

Prologue

“That is the most ludicrous story I’ve ever heard!! Where was the dramatic tension? Where was the pizzazz? Three thumbs down!”

The Monday morning tram ride up Swanston Street was not, as a rule, your favourite part of the week: overhearing obnoxious accounts of other people’s weekends in all-too-gruesome detail; the awkward transitions from ‘*Hey! Haven’t seen you in ages!*’ to ‘*Hope you don’t mind if I spend the next ten minutes grinding up against you!*’; the students too poor/impoverished or rich/environmentally-guilt-ridden/ironic to be bothered with showers and clean clothes. And on top of this, it was a Monday: and nothing interesting *ever* happened on a Monday.

But this morning had been different. You had bagged one of the few seats on offer, were busy pondering your good fortune, when your ears had pricked up; someone in the bench behind you had dropped their conversation to a very-excited and passionate whisper (perhaps the equivalent of shouting ‘*Don’t look!*’ in the hope of some privacy), clearly embarking on a story. With rising incredulousness, you had caught a few choice words above the general din of the tram: “beard... parrot... cutlass... busty wench”. And with your interest well and truly piqued, you’d been straining to overhear snippets of the story ever since.

From what you could gather, it seemed to be an account of the Undergraduate Ball which had taken place the night before, featuring who-knows-what extravagant costume theme. Apparently, one of the undergraduates had caused something of a sensation: arriving in an over-the-top pirate outfit, she had caused mayhem by loudly proclaiming, in apparent sincerity, to be a member of a vicious pirate gang, come to round up all present to be sold into slavery. Not receiving the hushed awe and cooperation she’d anticipated, and apparently fearful of returning to her ‘gang’ empty-handed, the ‘pirate’ had proceeded to drown her sorrows with all the rum she could get her hands on, and spent the rest of the night mumbling sea shanties to herself in the corner.

Yet despite the storyteller’s best efforts, his companion seemed utterly unimpressed:

“I hated that story! Hated hated hated it! Hated the sensibility that thought I would like it. Hated the implied insult by your belief that I would be entertained by it!”

Tram ride over, you make sure to catch a glimpse, as you alight, of who had been sitting behind you. To your delight, you see that one of them, the storyteller, is bare-chested and sporting an eye-patch; his companion, dressed more conservatively in a white jacket and turtle-neck sweater, is swilling a glass of red wine; clearly the Ball had been quite a success!

Making your way to your first class, you notice something distressful. A man dressed in medieval armor, with the squarest head you’ve ever seen, was idly swinging an oversized, nail-studded club, with scant regard for the horrified passers-by. Sure, this was probably another straggler from the Ball, but irrespective, that club could take someone’s eye out!

A little perturbed, you continue on your way. Without having gone 50 metres, you notice something even more unsettling. Near some bushes on your left, you see a man dressed entirely in black, oversized SLR camera in hand, with sunglasses and hood masking his identity. You watch, curiosity taking hold, as he silently takes a few snaps in an unseen direction, before promptly darting around the corner out of sight.

You wonder who this character could be. Suddenly, your imagination goes hay-wire as all kinds of diabolical possibilities flash into your head: a terrorist doing reconnaissance, bringing down Australian

society one postgraduate researcher at a time; someone from Monash University's marketing department, taking compromising photos of bleary-eyed Melbourne students with which to discredit the University; a Japanese tourist taking happy-snaps to show back home... whatever the case, it was a highly questionable activity!

You had half a mind to report him to the relevant authorities – *if* that didn't require so much effort. Besides, if he was really up to no good, someone else would surely notice and report him. After all, who were you to presume your powers of observation were superior to everyone else's? Yes, it would be *most* presumptuous to do anything proactive about this photographer.

Reassured by this thought, you shove the photographer from your head. Instead you make towards your favourite drinking fountain, serving ice-cold, highly-pressurised water to the Richard Berry building since 1978. To your consternation, you see that the drinking fountain is no more: instead a sign indicates that '*Due to Health and Safety concerns, the drinking fountain has been removed until further notice.*' Shaking your head in utter disgust, eyes raised to the heavens in supplication, you resolve to take action against this injustice! You'd take this up immediately with the Vice-Chancellor. To hell with class; you were thirsty, and this time not just for knowledge!

To your surprise, the Vice-Chancellor's office was not, as you'd always assumed, located on the very top floor of Redmond Barry, the very tallest building on campus, from which the Vice-Chancellor could pace while surveying his dominion spread below. Instead its location was decidedly more prosaic: the very top floor of Raymond Priestley, the *second* tallest building on campus. *Vice-Chancellor* indeed.

