

When Jokers Were Kings

A love story

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Some people are convinced they are victims of fate, while others claim to be children of destiny. After thirty years on this often bewildering planet, Bertie Jones had no such delusions. Instead, he assumed that his life was governed only by routine cause and effect. So he believed that all these unlikely events, no matter how bizarre, could be traced back to a practical joke at an office Christmas party.

It was a sultry night, with the sun setting over the Docklands swamp and the rancid odour of rotting seaweed wafting across the harbour. Bertie followed hundreds of other employees of the Southern Cross Bank into a waterfront bar, under the watchful gaze of a handful of senior executives. No doubt the executives were making sure that there wouldn't be any trouble.

This was the year of the Banking Royal Commission. A year when teams of young aspiring bankers camped for nights on end in their offices, and lawyers prowled the corridors like the gangs of old New York. A year when risk managers and company secretaries were dragged to the witness box like nobles to the revolutionary scaffold, waiting for their heads to roll into the waiting basket. And a year when day after day, month after month, there were new revelations of corporate greed and corruption and excess, each more breathtaking than the one before, with saturated coverage

in all the newspapers and on radio and television and across the internet. Conflicts of interest. Forgery. Fees for no service. Fees for dead customers.

Every previous year, the bank had paid for lavish Christmas entertainment. Usually a well-known rock band, although once it was a famous comedian who ranted about the evils of capitalism until the chairman gave the master of ceremonies a sideways nod and the microphone went dead. But this year was always going to be different. Only the month before, many of Bertie's colleagues had been retrenched. He was still relieved that he hadn't been rissold himself, given that he was a mail clerk: an endangered species.

Bertie was standing at the bar, beer in hand, scanning a platter of finger food from under his mop of raven hair, when he heard someone sobbing. It was Debbie from accounts. 'They're going to sack me.' She glanced at her phone. 'I shouldn't have raised that red flag.'

Another phone chimed near Bertie. It belonged to Greg from maintenance, who stared with disbelief at its glowing screen. 'Merry bloody Christmas,' he muttered.

'What's wrong?' asked Bertie.

Greg shrugged, and handed him the phone.

Bertie read an email from human resources, scheduling an appointment for Monday morning. 'Don't jump to conclusions, Greg. Let's hope it's nothing serious.' But even as he said this, Bertie knew it was wishful thinking. A fresh round of redundancies often began this way, with innocuous emails from the human resources department. Any moment now, his own phone could vibrate in his pocket.

'Incredible,' said Trevor, sliding in beside him at the bar. 'Just

when I thought they couldn't get any more diabolical.'

Trevor Parker was one of Bertie's few genuine friends, and his only friend in the Southern Cross shark tank. The wrong side of forty, Trevor had travelled the world, married and started a business; then in quick succession his hair fell out, his wife left him and he went bankrupt (according to him, in no particular order). He was short, with a big belly but slender hips, the delicate fingers of a concert pianist sprouting from meaty palms, and a snub nose with flattened nostrils. But what was most striking of all was his oversized head – almost as round as a bowling ball – balanced on top of his narrow shoulders. He had the skull capacity of a master criminal.

'Maybe it's just a mistake,' said Bertie. 'They wouldn't send anything official tonight.' Still, he noticed other workers checking their phones and exchanging anxious whispers.

'Mark my words.' Trevor waved a crooked finger. 'The only mistake is that some clown in HR diarised the emails for the wrong date. Or doesn't give a damn about Christmas.'

If there was about to be another tidal wave of retrenchments then, this time, surely Trevor would be among them. He was the bank's orange-bellied parrot: its one surviving stationery clerk. Now that the bank was committed to becoming fully paperless, he could no longer fill his days just by stocking the stationery cabinets, so he had become a modern-day roustabout, filling in for staff who were on leave. Sometimes he helped out with the mail round, telling jokes and giving gratuitous advice in his knockabout upcountry accent to anyone who would listen. He had nicknames for everyone. 'You look worried, Governor,' he might say. 'Heard the one about the octopus?' And he would rattle off whatever nonsense came to mind. Nothing bothered

him: he wasn't even stressed now.

Bertie decided there was no point speculating about the machinations of the human resources department and that instead he should gorge himself on more finger food, despite his burgeoning waistline. He was savouring a prawn skewer when the voices around him hushed. Mandy, a brunette from marketing, pointed to the entrance. 'He's arrived,' she whispered, with a tremor in her voice.

The CEO appeared, followed by his entourage. In his mid-fifties, Derek Taylor had silver hair swept to the side, a noble nose and a Mediterranean tan. He strode through the crowd like a warlord returning from battle; it parted before him as he shook hands all around, engaging in just the right amount of small talk with anyone he selected, before moving on to the next adoring subject. Bertie was in his line of sight, but those cold green eyes passed over him as though he was of no interest or consequence: instead they focussed on Mandy.

