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Other books by this author

The Zen of Being Grumpy (Connor Court, 2013)

A Guide to Climate Change Lunacy (Connor Court, 2010)

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Having left journalism after 38 years, I would like to dedicate this book to all those I shared the fun, and frustration, of journalism with over all that time.

Mark Lawson

I have added a few notes on various references that may puzzle non-Australian readers at the end of the book.

DISGRACED IN ALL OF KOALA BAY

By Mark Lawson

But few could ride beside him when his blood was fairly up

- The Man from Snowy River, Banjo Patterson, 1890

CHAPTER ONE

Miles Black walked several paces from his battered utility before he realised he had absent mindedly put on his hat when getting out of the vehicle. It was a broad-brimmed akubra scarred by work on his parents' stud in Victoria's high country. Back home he would have kept on walking, but he was wearing his dark, pin-striped suit, white shirt and red tie and he was in Sydney for an interview. A hat did not fit the picture. He went back and dropped it in the utility, and then had the usual trouble closing the passenger side door. Rust had eaten into the door catch which meant that the door had to be lifted and slammed at the same time to close properly. Apart from a second-hand computer and a few clothes left at a hostel, it was all Miles owned. He locked the door again and walked around to his interview.

The headquarters of the Bugle Newspaper Group was a long, two-storey brick building set back from a main road – a busy one – in one of Sydney's far northern suburbs. The building was built beside a natural, sharp drop in the ground, so that visitors could walk along a short footpath, past the modest sign saying 'Bugle Group', through double glass doors into the reception area at one end of the building without realising that they were on the first floor, which was reserved for administration and sales. The reporters were kept on the ground floor, well away from any visitors.

Having seen plenty of young reporters come and go the receptionist barely glanced at Miles. If she had looked a little longer she would have seen a well-built man in his early twenties of medium height, with sun tanned face and clear eyes. She might also have noticed a firm jaw and dark eyes and judged him "passable": and an even closer inspection would have revealed a hint of bow leg in his stance. He had, in fact, been brought up working with horses. As it was she checked her list and told him to wait, pointing to one of the green vinyl chairs by the wall. There was a stairway to the lower level on the other side of the entrance hall, which Miles thought led to both the reporters and the printing presses, for he knew the Bugle Group still did its own printing.

He killed time by inspecting a series of framed front pages of various Bugle Group newspapers set on the wall above the receptionist's head. He was too far away to read the stories on the pages but on one, for the *McCarrs Regional Bugle*, he could see the headline 'Residents flee' with a dramatic picture of burning forest beside it. Another for the *South Forest Bugle*, which serviced the suburb in which the Bugle Group headquarters stood, had the headline 'Local musos win through' with a picture of a school band with their instruments poised. There were plenty of front pages. For alone among the local newspaper groups the Bugle had refused to amalgamate its papers when the local councils were merged in Sydney many years previously. Instead of the informal industry rule of one paper per local council, there were four for the City of McCarrs – the *McCarrs Regional Bugle*, the *South Forest Bugle*, the *Smith's Creek Bugle* and the *Brown Beach Bugle*. Instead of having one local paper for the City of Lovett Bay, the Bugle group had three and

so on. This meant Bugle papers were tiny with two or perhaps even one, lone reporter, instead of the teams of reporters found elsewhere in Sydney.

Miles was aware of this history, having surfed through several web sites before making the long trip to the South Forest building, and was vaguely aware that a job with the Bugle group did not rate highly in journalism. However, his knowledge of the group's history, such as it was, did not solve the problem of the framed front pages he saw. A few were important stories but mostly they were routine. A life saved here, a new shopping centre opened there; and the local MP making a fuss about something else on another page. But why had those pages been framed? Much later he learned that they had all received awards for printing.

As Miles scanned the framed headlines he saw, out of the corner of his eye, a woman appear at the top of the stairs. She was a stern-looking woman perhaps in her 40s, wearing dark-rimmed glasses, and a dark blue dress. Her hair was swept up in a bun at the back that made her look older. This was Mrs. Bronwyn Forester.

