

The New Guy

Dominic Carew

Rossman sat bolt upright in our meeting, diligently taking notes. His hair had just been cut, his tie was perfect; he'd only this week joined our firm. We were discussing whether or not to switch stationery supplier. Gilroy said the staplers didn't work.

'That's a good point,' I said, and I was just about to ask what other people thought – I figured this was going to be a lengthy discussion – when someone's tummy gurgled. I couldn't be certain, but I believed it was Rossman's.

'The stapler next to the printer's impossible to use,' Gilroy went on. 'It doesn't grip the paper.'

'What about the one by the guillotine?' said Adams. 'It snapped apart months ago.'

'And the staples themselves,' said Mary Birch from accounts. 'Don't get us started on those.'

It sounded to me like a new stationery supplier was called for and as I went to say so, my elbows on the table and my hands clasped together, another gurgle came from Rossman's direction. This one louder, more severe, than the first. We looked at him. We couldn't help it. His pen carried on scribbling for a beat, then stopped. At first I thought the pause would end, that Gilroy would continue as before or that Mary Birch would speak, but neither of these things happened. Silence billowed out like smoke (or gas!) above us. Thicker and thicker. And Rossman, growing redder with every moment, sat eyeing his notepad while the gurgles within him clamoured over themselves to be heard.

'Rossman,' someone said at last. 'Are you all right?'

'It's nothing,' he said. He grimaced.

'Are you sure, dear?' said Mary. 'You look rather unwell.'

'Not at all,' said Rossman. Another rumble. A pop. A crack! He clutched at his stomach with his free hand. With his other, he held his pen above his pad as if to show us he was willing, despite the discomfort, to press on.

'Right then,' I said. 'If Rossman says it's nothing, I'm sure it's nothing.'

'It's nothing,' said Rossman.

'Good,' I said, still uneasy. 'Why don't we set up a meeting with Penmans, over on Pitt Street? See if we can't get a new supplier?'

'Right away, Mr Cooley.'

'What's that, Gilroy?'

'I said, right away.'

'Sorry, you'll have to speak up.' There was too much noise from Rossman.

'I WILL CONTACT THE SUPPLIER THIS AFTERNOON. AFTER THE MEETING.'

'THANK YOU.'

'WHAT?'

'I SAID, THANK YOU GILROY.'

'I CAN'T HEAR YOU. CAN YOU SAY AGAIN?'

'I SAID, SEE, WHAT I SAID WAS – AH GODDAMMIT, ROSSMAN!' I lost my cool. 'DO YOU THINK YOU MIGHT POP OUT FOR A MINUTE?'

He looked up from his pad. He popped out. We waited for him to come back but he never did. That night there were reports in the news about a man exploding on a train. His body and face were unidentifiable. They had to carry him away in sealed bags.

Dozens of them.