After endless gladhanding (during which Bertie half-expected someone to hold out a baby for a Christmas blessing), Taylor made his way to the stage and across to the microphone. 'I'm among friends,' he said, and began to loosen his tie: slowly, mechanically, as though he had rehearsed this for his act. 'So I hope this stays between us.' He paused for special effect. 'It's been a shit of a year. I don't know about you, but there were times I was embarrassed to call myself a banker.'

Even though Bertie felt that he was below the waterline, one of the slaves pulling the oars in a Roman galley (until they all dropped dead), sometimes he had felt the same. He had stopped telling cabbies where he worked, after a driver berated him all the way home to Warrandyte with the story of how he had been

swindled out of his life savings by a crooked banker. The cabbie didn't care that Bertie worked in the mailroom and wasn't a high-flying executive; instead, he assumed that anyone on the payroll was equally to blame.

'Sometimes I didn't want to show my face in public,' said Taylor.

Perhaps it was only because of the free beer, but the CEO was striking familiar harmonies on Bertie's emotional keyboard. Surely they couldn't be made of the same magic clay. Yet Bertie had also been made to feel ashamed of his workplace: by his own mother. Some nights he would arrive home to find the newspaper on the kitchen table, displaying a sensational headline about yet another banking scandal, and his mother giving him the fish eye as though he were personally responsible. But what did she expect from him: to quit out of principle? He had been unemployed for six months before he was offered the mailroom job. If he quit, how could he help her pay the bills?

'Anyway,' said Taylor, 'after the year we've had, the entertainment tonight has to be different. We couldn't fly out Sting or Springsteen. Imagine what the newspapers would have said about that.'

He pouted like a second-rate comedian who had landed his punchline. But only Mandy was laughing. How could she be oblivious to the surrounding misery?

'We have to adapt,' said Taylor. 'We have to improvise. We have to make our own entertainment.' He finally took off his striptease tie. 'And we've got the perfect solution. Something to help us forget our troubles. And something that no one can complain about. Not even Sarah Blanco or those other lefty journalists.'

Red curtains parted behind him, revealing an enormous machine. A karaoke machine.

‘After the year we’ve had,’ he said, ‘who could begrudge us a karaoke competition?’

His solution to the entertainment problem was certainly simple, cheap and innovative, but the crowd was hardly enthused. There was silence, apart from Debbie whimpering in the corner.

Taylor pressed on. ‘The winner gets a weekend for two on the Gold Coast, all expenses paid.’ He winked – perhaps at Mandy? ‘That’s bound to get you interested. I’d give it a shot myself if I could sing.’

He left the stage and returned to his entourage. Meanwhile another executive, Rupert Gaffney, stepped up as karaoke host. ‘Ladies and gents,’ said Gaffney, ‘this is no time to be shy. So if you want a holiday in the sun, you’d better come up on stage.’

‘What a spunk,’ said a woman near Bertie.

Bertie had overheard office gossip that Gaffney was the King of Tinder. He was articulate, in that blokey manner adopted by football commentators, and he certainly knew how to charm the crowd.

‘He can put his slippers under my bed,’ said another woman.

As the bank’s youngest director, Gaffney wasn’t much older than Bertie. But that was where any similarity ended. Gaffney was blond, athletic, and always wearing a designer suit. And if they were different on the outside, then on the inside they were entirely different species.

The first contestant was Sophie from the compliance department. She tried singing Katy Perry’s ‘Roar’, her voice cracking on every second note. Next was Wendy from risk management, an ex-basketballer in high heels who gave Prince’s

'Purple Rain' a horribly bruised complexion. Then came Wally from the deeds room, a thin fellow with a squeaky voice, who gave a brave rendition of Meat Loaf's 'Two Out of Three Ain't Bad'.

'More like zero out of three,' said Trevor.

'Did his best,' said Bertie, and put down his drink so that he could join in the round of applause. He didn't care that everyone who dared to compete was tone-deaf. That wasn't their fault: no doubt they were terrific clerks and accountants and team leaders. This was a bank, after all, not a school for the performing arts. Besides, the entertainment solution was working: despite those emails to doomed workers, the crowd was warming up. Amid the tipsy frivolity, Bertie checked his phone, saw that he still hadn't received an email, and dared to hope that he had been spared. He rescued his drink from an overly efficient waiter as Gaffney introduced the next contestant.

It was Gaffney's personal assistant, Jasmine Patel. She had only worked at the bank for a few months. Once, when Bertie had walked past her desk, he had paused to admire her, safe in the knowledge that she didn't even notice him. She was in her mid-twenties, tall and slim, with long dark hair, almond eyes and amber skin. High cheekbones, a fleshy nose.

