DANIELLE WOOD

ROSIE LITTLE'S BRILLIANT CAREER

Once upon a time (and I use these words advisedly, in the fervent hope that the sisterhood has by now worked its magic, and things have changed) the demographics of the average newspaper office were enough to make a girl despair. While the vast majority of the reporters were bright and ambitious young women (for ambitious, read 'desperate to get into television'), most of the subeditors were middle-aged blokes. Divorced, alcoholic blokes, I might add, through whose embittered kidneys the reporters' prose was destined to pass. The rest of the subs were mothers: former twenty-something reporters who'd come back part time after their maternity leave, bringing with them leftovers in Tupperware containers and repertoires of alarming anecdotes about pelvic floor muscles and mastitis. And, of course, all those who made crucial decisions behind the frosted glass of private offices were men roughly the same age as my grandfather.

Especially during the long, slow hours of nightshift, when I sat at the night reporter's desk, edgy from too much caffeine and not enough food, I was prone to casting my eye around the office and wondering what was my destiny? It couldn't be television: I didn't have smooth hair. Did that mean I would have to get myself a nice wardrobe of pastel suits and bail out into PR? Or would that be me, sitting over there at the subs table wearing a tartan shirt with a Peter Pan collar, eating my microwaved dinner and telling people who weren't listening how many stitches I'd had after my last episiotomy? Please no, I begged anyone in the cosmos who would listen, please don't let that be me. But please, don't let me be Lorna, either.

Lorna was that anomalous creature, a woman who had survived in a newsroom to middle age and attained a position of seniority to boot. So long had she been sitting in the chief sub's chair, shoulders rolled forward and chin stuck out, that her body had begun to look as if it were sitting down even when, technically speaking, it was standing up. Either way, the fleshy fold of her lower stomach lay over the top of her thighs like a thick apron, then her upper stomach folded down, in turn, over the lower stomach, followed by the uppermost layer of a heavy and apparently unsupported bosom.

Lorna was a very still person. She was quite still even when she was typing fast, and the way her fingers flicked and kicked on the end of motionless wrists put me in mind of an Irish dancer's legs. Her stillness was not benign, however. She used it in much the same way as a crocodile does: lying there inert, lulling her intended prey into thinking it's standing beside nothing more dangerous than a log of petrified wood. But, in fact, a crocodile can move as fast as a racehorse over a short distance, and when it

does, you can easily find yourself with your jugular vein dangling down around your sternum. To the left-hand side of the chief sub's chair, it was possible to discern a slight deviation in the walking track that had been worn into the carpet, and it only took new copy boys a day or two to discover why it was advisable to follow it.

'Incompetence. Nothing I hate more than incompetence,' Lorna would mutter, settling back into reptilian stillness while some fresh-faced graduate bled quietly from multiple cuts inflicted by the sharp edge of her tongue.

Or else she'd repeat, through barely opened lips: 'Six months. Six more months. Six months and I'm out of here.'

It was a well-known fact that Lorna was leaving in six months' time, since Lorna had been leaving in six months' time for close to twenty-five years. It was even said that when she first accepted the job — back in the days when the newsroom rang with the cheerful TING! of typewriter return carriages and reporters were allowed to chain-smoke at their desks — Lorna shook the editor's hand and said she was only staying for six months. But I never did believe that story, for the simple reason that it failed to account for Oscar. Bringing a pot plant to the office, I believe, is a sign of quite serious commitment.

The sum total of the affection that I could muster for Lorna was contingent on the image that I had of her arriving for work on her very first day, with Oscar. I dressed her for the occasion in a taupe-coloured skirt and jacket, and re-coloured her long, greying hair in an appealing shade of light brown. I gave her glasses, and while it is true that they were heavy-rimmed and unflattering, the overall effect of them was to suggest that this plain and sturdy-limbed young woman might harbour any number of intriguing mysteries. And this intimation of suppressed sentiment was only strengthened by the presence of the young monstera — nothing more than a single tender stem and a pair of leaves resembling a child's outstretched hands -– growing, greenly, in the earthenware pot Lorna held in the crook of her arm.

Over the course of the ensuing years, Oscar grew into and out of a succession of pots. An especially big move came when he was forced, by a combination of his own virulent growth and the advent of the new computer terminals, off the desktop and onto the floor beside Lorna's feet. By the time my own first day in the newsroom arrived, Oscar was housed in a colossal black plastic tub to the right-hand side of the chief sub's chair. He was more of a tree than a pot plant by now, and his trunk had thickened to match the diameter of Lorna's ankle.

