

# **Rum and other drugs**

## **Being prepared**

I went to the bottle shop looking for supplies. Needing variety but being fussy with my taste, I chose three differing packagings of the same product. Who would know when I would need drinks this week, things at home were always impromptu. I'd rather be prepared.

At the counter Steve the salesman says, 'Hi Frankie, how's your week?'

'Fairly uneventful so far, Steve, how's yours?'

It was the usual bottleshop banter, Steve and I had a purely alcohol sales based relationship. He probably knew more about me than I did about him.

'Rum', as he waves a bottle past the scanner.

'Rum', he says again as he scans a six pack of premixed rum and cola cans.

'Rum', he says a third time, as he scans a sole bottle of premixed Bundy and lime. He launches into a story of having had a bad experience with rum in his younger years.

His assistant responded to his tale, 'I think everyone has had a bad experience with rum,' as he packs my purchases.

They both look up at me. I looked them each in the eye and challenged, 'Sometimes, you just have to get back on that horse and ride it.' They smirked, their amusement was etched around their eyes.

Steve says to his assistant, nodding in my direction, his voice laced with defeat, 'This from a woman'.

I smiled politely and left.

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## Sal's ex

Sal hated Denny with a passion. Sal mused if she could find a similar passion in the love stakes she would be flying high. To her, Denny was a thief. An oxygen thief. There wasn't a breath Denny took that he deserved. He made her blood boil. He was arrogant, self centred, ignorant, blind, and lazy.

Her hatred for him permeated the air. Sal often said Denny was lucky. Each time he spoke to her she thought of how lucky he was. Lucky for him she didn't have a knife in her hand, she would say.

Thing was, they were once an item. That's one reason she hated him so much. When I first met them, as a couple, I couldn't understand why such a smart, sassy woman was hooked up with such a loser. It took all my strength to be polite to him. He paled beside her and I never invested the time in getting to know him.

She and I became firm friends and Denny just kind of fell by the wayside, like he wasn't even in the race. You can kind of tell the character of a person by their level of commitment and motivation. From where I sat he had neither. It was like he was just sitting on the back porch watching as I walked on into their lives and took his missus right out from under his nose.

And he still sat there even after we were long gone. Maybe noticing somewhere in that dimly lit cavern of his mind that something was missing.

That's the picture I have of Denny in my mind. I see stupid, pathetic. I don't hate him like Sal does. I couldn't be bothered, I was never invested. He wasn't worth it. He just didn't appreciate what he had when he had Sal. He had made a sad statement on behalf of men. And that statement suited my frame of mind.

## Too easy

Anyway, it turned out to be like stealing shit from a sheep. I took Sal away from him. It wasn't my intention. It just kind of happened and I went with along with it because it felt so right. I had never been with a woman before Sal. Not in a sexual way. But that all changed once Denny was off the team.

We got on so well together. It was like we were twins. Reading each others thoughts, finishing each others sentences. We set up house together in my home. We partied a lot, Sal partied a lot. I was comfortable and content. Sal was happy too. Stable and secure. We both knew we were loved and that made all the difference.

Sal would greet me each morning with coffee and a 'Good morning gorgeous.' She was like the champagne of my life, full of bubbles. She tickled my nose.

I was always the practical one. I paid the bills and organised the maintenance. She took care of entertainment and social events.

It was my job to put her to bed when she was so maggoted she couldn't walk anymore. 'Come on babe, time for your beauty sleep. Old George from next door will be up soon. He'll put his hearing aid in and wonder what he's missing out on.'

Sal would giggle and concede.

We both had vivid memories, of the time Sal had partied on past dawn and our 94 year old neighbour, George, feeling spritely when he first wakes up before his arthritis starts to protest, had heard the noise and come to join in. It was a disaster. George forgot he was 94. He thought he was 24 and he was dancing in his pyjamas like there was no tomorrow. His yahoo's had woken me. When I arrived in the loungeroom, I thought for sure, he'd break a hip with his moves. He tried to do the worm, bad, bad move. He had woken other neighbours and before long the police turned up as the sun rose.

Poor George. When we finally got him home, he spent the better part of the week in bed, his arthritis so much worse than normal and he had pulled muscles he hadn't used for years. He had strained his vocal chords in the bargain.

His family came and politely asked us to not include him in future events that may endanger his health. His doctor, on a house call, came to visit. He told us we had to be the responsible ones because George is losing his memory. He forgets he is old and frail. In essence, we had our arses chewed out because he had a ball.

