

PROLOGUE

I'm settled in Seat 4A, a window seat, deciding whether to have the omelette or cereal for breakfast. The plane is half full and there's a good chance I'll have two empty seats next to me. It's obviously a crack-of-dawn flight; the bleary-eyed crowd thins and the remaining passengers walk past my seat, eyeing it off. I have no idea how I scored them but, *hey bud, keep walking. To economy wit chu!*

I open my book, newly purchased at the airport bookshop. Called *It's Only Rock 'n Roll – Rock History from A(C/DC) to Z(Z Top)*, it's a treasure trove of unknown stories, facts and quotes that would be useless to anyone outside the odd pub trivia night. Who played guitar on Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean*? Eddie Van Halen. Freddie Mercury said his enhanced vocal range came from what? His four extra teeth. I believe every word.

I'm engrossed in this fine piece of literature when somebody stops in the aisle beside me, pulls down the luggage compartment, and lifts a small black carry-on bag upwards and in. I try not to look. She shuts the compartment door and I see her face for the first time. I only notice I'm staring when she smiles back while taking her seat. A near-divine smile.

She's in Seat 4C and now there is one empty seat between us. Sneaking a sideways glance as she's sorting through her handbag, I try to guess her age. Twenty-five, maybe. Olive-skinned and tall, probably 5 foot 10. And she is dressed smartly – a black jacket with a black and white diamond patterned skirt that reaches just below the knee. Noticing my gaze again, she looks at me. I catch a glimpse of her deep brown eyes before I dart mine to the left.

Having finished unpacking her bag, she asks me: 'Do you mind if I put these here?' They are two oversized textbooks, and she points to Seat 4B.

I look back at her and try to respond nonchalantly. 'Not at all. Hopefully the seat stays empty.' She puts the textbooks down and I notice she's not wearing a ring. I have but one chance - I need to strike up a conversation before she gets stuck into those textbooks.

It goes like this: 'By the way, do I know you?'

She examines me frankly. 'I don't think so.'

'What uni did you go to?' A wholly irrelevant question since she's clearly five or so years younger than me and we never would have attended together.

'UNSW.'

Bugger. 'Sorry about that. You just looked really familiar.'

'I get it all the time,' she says coolly. No doubt from all the other clueless guys that can't think of a better pick-up line.

Thumbing through one of the textbooks, she gets to her bookmark. It's disheartening to see both textbooks are about psychology, which pretty much closes the gate. I don't know a thing about psychology apart from a first-year subject I did, called *Consumer Behaviour*. There was Maslow. And Pavlov. And that's all I have.

Okay, last roll of the dice. 'Studying psychology?' I ask, cucumber cool.

'Trying to.' She looks up, closing the book on her finger to mark the page. 'But it's hard when someone's talking at me.'

'I just thought—'

'Thought you'd have a go?'

'It's not like that,' I say blushing.

'You're not very honest either.'

'Forget it.'

'What did you want me to say?' she asks. 'Expect me to go doe-eyed and maybe engage in a thought-provoking conversation about inattentive blindness? Or are you more a cognitive empathy expert? And then after we talk a little psych, I open up and tell you I'm a nervous flyer and really appreciate you keeping me occupied. And in mid-air we could swap inflight snacks, my cashews for your pretzels? Was that the scenario you pictured? So tell me, what do you know about psychology?'

I look at her, slack-jawed, my hands clammy as I flounder. 'I studied consumer behaviour.' She looks completely underwhelmed. With faux confidence, I say snootily: 'Pavlov. He had a lot of dogs.'

She chortles.

'I'll leave you alone. I'm sorry I said anything.'

She nods and lets go of her place in the book. 'Bravo. That's the first honest thing you've said to me.' Then, raising her hand: 'I'm Amy. And you are?'

I hesitate, as if she's about to bite it off. 'Um... Geoff,' then tentatively extend my hand to reach hers.

'When did you study consumer behaviour?'

Starting to regain some composure, I say, 'First year uni as part of a commerce degree.'

'So you actually know very little about psychology.'

'Enough to embarrass myself.'

She smiles. ‘I’ll let you in on a little secret. I’m not a Doctor of Psychology either, but I can bluff my way through it. At least, better than you can - Geoff.’ She looks down at the book I’m holding. Literary merit, zero.

‘You’re studying AC/DC?’

‘The Bon Scott years in particular, yes.’

‘I see.’

‘I’m a bit of a music geek.’

‘Nothing wrong with being a geek.’ Her voice warms a little. ‘So what does a music geek listen to? Don’t say AC/DC.’

‘Tame Impala. Peking Duk. Old school stuff like Queen. You?’

‘I don’t share my play list with complete strangers.’

I shrug. ‘Why would you?’

‘It may or may not include Taylor Swift. Possibly U2. But I’m not going to incriminate myself so if it’s all the same-’

I flick through the book. ‘There’s a funny story in here about Bono.’

‘Go on,’ she allows.

‘Okay, so this happened at a U2 concert in 2009. It was in Glasgow and Bono at one point asked the audience for complete silence. So the crowd goes quiet and you can hear a pin drop. Bono then claps. Once. Then again. The stadium is completely silent except for his rhythmic clapping. Bono says into the microphone: ‘Every time I clap, a child in Africa dies.’ Then from the front row a voice calls out: ‘Well stop clapping then, you sick bastard!’

‘That can’t be true,’ she laughs.

‘You’re questioning the credibility of this book? I spent \$19.95 on it.’

‘Any stories about Taylor Swift?’

An announcement over the PA system interrupts, telling us to pay attention to the safety demonstration as the plane begins taxiing down the runway. I fold the book away, and for the next two minutes consider my options. Play it sweet or talk to her incessantly. I wish I was better at this. Then the engines roar and the plane accelerates, reaches a decent speed, edges skyward. One thousand feet. Two thousand. After a few minutes we level off and she offers me the first hint of a smile again.