I remember my first Monday at the paper as a hopeful day for both of us. I arrived early in order to settle in, and while I pinned my favourite photographs and quotations to the felted surface of my cubicle divider, and set out on my desk a small, framed painting of an apple by my now-quite-famous–artist friend Eve, Oscar reached out and

brushed — for the very first time, with the tip of his uppermost leaf — the pale ceiling panel of electrical light that he had mistaken for the sun.

If we were to leap ahead by four years, however, we would find that same leaf pointing dejectedly down to the ground. Oscar's trunk had, during that time, reached the ceiling and performed a U-turn, and now a strong, green curve of it was braced against the disappointment of the lighting panel.

And as for me?

Well, I had come to understand how it might feel to be the daughter of a boastful miller. I'm sure you remember the tale: the one in which a miller (in order to make himself appear a person of great importance) tells a king that he has a daughter who can spin straw into gold. The king puts the miller's daughter into a room with a spinning wheel and a pile of straw, which she must turn into gold by morning, if she values her life.

'Here's a handful of hearsay,' the editor would say to me before retreating behind his pane of frosted glass. 'Spin me forty centimetres of copy by nightfall, there's a good girl.'

'Here's half a rumour and a skerrick of unsubstantiated fact,' he would say the next day. 'Sixty centimetres by nightfall, if you value your life.'

And sometimes what was required of me was to spin column centimetres out of nothing at all.

'So, what do you like best about maths?' I would crouch down to ask Bruno, the seven-year-old winner of a nationwide Grade Four mathematics tournament, while he made dripping-water sounds with his tongue inside his cheek.

'Dunno.'

'What do you think you'd like to be when you grow up?'

'Dunno.'

'How do you feel about winning the competition?'

'Dunno.'

'How will you spend the prize money, do you think?'

'Dunno.'

Are you actually retarded, or just a little shit? No, no, please, don't tell me, I think I can guess …

Or I would ask: 'What's the secret of your longevity, Mr Grosvenor?' — shouting in order to be heard by the one hundred-year-old man who had lost all his inhibitions along with his bladder control and nine-tenths of his vision.

'Nice tits,' he'd say, as drool dripping from the tip of his chin fizzled out one of the candles on his birthday cake.

'Oh, I'm so sorry,' his embarrassed and almost equally aged daughter would say, catching his hand before it dipped down the neck of my shirt. 'My father was always such a gentleman.'

By way of some rudimentary alchemy I usually managed to produce sufficient words to accompany the pictures. ('Ask seven-year-old maths whiz Bruno Crawford for the secret of his success and he'll tell you it's repetition.'/'Terry Grosvenor may be one hundred years old, but his appreciation of life's pleasures remains undimmed.') The trouble was, the alchemy did not cease when I filed my copy and went home to bed. My nights were sometimes sleepless for wondering what further transformation was being wrought upon a story that would bear my by-line.

'Please,' said a senior Health Department bureaucrat, the latest Rumplestiltskin to whom I had promised my firstborn child if only he would help me spin this day's quotient of straw into column centimetres. 'Please remember that I'm only doing this interview on the understanding that you don't use the word "epidemic". We are not talking about an epidemic here, just a few isolated cases of glandular fever, and we don't want people unduly alarmed.'

'Oh please, no,' I said the next morning when I walked to the corner shop to get some milk, and was confronted by the day-bills for our newspaper screaming TEEN KISSING BUG EPIDEMIC SHOCK from within their metal cages.

A Word from Rosie Little on:

Newspaper Headlines

It's said that sport is the civilised society's substitute for war, and also that the games we play as children are designed to prepare us for the realities of adult life. Certainly it's true that my brother thrived in the capitalist kindergarten of the Monopoly board, developing a set of ruthless strategies whose success is reflected in his bank balance even to this day. I, on the other hand, can still be undone by the kind of ridiculous sentimentality that would see me sacrifice anything, anything, in order to have the

three matching red-headed cards of Fleet Street, Trafalgar Square and The Strand sitting tidily together on my side of the board.

Working late shifts in a newsroom allows for plenty of time to ruminate on how childhood board game strategy might act as an early indicator of career success, and even to come up with the basics of a board game to prepare aspiring journalists for the life in the fourth estate. I call it HEADLINE DEADLINE.

