

Smugglers

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It ended one day with fat women dancing in the streets, and columns of the religious right marching through the city. Speeches were made, cheers were raised and smiles were beamed. Somewhere nearby the PTB kept an eye on another bunch of people who were acting diametrically opposite to those above and generally looking depressed. That's how it ended, or rather that's how everyone thought it ended, but it's actually where it started.

It was the day that after years of lobbying, proselytising and praying the parliament passed the Pre-Natal Persons Bill, known to all as the 'PNP'. This declared that a person's life begins at the moment of conception, or to put it another way, a fertilised egg and a foetus of any size, is a person. It's this other way that caused the trouble.

Elise had been on her honeymoon. Not by herself of course. She and new hubby Helmut Smuggles had been whisked off to sunny South East Asia courtesy of a stretched Hummer, her Dad's HSV Commodore and an Airbus A330. The resort was everything the brochure had promised. Days of swimming, drinking, water skiing, eating, drinking, wind surfing, drinking, eating, lazing on the beach or by the pool, eating, drinking and then sleeping. Well not really sleeping of course more a sort of 'being-in-bedding' and with all that drinking mixed with the tropic nights, passion got the better of them. "But they were newly weds, of course they were passionate" I hear you say, but it worked something like this...

Before committing to marriage, Elise had been very sensible and sat Helmut down for a serious discussion about where their lives would go after the nuptials. They had good, profitable, careers and an apartment each; one overlooking the trendy boulevards around the city marina and the other in the leafy suburbs with a view of the surrounding hills. They decided to live close to the city and rent out the suburban unit. It would be tight fitting all their stuff into the kitchen, living, bath and two bed rooms but then they'd save nearly half their current transport costs and the other unit would pay for itself. The financial future looked rosy. This did of course mean that they had to make the mature decision and put off having a family for a decade or so and despite her obvious desire to be a 'yummy mummy' and Helmut's professed love of kids, they looked forward to ten years of togetherness, alone.

Now this is where all the drink and tropical nights came in. In the excitement and stress of the wedding, Elise and had overlooked the fact that she was nearly out of 'the pill' and so they arrived at the hotel undersupplied for a honeymoon. On the second day Helmut managed to stock up on condoms and their days in paradise promised to be followed by nights in paradise and so they were, however no-one, least of all the two lovebirds, could recall whether the number of prophylactics left at the end of their stay balanced with their nocturnal activities and yes, you guessed it by the time they arrived at immigration on their way home, there were three of them.

Neither of them actually knew it at the time, but as we all know, 'ignorance is no excuse in the eyes of the law' and so as the hands of the clock turned, so did the wheels on the inexorable consequences that steamrolled their way to the door of the apartment.

Soon Elise was suffering morning sickness, noon sickness, night sickness, 'sick of being sick' sickness and just about every other form of unwanted gastronomic inconvenience you can name. She promptly began losing weight and the tiny bump that was growing into Angelina soon took command of her profile. The usual calculations were done by the doctor, the in-laws and the girls at work and it became obvious that the condom countdown on their little trip did not add up for a reason. Yep, they'd got too drunk and forgotten to take precautions. I mean you can't blame them and all in all though it was unplanned, it really was a bit of a blessing. Plans would need changing though and possibly housing too but little did they know quite how much.

The first hint of trouble came when they went to see a specialist. Elise's sickness really was a bit extreme and so she'd sought a second opinion, which entailed a night in hospital for tests.

She arrived with Helmut on one hand and an overnight bag in the other and filled in all the usual forms. You know the sort of thing; Age? Sex? ('You got to be joking' she thought), Address? Doctors name? Reason for admission? Any recent overseas trips? That sort of thing. Of course she answered 'yes' to the last question and filled in the details, starting a chain of events that she would rue for the rest of her life.

It turned out that in an effort to identify wounded criminals in the event that they happened to report to an emergency department for treatment, all hospital databases had been connected surreptitiously to the PTB surveillance computers in the bowels of Government Gardens. In their random yet elegantly programmed manner, they grabbed Elise's details and waded them over the quadrillions of entries lying dormant in their vaults until there was a sort of digital clunk and a perfect match located. Then the specialised code rubbed its virtual hands with glee and set about playing with the dates and other chunks of related data until it found something interesting... Smugglers! It had of course all started out with Smuggles, but Smugglers were something different altogether. To be precise, what was found were People Smugglers. It hadn't taken the most complex of algorithms for the silicon sleuth to calculate that two people had left the country and three people (as defined by the laws of the land) had returned, one of them without a passport or visa.

