

The Punch Line

“Edward, you have to hear this,” Caroline says, leaning out of her group and staring him down.

Ed was ambivalent about attending this party, held at Winstead’s beautiful estate, but it would have been in bad taste not to come. His corporation has reached a milestone in sales revenues and the CFO is hosting a celebration for his underlings—at company expense of course. Ed turns away from the hors d’oeuvre table, which supports a massive, crystal punch bowl. There is a line of partygoers behind him, and Caroline stands in a circle with several others, mostly women, under the dining room’s glittering chandelier. They’re listening to a man tell a story. Ed knows the voice, knows the man. It’s Brad, from engineering’s liaison office—a genuinely nice guy, though Ed suspects half of what he says is bunk, but he can never be sure. The women adore him, including his wife, and why not? He’s tall with broad shoulders, his hands large and rough—not a bit of softness to him except within his heart—the mythical cowboy hero. Brad travels to foreign countries and clears the way for the company’s engineering projects. Permits, red tape, bribes, charm—whatever has to be done. In the more destitute

nations he has promised schools, bridges, solar powered coolers, then helped to build them with his own hands. This at first irritated the trustees, but big contracts were signed and future work guaranteed—the other bidders didn't stand a chance.

Ed will oblige his wife but first he picks up a plastic cup and ladles some punch into it. The punch is colorful with all the floating fruit and it will keep his hands and throat muscles occupied. He turns to go but bumps into Deborah, the plump wife of a vice president, and slops a little punch onto her arm.

“Oh sorry Deb, didn't see you there.”

“That's okay Ed, just be careful with that punch—it'll sneak up on you.”

Ed enters the circle and stands besides his wife; she glances at him, laughing—they are all laughing. Brad must have delivered his punch line, something about three cows and a daughter. Then he lowers his voice and goes on to explain that the daughter had a serious limp, limiting her desirability as a bride, and how he arranged for a specialist to come and look her over. The circle goes silent.

McCain, a project manager originally from Brisbane, of the great Down-Under, breaks the spell with a single remark, “A limper ain't so bad.”

McCain is small in stature, with a great, ruddy crag of a

face. A former orphan, he tagged along with construction crews doing grunt work, learning all the while, and they became his family. By the age of twenty-one he was running the jobs—reinforced concrete, then structural steel. He’s been all over the world and could bury most comedians with his tales of missed communications, social gaffs and adventures gone terribly wrong.

He continues. “When I was a lad, rigging rebar on a site in Cloncurry, me boss suggested I take his little gal to the local dance—ya know, in town, Saturday night and all. Well, I couldn’t rightly knock back the offer, so I went to pick her up but had not the slightest notion she was minus a leg. Had a fake one, but I could tell. As you can imagine, I was quite nervous, and mindful of me boss’s parting words, ‘And the young lady will have a good time.’”

Brenda, from Ed’s accounting department, is now giggling out of control. Her sleeveless arm extends straight out in front of her, holding onto a cup of punch as if it were a handle to support her inebriated body. She leans into Ed and remains there, unable to recover. Despite the close proximity of Caroline, Ed does not push Brenda away, and for this he receives a nose full of perfume and a dirty look from his wife.

Regardless of what he’s saying, McCain’s accent alone is

enough to drive his coworkers mad. “But hey, who would’ve known, it all come good in the end—she wasn’t a half bad shuffler. Next day she even took me skydiving. She landed like an ace—I got balled up in a clothesline—sudden gust of wind wrecked me timing. Had me head in some jillaroo's underwear.”

“Whatever happened to that girl?” Brad asks after the laughter dies down.

“Amazing coincidence, really. Our crew moved on to other jobs, but nine months later me boss told me she had a baby boy, one legged but incredibly handsome.”

Given the rough appearance of McCain’s face, this kills the crowd. Brenda hangs onto Ed and writhes with laughter; whatever punch she had left in her cup is now on his pants. He glances at Caroline and mouths the words, “She’s hammered.” He’s not exactly on an even keel, either; some wise guy must have spiked the punch with an extra bottle of gin.

