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THE ESU ROLY SUSSEX SHORT STORY COMPETITION
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Highly Commended in the Open Division

Peter Murphy

Radio confessions

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“Do you have a secret ... something you want to confess ... something you’ve wanted to get off your chest for a long time? Call me and tell me about it?” – asks radio talk show host Lee Navada as he intros his evening *Have Your Say* program across Australia’s east coast and beyond.

Broadcasting from Coolangatta Hot Tuna FM studios on the southern Gold Coast, Navada has a huge following of mixed ages, mixed nationalities and mixed-up minds. And he doesn’t mind the latter calling in because he knows their rants and raves, their whinges and know-all egos play a significant role in boosting his show’s ratings and attracting payola bonuses from his employer.

He’s a clever operator in dreaming up suspenseful ideas to entice listeners to phone in and talk about anything and everything, even to spill the beans on someone who did them an injustice, risking defamation into the bargain.

Yet this time, asking people to confess their sins has an unexpected twist, as his second caller, a woman with a deep, seductive Lauren Bacall-type voice, captures not only his attention but also that of the listeners tuned in for the night.

“Hello Lee,” she begins, “there is something I feel I should confess which has bothered me for many, many years.”

“Go on,” Navada asks with an inviting tone.

“It’s difficult to know where to begin,” she says hesitantly.

“Why not begin at the beginning, if that helps?” suggests Navada.

“Well, it goes back to when I had just finished high school and, I suppose, I got mixed up with the wrong crowd, as my Daddy used to say to me over and over again,” she continues.

“I quite fancied this good-looking chap ... and so did other girls in our group ... but I was determined to have him for my own. His rich blue eyes were penetrating.

“He seemed interested in me, but he was always flirting with some other girls, in particular one girl who I thought was my best friend. We grew up together, went to school together and were always having so much fun when the weekends came around. Sometimes our parents didn’t approve of what we got up to, but it was pretty innocent, really.

“Anyhow, I began to grow jealous of Bobby’s attention for my friend Frankie. Her real name was Frances, but everyone called her Frankie, which she preferred.

“One night we were all at a nightclub in Surfers Paradise and I saw Bobby kissing Frankie in a way that was more than just friendly.

“I felt myself going into an internal rage and I felt I would have to do something about it so I could have Bobby for myself.”

There is silence for about 10 seconds, and Navada chips in, “go on”.

“I’d better stop there, Lee,” she says ... and *click*, the line goes dead.

The studio control switchboard is already lit up with calls, but Navada knows he’s just lost a live one, one that would send his show’s ratings through the roof.

He feels all other callers, no matter what their confessions, could not possibly match this mystery woman’s intriguing tale, which aroused suspicions of a dastardly deed.

But it is an unfinished “confession” and Navada knows he has to get her back on air fast, hopefully the next night. But how?

Even though his thoughts are on her, he needs to focus on his program and the next caller, Neville.

“G’day Lee. Listen mate, I’ve got a big secret which will blow your bloody mind. Holy shit, it’s a bewdy!”

“Sorry Neville, please watch your language,” Navada insists.

“Aaah, apologies mate, it just slipped out. Anyways, back a few years when I was working at the South Tweed car wash, this couple were ripping one off in the back seat as their car went through the automatic bay,” Neville chuckles.

“You’re not spinning a yarn here, Neville, are you?” asks Navada.

“No, no, no mate. I’m fair dinkum. And guess what? I know who they are. It was one of the local plumbers and this bosomy, blonde barmaid who works at the ...”

Quickly, Navada hits the “mute” button.

“Listen Neville, I had to cut you off there because we can’t mention names or places of work; otherwise we might get sued for defaming someone.”

“Righto mate, I get it. But the thing is, they were both married ... to other people, that is.”

“Thanks for your call Neville ... and our next caller is Lucy,” announces Navada, quickly moving on with the show in case Neville inappropriately blurted out some names.

“Allo darl, it’s Lucy. I phoned ya a week ago about me cat Pickles and you promised you’d ’elp me find a cat-sitter so I can go visit me dying Muv’a in Cunnamulla. ’Av ya found anyone yet?” asks Lucy, puffing and coughing on a ciggy and sounding like she’s more pickled than Pickles.

“Sorry daarl, tonight’s program is about confessions. Call the people at Cute Cats. They should be able to help you out.”

After four hours in front of his studio mic, Navada bids his listeners “good night and sweet dreams” at 11 o’clock, as he usually does, but his dreams are well and truly on Miss Sultry.

