'd better use some gloves and break out the old disinfectant before you start up. A pair of pliers might come in handy too. God knows what they shoved up his arse at *Warm Fingers* in the heat of the moment!"

Lester's underpowered intellect was so overwhelmed by this surfeit of information that Colin's last comment, by far the most crucial component, passed unheeded. The one point to penetrate the haze was the reference to money.

"So how much are we talkin' about?" Lester asked as he flung away the tattered porno.

"If we play our cards right, probably twenty thousand grand all up—may be more. The exposure will also do our business a world of good. Struth! I haven't seen that much cash since I hoicked my old woman's mobile-home last year."

Colin cleared his throat as his mind turned to Brutus, the third member of the Triumvirate.

"And you know what Lester: the money couldn't have come at a better time. I'm still on bad terms with the officials down at the dog-track; they're really pissed off about Brutus getting cosy with some of the female greyhounds at a training-session last month. They actually turned the fire-hose on him and then pulled out the steel truncheons as a last resort."

"What a bugger of a thing to do!" Lester exclaimed fraternally. "Brutus has got no female friends. And he ain't batting on the other side either! I've seen him doin' it tough all by himself! Those bastards should've let him get his cheapies for once!"

"Yeah, it was pretty sad stuff," Colin sighed. "I was a helpless spectator. Even so, they still couldn't stop him actin' frisky until the deed was done. I might have to grease a few palms in order to get things back to normal—and hope like hell that Brutus' sperm-count is lower than your IQ! And because Brutus looks like a bit of a mongrel, they're threatening to de-register him unless we can come up with some pedigree papers fast. Those bastards have had their gun-sights on my forehead since day one. We might have to go down to the newsagent next week with a pair of scis-

sors and some sticky-tape and start photocopying hard—and I mean real hard.”

Lester grunted then resumed his reading. Colin took his silence to mean that enough information had circumvented his partner's slowness of mind to register as impending fact.

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The one and only asset owned by ‘Downer and Associate, Funeral Directors’ is their beloved turbo-charged hearse, Comet. It was Lester who had so christened it. Comet is a mid 80's station-wagon which the duo bought for a song from Milosevic Motors after a prolonged battle of wits and a midnight raid on the much-feared car-yard itself. It assumed a new identity back in Colin's garage after a coat of black paint had been applied. Upon the removal of the back-seats, a plank of chipboard had also been fitted into the rear. After subjecting the hearse to a literal spit and polish treatment, Lester then capped his efforts by gluing two chrome-coated towel-racks onto the roof itself. All up, it took a fortnight of hard yakka and a few hundred bucks to complete the metamorphosis. Both Colin and Lester date their business from that proud day when they pushed the vehicle out of the garage to take on the world. According to his two owners, Comet is not put to shame by any of the sleeker limousines fielded by their well-heeled rivals. With a thirsty V-6 turbo engine under its bonnet it can also out-drag them, whatever the handicap imposed by his freight in the back. Much to the senior partner's satisfaction, Comet came equipped with an unduly powerful sound-system. Indeed, whenever Colin has the car to himself, one can hear the volcanic vibrato of the King, circa 1972, from two blocks away. The Dixie-horn also has its uses whenever some babes with more energy than class are in the vicinity. Comet's only shortcoming according to his owners is his dimensions. The space in the rear compartment is simply not long enough to hold the coffin of anyone over six foot one, amputees being the sole exception.

As so arranged, the front-seats are uncomfortably close to the dashboard, thus maximising what little room they have in the back. The seemingly unstoppable expansion of Colin's beer-belly would appear to be the only threat to Comet's long-term viability with the Firm.

On the eve of Comet's first funeral service, Colin brought home a stencil and painted "DOWNER AND ASSOCIATE" onto the rear panel; "FUNERAL DIRECTORS. SERVING THE COMMUNITY AND ITS DEAD TWENTY-FOUR HOURS A DAY." Business cards have been printed with much the same message in a variety of languages, not that it has done anyone any good, least of all the undertakers concerned.

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The trip to the hospital was uneventful. Strangely enough, all the major roads were deserted as if Melbourne itself was in mourning for its late governor. After their arrival at the hospital, the two undertakers sauntered through a side-entrance and declared themselves and their mission to an attendant on the desk. While Lester ogled the nurses on duty (his nuts-and-bolts lust even embraced the portly matron, some two weeks short of her sixtieth birthday), Colin completed the paperwork and then wheeled the trolley out to the hearse with the help of his partner.