"Miles Black?" she asked, in a tone suggesting she was about to make an arrest. Miles nodded. She gestured for him to follow, then walked back down the stairs without saying a word. The interviewee hesitated for a moment, wondering if he had actually been summoned – the woman had been very abrupt – then trailed after her down the steps and through a set of double doors into what seemed to be the editorial room.

The building's architect had obviously been venting his feelings about journalism when he designed the room. It had no windows. One side was well below street level, thanks to the drop in the ground. On the other side was the main access corridor for the building with no windows in the internal wall between the corridor and the newsroom. It was possible to sit in the newsroom, and not know whether it was day or night, cloudy or bright outside. The interior designers played their part by installing green carpet and wood paneling which must have looked dated the moment it was installed, and gave it a pallid hue by fluorescent lighting.

To the left was a series of offices and meeting rooms, mostly unused. On the right the room had been divided into two sections by a panel and half glass partition. In the smaller area, closest to Miles, sat reporters, each behind a PC mounted on a narrow adjustable desk. They also had vinyl-topped desks which they mostly seemed to use to stack piles of papers and reports. As he walked in they were laughing over a shared joke.

On the other side of the partition were the sub-editors who set the stories into the paper and wrote the headlines. They were mostly a lot older than the reporters, more female and considerably more harassed. Keeping track of all the different stories - some stories ran across all titles, some in a sub group and some in just one - was a production nightmare, which should have been handed over to News Ltd or Fairfax long ago to be straightened out. However, the nightmare was kept going by the *Bugle Property News*, with pages and pages of glossy, expensive ads. Several web sites competed with it, but *BPN* still ruled because it got packaged with the local newspapers that were thrust through all the mailboxes find once a week.

On that visit all Miles saw was a group of sub-editors staring into battered PCs on desks scattered at random through their side of the room, with connecting data cables taped to the floor. No one looked up. The printers, who tended giant presses through a set of double doors at the far end of the room, wrestled with production problems as bad as those of the subs.

Miles was led to the far corner of this editorial cavern to the office of Justin Brock, editor-in-chief of the unholy mess. Bronwyn rapped on the door, looked in briefly then gestured for Miles to enter. Without a word she returned to her desk, a few paces from Brock's office, to brood on how life could be better.

Miles pushed the door open to find a man in his late fifties, of robust physique albeit with the beginnings of a pot belly despite frequent golf that gave him a healthy tan. His hair had long fallen away to silver side fringes, framing a round, youthful face that featured a long nose and two small, brown eyes. Those eyes could turn hard, but sparkled with charm when he chose, which was not often with staff members. Potential recruits were a different matter. Dressed in an open-necked business shirt and casual slacks, he looked like an executive who had come into the office on the weekend. His BMW was the only journalist's car allowed in the company car park at the back.

"Miles is it?" said Justin getting out of chair to shake hands, and gesturing at the chair in front of his desk. "Bronwyn's not great at announcing people. We're not formal around here." Miles glanced around the office. The main wall decoration was framed awards, one from the Law Society of Victoria for the best story on law for the year, another from a financial institution and another which appeared to be a legal document.

"It's a writ," said Justin noticing Miles gazing at the decoration. "Only one I got in my hand from twenty-five years on the metros. Guy who issued it went to jail just after, but it makes a nice memento."

"It does at that." replied Miles thinking that the mementoes and the book case, on which stood a cricket trophy of long ago, could do with a good dusting – and he was not one to notice dust.

"So you want to join our crew, do you Miles?" said the editor in chief leaning back in his leather chair.

"Yes, I do."

Justin took a sheaf of papers, which Miles recognised as his CV sent in by email, from the top of a stack on one corner of his desk. At the other corner was an identical tray which contained two envelopes. He wondered briefly about the two trays.

"From the bush, I see. You're from down south - Curriwong."

"Corryong."

"Yeah, right. Where is Corryong?"

"On the Murray Valley Highway, just short of the Kosciuszko National Park on the Vic side."

"Snowy River country! You're a real bushie!" Miles never saw why anyone from the city became so enthusiastic when he said where he was from. If they felt that way, why didn't they go out and live there?

"Can you muster cattle?"

"Matter o' fact, I can." Miles could well have added that Corryong was the home of Jack Riley, the stockman generally accepted as the original for Banjo Patterson's poem *The Man From Snowy River*, but did not. If he mentioned the poem city folk were likely to start loudly reciting what they remembered of it.