Mounting the stairs, you reflect on another potential reason for locating the Vice-Chancellor's office thus; the hundreds of disgruntled students who must begin ascending these stairs, only to be deterred when their cost/benefit analysis factors in the nine flights to follow...

Entering the 9th floor lobby, you approach the Vice-Chancellor's secretary who sits typing, engrossed at her computer terminal. Reluctantly, she draws her attention away from her screen for long enough to inform you: "*The Vice Chancellor is not in. You'll have to come back later.*"

Not one to be deterred by off-hand dismissals, you ask when, precisely, he will be in.

"I don't know. He's just been called away on urgent business."

And at once, the secretary is back typing.

Knowing all about the tactics employed by busy people wanting to avoid appointments, and with the secretary's attention well and truly diverted, you pretend to back out of the room before ducking back, sideways, and through the door leading to the Vice-Chancellor's office.

As soon as you enter, you begin to doubt this drastic action. The Vice-Chancellor is clearly not in, and what's more, as you glance around the room, he's left his office in quite a state: papers strewn across the floor, an upturned chest of drawers, even some broken glass. Fearful of being blamed for the mess, you're about to leave when your attention is drawn to a pile of clothes discarded in one corner. Lying underneath an ordinary shirt, you can distinctly make out what looks like blue and red coloured lycra. Picking it up off the floor, to your surprise it turns out to be a full-blown one-piece blue-and-red lycra body suit complete with cape, with, what's more, the letters MU emblazoned in red and yellow on the front.

Unsure of what possible use the Vice-Chancellor could have for a lycra suit (apart, perhaps, from attending the Undergraduate Ball incognito), your attention is drawn to a small, leather-bound notebook lying next to the clothes. Picking it up, you notice that the cover is embossed with 'Agenda'. Flicking

through the pages, you are immediately struck by the entries:

15th September 2009: Confronted campus bike thieves; chained them to a bike rack, and called the police.

7th March 2010: Foiled a plot by cyber-villain to use our quantum computer to crack internet security encryption; E-banked in peace that night.

29th October 2010: Mused over the fact that with great power comes great responsibility.

And then, more recently, the entries got even stranger:

15th March 2011: Learnt of proposal to extend University House's wine-cellar; could this disturb the worm-hole below the car-park that I sealed-off with the help of Mad Max back in 1979?

25th March 2011: Construction of wine-cellar underway; must wait to see consequences.

6th April 2011: Wine-cellar complete; consequences as feared; worm-hole re-opened; will need to be vigilant.

7th April 2011: Situation deteriorating; expect 20 villains to enter campus throughout this weekend and next week; have compiled a list of information that will be necessary to repel them.

8th April 2011: Villains arriving quicker than anticipated; they appear well organised; expect that they will come for me; preparing to confront...

You have to force yourself to keep breathing as you take this all in. It seems the Vice-Chancellor has had a secret identity all this time; by day schmoozing with visiting academics, by night moonlighting as a super-hero, keeping the campus villain-free so undergraduates can laze around in peace between lectures.

But now it seemed like the Vice-Chancellor was in trouble. Flicking through the diary, you notice that there were no entries for the 9th and 10th of April. Nor had the Vice-Chancellor taken his 'suit' with him, wherever he was. And sure enough, turning to the back of the notebook you come across the material that the Vice-Chancellor had compiled, with some especially curious material paper-clipped to the back. Glancing at the information, to your surprise you notice, among the list of nefarious villains, the female pirate that had graced the Undergraduate Ball, the cyclops and 'critic' from the tram, the medieval club-wielding blockhead, as well as the suspicious photographer: villains all of them! At last, your surreal morning was starting to make sense!

"I thought I told you the Vice-Chancellor was away. Now get out!!!"

To your horror, you realise that the secretary has discovered your presence, and is now standing in the doorway, glaring at you. Fortunately, with your back turned to her, she hasn't yet caught sight of what you're holding. In a flash, you've gathered up the lycra suit and notebook, and bolted past her and out the door.

Outside, sipping some tea, you reflect on your morning. By all accounts, the campus was under threat from at least 20 different villains; the Vice-Chancellor, unmasked as the campus's resident crime-fighter, was missing, presumably kidnapped; and all you had at hand in order to resolve the situation was one lycra body-suit/cape and some scraps from a notebook!

This was going to be a long week...