A game for four players, HEADLINE DEADLINE closely approximates the actual process by which newspaper headlines are chosen on a daily basis. I won't bore you with the intricate details of the game; suffice to say that the set comes with two decks of cards, one of which is made up of cards bearing a single word (SHOCK, TERROR, PLUNGE, EPI-DEMIC, PLEA, THREAT, TRAGIC, etc.), while the other is made up of cards bearing newsworthy scenarios, for example:

An elderly woman was hospitalised yesterday and treated for shock after a youth burst into a hairdressing salon with a water pistol. The youth, who is understood to be unhappy with a haircut he received at the same establishment the previous day, squirted the hairdresser with the high-power toy gun, warning her that he was not her only unhappy customer.

The players must use their stock of single-word cards to come up with a headline to fit the scenario before a ninety-second time limit expires. For the above scenario we might get SIEGE SHOCK TERROR, for example. Or TRAGIC TEEN GUNMAN HORROR. Or VIOLENCE EPIDEMIC THREAT, perhaps.

It is possible that the prototype set of HEADLINE DEADLINE, which was slapped together with materials from the art department during a succession of slow news nights, still lurks dustily beneath my old desk. But it is unlikely that anyone will ever create a more perfect headline than the one devised in just seventy-six seconds on a Monday night when there was no news at all (due to the malfunction of the newsroom's fax machine):

NAKED HELICOPTER

NUN'S PLEA

The brilliance of this headline has eclipsed my memory of the scenario that spawned it, but I'm sure it doesn't matter. Sales would have soared.

It was nightshift on the Christmas Eve that marked my four years and one month's service at the paper, and by way of a concession to the festive season I had worn to the office my sixteen-hole cherry-red Doc Martens. I was on the phone to a policeman who could reasonably expect to spend his Christmas Eve answering the phone every

hour, on the hour, to me and my cheery voice asking, ‘Anything happening?’

‘No, not a sausage,’ he said, as patiently as he could manage.

I put down the phone and called the fire brigade, the ambulance service and the talking clock, only because it didn’t sigh at me as if to say ‘not you again’.

‘If I saved really hard,’ I reasoned with myself after I’d said a fond farewell to the talking clock, ‘I could be out of here in six months.’

The phrase echoed in my mind and tripped the alarm on an early-warning system. Out of here in six months. Had I really just thought that? My heart stopped for a pico-second and my eyes shot to the chief sub’s chair. Which was empty.

‘Where’s Lorna?’ I called out over the din of the subs’ table. Surely the magic pudding of her six more months had not finally run out? The night subs had already sunk a couple of cartons and in their red and white Santa hats they resembled a pack of aged and feral elves.

‘Don’t panic, she’s only having a couple of weeks off,’ said one of the elves, leaning back in his chair and scratching his scrotum. ‘Oh, fuck! I’m supposed to water Oscar.’

Oscar, doubling as the office Christmas tree, was drizzled with red and gold tinsel. An angel had been hanged by the neck from one his highest branches.

‘I promised I wouldn’t let you down, Lorna baby!’ the sub shouted as he directed a stream of pungent yellow piss into the pine bark at the base of Oscar’s trunk.

‘Anything happening?’ I asked the on-duty policeman, brightly, an hour later.

‘No, not a sausage,’ he said wearily.

‘Anything happening?’ I asked the on-duty firefighter.

‘Nothing,’ he said firmly.

‘Anything happening?’ I asked the on-duty ambulance officer.

‘Honestly, you people. Can’t you take a rest? It’s Christmas Eve,’ he whined.

‘How are you, darling?’ I asked the talking clock.

‘At the third tone, it will be seven-oh-six and twenty seconds,’ he replied.

‘You sound a little lacklustre,’ I said. ‘Everything all right?’

‘At the third tone it will be seven-oh-six and thirty seconds,’ he said, and I knew just how he felt.

‘Anything happening?’ I asked the on-duty policeman, another hour later.

‘No, not a sausage,’ he said even more wearily.

‘Come on, it’s Christmas. There must be something. Anything.’

‘Well …’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s just a whisper at this stage. Don’t know much about it myself.’

‘Hmmm?’

‘We’ve just sent our divers down to the waterfront. Some poor bastard’s bobbed up near one of the docks.’

We didn’t cover suicides; apparently it encouraged them. But if it was anything else — accident, mystery, murder — it was a story.

‘You’re a legend,’ I said after he gave me the precise location.