Justin smiled. "You talk like a bushie. Got a drawl there."

"So do your reporters have to talk fast?"

Justin dropped back in his chair, opened his mouth and shook his head as his way of expressing mock astonishment. "Mate, I wish most of 'em w'd shut up and get

out there and get stories. Never mind how fast they talk... Well, let's see," he glanced at the CV, "An ag science degree at a college in Albury. Ag science? Never had one of those before. Then you did two years on the *High Country Gazette*, part-time. Why didn't you get busy on a farm like every other bastard with an ag science degree?"

"I was. Had to help out with the family stud."

"A stud? Racehorses?"

Miles shook his head. "Not that sort of stud. We do stock and quarter horses for farms, mustering cattle; a few of what they call warmbloods for dressage and show events." The stud had briefly tried to breed racehorses with the only result being a big financial loss, which was part of the reason Miles had to help out. The other part was that his father had fallen ill.

"I see," Justin put the CV down and folded his hands across his small pot belly. "So tell us Miles, what brings you to the Bugle Group?"

"The stud was in a bit o' trouble. Took the job on the *Gazette* to bring money in, any money, 'n liked it."

"Bitten by the newspaper bug, eh?"

"You could say that."

"Not a good bug to be bitten by Miles. Newspapers are dying. They don't pull in the readers like they use to and the advertisers are going elsewhere. Even the celebrity magazines who still have readers, are finding it tough. All that also comes with a complete lack of community respect. Every now and then some bunch of clowns or other run polls of community attitudes to the professions. In those journalists typically rate somewhere between used car salesmen and sex workers and, Miles mate, last poll like that I saw the sex workers were gaining. You're jumping onto a sinking, disregarded ship, Miles."

The high countryman shrugged. "So I get my feet wet."

Justin laughed. "Fortunately, a few bastards still read us because we get shoved through their mailboxes every week, along with a whacking great chunk of real estate ads for which the Dixon family," - the Bugle Group's owners who refused to sell to the big publishing houses - "curse every one of 'em, charge like wounded bulls. But we're a newspaper group just like the big ones are and that means the journos don't take orders from sales guys. We decide what's best for our readers. Gotit?"

"Sure."

"But you didn't have to come this far to get a newspaper fix. There's a daily in Albury, right? Border Mail?"

"Yeah. Getting a junior spot there can be tough."

"Suppose. Or what about cross the state and try the Bendigo paper, or any one of the regionals. Must be a couple on this side of the border not so far from home. Let's see - there'd be a paper at Wagga or *The Canberra Times* maybe. That'd be tough too but worth a try and easier to step up into the metros if that's where you're aiming."

Miles shrugged. In fact, he had gone for interviews at the *Daily Advertiser* at Wagga Wagga, *The Goulburn Post* in Goulburn and the *Illawarra Mercury* at Wollongong, before winding up in Sydney. The editors of those papers had been good natured enough to see the blow-in from the bush at short notice but had no openings.

"Tight at the moment," was all he said.

Justin nodded. "It's tight all over, mate. Same on the wires and on newspapers and online, what there is of it that pays."

A disastrous turn in his private life had driven Miles away from high country with its clear skies and sweeping views, and forced him to fall back on his skills as a journalist - such as they were after a short time on a bush paper. But he had not fully realised, until he started his trip, just how difficult it was to get a job as a reporter without the editor owing his family a favor.

“See Miles,” said Justin, “we do usually hire reporters from the bush or other suburbans. If we take anyone from metros or radio or anything like that they don’t do the job. We deal in local stories, local personalities. Sometimes we might do courts or get a local robbery, or expose local councils for the thieving, corrupt bullshit artists that they are, but a lot of it is arranging pics for the school’s Easter hat parade, and writing about car parking near the town mall. The metro guys don’t want to do that stuff. You follow me, Miles?”

Miles did follow him. Among other things he had written about were the Corryong sewer system; a man who collected beer bottles; a shop keeper who had retired after 40 years on the job; and an interesting rubbish tip. He also knew all about arranging pics for the school Easter Hat Parade. In that respect, at least, The Bugle Group could have few terrors for him.