Now, it's a well know fact that entering a country without a passport or a visa is in fact a serious crime and trying to smuggle other people into the country was even worse. As a consequence high severity flags were set on Elise's file, an automatic email was dispatched to the PTBPD central bunker and various alarms flashed up on screens in the Apprehension Ready Team room (team motto; 'There's and A.R.T. to arrest'). Senior sergeant Malcolm 'Grudge' Match whipped the page from the printer and barked orders to his men as they rushed to don their protective gear. Helmets, bullet proof vests, weapons belts, (each with a Tazer, a hand gun, pepper spray, and a digital music player loaded with banjo tracks for those really serious situations) were quickly put on and with visors down the team stood at attention next to the Priority Exit. 'Grudge' spoke to the wall of muscle, pausing briefly as necessary to try and identify each one behind their night vision goggles. These were perhaps a bit of overkill as it was only ten in the morning on a sunny day, nevertheless it's best to 'be prepared' as the Boy Scouts would say. I doubt that that any of the crew had ever 'dib dib dibbed' or even 'dob dob dobbed' their way through a Tuesday evening at the local hall. No matter, they were all geared up and ready to go so 'Grudge' passed the coordinates to 'Wings' and the group followed him into the high speed elevator. Within seconds their helmet straps were pulling hard up under their jaws as the lift came to a rapid stop across the roof from the helicopter. Even before their morning cuppa and scones had settled in their stomachs again, they scurried over to where the support personnel held the sliding door open.

'Wings' leapt into the cockpit and punched a few buttons. Music blared from the console. "Ah, that's better" he thought and proceeded to run casually through the pre-flight checks ticking off items as he went. In the rear the assault team strapped in and relaxed. It was always a bit of a let down, this bit. All the rush and bother to leave the ready room and then the wait while the chopper was checked, but soon the whine of the motors and rushing wind from the blades picked up and so did the aircraft, rising in a port spiral over the CBD. Just beyond the city skyline the Smuggles didn't even suspect what was coming.

Elise was lying back on the hospital bed, staring at the ceiling and feeling queasy of course. Helmut sat next to her holding her hand in sympathy. Down the hall an indiscernible conversation was echoing into the rooms. Every now and then the squeak of rubber soles heralded the swift passing of nursing staff, going somewhere, doing something important. Lives hung in the balance in rooms all around the pregnant couple just out of their awareness. Out the window in the centre of the city view, a small black dot hovered gradually growing in size as 'Grudge' and his boys make a beeline for the

health centre. Helmut looked out across the car park as the first thumping of the chopper blades reached the sanctuary of the room. He rose and went to stand at the glass. Down below a security guard was ushering a couple of kids off the landing pad in preparation for the arrival and from the fourth floor Helmut briefly noted the lack of a hospital team waiting for the patient with a stretcher or wheelchair. The thought flickered past that the patient must be able to walk and then drifted off just as he did, back to the side of his wife. Behind him the sound of the aircraft dominated the scene as it settled with a slight bounce, precisely over the large 'H' on the tarmac. Out of sight and hearing from Elise's room, the assault team tumbled out and hurried into Triage. With a wave of credentials and an official looking order from the PTB, they rushed off in the direction for the lifts, pushing aside astonished patients, the bunch crammed into the elevator, shoulder to shoulder, sweaty and bulky already. Their semi-automatics they held tightly against their chests, the small forest of barrels ready to swing into action when the doors opened again.

Ding, whoosh! Out burst 'Grudge' and his cohorts. A quick glance at the floor plan, and a couple of snappy hand gestures and two squads split off in both directions. They snuck off down the corridor heading for a rendezvous on the other side of the building. Patients in the opposite wing furrowed their brows at the crouching silhouettes that flitted down the passage as they ran along, barely visible above the window ledges. Thirty seconds later Helmut found himself up against the wall with one arm bent up his back and Elise pinned down by four men sitting on the bed cover as she shook in fright.

