



## The Wrong Impression

Mark Piesse has recently moved down near Greater Sydney after a decade representing QVE Insurance at Orange.

“It’s like this,” his area supervisor says, “You’ve done remarkably well out here in this dusty old area, but you’ve gone as far as you can go as an area rep. The opportunity to rise in the ranks of the Company is on offer to you right here – right now. If you move down to Sydney, we can give you the management of all the Representatives in Southern New South Wales. It’s a big salary jump up, you retain a car for work and play – in short, the world – or at least the insurance world is your oyster. You’re mad if you don’t give it a go and as an extra sweetener, the insurance company will pay your kids school/college fees.”

This swings the deal, plus a 2% housing loan to allow him to re-house his family. He does this with a pleasant place at Springwood. He cars out from there to his new territory or in Head Office time, just drives down to Penrith and trains into the CBD from there. His wife comes from a Bathurst farming family. He scooped her up straight from the farm. They’ve had a very amicable married life, a pigeon pair of children and so on. She settles well into Springwood life and helps run the Op Shop as a voluntary worker at her daughter’s college.

Mark realises after a while that city working time creates quite a few, perhaps unwanted opportunities. Head office seems to be full of predatory women, a few of which give him the glad eye on his visits.

An unwanted opportunity bobs up one late summer afternoon when after a Boardroom conference just ends, he starts to exit the building in Martin Place. The General Manager’s secretary, who has looked after the hospitality for the meeting, is exiting at the same time. She nudges him.

“Well Mark,” she says, “it’s too early to go home and pretend you’ve had a hard working day. Come on down with me to Circular Quay and I’ll stand you a drink at the famous Porthole Bistro.”

He allows himself to be persuaded and they catch the Harbour Ferry over to McMahons Point. The Porthole’s very crowded.

“Ugh,” she says, “come up to my place – it’s just up the block. So he does.

She sits him down on the deck overlooking the ever interesting Sydney Harbour, sets him up with a boutique German beer in a frosted tankard and excuses herself. He hears the shower running and she emerges onto the deck wearing a scoop neckline, short, hemmed muslin dress. She pours herself a beer, tops up Marks, looks around casually and enticingly crosses her legs. Before she makes any further moves, Mark’s a goner and very happy to be. He’s led a very circumspect life and he thinks, ‘when opportunity knocks’.

He makes it home comparatively early still a bit dazed from this surprising, but very enjoyable happenstance. He settles into a pattern with leggy Corinne, the Manager's secretary and after a while is probably the best informed and to some extent, the best entertained staffer at QVE.

Corinne is not demanding outside of their fortnightly tryst. She causes him no problems and gives him some nearly unendurable pleasure. Mark, of course like any married man kicking over the traces, has a bit of a guilty conscience. Wife Sybil doesn't seem to have picked up any vibes of his affair. But having found out the ease of city ways in providing outside entertainment and fun, he gets a bit suspicious when shaving one early winter morning.

Sybil comes into the bathroom.

"Now Mark," she says, "you've told me you won't be home until about 6pm today. Is that still the case?" (She holds up her hand to indicate she's on the phone)

"Okay," she says and dashes back to the wall phone. A tiny bell of suspicion flashes through Mark's mind. He steps quietly into the hall to see what message Sybil is giving.

"Its fine," he hears her say into the phone. "The coast is clear – let the fun and games roll."

He steps back quickly into the bathroom.

"Now Mark," she says, "it's your birthday tomorrow, but I know you will be tied up late at head office."

Actually he has a meeting of some importance in Martin Place and Corinne is taking him out for dinner afterwards.

"So," she continues, "I'm giving you a night out tonight. Don't bother coming home. I'll take some casual clothes in and we can meet in the cocktail bar of The Saltbush Arms at Blackheath at say...6.30pm."

Having heard the promise of fun and games spoken over the phone, Mark's normally unsuspecting mind, as far as his lovely wife is concerned, conjures up some black thoughts. Perhaps Sybil has a good thing going with someone. Damn it all, she's a looker, a natural looker, hardly uses make-up, is tall, leggy, slim-hipped, but has a marvellous bosom. Mark thinks that big breasts usually equate with a big bottom, but not so with his wife. She's a honey and reticent and modest with it. She, in fact, often wears flattening bras, which stem from the roaring twenties, to keep her superstructure strapped in a bit, thus understates her wonderful natural figure.