I took a car to the scene, but parked it and its newspaper numberplates several blocks back from the water. Once out of the car, I concealed my notebook and pen by shoving them down the back of my skirt, beneath the hem of my cardigan. I was experienced enough to know that regular, just-passing-by nosiness was regarded by the authorities as much less abhorrent than the professional kind in which I specialised.

As I strolled down to the docks, I let my imagination out on a short leash. What would this corpse look like? Would it be bloated and blue? Would its extremities have been nibbled by crustaceans, or its eyes sucked out by eels? Would it be somebody I knew? A face I recognised? I entertained several deliciously morbid scenarios, but was forced to dismiss them just as soon as I saw that the divers had already done their work. One of them, his dripping wetsuit making a puddle on a concrete walkway, was zipping up a body bag, while the other was standing by the back of his utility, towel-drying the bare top half of his body. An ambulance was manoeuvring in the car park, readying itself for a swift pick-up.

I slunk around the side of the utility, pausing to observe a plastic bag full of toys, still

encased in their retail packaging, lying on the passenger seat alongside a roll of gaudy Christmas wrapping paper. I pictured the following morning's scene in the diver's home: his little dressing-gowned poppets, half-crazed on some kind of sugar-coated breakfast cereal, tearing that awful paper off their presents with squeals of glee.

'Hello,' I said, presenting my hand to the diver, who was buttoning up a warm-looking shirt.

'Hello.'

'I'm Rosie Little. I'm a reporter,' I apologised.

'Well, at ease, Ms Little. We've been expecting him. Chucked himself in a couple of days ago. So it's nothing for you to worry about.'

'You're sure?'

'Quite.'

'Thanks,' I said. 'And Merry Christmas.'

'You're working late,' he said, in a prolongation of the conversation that was most unexpected.

'Until midnight,' I replied, cautiously delighted.

'And what happens then?'

He wrapped a towel around his waist and from beneath it tugged off his wetsuit while I did my best not to watch.

'Depends which story I'm in, I suppose.'

'Don't you know?'

'No, not anymore.'

'Well, I hope it's not the one with the pumpkin.'

'No, no. Definitely not that one.'

'Got time for a quick Christmas drink, then?' he asked, pulling on a pair of jeans and nodding towards the nearby pub, its outside tables packed with drinkers on the verge of a holiday.

He introduced himself as Paddy and bought two beers, and while we drank them we talked about diving for pleasure rather than for dead bodies. I was charmed by the small specks of sea salt that had crystallised in his dark eyelashes and eyebrows.

‘You know,’ I said, ‘I rather had the impression that you had someone to go home to.’

‘Oh?’

‘The Barbie doll and the cricket set in the front of your ute.’

‘Oh?’

‘Trained observer, you see.’

‘Well, Rosie Little, trained observer, you didn’t stop to think perhaps that I might have nieces and nephews?’

‘An uncle? Who doesn’t outsource his present-buying? What’s wrong with your mother?’

‘She’s dead.’

‘Oh God, I’m sorry.’

‘Forget it. No, really, forget it. Have another drink, and tell me …Do you always go to work in outlandish red boots?’

‘I would love to tell you, but I’d better be getting back to the office,’ I said, allowing him a full view of my reluctance.

‘I’d like to see you again,’ he said, and I responded with something part way between a shy smile and a smirk.

He handed me a card inscribed with his full name: PATRICK WOLFE. Which transformed my smile into one of the regretful kind in which the corners of your mouth turn down rather than up.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, as much to myself as to him, for I had been beginning to like him quite a bit.

‘Why? Do you have someone to go home to?’

‘No. It’s all to do with nominative determinism I’m afraid, Mr Wolfe,’ I said, still

smiling.

He polished off his beer and upended the froth-lined pot on the bar towel.

‘Grrr,’ he said, and I was pleased to see that his face wore a regretful smile of its own.

I slunk back into the office by the side door and slithered in behind the night reporter’s desk. But to no avail. The nerviest of the paper’s photographers was pacing, anxiously, in his too-white sneakers and multi-pocketed vest.

‘The fuck have you been?’ he asked. Not waiting for an answer, he said, ‘You’d better come and have a look at these.’

On a large computer screen, he clicked through a raft of photographs of a suburban house reduced to charcoal. My pulse picked up speed. Where was this? When was this? They were good shots, some of yellow-clad firemen amid smoke and flames, but mostly of shocked family members staring at the charred and dripping-wet framework of a ruined home.

