

2023 Albury City Story Competition

GIRL FRIDAY

2792 words

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She is woken by the garbage truck. It's still a few streets away but she can hear it clearly: the surge of its engine, the distant bump of bins, carrying on the still morning air. Margaret stares at the ceiling rose, reluctant to move. It's Friday. Her last day. Today they will come for her.

She's expecting Ruby from Human Resources, followed, as always, by that smirking minx Letitia. Ten o'clock, the Outlook invite said. Your office. Please accept. And she has accepted, more or less. She's been waiting for them since Tuesday, working through her diminishing list of things to do. There has been no travel or appointments to arrange; her in-tray is almost empty. No Gus in the office next to hers where he's been for forty-three years. Just the ghostly impression of him, the sense of a rushed departure, the hollow ring of his unsaid goodbyes.

He could have phoned her. He must realise that, now he's gone, her days are also numbered. A brief call on her direct line just to check that she's okay, that's all she wants. No need for an explanation or denial—or excuse. Whether she believes the allegations is neither here nor there.

Margaret rolls onto her side and watches the shadow play of leaves on the bedroom wall. Gus was twenty-four years old when she came to work at the firm, two years younger than she was and already a junior manager. He was also very attractive—all the girls in the office thought so—but while he was nicer than other bosses, and more approachable, he never seemed to pay much heed to their fluttering attentions. When he'd chosen her as his PA after his promotion, she believed it was because she didn't flirt. She was aware of his good looks, of course, but she was also aware of his family, of Helen and the children smiling from the photograph in the frame behind his desk. It was a studio shot taken when the boys were very small, before Helen had her breakdown, or whatever it was she had, and stopped coming to work events with him.

The family photo. It, too, had gone by the time Margaret returned from lunch on Tuesday. That was the first thing she noticed when she looked through the glass divider, before she saw his cleared desk and heard their chairman, Philip Roach, summons her to the boardroom. The other

directors had gone by then. She wasn't even sure which ones had attended the meeting in person, having had nothing to do with its organisation.

That was only portent, as far as she could tell: the calling of an extraordinary meeting of the Board and the fact that she was not required to be there, or make any of the arrangements. Philip Roach had sent out the meeting notice himself the previous evening, and if there was a formal agenda, Margaret hadn't seen it. Could Gus have had any inkling of what was coming his way? He didn't seem concerned when he called her into his office on Tuesday morning and told her about the meeting scheduled for noon. 'Apparently you're not needed, Margaret,' he said with a kindly smile. 'You can take a long lunch if you like, go on. It's a lovely day.'

And that's what she did. Took her sandwich and a takeaway coffee to the other side of Hyde Park and sat in the sun, in the amphitheatre, watching the world go by. She no longer uses the lunchroom at work. Hasn't for some years now. She doesn't feel welcome or part of the group that gathers there these days, eating their healthy buddha bowls of kale and ancient grains. If she did, she might have heard about 'the incident'. Amy is one of them, after all; she's almost always there. They could have been discussing it for weeks.

Amy, of all people. What on earth was he thinking? Less than half his age and such a stropy thing, clomping around the office in her vegan heels, tossing that mane of auburn hair. She's never had much time for Margaret. Listens to her with folded arms and an air of weary patience, her tongue touching her upper lip and her eyes fixed on some point to the left of Margaret's ear. She considers her a dinosaur. All the young ones do, particularly since that awful PowerPoint episode last year. Gus had requested a presentation to spruik an idea to the Board. The IT creative was on leave, and as board meetings were Margaret's domain, the job of putting it together had fallen to her. She'd used PowerPoint before, of course, but when it came to actually making the slides, she wasn't confident. She'd done what she thought was the sensible thing and sought Amy's help, only to hear her relaying their entire conversation to other staff members in the lunchroom later that day.

'She didn't know where to start. I'm like, give me a fucking break! Where's she been all these years. PowerPoint's older than I am!'