By the time he's ready to set off to Mudgee for his regional meeting, Sybil has brisked around to get the house in very ship-shape order, has flower vases set out on the kitchen island cupboards and is out in her sunny garden with secateurs and a trug on her arm gathering up rose blooms for the vases.

Mark tosses up a bit all day. If in fact Sybil has a thing going then it's purely tit for tat and there is no reason for him to put his nose in. On the other hand, if she has a lover, he'd like to know who it is. Perhaps it's an undiscovered lover from Orange coming down for the promised fun and games. Or, for that matter, it could be any young fellow, unknown to him.

He leaves the meeting early – he's decided to investigate. By 4.30pm he's parked his car in the street below his house and is tippy toeing through the uphill bush part of his acre block. As he cautiously climbs up, he hears some soft yells and a silver car goes down his driveway. He rings his fixed line from his cell phone. He can hear it ringing, but no one answers. He can't hear any sound coming from his house other than the water fountain running. He continues his reccy. The house key is under the usual garden stone. He fishes it out, listens hard, opens the side door.

Things seem normal until he's into the kitchen. There's signs of lunch sitting around. Takeaway food boxes from the well regarded Black Toms in Katoomba, empty stubbies of Crown Lager. It's just as though someone has got up from lunch and not (yet) returned.

He continues his search, naturally into the main bedroom. Its spick and span, nothing out of the ordinary there. He cat-foots it into the guest suite. Strikes oil. The bed's a ruffled mess, there's three empty bottles of Krystal champagne, three wine flutes lying on the carpet, several demi-tasses of coffee on the bedside table. There's a small mirror, traces of white powder on it, a slight smell of an odd substance, probably happy baccy. He investigates further. Looks under the bed, recoils and rather wishes he hadn't. There's 8 well-used crumpled items there.

'Whoever has just left will be back to clean up this mess,' he thinks. 'Sybil is probably down at Penrith by now putting whoever she has been making whoopee with on the city train, perhaps.'

He leaves everything as he finds it and makes tracks. He arrives at The Saltbush Arms a bit earlier than arranged, but Sybil's there having a drink with a very well turned out and good looking man.

"Ah Mark," she says, "meet Alain, he's the owner of this pleasant place."

Alain springs up and shakes hands. "Well," he says, "I was just keeping Sybil company until you arrived."

"Come on Mark," says Sybil, "A shower and change into smart casual gear is next on your agenda. I've already changed into my new frock, as I thought if I left it until you arrived, I'd never get back down for a drink – or at least not for a while and probably totally exhausted."

He looks her up and down. She is wearing a black cocktail dress. It's very beautiful, very décolleté and he can easily see Sybil's not wearing understated bras. In fact, looking hard at her he expects that the only thing she is wearing under this little number may perhaps be a thong, or nothing at all.

"How did your day go, Syb?" he asks.

"Hmm," she says, "very busy, very physical."

'Yes,' he thinks, 'that's putting it mildly.' From what he saw in the guest room.

"Actually," she says, "I had to run the Op Shop on my own for most of the day. My two able assistants had much better things to do. In fact, they offered to take me along, but I didn't bite. We couldn't shut the door on such a used facility, even if it was running under staffed. So I did the best I could and I'm sure my missing helpers were putting their heart and soul into whatever and with whoever project they had on. But I did help them facilitate their day."

"In what way?" he asks.

"Later...later...later," she says.

She's full of go. "Come on lover," she says, takes his hand and leads him down a dim passage to a rich looking door. It has a sign above reading in French style, 'Le Morte – Quill'.

"What the hell is that?" he asks.

She chuckles. "It's Alain's discreet bar. He gets his bread and butter catering to Sydney lovers – married or going clandestine. The writing translates in the French to 'The Killing Pen'."

They go into this very dimly lit tiny bar. There's a copy painting, not a print perhaps, of the famous Nude Chloe, which has hung for generations in Young and Jacksons in Melbourne. Even more striking is a scaled down version of Michelangelo's David. But it differs from the famous original in the Uffizi in Florence

– this one is an erect David. Mark goggles at the decorations, Sybil bangs on the counter and Alain comes in behind the bar. It seems like personal attention is all the go here.