He can’t get her off his mind as he leaves work and takes his usual head-clearing, five-block walk home along the Coolangatta beachfront, around Kirra Point to his 14th floor apartment with sweeping views across the Gold Coast, its many creamy sand beaches and the Blue Pacific.

It’s springtime and there are several late-nighters strolling the Jubilee Walkway, taking in the fresh, crisp air of the Coral Sea coastline.

Navada is halfway home when a voice from behind calls his name, a woman’s voice. He turns and she approaches, saying: “Hello Lee, I’m pleased I caught up with you.”

“Do I know you?”

“I’m the woman who called you tonight. I used my actress voice just in case you figured out who I was. I used to do voice-overs for TV and radio lingerie ads with my sexy voice. I had to hang up because I felt it would be better if I talked to you in person.”

“How did you know it was me?”

“Because we have a past, back when we were both quite young. What I called you about tonight involves you.”

Feeling a little unsettled at what she just said, Navada says, “Perhaps you should tell me your name first before we go any further?”

“It’s Gloria ... Gloria Broadway. I know I’ve changed somewhat – had a bit of a rough life – but I’m the girl who fancied you when we were teenagers. When I called tonight, I gave false names. You were Bobby and my girlfriend was Frankie. Her real name was Cathy ... Cathy O’Sullivan. Do you remember?”

Navada thinks for a while, but he doesn’t recall any serious relationship with Gloria, certainly not romantic. And he vaguely remembers Cathy.

“It’s such a long time ago but, now that you mention it, I do have some fond memories of those times knocking around with the gang. So, how have you been Gloria?” he asks. “Oh, I have my moments. But I really do have a confession to make, Lee, and I just couldn’t go through with telling you over the radio, what with everyone listening in.

“All these years, since we hung out together with our friends, I have carried this awful secret about something I did to Cathy because I was hurt seeing you and her together. She knew I was crazy about you, but she flirted with you to spite me. She told me she was just having fun, but I didn’t see it that way.

“Lee, if I tell you what happened to Cathy, promise me you will not tell a soul, promise?”

Her revelations really start to unnerve Navada, and he says, “This sounds pretty serious Gloria. I had no idea you were crazy about me. I thought we were just friends. But if it helps, you can tell me your story. But not now, not here. I’m tired and I just want to go home and wind down. How about we meet tomorrow for lunch?”

So, they arrange to meet at a local cafe as they go their separate ways for the night.

But, suddenly, Gloria again catches up to her teenage crush as he’s about to enter the foyer security door to his building, and she asks, “Can I stay with you tonight, please Lee? I’m afraid.”

Even more edgy than before, Navada replies: “Gosh, I’m not sure if that would be a good idea. As I said, I’m tired and I just want to relax, alone. What are you afraid of, anyway?”

Gloria explains she’s been haunted by the soured Cathy relationship and the trauma of it all had brought her undone over many years, to the point she tried to “escape the misery” with booze and drugs and a suicide attempt. She says she has become withdrawn and found it difficult to get well-paid work, which led to her becoming transient.

The radio host’s Good Samaritan nature takes precedence over caution, and he agrees to take her in for the night, stipulating “just for tonight, okay?”

Up they go in the lift to his high-rise pad and, shortly after entry, he asks Gloria if she would like a drink.

“Yes please. Do you have any champagne?”

Navada pops open a bottle of premium South Australian champers and pours a couple of flutes.

“Cheers.” He raises his glass to his visitor. His usual nightcap is a Pedro Ximenez Spanish sweet sherry, but out of courtesy he elects to join his “troubled guest” in her choice of drink.

As he settles into his comfy beige French Provincial lounge chair – looking out at the flickering city lights through expansive sliding glass balcony doors – he sips from his glass and asks, “What happened between you and Cathy?”

“I killed her!” Gloria says in a chillingly nonchalant way that almost causes Navada to choke on his wine.

“You’re joking, *RIGHT?*” he asks with a sense of urgency as he sits upright in his chair. “Tell me you’re joking?”

“I wish I was joking, but it’s true. This was to be my confession to you on air tonight.

“For decades I’ve wanted to tell someone about what I did to Cathy, but I just haven’t had the courage. I know I should have gone to the police, but as the days went by, the months, the years, I kept hoping this nightmare would go away. How silly of me.