As he had never had a lasting relationship, sometimes Bertie worried that women would detect some overwhelming sense of failure about him. So he had never dared to start a conversation with Jasmine, except for asking which tray she wanted him to use for deliveries. 'The green one,' she had said, without looking up from her desk. He shrugged and left without a word. No reply was necessary.

Now she strode to the microphone in boots with black leggings and a red leather jacket with enormous shoulder pads, as though

she was dressed for a retro party, and declared that she would sing Michael Jackson's 'Beat It'.

At first, Bertie expected that she would be no better than all the other contestants. But when that thumping bass started, she snatched the microphone and began to strut, and swagger, and shake her hips as though she had been born for the stage. Not a trace of nerves. She displayed a perfect moonwalk. And her voice was melodious, even thrilling, with a crystalline quality for all the high notes.

The more he stared at her, the less he saw of Jasmine Patel. She wasn't just singing like Michael Jackson. For a few brief minutes, she actually became Michael Jackson.

Then again, it would be wrong to say that she resembled Michael Jackson, given that his appearance changed so much over the years. Rather, she looked like he did at one particular stage of his career. Not when he was a young man on the *Off the Wall* album cover, with a big smile and an even bigger afro. Not when his nose had dissolved after all that plastic surgery. No, somewhere in between, late-80s Jackson, when his hair was tousled and his skin wasn't yet completely bleached. The *Bad*-album Jackson.

When she finished, the crowd was in a frenzy. She waved to her adoring fans and blew a kiss. Was that aimed at Gaffney?

'Damn set-up,' said Trevor. 'Guess who's off to the Gold Coast?'

'What do you mean?' asked Bertie, as he devoured a gourmet sausage roll.

'I reckon she's Gaffney's assistant in more ways than one.'

Bertie digested this news with the sausage roll, although it was hardly as palatable. Life was unfair, rigged even, right from birth. Although talent helped, and also hard work, it was far more

important to attend the right school, for your parents to have useful friends, and to cultivate your own personal network to call on for various favours. Bertie had realised this years before and seceded from aspirational society. Even now, there was no reason to expect that even a karaoke competition would be different from life in general.

After Jasmine left the stage, she was surrounded by admirers. Bertie didn't line up with them to congratulate her. Instead he switched from drinking beer to bourbon and Coke. Alcohol was his one vice, and he was aware that he suffered an affliction commonly shared by those who come to it late: now that he had developed a taste for it, there were times when he simply couldn't stop drinking. But what did it matter if he needed to be carried out? No one would notice: he was invisible. To everyone except Trevor, who was staring at him quizzically.

'What's wrong?' asked Bertie.

'Nothing, just wait here.' Trevor laughed devilishly and marched off into the crowd.

Bertie turned his attention to a prawn skewer, his fourth that evening. Of all the items of finger food, the prawn skewers were the most delectable.

Meanwhile, Gaffney announced the next contestant. 'Engelbert Jones,' he said, 'please come to the stage.'

When Bertie heard his baptismal name, he ducked his head and nearly choked on a prawn. He searched for the nearest exit. But before he could retreat, he felt several hands on his back, pushing him towards the stage.

'No, I won't!' He brandished the skewer in self-defence. 'No, I can't!'

'Nothing to lose,' said Trevor. He took Bertie's wrist and

dragged him along. 'Except your job.'

Bertie wanted to explain that the last time he had been on stage, for the final night of his high school musical, he had been humiliated. But a slow handclap and a chorus of 'Engelbert, Engelbert' had already spread throughout the bar. He was surprised that so many people wanted to see him perform.

Deposited onstage like a sack of potatoes, Bertie cringed away from the spotlight. When he was younger, his mother often said that he could have passed for a matinee idol, with his clear blue eyes, gleaming teeth and broad shoulders. Since then he had put on thirty kilograms and she had long since dropped the charade, especially after she sewed a wedge of extra material into the waistband of his jeans. His long-lost dimples were canine jowls: when he frowned, he brought to mind the lost and almost impossibly sad expression of a basset hound.

Gaffney approached him. 'What are you going to sing?'

'Ah, well...' The handclap of the crowd matched the pulse thudding in Bertie's ears.

'Looks like Engelbert's lost for words.' Gaffney swung back to the crowd. 'Should we choose a song for him?' He grinned. 'Maybe some Engelbert Humperdinck?'

'No!' Bertie spluttered. 'Anything but that!' Although he loved his mother, he was still aggrieved that she had christened him Engelbert. Such a preposterous name.

Gaffney turned to the machine. 'Let's see what we've got.'