Thankfully, George forgot the night that he was the life of the party. But we had made a pact then and there for George's wellbeing, and our own, parties come to a standstill well before dawn.

Sal liked to party real hard. Sometimes I would and sometimes I wouldn't. I could come home from work to a houseful of strangers she'd found at the local bowls

club. They'd be singing and dancing and boozing on. It would be four in the afternoon.

If I came in too late on the party scene I'd just disappear quietly. Take myself off to the bedroom, put on some headphones and read a book or take the time out to go visit a friend I hadn't seen for a long time, one of the few left that hadn't judged me along the way for my newly recognised sexuality.

Sal and I played happy houses for three years. Never an argument. In our own romantic gestures we had given each other a cat. So there were two cats underfoot. A pussy for a pussy we had both joked. They were symbolic of ourselves. Mirror images. Neither cat able to have kittens. Neither woman able to have a child. And amongst the four of us we found all the nurturing we needed to give and to receive.

It was after another one of Sal's shindigs on a Wednesday, when I had dragged myself off to bed early that I awoke restlessly, feeling like something was amiss. Sal wasn't in bed but I could hear her bustling about in the kitchen, nothing unusual there. But something had happened during the night. I remembered vaguely a cat fight, growling and snarling. It had all abated before I woke properly but it had happened in this bedroom. I sat up wondering what they had been fighting about. I looked under the bed and found a dead mouse. Ugh.

I wondered at the bad feng shui attached to sleeping over a dead mouse as I crouched down looking at the sacrifice the cats had left to their human gods, during the night.

I padded barefoot to the kitchen to get paper towel. Sal was there, bright and bubbly as always. How she could tie a big night on and still rise early with bubbles to spare defied reason.

‘Our darlings have left us a dead mouse,’ I said by way of greeting, ‘have you slept?’

She threw bacon into a sizzling pan and turned to pour boiled water into two coffee cups. Her slim figure was outlined under her nightie backlit by the morning sunlight streaming in through the window.

‘Not yet, after breakfast. It’ll be ready in five if you want to freshen up.’

She smiled at me but there was something not quite right. Her usual morning greeting hadn’t arrived but I put this down to the fact that she had pulled an all nighter again.

Even though I dismissed it with an excuse it still nagged that something wasn’t quite right. The feeling surrounded me like a cloak of darkness. I shrugged it off. I needed a shower.



I took the paper towel, wrapped the dead vermin and brought it back to the kitchen, putting it in a plastic bag and depositing it in the bin. Without another word I returned to the bedroom, made the bed and got into the shower washing away the remnants of sleep.

## **Bombshells for breakfast**

Feeling fresher, I returned to the kitchen, breakfast was on the table and Sal was seated flicking through yesterday's newspaper, sipping her coffee.

I sat. 'What is on the agenda for today?' I queried as I brought the coffee cup to my lips. Oh god, I loved my first cup of coffee in the morning. It woke up my insides.

'I wanted to talk to you about something,' Sal started. There was a seriousness about her, an anticipation. Not something I had ever seen on her first thing in the morning after partying all night. I wondered if she was still high.

'Shoot,' I said, cutting bacon and runny eggs to put on the toast.

I could feel the unsettling heaviness creeping in again as my wet hair dripped on the shoulders of my shirt.

The bacon and eggs were good. Sometimes it is just the littlest things in life that make the difference I mused, as I waited for Sal to speak.

'I'm going to move out.' She announced. It was calm, a matter of fact statement.

My heart skipped a beat as thoughts raced through my head. What? What the fuck? Why didn't I see this coming? Where to? And why? What does this mean? Are we over?

She peered at me waiting for a response, trying to read me.

I raised my eyebrows and lowered them again. A sign of surprise, acceptance and defeat. 'Ok', I said trying to keep my voice calm as the bacon lodged on its way to my stomach. I wanted to be patient, to wait for the rest of the story that would explain it all. Meanwhile, my guts were screaming at me to react.

'When? Do you need a hand?'

She smiled, relieved. 'Over the weekend. Sarah has just moved into a new place by herself but she can't afford the rent, so I'll move in there to help her out with finances, look after the kids when she gets stuck at work, you know.'

'Uh huh,' I nodded through a mouthful of breakfast, thankful this simple task was preventing me from showing a flood of emotion.