“When I found out you were on Hot Tuna radio with your show, I tuned in regularly just to listen to your voice. I love listening to your voice, Lee. Then tonight when you invited listeners to confess their sins, I thought ‘Here’s my opportunity to tell my story without anyone knowing who I am.’”

A shocked Navada is lost for words. His mind is ticking over frantically about what he should do, knowing he has a murderer sitting right in front of him ... and inside his own home, to boot.

“Killing someone isn’t an answer to anything. Why did you have to do it? Surely, there would have been other ways to settle your differences?” he stresses.

With a callously blunt reply, Gloria says: “Because no-one was going to have you except me. You were mine and she had to go.”

“Listen,” he urges. “This has to end, right here and now. You have to go to the police and tell them what you did. I don’t care how long ago it was, you must go to the police. And we’re going right now, even though it’s nearly midnight. C’mon.”

Navada stands bravely and compellingly in front of her and beckons her to do as he says. “Do the right thing Gloria.”

“I’m not going to the police, buddy,” she says sternly and defensively. “I asked you to promise not to say a word to anyone. Don’t betray me.”

“I didn’t promise anything. We’re talking about murder here and you must do the right thing. You must tell your crime to the coppers.”

“Stuff that,” she retorts angrily. “This is a cold case and there’s no body to be found. Cathy’s gone for good. Let’s leave it at that.”

Navada excuses himself, feigning illness from what he’s just heard, and heads to his bedroom’s ensuite where he calls the Triple Zero operator: “Put me through to the police. Please hurry.”

Gloria grows suspicious and sneaks to the side of his bedroom door to try to listen in. She guesses he’s calling the cops.

Enraged, she heads into the kitchen and from the cutlery drawer purposely selects a chef’s boning knife – dangerous in the wrong hands. It makes a distinctive high-pitched steel ring as she whips it out of the drawer, a sound similar in *The Three Musketeers* movie when d’Artagnan draws his sword from its metal scabbard for a swashbuckling clash-of-steel with an enemy of the Crown. *En garde!*

Gloria, with a fierce look in her eyes and intent on maintaining her freedom, heads back to the bedroom door and waits for her prey, the man she claims she was “crazy about”. It’s dog-eat-dog now.

Navada finishes his 000 call and hopes the police arrive quickly as he walks into his spacious bedroom, thinking she’s still in the lounge room.

Gloria suddenly appears at the door, knife held high in her right hand ready to strike. Navada takes swift evasive action, a move he learned at taekwondo martial arts classes.

She lunges; he quickly steps to her side, grabs a handful of her shoulder-length blond hair and flings her heavily into the wall.

There's a loud "crack" as her head slams into the wall. She slumps to the floor, losing grip of the knife, which Navada quickly picks up and tosses out of harm's way.

He stands back for a while looking at her motionless body, clad in a colourful floral top and gold-stitched white jeans with flared hems. He kneels to check her pulse. Nothing!

Gloria is dead!

The police arrive. He tells them the whole bizarre and almost unbelievable story over the next hour of questioning. Chief investigating officer, Detective Senior Sergeant Bill Fogarty, tells him there will be a full investigation, but he says he tends to believe Navada's version of events.

After Gloria's body is removed and the police leave, the radio pro goes into shock as he has difficulty trying to comprehend what just happened. Yet he is satisfied he did the right thing by calling the police.

It's already 4 o'clock and he just paces the floor, aimlessly going from room to room, coming to the realisation that he just killed this deranged, heartless, vengeful woman. Even though it was in self-defence, he nevertheless is deeply upset he killed her.

He can't sleep, he's shaking, he's traumatised.

Dawn breaks and his mind and body are heavily fatigued. Thinking straight is difficult. Coffee, black coffee, more coffee. Will that help?

The hours pass and, drained by exhaustion, he collapses on his bed and, thankfully, falls asleep.

Navada wakes many hours later, around mid-afternoon. The sleep helped clear his head and he knows, through his martial arts training, he can harness chi energies to rise above the trauma of the gut-wrenching Gloria experience.

Time to focus on work, to prepare for the night's talk show, to compose himself for a busy shift of constant callers with more confessions, more whingers, weirdos and wankers, more pompous know-it-alls, more slips of the tongue; more sponsors' plugs. It's full on, but it pays well.

The control room manager begins the finger-signal countdown to ON AIR ...
"Stand by: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, you're on."

"Good evening everyone, you're with Lee Navada for the next four hours ... and to kick off the show, I have something disturbing I want to confess!"