Bertie riffled through the filing cabinet of his mind for a song that he had sung in the shower with at least moderate success. Maybe a Billy Joel ballad, or some Elton John, or even a Beatles track. It struck him that he was ridiculously old-fashioned, but he found the latest pop music bewildering, Adele always excepted,

and he could hardly attempt ‘Hello’ or ‘Rolling in the Deep’.

Gaffney sidled up to him. ‘You’ve got ten seconds.’ He extricated the prawn skewer from Bertie’s grasp. ‘Or it’s “The Last Waltz” for you.’

Perhaps he was referring to that schmaltzy Humperdinck ballad, or else Bertie’s employment status. Regardless, Bertie felt like a wildebeest in the African savanna, cornered by a pride of lions. Was he the sort of wildebeest that waits to be devoured, or the sort that takes flight?

‘Five seconds.’

‘Come on Bertie,’ called Trevor. ‘Blow us away!’

In the dark recesses of his existential dread, Bertie’s thoughts settled on his dear, departed father. His father had loved early rock ‘n’ roll: Bill Haley, Little Richard, Chuck Berry. And especially Elvis Presley. If Bertie couldn’t sleep, his father would croon a lullaby – maybe ‘Wooden Heart,’ or ‘Love me Tender’ – and Bertie’s eyelids would mysteriously close. Other times, just for the sake of it, his father would sit Bertie on his knee and warble the King’s greatest hits. So Bertie made a fateful decision. ‘Elvis Presley,’ he said. “‘Kentucky Rain’.”

‘Are you sure?’ Gaffney smirked: perhaps he figured that Elvis was as dated as Engelbert Humperdinck.

Bertie nodded, resolute. That song was his father’s all-time favourite.

Gaffney turned back to the machine and scrolled through an unending list of songs, blinking with evident surprise when he found Bertie’s archaic selection, as though it shouldn’t be found on any self-respecting karaoke machine. ‘You’re digging your own grave.’ He handed over the microphone and slunk into the shadows.

Bertie heard the keyboard riff and stood stock-still, staring at the glistening microphone, not daring even to glance at the audience. The opening arpeggios led into the familiar bouncing bass-line, and it was time for him to sing that he woke up one morning to find that his girlfriend had left him.

The lyrics were displayed on a screen at his feet, but Bertie didn't need to read them. Instead, he closed his eyes and miraculously felt a deep inner calm, forgetting the audience, losing himself entirely in the music and his memories.

On one level, the song is about a man looking for his runaway lover: he is searching everywhere in the cold Kentucky rain. But Bertie could divine a deeper meaning. The song was about him, had been written just for him. Even though he had never been to Kentucky or had a steady girlfriend. None of that mattered. Kentucky was just a metaphor. The song was really about that night when he was twelve and the hospital called to say that his father wouldn't be coming home. He ran outside, his eyes watering. And it happened to be raining.

He kept singing about the towns he had passed through with his shoes full of rain, searching for his girl, when in reality he was only thinking about his father. He was back in his childhood bedroom with the *Toy Story* poster on the wall behind the door. Tears welled in his eyes but he held them back, instead pouring his emotions into the lyrics. That was oddly satisfying. It felt as though he were coughing up a chicken bone that had lodged in his gullet.

When the music died away and he finally opened his eyes, the first person he noticed was Tracey from human resources. She was standing near the stage, staring at him in wonder rather than amusement, and her eyes were moist. (Had he possibly

moved her? No, that was impossible: Trevor had always insisted that anyone who worked in human resources must have a tin heart.) And when Bertie looked around the bar, there was the same gaping expression on so many faces. It brought to mind the surprise of the judges on *Britain's Got Talent* when they first heard Susan Boyle. No one spoke. No one moved. It was so quiet that he could hear distant sirens. But only for a moment. Then applause rolled in like storm clouds.

Afterwards he stood at the bar, while strangers came over and slapped him on the back and shook his hand. Even some of Jasmine's admirers. And he basked in their adulation. It occurred to him that he was the people's favourite: a hero of the oppressed. Although Gaffney no doubt wanted Jasmine to win, he hadn't counted on this groundswell of support.

Trevor gave him a beer and he whisked it down. And Bertie was so popular that he didn't need to line up for his next drink; instead, someone handed him a bourbon and Coke. He downed that as well.

Even if the competition had been fixed, surely Bertie had given the judges a dilemma. He was a chance, wasn't he? He imagined his mother's surprise if he were to arrive home and announce that he would be taking her to the Gold Coast, all expenses paid. Although he hadn't won anything since his five-dollar bet on a longshot in the Melbourne Cup nearly a decade before, perhaps his fortunes were finally changing. He could picture himself striding into the lobby of a luxury hotel, replete with Hawaiian shirt, wide-brimmed straw hat and his beaming mother. There was no reason why he couldn't take home the trophy.