With the warm flush of alcohol in his blood, all the laughter and Brenda’s fingers dug into his arm, Ed is actually enjoying himself. Brenda is not the prettiest woman in accounting, perhaps the least pretty if one was to take a poll, but she tries hard. She’s lost weight, whitened her teeth, and piles on the cosmetics, but still has trouble attracting a decent

man, one who wanted more than a quick bang. She's klutzy, always dropping papers or stumbling up steps, and speaks with a kind of tradesman's slang she must have picked up from her father. But she is always kind and thoughtful to everyone, a hard worker, and Ed has grown fond of her, and very protective. He would often talk her up in front of the young men and remark what a great friend and wife she would make. Later on he would have to listen patiently to her tearful renditions of what passed as dates, or see the heartbreak on her face when promised calls never came. She finally got up the nerve to corner a guy and ask why he wouldn't see her again. He flat out told her she wasn't pretty enough, brazen as brass. Her simple desire for a rugged man to snatch her up, ravish her, and protect her with his life began to feel like an impossible dream, and Ed had to do some fast-talking to convince her not to quit her job. He made a few calls and the young man was no longer employed with the company.

As on cue, McCain leaves the circle with a wink and a nod. There is one more tale, about a possible set-up in the back allies of Port Said, told by Alexis, a marketing vice president, and then a lull occurs. Now Ed is an accountant, and boldness, or the deliberate seeking out of novel, strange or possibly dangerous situations, is not something he is

entirely comfortable with. Foreign travel would bewilder him, skydiving would be terrifying. He feels safe in the world of numbers—he knows numbers—that and gardening and Jeopardy questions. Ed doesn't look bold—short, with a small, round face and neatly trimmed beard, now graying—but right now he feels bold. Perhaps it's time to come out from behind the tree and flash his sword. He has at least one good tale. He glances at Brenda, takes a slug of punch and seizes the moment.

“That's funny, I had a similar experience when my jeep broke down in a bad section of town, Dorchester I guess it was, and I—”

“Oh Edward, come on, they've heard that story before, and it wasn't a jeep, it was a Highlander.” It's Caroline's voice, and the room's mood drops like a drunk roofer.

All the alcohol Ed has been carefully consuming flashes from warm and fuzzy into a flaming brush fire. His soft and kind face turns red, and he mumbles, “Well, not everyone has heard it,” but the damage is done—his story dead—the transmission slammed into reverse three seconds from the start line. A complete breakdown, not in Dorchester, but right here in front of everybody. “I'm out of punch anyway,” he says before walking away, leaving Brenda to lurch forward a few steps and stare with her mouth agape, looking

dumbfounded.

Ed skips the punch line and shuffles out onto the patio. It's dark and cool outside. He surprises a young couple kissing. "Oh sorry," he says, and moves further out, onto the grass, wet with dew. He looks up; only the brightest stars manage to outshine the lights of Boston, glowing off to the east. He checks his Rolex: only nine forty-five. The watch had been a gift from Caroline many years ago, when they were in love. The wound tonight is hemorrhaging and he can't seem to stop it. It wasn't right for her to say what she did, but he knew it was true. Can't blame her or anyone else; he is a big disappointment. Fifty-one with no children, no close friends, no accomplishments that could breach the company's newsletter, no stories that anyone would want to hear.

For a few moments he entertains the possibility of personal transformation. Once, on his evening commute, he picked up a backpacker out in the rain. The young man said he was trekking across America. Said it just like that, matter-of-factly. He then recalls reading an account of a gent with prosthetic lower legs who climbed Mount Everest, and of Buddhist monks in Tibet—meditating overnight on a mountain in the cold, their mind control the only thing saving them from dying of exposure. There were, in fact, thousands

of stories revealing amazing accomplishments, and Ed began to wonder if he found a worthy goal, a goal that burned inside him, that he too could—”

“Ed—Ed, there you are, ’ole buddy. Been looking for you.”