Amy asks, ‘You were saying?’

‘Sorry?’ I ask.

‘Taylor Swift. Any stories?’

I relax a little. ‘Taylor Swift? There’s not enough pages in this book to cover Taylor Swift.’

‘Probably.’ She puts the textbook down. ‘So what are you doing in Adelaide?’

‘A trade show. An IT trade show. I’m the Marketing Manager of a small software company. Ever heard of Heatseeker Software?’

‘No. Should I have?’

‘It’s security software. Cyber and mobile security, that sort of thing. Anyway, there’s this big security conference at the Adelaide Hilton today so I’m there to set up the booth, talk to people, hopefully get some business, and fly back tonight. Done it many, many times.’

‘It sounds like fun,’ she says.

‘It can be. And you?’

‘I’m working on my thesis. Conveniently, my mentor is a doctor at the School of Psychology over at the University of Adelaide. But she’s worth her weight in gold.’

‘So you come here often?’ I ask. And then think to myself, *Holy shit*.

‘This is my first time-,’ she says before stopping, then restarting: ‘It’s all been online. So a question for you - if you had a few hours to kill in Adelaide, what would you do?’

A sensible question, Geoff. No pressure. ‘If you’re at the uni, it’s not far from the town centre. You can walk to Rundle Mall, the Art Gallery or the Botanic Gardens. Also, Adelaide Central Market – it’s not walking distance but it’s good fun. Ignore the jokes about Adelaide and you might enjoy it.’

‘Like?’

I clear my throat. ‘Okay. Favourite place in Adelaide?’

‘I don’t know. Where?’

‘The departure lounge.’

She laughs encouragingly. ‘That’s bad.’

‘Unfair, yes. Another one. What’s the best thing to come out of Adelaide?’

‘What?’

‘Qantas Flight 78.’

‘That’s worse.’

‘Sorry. Yes, it is.’ I take the hint and think quick to get this meet-cute back on track. I look at her book. ‘So what’s the thesis on?’

‘Time perception and temporal illusions.’

‘Sorry?’

‘It’s about the brain’s stopwatch,’ she says. ‘There’s real time and our perception of time. And then a temporal illusion is our distortion of time when something is happening extremely quickly. In other words, you may feel time slowing down or speeding up. There’s a lot of temporal illusions documented, like chronostasis, the Kappa effect, and the oddball effect – that’s where perceived time slows, usually when you’re in danger or you meet someone you’re immediately attracted to. One school of thought is it’s a defensive mechanism. Maybe, maybe not.’ She looks down at her book. ‘And you think you’re the geek.’

And that could’ve been her cue to smile politely and get back to her textbook for the rest of the flight. But it wasn’t. I talked, she talked, she smiled (God, that smile). And I’m falling. And giddy. And I don’t want the flight to end. Maybe it’s the oddball effect.

All too soon, the plane starts descending and we hit the Adelaide tarmac. While it taxis to the terminal, I sneak a peek at her boarding pass. Full name: Amy Wells.

So as the doors open and we disembark with our bags, I know I have to see her again. Amy shakes my hand, says it was lovely to meet me, and I wish her all the best with the thesis. Desperation would’ve been to chase after her and ask to share an Uber. But I don’t.

The Perfect Crime

When I reach the Adelaide Hilton, I log onto the Qantas website. Amy had said her mentor workshop was in the afternoon and she only had a few hours spare in Adelaide, which means she’d catch an evening flight back to Sydney – of which there are only two, the one I’m on (QF 78) and QF 76. I call Qantas, mention my colleague Amy Wells, and say that I want to catch the same flight back to Sydney. I learn she is on QF 76 so I change my ticket to that flight. My next problem is trying to get her seat number. This is where I need to be truly devious.

‘What the hell are you doing?’ Greg asks me, out of curiosity more than anything. Greg is the Adelaide-based sales guy on the booth and he can tell I’m distracted. It’s now just past lunch. I tell him the story. Everything. No, I don’t have a photo of her – what do you think I am? A stalker? I tell him I have to, HAVE TO, be at Adelaide Airport at least an hour before the flight boards. Probably two hours. Can he pack up the booth at

the end of the day? He says yes, I hug him, plant a big kiss on his cheek, and grab an Uber.

I get to the airport and wait at the far end of the Qantas check-in desk. Watch and wait. Watch and wait. At 5:12, Amy walks into the terminal. She goes up to the auto check-in kiosk, punches in her details, and gets her boarding pass. I'm hoping she's chosen a seat that appears to have an empty one beside it. As soon as she's moved through security, I run to the check-in counter. I tell them I work with Amy. We got separate Ubers. She'll be on this flight, I'm hoping the seat next to her isn't taken. Oh, it's not? Seat 9B? I'll take it. You are wonderful. That's why Qantas is my favourite airline. Thank you so much.

I'm one of the last to board. I walk through the gate, onto the plane. And I'm in and there she is, eyes closed.

I stop at Row 9, turn right, and go for my own personal Academy Award. 'Seriously?'

Amy opens her eyes and looks up. Her eyes light up when she sees me. 'You are kidding me.'

'Unbelievable. Of all the flights and all the seats.'

'Amazing.' Amy is lost for words.

'Hey, if you want some rest, I'm happy to sit somewhere else. It doesn't look like a full flight.'

'No, no. Don't be silly. Sit here.'

I put my bag in the overhead locker and sit next to Amy. 'Take a look,' I say as I show her the evidence – a boarding pass clearly showing seat 9B.

She takes the pass and skims it. 'That's incredible. What are the odds?'

Surprisingly short, Amy. Surprisingly short.