"Bloody hell, he wasn't a small bugger, was he?" he commented as they heaved the body-bag into the hearse. "Sir Fred must weigh a bloody tonne, even if he got a few shots away at *Warm Fingers* just before the end! We should be paid by the kilogram, eh? What do you reckon, cocky?"

Lester grunted. Important as the money would be, food was foremost on his mind. Home-cooked meals are a rarity for both men and Lester's larder is usually stocked with nothing better than baked-beans, dog-biscuits and mouldy pizza-subs at the best of times. Dinner-time having come and gone, they soon decided to pull into their favourite take-away on the return journey.

Once the pair was away and homeward bound, Colin further unfolded the commission in the plainest language he could summon:

“Listen up, Lester! I’ll pick you up nice and early on Thursday morning so be ready by nine thirty sharp, OK? Just stand outside your block of flats. We’re off to the country after the ceremony because the bastard wanted to be buried in Warragul (what a bugger) with his wife. First thing tomorrow, I’ll ring those pricks at the cemetery and let ‘em know what’s happening. The family will take care of the headstone from what I hear. Other than that, we’ll follow the same schedule as usual. That means I want you looking and smelling at your best.”

“Do you want me to pinch some flowers from the local cemetery to put in the back of the hearse with the coffin like usual?” Lester asked brightly. “I’m really good at that sort of stuff. It also helps to save the world by recycling.”

“No, bugger it. This time we’ll have to fork out some real money to the local florist for some quality stuff. Anyway, if things go according to plan—and they will—the Kenningtons and the bloody Government will end up paying for every single petal and a lot more besides!”

At the next set of traffic-lights, Colin decided to add detail to his generalisations. Such candour was necessary if the windfall was going to have more than a passing impact on their careers as funeral directors. Moreover, their superannuation consisted of a few McDonald’s gift-vouchers and little else.

“Now Lester, don’t get angry at what I’m about to say but it’s time to get specific. We can’t afford to stuff up this job in any way. We’re going to be on public display for the first time since the last police line-up. As the head of the Firm, I’m expecting you to dry-clean both your suit and your head-rug before Thursday morning—and the rest of you could do with a bloody good scrub as well, believe you me. Phew! I reckon that anyone who stands down-wind of you on a hot day is doing it tougher than those poor sods at Chernobyl.”

“What do ya mean by that?” squawked Lester, ever mindful of his body’s shortcomings.

“Everyone knows that you’ve got a problem with the ‘B-O’,” Colin said in a fatherly fashion, “and I mean big-time body-odour! You smell like a bloody rubbish dump at the best of times. Why do you think we’ve got the car-windows wide open on a night like this, eh? You’re the only person in the bloody world who’s got a ‘Side A’ and ‘Side B’ approach to toilet-paper and you apply the same rules to your underpants every morning. And don’t bullshit me about your skin being allergic to soap! Surely there must be some sort of product on the market that doesn’t make you go tomato-red at the slightest touch? What about some of that medicated shit? I’ll give you twenty bucks to go down to the nearest chemist and buy a truckload of the stuff.”

“Colin, you know I’ve spent a bloody fortune trying to find the right soap,” Lester protested, “and I’m tellin’ you there’s no such thing. Besides, as my old grandma from Scotland used to say: all you need to do each day is rinse your bum good and proper. She got through life OK—God bless her dear old heart—and I can’t see why I should be any different. Do you?”

Colin shuddered at the proximity of unthinkable thoughts.

“Somehow, I don’t think you can compare the two climates on such matters. Just have a bath within twenty-four hours of the funeral—and that’s an order you big skunk! And while we’re on the subject, it’s about time you did something drastic about your pimples! They’re shockers! They look worse than the red bums on those bloody monkeys at the zoo! People must think you’ve contracted rabies again from a mad-dog bite when they see you up close and personal.”

Lester shrugged his round shoulders.

“Don’t worry about me, Colin. Just make sure you manage to do up your zipper, Porkchops! At least no one has ever called me bean-bag bum to me face—and that’s just for starters, fatso!”