“If you’re aiming high they can be pretty shitty jobs, but they can be what you make of it. Survive here for a while and you can do anything. I see the stuff you’ve been doing is the sort’a stuff we do around here.” Jason picked up the resume and flipped through the copies of stories Miles had included. One story was of the man who collected bottles. Jason paused at it, snorted in an amused way and flipped on. “And you have a referee, who I remember from state rounds on *The Age* 20 years ago. I wondered where Rod had got to.” Miles was interested to hear this. He had gotten on very well with Rod – a journalist of the old school who had insisted on lecturing his junior staff at length on reporting – but he had left so quickly that the parting had not been amicable. “Rod says you’re an operator.”

“Nah, not me.”

“I wouldn’t admit to it either, but he says you should be given a go and if he says so then I’ll give you what you wish for – a job here - but it’s a tough one. You know Koala Bay?”

“Suburb around here.”

Justin nodded. “Most remote office we’ve got, about half an hour’s drive north of here. Mate, it’s almost in bloody Newcastle. Some of our reporters work out of this office, but if the paper’s area is too far away the reporters work out of satellite offices. Koala Bay is a satellite office. It’ll be you and another reporter, Angela, and some admin people and such but you won’t have much to do with them. You’ll like the office – just a couple of streets down from the beach.”

“So Angela is the editor?”

“No, she’s a junior – less experience than you - but she doesn’t report to you.”

Miles had never expected to be made editor, but he was naturally curious. “Then who’s editor?”

“I’m the closest you’ve got. Listen, if you want the job I’ll take you through to Evelyn who’ll be your sub and she’ll explain how our system works. The money is poor – you get J3 at our rate.” (Miles was not quite sure what that meant, but suspected he would not be paid very much. His suspicions were later confirmed.) “We pay a car allowance but we don’t pay for mobile phones.” He put particular emphasis on the word don’t. “But I

gotta rush this. If you want it the job is yours from Monday.”

“Happy to be aboard.”

“Good, good! And I expect some stories from up there. The woman you’re replacing, Jan, was hopeless.” He said the last word with force. “She’s been there a month and she’s getting out before I can sack her. What we do is not all dull stuff, but Jan didn’t get anything.” He handed Miles the latest issue of the Koala Bay Bugle, the first issue he had ever set eyes on. The front cover featured a group of school girls who had done a walk against hunger, and a lead story about the local MP having planted trees on the foreshore. Miles blinked and read the story again. Even the High Country Gazette had never been reduced to that sort of desperation. He flicked through the rest of the paper. There were no news stories worthy of the name.

“Did you speak to Jan?”

“Tried a couple of times but she always called back after I was gone.”

Somehow in the back of Miles’ mind a warning bell sounded, but when you want a job warning bells are easy to ignore.

CHAPTER TWO

The local media organ that spoke with a voice like thunder to the inhabitants of Koala Bay, the *Koala Bay Bugle*, was in a cramped set of rooms in a nondescript, red-brick building above a bargain shoe store a few steps away from the commercial centre's main drag. A block east was Surf Road, the beach car park and a large surf lifesaving club of crumbling concrete. The club looked out on a fine white surf beach and small bay, Koala Bay, skirted with trees and guarded by two rocky promontories. The first settlers had found the bay area covered by trees which provided food for a substantial community of koalas, but now the only koala to be found in the area was in the name.

Going the other way, west, from the thriving commercial centre was several kilometres of suburbia where the news-hungry readers of the *Bugle* lived. Mostly isolated from the general sweep of Sydney suburbia by tracts of bush that had been spared from the developers, Koala Bay was a quiet and prosperous community.

Any visitor to the community's newspaper who opened the street door, as Miles did on that first day, found a set of narrow and steep wooden stairs which went up to a shared corridor. On one side of the corridor was an insurance broker, and on the other was the *Bugle*'s grim offices. There was more of the Bugle Group's trade mark green carpet and wood paneling, but the chairs were several steps closer to a junk yard and the desks looked like old-fashioned, half-sized kitchen tables badly painted a light brown.

