

Fitzzy's Complaint

Derrick, our hot shot cadet reporter who is currently on sick leave, has decried my writing style. He calls it 'needlessly flamboyant'. I told him I'm a 'colour' writer. I put the razzmatazz, the human interest into the big news stories of the 1980's and you can't do that unless you have the verbal palette of a master and the gumption to go hard. I think of myself as the Brett Whitely of the features page.

Of all the characters I have encountered in my professional life, none has been more deserving of a colourful recount than Fitzzy. Let's see if you agree.

Imagine an Easter Island statue that has endured too many gales. Superimpose that face onto a lanky, creaky frame garbed in a white shirt, blue braces, wide tie and baggy cuffed trousers. Add a full head of Grecian 2000 hair with a noticeable smear of Brylcreem, position the image behind a mission brown desk in a Sydney newsroom and you have an identikit of Carter, our features editor. Carter is hard to read. There's a rumour he once bluffed Rupert out of \$50 000 in a late night News of the World poker game and that's why he was exiled to Sydney.

But one afternoon on 15th March, 1989, Carter was open-mouthed, blinking rapidly-- a quivering, transparent bag of body language 'tells'-- as a giant with a Halloween mask face and the gait of a great ape came lumbering across towards him.

Tim nudged me. "That's Fitzy. I photographed him for the crime page."

"He'd be six feet six...." I guessed. "110 kilos?"

"I used the telephoto," said Tim.

Carter had dropped his left hand low below his desk and was pumping it up and down.

"That's the signal used by forward scouts in *Platoon*," whispered Tim. "It means *come at the double*" Tim was a big fan of Vietnam War movies.

We took our time walking over to Carter's desk. Union men don't like to be ordered to move quickly.

"Tim, Dan..." Carter announced. "Like thee to meet Mister Fitzgibbon." Carter reverted to his Yorkshire accent when he was under stress.

"No last names!" boomed Fitzy. His voice made Darth Vader sound like one of the three tenors.

"Absolutely," Carter assured him. He turned to us. "Fitzy wants to tell his life story, warts and all, using his words only. I told him he could trust us."

That was news.

"I promised me Mum. Her voices told her I was goin' to hell if I didn't confess. She got real stirred up about me bashin' mugs who owed money tuh Georgie Freeman."

"Grinder George, the late racing identity?" asked Tim.

"Georgie was never late in his life, mate." Fitzy hawked some hidden phlegm. "Not like Neddie."

"Neddie Smith, the murderer?" squeaked Tim. He was a big fan of Australian crime shows.

Fitzzy spat something into his sleeve. "Neddie was never on time. Bad as Islanders, they're always late. Shit, I suppose I havta admit what I done to Kava George after he missed that break-in at Lakemba. Can't risk leave nothin out or Mum might hear."

"Very wise," said Carter. 'Ma', his Yorkshire ripper mother, was the motivation behind Carter's long working hours and the pints of black ale that prepared him for his homeward journey to the bachelor flat he shared with Ma. I was with him one night when his fifth pint took him back to his youth.

"My Da was always the first volunteer. Rough shifts, mucky business. Anything that would shorten his time under Ma's roof. Night of '66 cave in, rescue team came knocking on our door, wanting death or glory boys. Da winked at me. 'Freedom for a night lad' he said, and patted me on head. He were point man during second blast. Still buried there."

"That's hard," I said. "Losing a father."

"Aye, but..." he took a gulp. "It were comfort he died happy. What if he'd been maimed and fallen under Mam's care?" Carter shivered. "Two more pints. *Now* please."

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As Fitzzy stared at my Sony recorder like a Great Dane encountering his first praying mantis I could visualize him in primary school – a lump of a boy hunched over a frail desk, written off by teachers, his mother's disapproval ringing in his ears like tinnitus.

"Did you have a religious upbringing, Fitzzy?"

"Sorta."

"Catholic?" I was hoping for recollections of the confessional and its cathartic benefits.

Fitzzy began cracking the knuckles on his scarred right hand.

"Protestant?"

"Pentecostal. They speak in *tuuunngs*."

I detected a tinge of reverence.

"Tongues?"

"Spirits speak in *tuuunngs* when they wanta make contact. Pentecostals helped Mum. Got her away from sick-ciatrist doctors and their shit drugs."

"Is she okay now?"

"Still got *obsesstosis*. Washes her hands ten times a day, washes her clothes till they're full of holes. But after she's been tuh meetings, been speaking in *tuuunngs*...' He cracked the joint of his little finger. "Better."

I took a breath. "Fitzy, did you ever attend meetings?"

He nodded.

"Because maybe, you know, if you relaxed, the right voice might visit you?"

Fitzy shrugged and closed his eyes. We waited. Tim asked if gospel music might help. I kicked his shin. Another minute passed. I was about to suggest coffee when Fitzy's right hand started moving. Slowly and gently, as if attached to an invisible pulley, it rose until it was level with his heart and stayed there, calm and steady. Fitzy opened his eyes. "Burglary, horse-nobbling, pimping, fake insurance, robberies...I've done 'em all." He lowered his hand. "Startin' with burglary..."

You would have thought he had swallowed a plumber's drain snake. I pushed record as Fitzy's past came rushing out. After an hour or so he stopped to make it clear he wouldn't 'dog' on anyone from New South Wales. He was prepared, however, to give the lowdown on Melbourne crims because he hated everyone from that city. There was one exception. Fitzy had a surprising respect for Christopher Flannery, the Melbourne hit man

who hadn't been since getting into a car at Taylor Square in 1987. Tim whispered that Ian 'Chopper' Read was a suspect in the disappearance.