Did my relationship just grind to a standstill without any warning signs? I was mystified, incredulous. It seemed surreal.

I had noticed her response was rushed with the words tumbling over each other. I wasn't sure if it was excitement or nerves. I also noted that being a good Samaritan would not have been her only motivator.

I know Sal. Yes, she was good and kind and she loved to help out, especially the down and out. But Sarah was neither down nor out. I knew Sarah, long before Sal had met her. I knew Sarah from a past life. One when she and I were both in new relationships, with men, and we were both pregnant with our first child. I lost my baby, she didn't. I knew Sarah to be competitive. She always wanted and yearned for what others around her had. She was a coveter.

Jo, another mutual friend from back then, bought a new car. Sarah whinged and whined, then cajoled and pressured her husband. He was reluctant to go into that much debt. But Sarah got her way; it was the icing on the cake for their relationship. The best and the latest model, top of the range.

Their marriage didn't last another year. Sarah had popped out the second child by then and persuaded him to buy a house in a nicer suburb. She walked away with the car and the babies and the new furniture and the designer clothes. They had to sell the house that she was busy splashing around money on, to get a new kitchen and install a pool. Money they didn't have to start with. She was bitter about losing the house, he was the bastard. He was left with the debt.

I hoped for Sal's sake she could see Sarah for what she was. A tiny part of me sighed with relief. I had no inclination to get mixed up in the dramas of others.

The sigh of relief was that Sal has decided to go to the problem, not bring it to my doorstep. For that I was grateful. Too often Sal had brought home a stray infested with fleas that I would have to help clean up. And I'm not talking cats; I'm talking bums with issues.

'Sal you are too kind.' I replied. In my response was a tiny hint of sarcasm. Sal could be her own worst enemy all in the name of kindness. It was also true, she was very kind. Her panache for getting into the mess of other's was beyond what I could manage. She wanted to fix things, make people's lives better. And she did, just by being a part of someone's life. Her bubbles and care made her loved by all. But Sal, often took one step too far, getting in on the front line.

I was sure Sarah's real reasons had nothing to do with being unable to afford the rent. She was renting before, alone and I knew that rent was out of my price range. Where she had moved to recently was cheaper. She worked, topped up with welfare payments and drained the ex dry to keep her standard of living as she liked.

I wondered what Sarah's real motivations were. I wondered if it had anything to do with me. Not that she cared about me as a person. She only cared about herself. She may have set her competitive sights on me and my happiness. It wasn't out of the question. I had purposefully steered away from her view over my life many years ago. For that very reason, I had kept my distance. And after all Sarah was a coveter.

Or it may have nothing to do with me. It may only be the allure of Sal. Sarah's recent move back into our humble little suburb meant Sal met Sarah at the club, only a few weeks ago.

Sal sat opposite me, nibbling at her bacon. Her dark eyes studied my face and full lips produced a smile. Her smile always lit up a room, her neat white teeth shone against the backdrop of her dark Polynesian skin. Her laughter lines were more pronounced from lack of sleep this morning.

I wondered again what Sal would get out of this.

'I'm glad you are ok with it,' she said quietly. 'You're ok now, you don't need me anymore, but Sarah does. So, thank you for understanding.'

The words hung in the air for a moment, caught in a time warp. Then they fell shattering like crystal around me. A dim realisation that Sal had seen me as a soul that needed saving began to form. She came to me because she thought I was lost, that she brought stability to me, that.... oh my God. I had never thought of it that way. I had never thought she was rescuing me.

If anything I thought I was rescuing her, from Denny. Had I just become Denny? Sitting with the vacant look on my face, knowing I could not clip her wings if she wanted to fly the coop? Had she rescued Denny and then moved on to me when she felt she had done what she needed? Had she rescued me and now the challenge was gone she needed Sarah to be her next project?

My insides churned and I felt nauseous all of a sudden. My appetite died an instant death. I was more than half way through breakfast and the thought of congealing egg made me gag. I swigged at my coffee, trying to regain my composure and manage my emotional turmoil. I needed time to think about this. To process.

Sal stood up, taking her plate to the sink. 'So, can we talk some more later? I'm really beat,' she asked with her back to me.

I struggled to calm my breathing before I allowed my voice to be heard.

'Of course, Sal,' I forced myself to sound cheerful and gracious, 'I have to meet Tim soon so you get some sleep and I'll see you later in the day. Thanks for breakfast.' I stood to clear my plate from the table.

