

## **The Smiler**

**By Sion Scott-Wilson**

The weather could have been kinder of course. But there was me, Craig and Greg standing there on the deck of The Pride of McQuarie down at Circular Quay. The big waves in a protected harbour meant that we weren't getting out for a cruise but it was nice just to be allowed on a flash boat like that, even though it was like riding on the back of a drunken hippo. It made us feel valued, it really did.

Talk about a turnaround though. Six months before, all we were hearing was paycuts and redundancies. And now with the SouthEast Asian market resurgence and the Aussie dollar kicking Bhat, we were laughing.

We were laughing at something Smudger said. Something about the new girl in Human Resources. Or was it the new human in girl resources? Can't remember now, too pissed.

We were the mainstay of the Newman International sales team and we were the reason for this party. Make no mistake, we were the ones that kept it all afloat. And Newman had pushed this particular boat out for us. The HR lot, the propeller-heads, the finance people, they weren't the ones that saved the company. It was us: me, Craigo, Greg-boy and the German, but the German never turned up to anything social so he didn't count. This was our night and we knew it. Everyone knew it. Even Newman admitted as much in his speech.

The three of us despised the hangers-on, all those other departments; the klag-nuts we called them - bits of shit that hang off a sheep's arse. But we always had time for the Smiler; the funny old girl who worked in Finance and brought us our payslips on the last Friday of every month. It wasn't just the money though, because for a while back there it could just as easily have been our termination notices that she carried. No, we liked her. We just liked the way she carried herself, which was like a crumpled old shopping bag bent in the middle. But Jesus, what a smile. It was like God had swiped a bunch of bones from her spine and stuck them into her mouth instead.

She was sixty if she was a day, but me and the boys reckoned that she was a beautiful woman; ripper. She never said much, but we loved that smile. It was there in the bad times, the scary times and it was still there when things began to pick up. And it never changed.

So there we were, happy-as-Larry on the top-deck of our boat. Speeches over and Newman had departed which meant that most of middle management, along with the

team whose job it was to give him a saliva-bidet had gone too. And suddenly, at the end of the pier there was the Smiler.

I take full responsibility for what happened, up to a point. Greg doesn't remember and Craig pretends he was in the dunny at the time. But the fact is that the three of us raised our tinnies to the Smiler and we egged her on.

I wish to God we hadn't.

She stood up there on the wooden pier hunched in her red satin dress, a weird inverted 'S' backlit by the Sydney harbour lights, like a scalding brand on the haunch of newborn calf. And of course she was smiling. She'd made an effort.

The Pride of McQuarie ascended again, bronco-riding the white caps that slapped against the harbour wall. The Smiler stood fifteen feet above us watching wide-eyed as the boat rose and fell, one foot hovering tentatively over the upper deck as it lurched up and down like a busted elevator. I knew in my heart that she was going to give it up as a bad job until Greg broke the spell.

'Come on Smiler. Get on board.' And he raised his can of VB.

That's all it took.

We all joined in of course, holding up our stubbies like a cluster of miniature lighthouses while this stunted little woman summoned up the courage to step on.

Timing. That's the thing. Ask Newman. It's why we're the premier Asia/Australasia network provider. It's what makes the difference between success and instant death, that's what he said; the essence of his speech. And it's what the Smiler didn't have.

You could tell that the Smiler wanted to make a point that night. She wanted so much to prove that she was a party person; one of the gang. She scrunched up her eyes and stepped onto the deck. But the deck wasn't there any more and the Smiler dropped like a stone. I can still recall the awful sound as she caught her upper teeth on the outside boat rail before disappearing into the oily green waters below.

They say that there was a huge White Pointer prowling Sydney Harbour at that time which is why no trace of the Smiler was ever found. I don't know about that. All I can say is that Craig, Greg and me felt so bad about this thing that two nights later we went down to the Pride of McQuarie and prised those teeth out of the pine guard rail – and guess what? They were false.

Ok, the old Smiler's teeth turned out to be fake, but so what? It didn't make us think any less of her. The boys and me found a nice jewelry box and stuck the busted remnants in. We had a few schooners down at the Oaks and then got a taxi to the Smiler's address. I rang the bell.

Craig couldn't stop giggling.

'Shut the fuck up and have a bit of respect,' I said.

The door opened and an oldish, sad-looking bloke appeared.

'Can I help you?'

'Here.'

I gave him the jewelry box. He opened it.

Craig sniggered again, I elbowed him.

The Smiler's husband considered the box for a moment or two. His mouth turned down at the corners like one half of the MaccyD sign, then he closed his eyes.

And did he thank us? Craig, Greg and me?

Did he buggery.

End.