"Secure here! Secure here!" came the reports from the squad leaders. 'Grudge' stepped up to the bed.

"Well now missy. What do we have here?"

Elise tried to reply. "Hush!" he said. "That was a rhetorical question. I know full well what you've been up to. The evidence is right there" and he gestured pointedly at the blankets covering her stomach.

"Well we are m,m,m,arried" she stuttered in defence, "And what business is it of yours, whoever you are, what we do behind closed doors?"

"You leave her uh!...lone" her husband cried, as the man in black increased the pressure on the half-nelson to shut him up. He collapsed to floor, nearly breaking his arm before it was let go.

"Take him to the chopper." Two thuggish looking men picked the young man up with ease and carried him off down the corridor as he slowly recovered consciousness.

"Right young lady, what have you got to say for yourself?"

Elise was in a state somewhere between shock, terror and distress. Trapped on all sides by such emotions she was struggling to take in that she was being addressed. 'Grudge' repeated the question.

"I d...don't, know what you mean." She replied finally.

"We have a warrant for your arrest for People Smuggling. Do you have anything to say? Of course you don't have to say anything but... etc. I'm sure you know the details."

"People Smuggling! Where from? Where to? When? How? Don't be ridiculous!"

"Then you deny it? You do realise that pleading 'not guilty' will go badly for you when you're convicted."

Elise noticed the use of the word 'when' and felt a little shudder run down her spine. This guy was a bit too sure of himself for comfort. 'It's all very well knowing you're innocent' she thought, 'but I doubt that this guy's gonna be easily persuaded.' She cast around in her memories for something, anything that could be construed as people smuggling. Examining her only adventures with customs and

immigration she could see no cause for alarm. They'd filled in the forms as instructed, asked all questions quickly and correctly and been passed through promptly. Nothing to worry about there, or so she thought.

'Grudge' unhooked the chart from the bed end and flipped the pages.

"It says here you're due on the 25th and conception date...? Ah, here... on or about the 25th of June last year. Were you or were you not overseas at that time?"

"Yes, but.."

"That's enough. You now admit that you brought an undeclared person into the country then?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You were pregnant when you returned home. You just admitted it, and by law the start of a person's life begins with the fertilisation of the egg, ergo, you were concealing a person. You were people smuggling. Cut and dried."

Elise's jaw had dropped and tears began to well in her eyes as the realisation of what he was saying hit her.

Her accuser switched off his recorder. "Thank you for your co-operation Ms. Smuggles. You've saved yourself and us a lot of trouble and court time. Your confession will be attached to your file with your voice print identification. Should you wish to access it, just make an application to the PTBPD on form PAF001c with ten witness signatures, 1000 points of identification and cast iron justification for your need to have a copy of it."

"As a result of your criminal behaviour and by the powers invested in me by the PTB, I hereby sentence you to eighteen years and 10 days, or eighteen years from the date of birth of your child, whichever is the greater, in the Uluru centre for undesirable citizens. I'm sure you'll be quite comfortable there. Comfortable, but well out of the way. You won't be causing any trouble with your evil ways. Your husband will be going with you as co-conspirator and accessory before, during and after the fact of the crime. We don't like law breakers like you" and he sneered at her as his men stood and helped her from the bed.

"You make me sick" she said and promptly threw up all over them, unfortunately missing 'Grudge' completely. Behind the full face visors the sound of dry retching could be heard as the men tried to maintain their composure. Their black uniforms were now spattered in rainbow hues, but mainly with a sort of carrot colour. They dropped her arms and she thought of running, but where too, and in her condition she wasn't likely to get far.

'Grudge' grabbed her arm as his men wiped themselves down with hospital towels. They fell into file behind their boss and the party traipsed out of the building somewhat the worse for wear and trying to ignore the snickers of amusement from passing patients. They climbed into the chopper where Elise was reunited with her husband and the black blades whirled faster and faster until it lifted off into a glowering sky. Above the hospital it turned northward and sweeping around parliament house, headed for a future the likes of which had not been dreamed of when the 'PNP' entered the statute books.

Smugglers indeed!