Sal turned towards me heading towards the bedroom. The sunlight caught the trail of a stray tear on her cheek that she had wiped away.

'Thank you, my darling Frankie,' she said with the weight of the world delivered in those three words. She wrapped her arms around my neck and kissed my cheek as I stood with my plate and cup in my hands. Then she left.

I wondered what would become of the cats.

## **Eager to move on**

We never did talk that afternoon. She was out when I got in, but there were half packed boxes in the living room waiting to greet me, reminding me that my life was about to change. I had managed to avoid thinking about it most of the day, throwing myself into work and focusing intently on clients so the thoughts would not barge in.

I couldn't steel myself up again to face her later, so I went out after dark when my resolve waivered, returning after midnight. She never came home that night. Being at home with packed boxes and no noise brought it all home to me. I was in shock moving like an automaton waiting for reality to sink in or to wake up, whichever would come first.

Friday was the only other day that separated this life from the next. After a restless night's sleep, I went to work as usual returning to find the half-packed boxes now fully packed and stacked near the door. There was little trace of Sal's personality left in the house. It seemed barren and lifeless.

I sighed, wondering what I should do. I pulled out a chair sat at the dining table, putting my hand bag beside me. My shoulders slouched as my heart grew cold. I couldn't hide in my work anymore. The work week was over.

Within minutes Sal bounded in through the doorway, her face alight with laughter.



‘Oh, hi,’ she greeted me slowing in her tracks and her enthusiasm.

‘Thought I’d get a jump on the weekend so I’ll move some of these now,’ she motioned towards the boxes.

‘Sure,’ I responded steeling myself with a gut-wrenching smile. ‘I won’t get in your way; I was just heading to the shop.’

I picked up my handbag that I had put on the table not five minutes before. I moved towards the lounge room knowing I had no plans for the shops just a plan to escape the uncomfortableness that now permeated my home.

As an afterthought, I said, ‘Do you want anything?’ A standard line anytime anyone went to the shop without the other.

‘Oh, a bottle of bubbles would be lovely,’ she grinned. Her smile was infectious. I couldn’t help but smile back with a genuine one in return and feel myself relax a little. The smile gave me hope. The smile told me this is just a bad dream and I’m imagining it all. We would have a drink and it would all be sweet.

‘Of course,’ I said returning her smile.

I moved towards the door as she replied, ‘Thanks darling, can you ask Sarah to come in?’

I halted mid step, realising that Sarah must be waiting outside for Sal. The weight of disappointment engulfed me. This was more than I could bear, so I continued to walk out of the doorway and to my car. Not once glancing over to Sarah who stood in the garden loitering in the shadows like the unwelcome intruder that she was.

I got in the car and drove. I drove straight past the shops blinded by the barrage of emotions. Of course, I didn't get the champagne. I put the smile that had drugged me out of my mind and I drove.

I drove out of town, towards the hills. Oblivious to the traffic or the weather, I was on autopilot following the road wherever it led, not thinking of a destination just the escape.

## **Run but you can't hide**

As dark began to creep in two hours later, I looked down at my fuel gauge and up at the road sign ahead. I was nearly two hundred kilometres from home and I needed fuel and I was hungry and I needed to pee. My thoughts had been racing the entire time, tripping over each other as I struggled to make sense of it.

I took the next exit off the highway to the nearest town and fuelled up the car. I wondered what I should do next. I had no plan. No plan for how to handle this, no plan to fight, no plan of where to eat or sleep and definitely no inclination to return home where I knew an empty house would begin to haunt me or even worse, Sal having one last fling there with Sarah co-hosting. I shuddered.

I wanted answers. I wanted to know what had happened to us. Why hadn't I seen any signs that Sal wasn't happy? Or was she just waiting for her next project to appear, marking time with me?

My head hurt from all the thoughts and mixed emotions I was churning through. Denial, guilt, anger, fear, sadness, acceptance. It went around in circles.

Looking at the clock on my dashboard it said 7.05pm. I drove further into the town. Cars were parked at motels and hotels and the supermarket. Mostly the street was bare of humans. They were all busy inside these buildings. I decided to stop at one of the hotels, the third one I came across. Its wooden façade worn with time looked non-threatening in its age.

Clutching at straws to alleviate my pain, I thought a bit of comfort food, maybe a good steak dinner would make me feel better.