On that first day Miles entered from the front door, rather than via the rear stairs which led to the building car park (not that he was allowed to use the car park, but it also led to a back street where parking was free). On the front desk in the first room was Kelly, a very young girl who was good looking in a washed-out sort of way, with red-streaked blonde hair. Her main topic of conversation, as Miles soon found out, was her boyfriend. Kelly introduced him to the office manager, Ros (short for Rosalind), who grinned inanely at him. She was a short, plump, plain woman with a mop of curly, reddish-brown hair and flat, brown eyes. In season and out she wore tweed-pattern dresses and a succession of plain shirts of varying shades.

"Hope you're better than the last one," she said, without any preliminaries. "Other one was a real pain. A real whinger."

"Um, right!" said Miles, remembering Justin saying he would not have much to do with the admin staff. Ros led him off on a tour of the office. She gestured at one very large room indicating that it was her private office, then showed him a cramped room adjacent to the reception room, in which sat Kate, who sold the advertising. She had greying hair and a permanently worried look but flashed Miles a nice smile. Then he was led to an ex-storeroom into which, in defiance of fire regulations, had been crammed two elderly desks for the reporters, separated by an equally old filing cabinet. The cabinet was topped by a printer which printed from the bog-standard PCs on each desk. The right-hand desk, furthest from the room's single, tiny window had obviously been vacated, bar a couple of anonymous stacks of documents, a computer, and a stained off-white phone with a headset.

The room already had an occupant. At the left-hand desk, nearest the window, sat a

blonde girl wearing earphones attached to a music player on her desk. She had been typing away but as they came in, she stopped typing to wave her hands around in the air, apparently in time with the music. Ros tapped her on the shoulder. She turned, taking off her headphones and flicking her long, blonde hair in a way that Miles found distracting. Her long hair framed a narrow, oval face with high cheek bones and dazzling blue eyes.

“This is Angela who you’ll be working with,” said Ros, “She’s a real treasure.”

“I’m Miles,” said Miles, putting on his best winning smile and holding out his hand.

Her blue eyes rested on him for a split second, her lips twitched in what may have been a smile and she touched the proffered hand. Then she turned away and started to put her earphones back on. Miles was taken aback.

“You have any stories for me?” said Ros. Reluctantly Angela let her earphones drop and even went so far as stopping her player, before handing over two sheets of paper, with tiny stories on them. Ros read both items with apparent concentration, and handed them back. “They seem alright.”

Miles wondered what was going on.

“I see all stories, Miles.”

“You do?” Miles was astonished by this.

“I do,” said Ros in a decided voice. “And keep the door open, and I don’t want anything hung up on the walls in here.”

Miles had wondered why the room had looked bare. The directive was so ridiculous that it even distracted him from the question of Ros seeing stories. “Why not?”

“It’ll spoil the look of the place.”

Miles laughed out loud, to Ros’s obvious puzzlement.

“In this hole? Ros, this is a store room in need of paint. Couple of posters might lift the place.”

“Excuse me, I’ve seen the Mayor sit in that chair,” she pointed indignantly to the one other item of furniture in the room, besides the reporter’s desks, chairs and the filing cabinet – an orange plastic chair wedged under the narrow window beside Angela. Anyone who wanted to use it would have to squeeze by Angela and then move a stack of past issues of the *Koala Beach Bugle* onto the floor. “I won’t have him staring at pictures of rock stars and half-naked women.”

“Ros if he’s in that chair he’s already in a store room down the back. Why don’t we use that big office up the front for interviews. We’ll have more room and we can put posters up here.”

“That’s my office, thank you very much,” snapped Ros. “I can’t have reporters cluttering it up. Important business is done in there.” She turned and left muttering about whingers.

“Nice people in the city,” said Miles half to himself and half to Angela who had condescended to listen, hoping that Ros might allow posters to be hung on the wall. He turned and realised that she was reaching out to start her player again. “Just before you start the music again...”

“I have a boyfriend.”

“Don’t doubt it, but I wanted to find out stuff about the newspaper on which we both work,” he emphasised the last few words, “if you have time”. She half shrugged and quarter-smiled, as if to imply that she really knew what Miles was up to but did not start the player. “Like, when is deadline day?”

“What day?”

“When do we have to get our stories in to Eve?” Justin had introduced him to the sub editor, who also happened to be chief sub editor, but she had been in a hurry to finish work on another paper and there had been no time to ask about basic production details.