Snide references to his girth, as Lester well knows, never fail to needle Colin. In light of all the energy his libido used to consume, three was a time when he was a certified member of the Ethiopian stick-man army; now, on his present diet and a half, he could be likened to a sumo wrestler.

“Very funny, ant-brain, but I’m actually trying to be serious here,” Colin replied testily. “In the very least you could give those white-heads a good squeeze and dab some make-up on the worst of those pimples—especially that big bastard on the tip of your nose! It makes you look like bloody Witchy-Poo! Don’t you realise that appearances matter in our game? If we really want to move up-market in the funeral-game then we have to play it smart when it comes to doing these toffy jobs. That’s where the big money is made. Word gets around. I have no intention of being buried at the end of my days like one of those poor bloody hoboos we have to bury on the cheap in the middle of the night with no-one around!”

“I’ve got better things to do with my time and dimes,” Lester declared grimly as he turned his attention to the old porno. “The toffs will just have to put up with my pimples, like ‘em or not. The ones on my dick are the ones I really have to worry about!”

“Look, your dick is not on display but your face is,” Colin vociferated one last time. “If you don’t get serious about cleaning up your face I’m going to change the name of the firm from ‘*Downer and Associate*’ to ‘*Downer and Pizza-Face with Extra Anchovies!*’ What do you think about that, dumbbo?”

Lester had been preparing to rebut this comment when his eyes were accosted by the curvatures of a failed actress, bare to the eyes of the same world that had laughed her off the silver-screen. “Hell’s bells,” groaned Lester as he pawed at the frustratingly two-dimensional bunny. “Perhaps it’s time I pinched somebody’s credit-card and went down to *Warm Fingers* myself!”

In the adjacent lane, similarly delayed by the same traffic-light, two elderly ladies on their way to the bingo took the

opportunity to stare unashamedly at the hearse. The weight of their gaze did not pass unnoticed. As if to vent his excess sexual energy (better now than later, you might say), Lester wagged his serpentine tongue at the pair then pressed the centrefold flat against the side window, thereby causing the frailer of the two women to reach for her tablets.

“You idiot!” snarled Colin, thumping his partner’s ribcage. “They could be our next customers with any luck. Write down their licence-plates! I’ve got contacts down at the cop shop. I’ll get their numbers and then give the old bags a ring next week. After all, they can’t live forever and someone’s got to bury them.”

It took five minutes for relations to be restored. The peace-maker, as so often with these two men, was hunger.

“You know,” Colin remarked as they patiently waited in the drive-thru for their massive order to be assembled, “I’ve seen some footage of Elvis at dinner-time and it was pretty gruesome stuff even for me. He practically vaporised the food as soon as it was shovelled into his feed-bag. But even he would have been shocked to see how much grub you can stuff into your mouth at one time. I honestly don’t know where it all goes. It’s not as if you spend much time on the dunny. You must have more worms in you than the stiffy in the back. With God as my witness, I’ve seen you eat your own weight in food in less than five minutes. It’s no bloody wonder you’re always heading down to the pawnbrokers to hock some more stuff!”

“The quack says I’ve got a problem with my metabolism or something,” Lester lamented. “That’s one of the reasons why I moved to Australia. I got sick of eatin’ mutton night after night in New Zealand. That’s the best they could offer me so I took off for good!”

“Well, dear old Sir Kanga should keep you in grub for another week at least. Half of the problems in your life would be solved quick-smart if you took up my offer of the free worm-tablets.”

Staring boggle-eyed at the half-opened body-bag in the back of the hearse, the teenager at the service window unsteadily

handed over their fast-food banquet, bag after bag after bag. With one hand on the wheel and the other around the jugular of a Big Mac, Colin darted back onto the road and then floored the accelerator. After a ruthless carnage, more brutal than usual, that obliterated a legion of hamburgers (sometimes the hand is quicker than the eye) and enough fries to cause another potato famine in Ireland, Lester cleared his throat noisily.

“Col, I have a big favour to ask you and I know you’re going to say yes this time!”

“What is it, you crafty little runt?” Colin gargled through a mouthful of nuggets (the next item on the menu). “What do you want from me now?”

“Can I borrow Comet on Wednesday night? I want to take this hot bird to the drive-in. She’s keen for a good root and I’m just the man to give it to her good and proper.”