## **Birds of a feather**

I was feeling in no way social so I chose a table in the corner of the eatery and browsed through the menu. Typical pub grub. Crumbed fish and chips, garden salads, steak and veges, roast of the day. The interior was dimly lit with wood panelling and high ceilings. I was sure I wasn't the bearer of the first broken heart that had crossed the threshold.

I settled on a small sirloin with mushroom gravy and jacket potatoes and veges. I went to the counter to order. Looking over the bartender's shoulder to the opposite side of the bar I saw Denny, sitting on a bar stool, a beer in front of him, head down.

The bartender moved away to get change. Denny raised his head in that moment and saw me, greeting me with a thin smile. I nodded in return and ordered a beer before returning to my table.

I had no idea why Denny would be in this town let alone the same pub I had chosen for dinner but I found it comical that this far away country town now hosted two of Sal's exes in the same bar on the same night.

I returned to my seat and watched as Denny moved around the bar towards me. He didn't say a word, just pulled out the chair opposite me and sat down with his half glass of beer.

'Frankie,' he nodded, 'How have you been?' like we were friends who had lost touch.

‘Fine. And you?’ I enquired with forced politeness.

‘Yeah, getting there,’ he said with a sigh.

A strained silence hung in the air before he said, ‘How is Sal?’

I could pretend all was well, that our life was as I thought it was, two days ago, happy and content. I was tempted; it was none of Denny’s business after all. The words that came out of my mouth weren’t anything like that.

‘She left me,’ I could hear my voice crack like it belonged to another.

‘Oh. I see. Sorry,’ he offered slowly. We sat in silence again for a bit as I sipped my beer for something to do in the awkwardness.

Then he said talking to his beer, ‘She does that. And you don’t see it coming. One day she is there then the next she tells you she is moving on. No explanation, no discussion. She just goes. And you had no idea.’

He looked up from his beer to meet my eyes. I nodded feeling the tears pricking behind mine.

He could see into my soul, sensing my pain and my vulnerability.

‘When?’ he asked quietly. The word was asked with same reverence as you would asking when finding out someone had died.

‘Today’, I croaked as my emotions tugged at my voice.

‘Mmm,’ he nodded his head. ‘I remember being in shock. It took me a long time to process it. I let her go without a fight. There is no point fighting her or fighting for her, you know, she won’t be tied down. She just won’t commit long term,’ he said with resolve. ‘So, when her time is up she just moves on, like it is the most natural thing in the world. Without even breaking a sweat,’ he reminisced talking slowly, reflecting. I could see him thinking, it was written in his gaze.

‘Who?’ he asked.

‘Is there always a who?’

‘Always,’ he said with finality. ‘There is always another person that she needs to fix waiting in the wings. I don’t think she falls out of love; I just think her desire to fix people is what drives her, at all costs.’

His words were kind, bringing me some comfort that it wasn’t anything I had done that drove her away. I just wasn’t a challenge anymore. I snorted involuntarily as I rounded out the thought that I didn’t know I was a challenge to begin with.

The waitress appeared with my meal. The smell of freshly cooked steak in a hundred-year-old country pub brought me comfort and I felt ravenous. Had I eaten since bacon and eggs two days ago, I wondered.

Denny said, 'Mind if I stay while you eat?'

Even though I wasn't feeling social he had brought with him the understanding I needed right now to balance my thinking.

'Sure', I said, 'Do you want some?'

He shook his head. 'I've already eaten. I'll get us another beer though.'



## **Dinner with a side serve of clarity**

I ate as Denny chatted. The steak was tender.

He told me how he had moved on, what he had done. How utterly devastated he had been. How he heard she hated him with a passion and how he didn't understand why. He couldn't fathom why her love for him had turned to hatred. He had given her all the space she needed. She loved to party, she was a free spirit and he had never tried to tame it. So, he didn't understand why it had bred hatred.

I was beginning to wonder how much of my view of Denny had been flavoured by Sal's hatred for him. I saw him as pathetic, a waste of space, lazy. What had I based those opinions on? I didn't see him fight for her, but here I was doing the same thing, and ultimately for the same reasons.

Neither of us wanted her to be unhappy so we had each given her all the space she needed to be free, to not feel shackled. And when the time came and she walked, we no longer felt we had any say because we had been complicit all along. And we had been.