This from someone who's been with the firm for all of five minutes and goes by the pretentious title of Knowledge Manager. Margaret pulls the sheet in under her chin and smiles ruefully. Girl Friday was the job she'd applied for all those years ago. She had just returned from London where she'd been working as a temp. She was proud of herself at the time. It was something of an achievement for a young Australian girl to take herself off to London and land herself a share flat and a job in Marble Arch. Temping was quite the thing back then. The curved walls of the Tube stations were lined with the agencies' glossy ads—pretty young women with updos and ironically 'brainy' glasses, nibbling thoughtfully on the end of a ballpoint pen. Funny how selective the memory can be, assuming the clichés of another time. When she thinks of her life in London now, she pictures her younger self, swinging down Portobello Road all fancy free. She doesn't think of the long, grimy trips on the Tube, or the gloomy weather, or the wretched pay she received as a junior typist.

She sighs. Girl Friday. No such job anymore. The typing pools have long since dried up, and even secretaries are now an endangered species. It's do-it-yourself for anyone less than top management these days: type your own letters, book your own flights. Margaret has managed to survive as Gus's PA, but more and more, she feels as if she is indeed alone on a desert island. No-one appreciates her skill set anymore. Who cares if she can touch type ninety words a minute—who's counting? As for her 'thing with filing'; for that too, she has become the butt of office jokes. There was a time when she was called upon to show new employees around and explain to them the various office systems: filing from back to front, oldest to most recent; the indexing system for contracts, correspondence and reports. It's been a long time since she was asked to show anyone around. Even her practice of printing things out and filing them in hardcopy was described in a recent staff meeting as 'environmentally irresponsible'. They're even talking of doing away with printed annual reports. Margaret shakes her head. It may be cheaper to put them online, and better for the planet, but no one will ever read them there.

She'd once tried to make this point about the physical office by challenging the Information Services team to a race. First to locate the Murphy Billeton contract—ready, set, go! She'd imagined them all stuffing around on their PCs while she walked calmly across the room and retrieved the hardcopy. That's what would have happened anyhow, had any of them been willing to play.

Only last week, Amy had come to her office, waving a piece of old fax paper pulled from the back of a drawer.

‘Margaret, please enlighten me. What are we keeping this for? You can hardly read it, look!’ she said, slapping it down on the desk.

At first glance, it looked very much like a blank sheet of paper, shiny and discoloured, the way old fax paper goes. Margaret examined the ghost writing and then handed it back. ‘It’s a memo,’ she said tartly, ‘about the Rhodes project. Just leave it there. You never know, it might be important.’

She squints at the clock radio. She should have had her shower by now, have been dressed and eating breakfast. She needs to be out the door by 7.15 at the latest to catch her preferred bus and train. But this morning, at some unconscious level, she’s decided to go in late. What can they do—discipline her? Threaten her with the sack? No, she’ll go in after ten, making it perfectly clear that she knows what’s about to happen. They will not catch her off guard. She’ll meet them head on. There’s nothing for her to do in the office anyway but wait for them to come for her, like Anne Boleyn in the Tower. The knock on the door. Ruby and Letitia, brandishing offers of redundancy to help cushion the blow. Surely, at seventy-one, she’s considering retirement. ‘Sorry, girls,’ she’ll say, knowing how that annoys them. She has no plans to retire. What on earth would she do with herself? She’s fit and healthy, still has her faculties, and until last Tuesday lunchtime, she was quite useful too. There’ll be a new CEO. He’s going to need an assistant—or she. They may well go for a woman this time, given what’s happened with Gus. An internal appointment? Surely not. No-one springs to mind. These young upstarts can ‘lean in’ all they like; they’re not management material.

She’s thinking of Amy again and it makes her feel uneasy. She’s heard only sketchy details of what happened. It was in the copy room, as far as she can tell, late in the day when most of the staff had gone home. She is ashamed of her desire to know more. It feels grubby to ask, and disloyal to Gus, although, since he packed up and left as he did, she can only assume it’s true. Imagining the two of them in that stuffy little room, Margaret suddenly finds it hard to breath.

Her dealings with Amy haven’t always been so strained. There was a time when they used to chat a bit, standing in the kitchen, waiting for the urn to boil. Amy had also lived in London for a time. And they were both redheads, which, in Margaret’s mind, gave them a special connection. Of

course, Margaret's hair was no longer red. She'd had to describe it for Amy, how she used to wear hers long too, in a ponytail at the back.