“Who? – oh – um, dunno. I just write ‘em and send ‘em.”

“I see,” said Miles. “Well, what sort’a stories do you write?”

Another half shrug. “Stuff that comes in. Stuff from council. Go to the cops on Monday.”

“As in today?”

“Uh huh!”

“Did you get anything?”

“Anything what?”

“Stories. Stuff to write for the paper.”

“Go in about half an hour. Never get anything much. They take me into their tea room and have coffee – all the cops and detectives sometimes too, ‘cept the woman detective.”

Miles was sure this was the case. “So if you get anything from this cosy talk with the cops, when do you have to put it into the system?”

“Before lunch.”

“So I guess the deadline’s Monday lunchtime. A lot of stories have to be done by Friday to keep the subs quiet about copy flow.”

“Guess so!”

She was plainly tiring of this conversation. Being the shrewd country lad that he was Miles had already made a fair estimate of Angela’s worth as a reporter. He had also come to the regretful conclusion that they were unlikely to ever be soul mates, but he still wanted a few snippets of information from her.

“Before you get back to your music; the stuff you showed Ros, do you mind if I have a look too?”

She handed them over.

“These are community notices,” said Miles. “Why did Ros want to see them? Justin never said anything about someone up here vetting stories?”

“She’s office manager.”

“So – does that mean she gets to vet community notices, or anything else? Does she write anything?”

Another half shrug and another puzzled look. “Don’t think she writes.”

“So how do ya reckon the Bears will do?”

“The who?”

“The local football team. In this community notice you’ve printed out for Ros you’ve said they’ve got a pre-season match Saturday week against a Newcastle team.” Miles turned the notice in question around to show her. “It says ‘Koala Beach Bears’ and ‘Match’, and since the football season’s starting soon I guess it’s a football team.”

Angela looked at him blankly, both hands on her ear phones ready to put them back on. “I don’t follow football.”

Miles sighed and put the notices back on her desk, then turned to his own. He switched on his computer to find that there was nothing to find out about it. He looked at the paper’s website, which allowed users to look at that week’s front page stories. That was

about all the group had in the way of a library system. His first call was to the South Forest head office to ask about Ros. He got to Bronwyn.

“Yes Miles,” said Bronwyn, in a resigned voice.

“Is Justin there?”

“He’s in a meeting, what do you want?”

On his first day in a new job, Miles bit back a sharp reply.

“Well, I need to talk to him. The office manager here is saying she has to vet stories.”

“That’s right. She does.”

“She does?”

“You heard me.”

“Look, I really need to hear this from Justin.”

“Well, I’m telling you that’s the procedure there. Ros has a position of authority. She’s trying to build the place up so she needs to check the stories.”

“How can checking the stories help her to do that?”

“That’s not for you to ask. That’s the way it is.”

“Justin never mentioned any of this to me. I was told I report to him and my stories are to go to Eve.”

“She’s the sub editor.”

“I know that! And I know Justin’s the editor in chief, but he never said anything about Ros.”

“I just told you who she is, she’s your boss. You have to do what she says.”

“Look, I need to hear this from Justin. He said I wouldn’t have anything to do with admin here. Have him call me.”

“It’s not going to change.”

“Then he’ll tell me that. Have him call me.”

Miles then called Eve.

“Listen, what’s the deal with Ros up here?”

“Oh, she and Jan were always arguing. Ros was always telling her not to run stories.”

“And did she run them or not?”

“Sorry, I dunno.. all I know is that the stories she sent were weak. We always had to use stuff from the other papers as leads. Never had anything good. Every time I said something she complained about Ros, but I didn’t take it very far. You don’t get time to talk much with the reporters in this job. One paper after another, you know how it is. But I don’t think she was very good.”

“What does Justin say about this?”

“Umm.. I don’t see Justin much. We handle a lot of papers here. Why don’t you try Ellen at Lovett Bay? I think she and Jan use to talk a lot.”

The *Lovett Bay Bugle* served the patch of suburb adjacent to Koala Beach and also had its own editorial office. As it was a much bigger paper and its area included the Lovett City council chambers – the headquarters of the local government area that also included Koala Bay - it had three journalists, including a trainee. Ellen took about half an hour to return the call and proved to be a cheerful person with an obvious Kiwi accent.