"Most blokes when they fire the old Owen gun they spray bullets everywhere but Flannery could make it sing and dance. He had a beautiful crouch. He locked his knees..." Fitzzy dropped down to demonstrate the Flannery crouch. "...like he could sweet talk gravity."

Tim couldn't help himself. "Was he as good as Chopper Read?"

"Chopper!"

Tim backed away.

"Flannery should never have trusted that fat prick with no ears. I was supposed to meet Flannery that day but I was late. Drinkin' with Neddie." Fitzzy slapped his forehead in disgust. You could almost hear tectonic plates colliding.

Tim chose that moment to use his flash. Fitzzy reared up, covering his face with one arm, he advanced on the camera like an enraged Elephant Man. I rushed over, promising Fitzzy we would black out his face, use only his words, trust us, we'd never cross the line etcetera. Some hovering co-workers began retreating to a safer vantage point. One of them was Derrick, our hotshot cadet reporter. Melbourne Grammar, Monash honours graduate, member of the MCC since birth. Derrick—the management pet.

"Mind being extra talent?" I asked.

"Sweet as..." replied ever helpful Derrick. He sucked air into his gym-enhanced chest and struck a pose beside Fitzzy.

I chose my words carefully as I set up the shot. "Fitzzy, could you demonstrate the 'Christmas grip' that Killer Kowalski showed you, the one banned by the World Wrestling Federation?"

Derrick blinked.

"Don't worry," I assured him. "We'll fake it. Safe as..."

While Tim was taking light meter readings I casually mentioned that Derrick had just transferred in from Melbourne. Fitzzy's eyes lit up. He grabbed Derrick, inverted him like a lightweight Chubb safe, and imbedded the knuckles of his left hand in Derrick's throat.

"This okay?" bellowed Fitzzy. "Want me tuh grab his nuts?"

Carter appeared in our midst. I suppose he was there in his capacity as O H & S representative. The regular meetings were another excuse for time away from Ma.

"This better get Mum off me back," grunted Fitzzy.

"Bound to," puffed Carter. "Perhaps relax strangle-hold, lad? When thee's ready, of course."

No one below upper management liked Derrick.

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This anonymous thug in a soiled shirt and old trackie pants wants to step into the confessional box. He wants you to be his priest

I was pleased with my story. It had punch and colour and every quote was verbatim. Carter had triple checked that aspect and vetoed some flamboyant flourishes in my copy. I didn't protest.

Fitzzy rang me on the day the article appeared. I could hear thumps and groans in the background and hoped he was calling from a gym where some pugs were putting in an honest day at the bag.

"My Mum freaked!" he bellowed.

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I chose an old laptop that weighed several kilos. My plan was to hurl it and run. Tim stashed a steel Maglite torch in his camera case and practised his technique at every opportunity. He would snatch the torch, whip it back across his shoulder, feint a blow to Fitzzy's head and launch into a balletic array of blows accompanied by 'hey... ha...ha!' Tim was a big Jackie Chan fan.

Carter favoured an ergonomic strategy. "I'll run to staff toilet, climb out the window and stay on sill until coast is clear."

Days passed. Tim became upbeat. "Maybe Fitzzy's mother has forgiven him?"

Carter shook his head. "Thee's much to learn about mothers."

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Carter, Tim and I were waiting for the lift without a laptop, torch or window in reach. The doors opened and Fitzzy lurched out. He rhino charged me, rammed my back against the framed photo of Rupert holding a Beijing Press Freedom award and imbedded a Killer Kowalski knuckle into my throat.

"My Mum went crazy when she read them lies."

I looked sideways and saw Carter and Tim trying to shrink-wrap themselves against the far wall. "But the story was true...exactly like you told us," I gurgled. "What upset her so much?"

He grimaced. "Yuh said—"

"Was it the bashing?" I could see he was lost in a dark and shameful place. "The QC's guide dog you ran down during that fake insurance robbery?"

He shook his head. "Yuh said—" His knuckle fell away from my throat. His eyes were damp. "I wore a dirty shirt!"

I reached up and laid a limp hand on Fitzzy's vast back.

"I told yuh she had *obsesstosis!*"

Carter joined us, promising 'a full retraction' while Tim chimed in about our ongoing problems with 'moronic proof-readers'. Moving as one, we steered our broken Caliban into the lift, descended to the ground floor and with unspoken agreement sought refuge in the closest inner city pub. It was a trendy place crammed with Derricks and Derrickettes but we were in no position to be choosy. As Tim was ordering drinks, Carter mouthed 'calling coppers' and slipped away. He came back a few minutes later and downed a pint in one gulp.

Tim was keeping Fitzzy occupied with anecdotes about Jackie Chan's capacity for pain when Carter and I saw three young uniforms stride in. Carter jerked his thumb towards the exit.

"Shouldn't we stay to point out Fitzzy?" I muttered.

"Nay, he stands out like Quasimodo at Ken and Barbie convention."

My conscience still troubled me. "Won't the cops need help? They look pretty young."

"Sergeant said they were only ones green enough for job. Look at situation objective-like. It will be rich learning experience for the lads. And they heal fast at their age."

"You're the Occupational Health and Safety expert," I conceded.

Tim saw my wind-up signal and slipped away as the young cops were approaching Fitzzy from behind. A few metres before they reached him he spun around like a white pointer sensing the presence of a pack of baby seals.