Why had I thought him pathetic? Because he hadn't fought for her? Because he let her walk over him? Because he was a broken man?

Oh, I was really getting a good look in the mirror now. A look back into the past bringing a new perspective, and a look at the here and now, my reflection being bounced back at me.

How had I not known Sal thought of me as broken and in need of fixing?

## Revelations for dessert

Denny and I talked long after I had finished eating. The steak was delicious and by the end of the night I was glad I ended up here, with a full belly, in this one-horse town, in this old hotel with great food and much needed right time company.

I saw a very different Denny. He was kind hearted and considerate. He avoided conflict and seemed very spiritual in his outlook on life. I could see why Sal might have thought he was broken. She wanted to ignite him, to set him on fire. He was just a placid guy, not wanting to cause ripples in his world as he waded through it. That didn't need fixing. Did she think she succeeded in fixing him? Had she accomplished what she wanted to do?

I asked Denny. He said he didn't need fixing. He was happy with life, yes, he had baggage, we all do but it was nothing that was holding him back. He just doesn't take life at break neck speed, he takes the time to smell the daisies along the way.

'No, that wasn't why Sal came into my life. Yes, she thought she could fix me but really, I was only a stepping stone. A way out, an alibi.'

'An alibi?'

Denny filled in the gaps. He had fallen for her mystique and her bubbly personality; he never knew he was being used. He overlooked the fact that he was always paying the tab, for everything. He said looking back he was really only a free ride for Sal.

He would happily buy her wine at her request, never once wondering if she would ever buy the wine or the cigarettes or the groceries. She cooked and cleaned and he provided. He settled into that arrangement thinking it was a small price to pay to have her in his life.

Ultimately, he was just the free ride. He hadn't realised till the end that she had viewed him as being broken and needing to be saved. Like me, an out of the blue one liner told him it all.

Two years after they had split, Denny was in Sydney for work. In the street he ran into the guy who had introduced him to Sal in Sydney about five years before. The guy was a distant cousin of Sal's. The two men decided to have a beer and Denny learnt then that this is Sal's MO. She had done it time and time again.

Found a good heart, painted them as a soul in need of saving and set about on her mission to save them, all without them realising this was how she thought of them. She masked her motives with her love and attention, her caring. And the release from being an eternal saviour was her partying.

The pattern went on and on. Each victim, as it were, financially supported her partying habits never knowing that the partying was a reward to herself for her hard work.

This revelation was indeed confronting. How had I been so gullible? I know there are two sides to every story and people view things differently but this is a total mastery of deception. How had my instincts failed me so badly?

And then I wonder if they had. Hadn't there been the odd tug of feeling used when Sal's new friends lobbed up for a night of partying, raiding the cupboard and spilling drinks on the carpet.

Hadn't I felt resentful paying the exorbitant electricity bill that time when Sal had let her mate use the shed to continuously charge his appliances for over a month? Had I not turned a blind eye to it? I didn't even know what those appliances were or why they were in my shed. I didn't ask. I trusted Sal so I trusted her judgement.

Hadn't I felt resentful when Sal had dragged my brand-new doona off the bed to be a throw rug on the lounge room floor for yet another group of new friends. And then a bottle of red wine had been knocked over, staining the cover, ruining the doona and soaking through to the carpet that had only been professionally cleaned the week before? I had been angry and upset.

How did I move past it? Sal had wooed me. Massaged my shoulders, run me a hot bath with bubbles as she cooked a delicious meal and scrubbed the carpet and soaked the doona cover. The doona itself would never be the same but the scars were hidden under the revived cover. Hadn't I told myself they were just material possessions? Hadn't I allowed the inconsideration to be mitigated by Sal's attention?

Putting away the resentment that it was my hard-earned money that had purchased my new and expensive piece of luxury I indulged in as a reward for that hard work?

How many times had I let these things slide? How many times had I ignored my instincts and reactions? Was I suffering from Stockholm Syndrome?

How many new friends had Sal dragged through my door? Yes, my door. My door to my home.

How many of them had hung around? I thought back over the past three years. Most of them were drifters, they come and go, they party, supply drugs, have a good time, mess up and then leave. Maybe only two of them were there long term, both males, clearly smitten with Sal. Neither of them I had any time for. Why? Why didn't I like them?

I looked at Denny. Both of those guys were similar to Denny. They all appeared to have had their balls chopped off and would be happy to have them served to them on a plate, if only it was by Sal.