“So you’ve found out about Ros have you?” she said when Miles explained the problem.

“I dunno if I’ve found out anything yet. How come she’s looking at stories.”

“She use to drive Jan mad the way she was always checking her stories. She’d even get into her system at night and Jan’d come in, in the morning and find comments on her stories. She only stayed a few weeks because of Ros.”

“So is Ros entitled to look at the stories? What does Justin say about this?”

“Justin agrees, so Jan said.”

“He does? It’s a strange arrangement?”

“It certainly is?”

“Does your office manager look at stories?”

“No way – we don’t really have one anyway, the sales manager and receptionist split that job between them.”

“Then why here?”

“I don’t know, but I do know that Ros is the managing director’s sister.”

“WHAT!”

“Have you spoken to Justin?”

“Left a message. He hasn’t gotten back to me. All I got was Bronwyn insisting that Ros has authority over stories.”

“Jan tried for weeks to speak to Justin I know that. She was almost going to try the union.”

“But she didn’t?”

“Her boyfriend got a job in Perth and she decided it was easier to move with him than keep arguing with Ros.”

“So she never got to speak directly to Justin?”

“Don’t think so.”

“Hmm, okay. Do you speak to him?”

“Try to avoid it. The only time you ever hear from him it’s trouble and if I want something like more staff, even replacement staff, resources, pay rises, I don’t get them so I’ve given up asking. I was told it use to take a full union strike to get a pay rise at the group but no-one’s a member of the union now so no strikes.”

“Just what a boy from the bush wants to here.”

They talked on for a time, then Jan said, “Why don’t you come up here for the usual few drinks afterwards on a Friday. That’s just after deadline for us; we go half a day earlier than you. A few of the journos from South Forest come up, so you can talk about this stuff.”

“Sounds good, see you then.”

In short order Miles called the other two group titles adjacent to his own, including the *South Forest Bugle*, where he encountered Tom. All the other reporters he had spoken to were roughly in his age group but Tom, to judge from the timbre of his voice, was closer to retirement age than Miles was to his 21st birthday. He was also a well-educated man with a keen eye for the ridiculous.

“I’ve never heard of that one,” said Tom. “The Bugle Group do some strange things, and hire some strange people – there was a reporter years ago who use to expose himself out of the back window of one of the offices.”

“WHAT!” Miles was not sure he wanted to be told that.

“The other reporter on the paper only found out about it when the police came. He was a Baptist too.”

“The one exposing himself or the other one?”

“The flasher. Anyway, I’ve never heard of an office manager looking at stories. But then the Bugle Group is such an odd place because no one checks on what’s happening in the branch offices, least of all Justin. So people out there can do anything.”

“cept expose themselves.”

Tom chuckled. “Except expose themselves out the back window.”

After speaking to Tom, Miles sat for a few moments looking out of the tiny window for a few moments, wondering what he had got himself into. Angela still had her ear phones on and was still typing heaven knew what – Miles suspected email. He turned back to his computer and phone.

CHAPTER THREE

Miles' main task in the next few days to come, his main task of every week, was to find a story which could be used as a lead story for the *Koala Bay Bugle*. While Miles was looking for a lead, he also needed a few more stories plus pictures for inside, although that was much less of a problem. Interviews with returned exchange students; a high-spirited lady who had been 60 years with the Red Cross; a man with a genuinely interesting collection of antique cars and residents complaining about a noisy air conditioner in a nearby supermarket, were all grist for the local media mill. But none of those relatively small doings would be acceptable for the lead story itself.

In his first calls Miles made contact with Lovett council. The council itself was covered by the Lovett Bay journalists but the council press officer occasionally dealt directly with the *Koala Bay Bugle*. He was happy to hear from Miles, but could not point to much that week apart from a few events which belonged in community notices. There was an ambulance station and a fire station in Koala Bay, but all their recent calls had been outside the area. What about the surf lifesaving club on the foreshore? They had nothing and, in any case, summer was over, but they would keep Miles in mind. The local chamber of commerce had little to say, while the Rotary Club president had a great deal to say but none of it was worth repeating. The local branch of the State Emergency Service was involved in a fundraising, as was a drop-in youth coffee shop in the main mall down the road. Miles thought he could throw a little publicity their way, but the stories were not going to be candidates for the front.

