

# Pickled

By Mary Moody

In the pouring rain, the semi-naked body of the President is discovered floating face down in the grey-green water of Circular Quay.

‘Jesus Christ,’ says a burly looking bloke on the wharf, an ex trade union official meeting some deck hands to discuss the implications of the radical changes to the industrial relations legislation.

‘Call the cops, there’s a woman in the drink.’

A mobile call and ten minutes later sirens herald the arrival of police, ambulance and the body retrieval squad.

‘She’s fresh’ says the wet-suited diver as he wrangles the corpse into a body basket.

Pulling the long, blonde tangled hair from her face the diver gasps.

‘It’s a bloke! In a spandex bikini and a wig. Gross.’

The body is lifted into the back of a van. The ambo is puzzled. The face of the bedraggled corpse is familiar, but he can’t put a name to it. The face is bland, almost boring. Eyebrows plucked severely to a high arch. Diamond nose ring and not one hair on the body. Smooth as a baby’s bum.

As they speed toward St. Vincents casualty, he catches a flash of a late edition Telegraph billboard.

**President  
Missing**

It's him.

The blonde.

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The Head of Police Security is towelling dry. His swim at the Bondi icebergs pool had been particularly soothing that morning. Then the call comes through.

'Deja fucking vu' says his 2IC down the line. 'They've lost him. One minute he was power walking and the next - gone.'

'So what are you doing about it?' says the boss.

'We are trying to cordon off the entire area but it's bucketing down. And keeping the media at bay is a nightmare. Better get here fast.'

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Mid morning. An atmosphere of panic prevails as the country's five top security honchos huddle.

'This new man of the people crap created this situation. Needing to brush shoulders with the down and outs instead of the usual toffs who live around Kirribilli House.'

'First Harold Holt, now this. To lose one leader is pretty damn unbelievable, but to lose two is total incompetence.'

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In the morgue, two forensic pathologists prepare the autopsy. One haggard from a lifetime of dealing with death, one fresh-faced from medical school.

‘Awesome, my first case. What luck!’ says the younger.

Stomach contents reveal traces of a cheeseburger. Chunks of dill pickle partially digested.

‘Did he have any enemies?’ the young man asks innocently.

Beneath his mask the older man gasps in disbelief.

‘About half the population. Workers and unionists, low income earners, women, aboriginals, asylum seekers, Muslims, small business people, single parents, students, filmmakers, artists, writers. The list is endless.’

The younger man looks perplexed. ‘The cause must be sex related, surely, by the outfit. He seems so straight.’

‘Yeah,’ says the older man with a degree of amusement. ‘The media will have a field day.’

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The day of the disappearance. Wayside Chapel. The volunteers have a quick cuppa then throw open the doors for the breakfast crowd to shuffle in. One of the regular volunteers sees something unexpected. His jaw drops in disbelief. What the hell is his older brother doing here? And why is he running down the narrow backstreet clutching a backpack? And what’s with the false moustache? Weird.

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The day of the disappearance. The man in green and gold trackpants is flanked by his sunglass-wearing bodyguards as he strides

purposefully up Darlinghurst Road. Their eyes stray momentarily to catch the window display of the Tool Shed, an adult accessories boutique. In that brief flash of time, their valuable charge vanishes into thin air. Ffooff.

The men in sunglasses scatter, running, shouting into their mobiles and fumbling their guns out of the shoulder holsters as they frantically search backstreets.

It takes but a few minutes for the area to be flooded with police, national security, riot squad, emergency and rescue squads. The motley gang of street dwellers sipping hot coffee at the Chapel have never been so well entertained over breakfast.

Only one person knows the President's secret vice. It's not one of the more common foibles that brings undone people in power. The President is a moderate man, mind-

numbingly conservative. No young women in his office have ever been offered a cigar; and unlike some of his other ministers, he's never donned fishnet tights. Indeed, it was once said of him by a fellow parliamentarian that he was such a wimp he wouldn't be bold enough to take a leak in the shower.

But the wafting aroma of a certain brand of burger is enough to cause a tingling in his loins. Cheeseburgers, in particular, are his private passion.

The President bypasses the front counter and goes straight to the kitchen of the fast food restaurant. They are doing 'breakfast' but the young female manager, celebrity struck, is only too happy to produce a soggy cheeseburger with extra sauce. He hides in a toilet cubicle to pleasure himself. Within minutes he feels a tingling sensation all over. His blood pressure plummets. His

airways close over and his entire system shuts down.

As the sirens screech he draws his last breath. His sneaker-clad feet poke out from the cubicle and are quickly discovered by a man emerging from the cubicle next door, clutching a jar of pickles. It's the man with the backpack and strange moustache. He's out of breath, but smiling broadly.

The manager is mortified. The multi-national food chain is already in financial trouble. The deli choices haven't worked and if news gets out that the leader of the land has choked to death on a cheeseburger, it will be disastrous.

But the man with the backpack has an idea. Dump the body. But first, a red herring. If they can disguise the corpse it may throw the police off the scent of fries and coke.

They hatch a plan and after a few calls a battered van arrives. A transvestite appears with a bag of spangly costumes and wigs. They slide the body into the van where a man is waiting. Covered with tattoos from head to toe he's the owner of the Mischief Moon tat parlour just around the corner. Deftly, he pierces the side of the nose, avoiding the abundant nostril hair, and inserts a small diamond stud.

The restaurant manager waxes the hair from the entire body, including the buttocks, and reshapes the bushy eyebrows with tweezers. Some super glue and the wig is firmly affixed.

Time is running out. They need to get past the roadblocks but rapidly realise they are trapped.

Plan B. They wrench up a heavy metal grate covering a stormwater drain and silently slip

the bewigged and spandexed President to a cold and watery grave.

The overflowing gutters gush water into the system and within twenty minutes the President pops out beside the ferry wharf.

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‘Anaphylaxis,’ says the older pathologist. ‘A massive allergic reaction that causes the throat to dramatically swell and the blood pressure to dramatically fall. Without an injection of adrenalin death can occur within minutes.

‘It was either something in the finger food he ate last night when he opened the Jeff Koons exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, or the mysterious cheeseburger we discovered in autopsy. Medical records show he had quite a severe reaction some years ago to a food colouring

used to brighten up certain brands of dill pickles. But they were taken off the market about that time because a lot of people had similar reactions.'

'So he didn't choke?' says the Head of Security.

The pathologist nods. 'And we may never know what caused it.'

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The Wayside Chapel volunteer finally tracks his brother down by phone. The two are poles apart. One a humanitarian, one a steely eyed go-getter. A politician.

'What were you doing in Sydney the other morning?' he asked. 'I saw you looking frazzled. Carrying a backpack and wearing a silly moustache. I thought you were supposed to be in Canberra?'

Silence on the other end of the line, then a forceful response.

‘I wasn’t there. You never saw me.’

The End