“Shooter Alain,” she says. “Smirnoff for Mark, Absolut for me.”

He fills two shooters, she throws hers off in a flash and bangs the glass down for a refill. Mark, who’s never been much of a hard liquor drinker, follows more slowly. She throws down her second.

“Come on lover,” she says, “let’s get really fired up.”

They toss off eight shooters in no time. She tips her glass onto the side.

“Single malt scotch now,” she says. “Glenlivet for Mark, Laphroaig for me.”

Alain tips in ice cubes and pours the scotch over. Three of these and she’s calling for wine.

“I’m on the sweet stuff tonight,” she says, “I have to be sweet for Mark here. He’ll have dry.”

She tugs her dress neckline down a bit revealing more of already revealing creamy breast.

“Come on mate,” she says. “We’re off to our room.”

Mark looks a bit glazed by now and she notes without showing that she’s noted it, that he trips a bit on the stairs.

“What about dinner?” he fuzzily asks.

“No worries,” she says. “We’ll be having room service steaks and oysters in 90 minutes – that’s if that is not too soon for you.”

Next morning she gets things going early. She will have to fox the kids and make sure he is on the correct city train. They are over at the Springwood house by 7.30am. Mark’s pretty much still under the weather. So much so that after he’s had a shower at The Saltbush, he absent-mindedly goes back for another. He enters the house curiously. The kitchen is spotless and there’s a card on the kitchen counter. He makes a very surreptitious detour into the bedroom that yesterday afternoon showed every sign of wholesale debauchery. It smells of heavy lavender room freshener and is otherwise impeccably presented. Still a bit muzzy and still a bit woozy in the head, he changes into a city suit and puts in his briefcase a few odds and ends he may need tonight in town.

When he goes back into the kitchen, Sybil is sitting on a bar stool, a card open on the top and counting out bank notes.

“What’s all this?” Mark asks.

“Umm...yesterday I let my two fellow workers have the use of the house for the day. They were, I think, entertaining a couple of FIFO’s – not perhaps for the first time. They’re both well-known Blue Mountain social butterflies and they needed somewhere very discreet, but handy enough at the end of what they had arranged, to pick up their kids. Anyway there’s a decent amount of cash here, no doubt contributed to by the said FIFO’s. There is, I think, enough to put in The Saltbush bank account to square last night’s expense. We certainly had a nice time didn’t we?” she says.

It seems Mark’s memories of the night are none too clear – understandable after the booze he put away. She runs him down to the station and runs the kids to college. About one-ish, she drives over to Blackheath to pay the evening’s bill. The head girl motions her back to the Killing Pen. Alain’s in there totting up figures.

“Hi Sybil,” he says, “No complaints about the night?”

“Ah...” she says. “What was in those very innocuous drinks you served me – me that is, not Mark?”

He chuckles. "Mark's," he says, "as per your instructions, were all full on. Full strength, even his ice blocks were made of frozen gin. Now yours, all the shooters were Franklin Valley non sparkling spring water, your scotch was Mason's non-alcoholic look alike scotch – much used by barmen when someone is buying them a drink, your wine was Woollies Bottle Shop non-alcoholic wine and your Grand Marnier liqueur was really little better than coloured water."

She laughs. "It sure worked a treat last night," she says. "And my deep plan was to leave my beloved husband lacking any real running in him for tonight."

"Which," Alain says, "is obviously not one he will be spending with you."

"Bang on," she says.

"You know," he says, "if your afternoon is not spoken for, perhaps I can offer you some real drinks followed by etc, etc."

"Alain," she says, "just a German beer would be fine. I've never done etc, etc outside of marriage."

He puts his hand near hers, looks her in the eye.

"So?" he asks. He's looking for a positive sign and she near as damn it, gives it. But she's had a busy night and it's catching up with her. She puts her hand on his.

"Offer appreciated," she says, "but rejected. But I'm intrigued and I wouldn't want to lead you on entirely. May I take a raincheck on your offer and think deeply?"

On the way home, she thinks about her last night's strategy. She is no dill. She has a fair Idea of what Mark is to be involved in this evening, but what she has done will almost certainly mean that he will be in damp squib mode this evening, no matter what is on offer. She laughs to herself about this, turns into deep think mode as she re-runs Alain's offer through her mind again.

'Hmmm...' she thinks.