‘When was this?’ I asked.

‘About quarter past eight. I couldn’t find you, so I just went.’

‘I’ve been checking the rounds all night. The bloody fire brigade told me there was nothing on.’

‘Look at this, though. This is the shot. This is the front page,’ he said, and I had to agree.

It was a wide-angle shot of the scene, and in the foreground was a small golden-haired girl in a polka-dot dress, one angelic cheek lightly touched with soot. In her arms she held the blackened remains of a Christmas wreath that had been hanging on the now-unhinged front door. Her lower eyelids were brimming with tears. Nauseating. Perfect.

‘And I missed it,’ I said mournfully.

‘Yup.’

‘Did you get any words?’

‘I got the kid’s name. Madison Jones. She’s four and a half.’

‘And that’s it? That’s all you know?’

‘Yup.’

‘I’m in Deep Shit.’

‘Yup.’

‘Or not,’ I said. ‘Just the one “d” in Madison?’

‘Yup. Why? What are you going to do?’

‘The same thing I do every day,’ I said grimly.

And at my desk, I began to spin.

An hour and a half later the first edition of the Christmas Day paper rolled off the press and into the hands of the editor. He called me into his office, and as his high-backed chair swung around, he came to face me with an inscrutable look that induced a sharp pang of conscience.

‘Gold,’ he said, his face breaking into a smile. ‘Absolute gold.’

He gestured to the copy of the paper lying on his desk, its front page almost entirely filled with the image of little flaxen-haired Madison before the wreckage of her family home. Beneath her, in six-trillion point Bodoni, was a quote lifted from my story, which appeared in full on page three. It read: ‘But what if Santa doesn’t know where to find me?’

‘Fancy her saying that, hey?’ the editor said, shaking a grandfatherly head, and I saw for the first time how pure was his willingness to believe that I truly could spin straw into just his kind of gold.

‘Fancy,’ I replied softly.

‘Magic,’ the editor said, plonking down on the desk in front of me a bottle of champagne. ‘Looks like it’s about time we started to expect a bit more of you, doesn’t it?’

It was in order to postpone the vision of my daily pile of straw growing to mountainous dimensions that, once I left his office, I popped the champagne cork, downed one cupful, poured myself another and joined the subs in their raucous and tuneless carolling. ‘I saw Mummy blowing Santa Claus, underneath the mistletoe last night,’ we sang, until the tower clock next door chimed in another Christmas Day.

Nightshift over, the office was strewn with plastic cups, vanquished bottles, emptied bags of potato chips, early copies of the first edition and the odd drunken, sleeping subeditor: so much rubbish for the cleaners to deal with in due course. I flopped into Lorna’s chair and lay my head on the paper-thin pillow of a day-bill that declared CHRISTMAS BLAZE TRAGEDY SHOCK. Through the floor I could feel the vibrations of the press, still churning deep in the bowels of the building, still replicating my golden little lies.

In that shallow, woozy sleep, I dreamed that Oscar, with one flex of his serpentine trunk, dislodged the plastic covering of the lighting panel that had teased him for so long. Then, with his upper trunk, he forced the housing of the light fixture up and into the ceiling cavity, revealing a tangle of red and black wiring, as well as the silver lining of the roof itself. He slid one leaf into the overlap between two sheets of insulation, and began to thump with a coiled green fist on the underside of the roofing tiles. Soon, the silver sheeting split wide open, and clumps of terracotta showered the office floor, allowing a refreshing draught of night-cooled air to pour in. Through the hole in the roof could be seen a segment of dark sky, the stars like gleaming sword-points upon which veils of wispy cloud were tearing themselves to shreds. In place of the moon was the illuminated rim of the clock face on the tower next door.

Then someone else stepped into my dream, and up onto the rim of Oscar’s tub. She grasped the plant’s trunk in two hands and there was a slight creaking sound as she placed one foot on the lowest of his branches. Steadily, she began to climb, hand over hand, up through the leaves, around and around as if Oscar’s branches were the steps of a helix-like ladder. She came into view, and went out again, obscured now and then by foliage. In some glimpses, she wore a taupe-coloured suit, thick pantyhose and unflattering heavy-rimmed glasses, and in others, she was a small child with golden curls and a polka-dot dress. Up and up she went, up towards the open, beckoning sky. And when I woke, I knew that it was time for me to follow.