“Oh, hi Brad. I was just enjoying the fresh air.”

“Yeah, can’t blame you. Look, I’m sorry about what happened in there—I’d like to hear your story sometime but not now, we’ve got a bit of a problem. That gal Brenda, she’s pretty sick—the damn punch. She’s been calling your name and we figured you might know where she lives and maybe give her a lift home.”

* * *

“Oh Ed, sorry, sorry. I’ve made such a fool out of —oh, this grass—you know, myself, tonight, in front of—shit, my shoe is off.”

Ed is attempting to herd Brenda across Winstead’s beautiful front lawn, but her high heels keep punching into the soft sod. He retrieves her shoe, then bends down, grasps her ankle and slips it back on. She rests her hands on his back to keep from falling, then leans completely over on him. He feels her long hair on the back of his neck, feels the wet grass on his knee. He thought it best to guide her over the yard instead of the long, winding drive, but now he’s not so sure.

“Brenda, straighten up so I can stand.” She does this and he’s able to get up, but now she locks her arms behind his back, pressing her body hard against him.

“I’m dizzy,” she says, her eyelashes brushing his cheek as she looks up at him. “I had too much punch—please take me home.”

“I’m trying, dear. Walk with me just a bit more and you can sit down.” She doesn’t let go, and the plight of his friend, feeling so sick and defenseless, elicits a deep compassion—but the heat from her belly and the pressure of her breasts arouse other things, and he forces himself to remain a gentleman. He gently pushes her arms down and she releases him.

They reach a long line of parked cars alongside the street. A Mercedes-Benz lights up and beeps as Ed hits the remote. He eases her onto the soft, leather seat and takes her wet shoes off. He buckles her in and reclines the seat back. “There you are, sweetheart,” he says, out of breath. “You’ll be home in bed in no time.”

No sooner does he pull away from the curb than she turns toward the window and pukes, the car’s motion the likely tipping point. “Oh Ed I’m so sorry. Look what I done to your door.”

He smiles. “Don’t worry about it—this is my wife’s car.”

He hands her a hanky. “You feel better now?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

Ed turns the heater on to keep her warm but lowers the windows to allow cool air to wash in. He turns often to check on her: strands of golden brown hair flutter above her head, and now her head flops toward him, her eyes closed—her face serene, innocent, beautiful.

He arrives at her condo and helps her inside. She’s still unsteady but not as sick—the fresh air has revived her. They stand in her living room in the dim light of a small table lamp; there is the faint aroma of vanilla, and a few stuffed animals repose on her couch.

“Well, I better get back,” he says. “If you give me your keys I can drive your car over to my place and we can get it to you tomorrow. By the way, I’m sorry for leaving you alone back there at the party. That was rude.”

“Ed, don’t leave yet, I need to talk—you want something to drink? I’ll make you some coffee?”

“No thank you—you should go to bed.”

“Don’t say that, please? Stay with me awhile. You know, people think we’re just friends, but I, I would never hurt you like that. I know she doesn’t love you—she treats you like shit. You know I would never treat you like that, you know it.”

“I know, but I better get going—you need to get some sleep.”

Her eyes fill with such pain that he has to look away, and then she asks, “Ed, do you—do you think I’m pretty?”

“Brenda, please. You’ve had too much to drink.”

“No Ed, I gotta know. Are you attracted to me at all?”

But he isn’t about to take the bait; she must know he loves her, but what could he do? He’s married and could never take the chance—there are too many complications, everything entangled and full of unknowns. He remains silent, staring at the floor.

“Ed? Please, say something.” He meekly looks up to her face. She turns her head slowly from side to side, whispering, “Please, Ed, please.” Tears roll down her face, her chin drops to her chest and her hands clench into fists.

Ed very quietly shuts the door on his way out. He’ll pick her up tomorrow and together they’ll get her car. He’ll order her a beautiful bouquet of flowers and have them delivered to her desk on Monday. The note will say: *Saw you at the party—a secret admirer.* She’ll feel better then.