Deep down, she feels some admiration for the girl. It would take guts to do what she did, to go straight to her desk and fire off an official complaint against the CEO. There have been other allegations since, of course. Me too—here they come, crawling out of the woodwork. None of these complaints sound too serious: a lingering hand, a touch on the thigh, I felt uncomfortable. Not hanging offences on their own but enough to tighten the noose. Margaret doesn't feel the same admiration for these women. Why didn't they come forward earlier if they were so upset?

She frowns to herself, sensing some kind of contradiction. It may not have happened in the copy room. From what she knows, Margaret has only a few images, blurry and rushed, like a jump-cut crime reveal at the end of a bad police show. Amy stands at a filing cabinet with her back to the door, flipping through the contents of a manila folder. But there are no filing cabinets in the copy room anymore, and Amy is unlikely to have used them if there were. Margaret tries to change this bit, to construct it differently, but the image is fixed and, try as she might, she can't move things around. It could have been Gus's office but, no, that can't be right. From her desk, she can see pretty much everything that goes on in that room. But if it was after hours, as she has concluded—. She was usually gone by 5.30, leaving Gus at his desk. He was never one to hurry home. She can see Amy's auburn hair and her emerald green dress, polished cotton with a long zipper down the back. But Margaret can't remember Amy wearing a dress like that. As she pictures it now, it looks to be homemade.

There's a loud rattling noise. A rush of dusty wind. Margaret coughs and grabs for the glass of water by her bed. The dress—of course—of course it was homemade! She'd had a lot of trouble putting that zipper in: pinning it twice, tacking it, feeding it bit by bit under the chugging foot of her Bernina. She'd used a Simplicity pattern and fabric bought in London, at the sari emporium near her flat in Tooting Bec.

She'd worked back late that day and had gone to his office to fetch a file from the cabinet in the corner. Gus was talking on the phone and she guessed that it was Helen. He hung up as she came in and she thought he seemed upset. 'Is something wrong?' she asked him and his demeanour

crumbled. Helen wasn't well, he said. She'd been ill for some time. She hadn't been herself since their second child was born. He rambled on at length about what he called 'her breakdown'—how hard it was on all of them, how distant she'd become. He slapped his palm down on the desk and pushed his hand towards her, his fingers juddering on the shiny cherrywood. 'I need a hug,' he told her.

Margaret's heart began to pound. Behind his shoulder, Helen watched them from her silver frame.

The rattling. The rushing wind. She is on a train, in the vestibule of a railway carriage, hurtling through the night. It's an old red rattler—she can see it clearly—and young Margaret standing by the open door, her tooled leather handbag pressed against her thigh. As the train leaves Redfern Station, she takes another look; lifts the bag and glances down to see if it's still there. Will it quickly dry and fade, or will it leave a stain, this wet patch, dark as ink, on the polished cotton?

She returned to the office the following day, full of trepidation, and watched Gus through the glass as she went about her work. There was no acknowledgement from him, no wave or morning greeting. Her fingers rattled on the keys of the Remington as she listened to his sonorous voice on her Dictaphone. At ten o'clock, he came and put a notepad on her desk. 'Can you type this up and send it out?' A memo from a meeting. She nodded, he smiled, and that was when she realised that a contract had been signed. It would never happen again and she would never tell. The memory would be filed away, put to the back of her mind, and over the years, it would fade like a piece of old fax paper. What are you keeping this one for? You can hardly read it. Just leave it there. You never know, it might be important.

Exhausted, Margaret falls into a shallow doze. Her limbs grow heavy, her breathing slows, but her thoughts continue to rattle and jag just below the surface. The garbage truck turns into her street and trundles towards her. In her bedroom at the front of the house, the noise grows deafening. She cowers in the bed as the beast bears down on her, as its shadow fills the window, blocking out the sun. Her wheelie bin on the kerb outside has become a filing cabinet, and she sees a whole row of them now, standing sentinel, beige and grey, spaced along the street. Out comes the truck's mechanical claw and grabs hold of hers, hoists it high in the air and tips it upside down. The drawers fly open, one by one, releasing a flurry of paper, a blizzard of letters and documents, memos and

reports. Margaret whimpers and covers her ears but she can't block out the noise: the wheezing truck, its squealing brakes, the buckling of metal. As it draws away, she hears a sound like the shattering of glass as a thousand crystal file tabs are crushed beneath its wheels.