Colin waited for the last of the chicken debris to disappear into his gullet before savaging the proposal.

“You’ve got to be kidding! I know what you’re going to get up to, sleaze-bag. Think of the Firm’s good name! Comet is not a mobile brothel; he’s our bloody livelihood in case you haven’t realized by now! You’ll just have to borrow your cousin’s bomb or else take this poor wench straight up to your love-palace and do the dirty dancing there on the bean-bag!”

“I can’t imagine that driving the hearse to the dog-track with that mangy mongrel of yours in the back is doing our reputation much good either,” Lester replied defiantly. “Of course that’s just my opinion and you keep sayin’ I’m a dumb bastard!”

“Now wait on,” growled Colin. “Putting bread on the table is one thing, a cheap bonk in public is something else altogether. While I’m glad to see you’re becoming more inclusive in your sex-life (thankfully, Colin did not elaborate on this point), there’s no reason why the Firm should be associated with such disgusting activities in public. Just imagine it: there’s Sly Stallone on the big-screen getting stuck into the terrorists—but do the people in the drive-in give a shit

as he fires off his bazookas? Probably not. In fact, they're all getting their cheapies out of the hearse whose suspension is going up and down like a bloody yoyo, to say nothing of the shrieks of terror coming from the same vehicle! Don't forget for one second that our name and phone-number are painted on both sides of the hearse! We just can't afford to risk the business for the sake of a slime-bonk in public!"

"Bloody hell Colin!" Lester raged. "You owe me one! Who gave you that tip about the nags last week? I saw how much you pocketed. You gave me nothing in return. Besides, a good third of the car is mine. You promised me if I put my lifesavings down on the table I could borrow it a couple of nights each week. That was the deal and you know it. Apart from that night when I took that old slag to the fun park you've never allowed me get behind the wheel even once. I don't like making threats, Colin, but if you don't let me take it to the drive-in on Wednesday night for a guaranteed root then this partnership of ours is kaput and I want my dough back—with interest—as soon as possible!"

Colin was trapped. Still, there was a victory to be gained in surrender.

"OK, listen up, Sunny Jim. Comet's yours for the night, but you're deader than the guy in the back if you so much as scratch the duco—and that's a promise. In return, as I said before, you're the one who plugs up the stiffy when we reach home."

"You're on!" purred Lester, foreseeing glory in return for so little.

The undertakers arrived at Colin's dilapidated house not long afterwards. After carrying Sir Alfred down the alleyway, Colin fished a set of keys from his pocket and kicked open the door to the shed. After clearing away the tools and the empty bottles of beer, the men counted to three and swung the cadaver onto a workbench. Before retiring for the night, Colin conveyed his instructions in detail regarding the preparation of the cadaver for the funeral: scrub, clean, comb and plug the respective areas. He also ordered Lester

to fetch Kanga's medals first thing in the morning from his daughter. Lester dreamily nodded his head at the end of each point and wrote down the Hiltons' address on his arm with a pen. And that was it.

Once Colin had retired for the night, Lester, who was feeling more listless than usual, pulled out a porno from his secret cache and began to devour the publication from cover to cover. Sir Alfred served as his chair (while lumpy and cold he was more comfortable than anything else on offer). Lester also switched on Colin's age-old transistor radio in the hope of catching the last race from the dog-track. Unfortunately this much-loved item is not known for its reliability; it has the knack of turning on and off whenever it chooses. Lester fiddled with its miniature dial until he found the correct station. For the next twenty seconds he listened breathlessly as one of his dogs surged to the front of the pack and streaked towards the finishing line. Then the radio crackled, gave up the ghost and fell silent. Resolving then and there to buy a replacement with his winnings, Lester angrily threw the item away and returned with a vengeance to his porno (as it so happened, the radio landed safely in one of Colin's spare coffins).

Time passed quickly. When Lester next checked his watch, it was twenty minutes to twelve. Lester decided on the spot to defer his fearsome duties until the next day. Then, without further ado he switched off the light and ambled down to the shops in order to catch the last bus of the night.

By acting in such a manner, Lester committed two critical sins of omission, both of which were to have far-reaching consequences to everyone concerned: the door to the shed was left unlocked and he had forgotten to feed Brutus for the eighth night in a row.

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