I asked Denny if Sal ever been in a relationship with a woman before.

'Not that I know of,' he responded. 'You know, it killed me to know she left me for a woman. It crushed my manhood, my ego. I thought I was the luckiest guy alive to have Sal. I don't think I ever expected her to be faithful and I was grateful that she was. Guys fell down behind her when she walked by. They would do

anything to be the next guy. I think Sal knows her power and she uses it well. I finally decided that she changed teams because she was tired of it being too easy to pick and choose. And she is picky.’ He drew breath.

‘I’ll give you my take on her. She doesn’t want to accumulate things in her life that will hold her down, so she is free to fly whenever she wants. That’s why her life amounts to a few boxes of possessions only. She gets into relationships and everything becomes hers to use while she is there. She likes the good stuff so she will choose relationships that benefit her, that have classy trappings, plenty of free income to leech off and use to party. When she is done, she goes on to the next person. With a brand-new set of pretty things. It took me a lot of reflection to see how it had happened. I remember overhearing her once offering the use of her circular saw to a guy at the bar.

‘I had a circular saw, she didn’t. She never even referenced it as ours, just hers. Then she came to me and told me, whatever his name was had asked to use my circular saw and she thought that would be ok. Could I help a mate out?

‘Of course, like the sucker I am, I agreed. In the conversation with him, it was hers, in the conversation with me it was mine and I was doing the favour but I never got the brownie points for it. She did. And when she swooned out, I realised most things were either missing or broken, like the circular saw. Like a whirlwind had been through my stuff and the things I had worked long and hard for to accumulate were no longer around.

‘I saw her on the street one day after we had split. I asked her where my circular saw was. You know what she said? “Remember you lent it to that guy, that friend of yours. Didn’t you get it back from him?” Other than see him that night at the bar when she was talking to him, I didn’t even know his name. He was never my friend, I never even met him, she must have taken the saw to him because I had forgotten about it by the next morning.’

He splayed his hands in front of him, open palmed, ‘And here she was standing in front of me telling me I was responsible for my shit that she had given away. She took no responsibility for it at all. Even calling him, my friend.’

He paused briefly before concluding, ‘It was my own fault. I was too happy to have her in my life I never picked her up on it.’

He sighed and continued. ‘When she left me for you, I was gutted. Why a woman? Then it came to me. She could manipulate men in her sleep, there was no more challenge in it for her, so she went looking for other challenges.’

Again he paused, ‘I wonder what happens when she has mastered the art of manipulating women? What is the next challenge?’

‘You mentioned you were an alibi, what did you mean?’

‘Ahh, you know the guy before me was an old codger. He was something like 70 years old. She screwed him big time. I didn’t know this until I ran into her



cousin in Sydney. He said that is why she wanted to get out of town. She latched on to me, said she wanted a sea change and we headed up north.’

‘No, I didn’t know. She did mention once she had an old male friend that she was very close to in Sydney who had died. I gathered it was before she met you. She said that you were the distraction she needed at the time and she hadn’t really thought much about your relationship, just went with it to feel better.’

As the words came out of my mouth, I saw the fleeting look of pain behind his eyes. Even after all this time, he still held a candle for her.

‘I’m not surprised she thought I was an out and treated me with so little respect. Her and I were a bit of a rush job. She threw herself at me. Now I know why. She had fleeced the old guy for everything he had. Sent money back to family overseas, sold off his car telling him he was too old to drive, pocketing the money and hiring a limo when they wanted to go anywhere. Like the doctors, I suppose,’ he rolled his eyes.

‘Apparently the family, his family, were very concerned with his new love interest. His wife of nearly 50 years had died just before Sal met him. She was on to him like butter on a hot crumpet making him forget his pain. She drove a wedge between him and his family, always finding excuses that they couldn’t visit. Whisking him away on holidays she booked, to avoid them, and to spend his dough. He lapped it up, thinking he was young again. She would shout everyone in the bar wherever they stayed, using his money, of course. She would put him to bed early and she

would party on late. She always made sure she was there for him first thing in the morning, being attentive, giving him hope. Anyway, it lasted about a year and the old guy had a heart attack. No doubt he just couldn't keep up the pace. Shopping and dinners and travel. Poor bastard,' Denny rolled his eyes again.