Unusually, there were two state Members of Parliament for his area, as the boundary between the two electorates neatly bisected the Koala Bay Bugle's circulation area. The southern-most of these two electorates was a Liberal but the northern-most was held for Labor by a strong local member, David Lindley. His electorate was shown in the maps printed in newspapers around election time as an island of red amongst a sea of blue north of Sydney Harbour. The press secretaries of both of these MPs wanted to be Miles' new best friends. Lindley took the trouble to call him personally to spruik a press release about housing for the elderly in the area. The release said there should be more accommodation for the elderly, and that inspired Miles sufficiently to ring two nursing homes in the area. Both said their waiting lists were always long but their length had not changed in years; in fact, if anything, they had shortened; but there could always be more accommodation for the elderly. Hmm! All that could be stretched to a "crisis" in housing for the elderly, but he instinctively recognised the story as 'a bit thin', and went on looking.

At one point Miles got up to look in the filing cabinet, earning a glare from Angela. She had finally taken off her music earphones, only to replace them with a phone headset to make what were obviously personal calls. Miles found these calls wearing. Angela had a penetrating voice, the tiny office had a tendency to echo and the conversations were inane.

"Well, that's what I told him," she would say. "He didn't! He didn't! That arsehole! Tell him where to get off! ... New person's a guy." (This was said in a particularly scornful voice.) "... You guys coming out with us? Dunno.... Maybe we c'd go into town – that new place. No, I see him tomorrow..." And so on, and on. Miles suspected it would be even more mind numbing to hear both sides of the conversation but at least Angela's phone chats drove him to put his own phone headset back on to make more calls.

Before going back to his phone that time, Miles found that the filing cabinet was full of reports. There were several Lovett Council annual reports; a state government drainage report of two years ago and a Federal Government report on the development of north-eastern Sydney of five years ago, which had a useful map. He found some blutack in a drawer and put it up, earning another glare from Angela.

“We’re not supposed to put anything on the walls,” she said, after finishing her call.

“Uh huh,” said Miles without moving or looking at the offending map, “so you’ve got any stories on this week?”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, you know, things you can write up to put in the paper. The stories that keep the ads apart. Any interviews lined up; anything happening you know about?”

“I told you,” she said, after an exasperated pause. “I just do the stuff that comes in.”

“Okay, then,” said Miles patiently, “how does the stuff come in? Where do you get it?”

Angela gave him the look she reserved for total idiot-loser, drop kicks who tried to pick her up in pubs and gestured vaguely at the screen. “There’s an inbox with stuff that comes in.”

“Do I have access to it?”

“Guess - Jan did.. I got on really well with Jan.”

“Glad to hear it.” He was soon flicking down a list of not very interesting statements, notices, releases and occasional letters to the editor. One was about the beautiful trees in the park, another was commenting on a story of two weeks ago. There were several reports from sports clubs on games they had played. It was the job of the secretary of the local clubs to write a report about the club’s latest game. Sometimes they did.

“What do we do with the sports reports?”

“Send to the subs.”

“Just send it back out again as an email?”

“Uh huh!”

“What about this item on hiring an extra parking officer?”

“What about it?”

“Its not worth much at the mo – they’re just hiring an extra parking officer. But it c’d be worth more. Everyone hates parking fines, so maybe they’re hiring an extra officer because they’re getting lots of fines, or maybe they’re not getting enough? How many officers have they got for this area?”

“Didn’t it just say they’re hiring someone,” said Angela.

“So we ring ‘em up. Why are they hiring the extra person? It may be worth something.”

Angela shrugged, evidently unconvinced. “Maybe.”

“I’ll do it if you want.”

“I’ll do it!” she said quickly, shooting Miles another look of withering contempt. She never did anything about the parking attendants story. He discovered it later in a corner of the paper, almost unchanged except for Eve having rewritten the lead paragraph. He later rang up himself to discover that a story about a general increase in controlled parking areas requiring an additional inspector had been prominent a month previously in the other two papers for the City of Lovett – the *Lovett Bay Bugle* and *Cowan Creek Bugle* - but not in the

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