'He ended up in hospital and she was there for him, didn't tell his family it had happened. When he asked for them, she said she'd called and they would come when they could. They never did because they never knew. He died there a week later, by himself, alone.' Denny shrugged at the sadness of it.

'Sal was on an all-night bender with new friends at an upmarket new nightclub in town. Spending his money or what was left of it. The story goes that the family was notified by the hospital of his death because they couldn't find her. She arrived back at the hospital the next day looking like Cinderella had pulled an all nighter and the family were furious. They demanded answers. Who was controlling his money, did she have access to his accounts? She slipped out of the hospital, cleaned out what she wanted from his house, sold most of it on eBay, drained his bank accounts and booked herself on a last-minute cruise, playing the grieving widow. By the time she returned to Sydney the family had lawyers and police looking for her.

'They found out she had encouraged him to borrow substantially against the equity in his home. Legally Sal could have had a stake in the home because she was with him for a year, but,' he raised his hands, palms upward in a sign of submission, 'she doesn't like to be tied down. So, the family was left with the house and the mountain of debt to go with it. She had spent it all or hidden it away. Coming back to

Sydney she went into hiding, straight to her distant cousin, our mutual friend, crashing at his place so she could find her feet again. Two days later, she is out on the town with him and he introduces us. I was her ticket out of the hot seat. The rest is history.'

'She never got caught?' I asked. I was hearing a story of a very manipulative woman. I struggled to get my head around it. I felt a little shocked, a bit numb but I didn't disbelieve it. As Denny's words completed the picture I felt a sense of closure envelope me.

'She doesn't exist,' he replied. She never has a lease in her name or phone bills or electricity bills. They can't track her cause she has no print. Ebay she set up for a week to sell stuff and then she deleted the account. You know how she operates. She'll throw you some cash for groceries, you put it on your card. If she works it is all cash in hand, dodgy jobs or in-kind favours. Nothing recorded. She doesn't even have a bank account. This is our Sal.'

## Compassion as a nightcap

I suddenly felt sorry for Sarah. As much of a cow as she was she didn't deserve to be a victim. But then again, neither did I. How had I been so blind? At least I wasn't in the same boat as the poor old man. Well, I suppose he was very happy at the time. His family would be the ones with the axe to grind.

The bar tender called last drinks. I thought about the drive home. Farming country could mean stray stock and zealous cops looking for out of towners meant I would have to be super alert travelling home. I felt tired, the emotional drain had taken its toll on me.

'Thanks for the company, Denny,' I said with complete sincerity. 'I should get going; it's a long drive home to an empty house.'

'Stay,' he said. 'Nothing in it, I promise. I have a spare room at my place around the corner, it's yours for the night if you want to sleep there and drive home fresh in the morning. You've had a tough day and I wouldn't think a long night drive would be a good idea. You must be emotionally drained and you'll probably fall asleep at the wheel. I've seen too many mates killed on the roads after heated arguments. It's up to you, but I think you should get a last stiff drink to help you sleep off your day and have a decent night's sleep. Tomorrow is a new day.'

My face must have displayed my mixed thoughts.

‘I’m telling you, nothing else to it, just a bed and a safety plan is all,’ he reaffirmed.

My body was tired, I could feel the tension in my shoulders and I knew that sooner or later I would need a good cry. I did not want to be doing that on the highway in the middle of the night. The thought of the long drive back was also daunting. It would be early hours of the morning when I got there and I probably wouldn’t sleep then, I’d be wired and even more emotional. What he said made sense.

‘Ok,’ I agreed, ‘thank you for being so considerate.’

‘Hey, I don’t owe you anything but I do know what you are going through, I just wish someone was there for me when I went through it.’ He bowed his head. I felt a twinge of guilt nuzzle at me. I really didn’t deserve his kindness.

He looked up suddenly, his moment of sullenness shed. ‘So, what will the last stiff drink be?’ he asked as he rose from his chair.

‘I’ll have a rum and coke thanks, make it a double.’

He smiled. It was a nice smile. I had never noticed it before. Probably because Sal shone so brightly, she sucked all the light out of everything and everyone else around her.

‘Ugh,’ he groaned, ‘I had a bad experience with rum once. Never again.’

I smiled knowingly. His statement took me back to a warm memory of a few days before that had made others smile. I realised these same statements said in two different places by two different men, were bookends to this drama.

‘One double coming up. You’ll get through this,’ he said with a certainty in his voice that gave me the confidence to know that I would. With dignity.