

Dotting every 'i'

by Matt Potter

The network almost went into meltdown, we were so busy googling her name and experience.

"She seems eminently qualified," said Bernie my line manager, clicking on another link.

It was true: experience in publishing, business degrees from Harvard and some place in Switzerland.

And in person she was a knock-out: sleek blonde hair; long legs swathed in silk stockings or woollen trousers; a hint of perfume as she floated by with an expensive watch on her wrist.

"Just call me Amber," she said, rolling the 'r' — was her burr Swiss or American? We couldn't tell — looking each of us in the eye as she shook our hand. "I'm really looking forward to working with you."

"She had a weak handshake," I told Bernie when we were back at our desks. "Almost limp and gooey." I googled *weak handshake*.

Her presence in the building was immediate: a flash of blonde as she welcomed important writers into her office; calm but commanding footsteps on the plush carpet; her voice distant but everywhere.

Soon I felt her presence too: a journal article I had edited was returned from her desk with the words *cunt*, *pussy*, *cocksucker* and *fridge* crossed out.

"*Fridge*," I said. "What's so bad about *fridge*?"

"She's probably just establishing herself," Bernie said. "You know how these high-fliers are."

"Let me check with Amber," her red-haired assistant said, Amber's huge appointment diary tucked under her breasts.

"Yes," said her new assistant — a man with a crewcut — two days later. "Amber doesn't like the word *fridge*."

My fingers hesitant above the keyboard, I deleted *fridge* from the article.

The next week the same assistant stood at an editorial meeting and said, "Amber believes the division's publications are using too many adjectives. They're getting in the way of true meaning."

Silence around the table. I played with my blue pen, gave a large sigh and putting the fine white china cup to my parched lips, sipped refreshing green tea.

"Adjectives *can* be over-used," Bernie said. "We'll put a curb on them."

A week later Amber's new blonde assistant (sorry, the blonde who was newly assisting her) stood up at the meeting we had every week and said, "In the spirit of cost-cutting Amber has banned all apostrophes and commas."

"That's not going to work" I said.

"It'll be cheaper and save time" the blonde said. "And to celebrate this decision Amber has invited you all into her office for drinks now that the workmen have refurbished and renovated it."

"Hot or cold drinks?" I said. The assistant looked at me.

I snuck in some adjectives to describe Ambers office: sleek and white with a view of the city we did not realise the building had. Mainly because a picture window had been knocked into the wall and a balcony added.

"I heard she got her business degree from the Mafia" one of the personal assistants said under her breath as we looked out at the view.

Amber watched as the blonde passed around glasses of champagne. Im sure Amber sipped the expensive stuff while the blonde handed around the cheap shit.

The next day a memo was sent around — adjectives are back it said as it was realised *not* using them actually meant using more words. But instead capital letters — except to start a sentence — were banned.

"But were a medical publisher for gods sake" i said (suddenly glad i was no longer forced to say *publisher of books to do with medicine*.) "Clear communication saves peoples lives."

Full stops at the end of sentences will also be phased out the memo said

“How do we do that?” i asked bernie “Use them only seventy-five percent of the time and then reduce them each week by a further twenty-five percent until we reach the target?”

“I dont know” whispered bernie as we stood at the urinal “Im looking for a new job”

Next week ambers new assistant — a chic korean girl fresh off the korea airlines stewardess programme — stood up and said “amber was asked to turn the profit margins of this division around and she has noticed you are not reducing your use of full stops quickly enough”

“But thats difficult” I said “We dont know the ruling on spaces between sentences”

“Amber has allowed an extra space between sentences to compensate” She smiled and flicked her black hair like she was dispensing relief to flood victims

“So does that include the space where the full stop would have been or does it mean there can now be three spaces between each sentence?”

“Can I get back to you on that?” she said

A memo came down later that day *As a space is less expensive than the ink of a full stop three spaces are allowed between each sentence But no more than three*

“Are they going to spend more money employing someone to count spaces now?” i asked bernie as a small group of us stood a block away from the office smoking the next day I had given up smoking ten years earlier but smoking — amber was violently anti-smoking — was now an open act of rebellion

“And what about indentations” i said “Is she going to ban those?”

“Why is it that you give a woman a bit of power and she turns into a man” said a new intern from the copying room “You can hear her balls rubbing on the carpet as she walks”

“Just keep your head low” bernie said to me “She has her spies and she knows you made that remark about hot or cold drinks”

And then the monthly financials were published and costs were plummeting Sales were plummeting too but costs were out plummeting sales so amber looked here to stay

I kept my head down

I ate my lunch in the staff room and made the usual mess on the table or sang jaunty ditties in the staff kitchen and had my excuses ready should amber discover my new fondness for indentations I even asked ambers newest assistant — the korean girls twin sister — if she had a list of words we shouldnt use

“Let me get back to you on that” she said “I cant breathe without it being cleared first” And then covering her mouth she scurried away sobbing

“She was a nazi before she had her plastic surgery” said one of the managers in distribution

And what about the quality of care? other staff whispered — finally oh finally — as they slunk through corridors and listened out for the roar of ambers new mercedes-benz As a medical publisher dont we have a responsibility to the medical profession and the general public?

Holed up in her office amber dispensed more edicts

No more using double letters

No more italics

No more punctuation of any kind including capital letters

cut out third word every sentence

staf thought hit paydirt she also vwls

bt nfrntly mnthly fgrr vn bttr

when wil someone do something i said that night

on the phone to bernie refusing to speak without vowels *and* with all words included and in italics when i wanted

we should have a secret meting he said agreeing to do the same

we can have it at my place I said only if she finds out youll have to say it was your idea

wr hvng scrt mtng tld vrybdy wrk ts tnght
t plc

"This is my house," I said, standing up at the secret meeting. "And I'll spell and punctuate my sentences the way I see fit."

But no one volunteered to approach the company board.

That night, I lay in bed, eyes wide and head buzzing. I could picture myself marching into Amber's office and demanding the restoration of all punctuation, delivering ultimatums about employment conditions and editorial autonomy and damning her to the furnace of bad and ambitious bosses.

And then I turned and saw my wife, sleeping, beside me. And heard the soft breathing of our children in their bedrooms down the hallway.

And swallowed as I shut my eyes and attempted again to sleep.

And drove to work the next morning with the same overhanging dread.

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"I've changed my name to Ambré," Amber said, flouting her own rules as we looked on. "And anyone not putting in the accent will have their pay docked."

"And how much does she think that accent over the 'e' is going to cost?" I said at home in my soundproof bunker while flipping through the local job ads.

Then suddenly we found a notice on Ambers door: Back in three days.

And sensing a change, we slowly, timidly brought out our punctuation, double letters, *italics* and every third word from hiding.

"I've got a job with the government," Amber said at a meeting she called the morning of her return. "I'm heading the Red Tape Productivity Commission, starting today."

We raised our glasses of left-over cheap champagne and waved goodbye as she drove away in her Mercedes-Benz, towing her bowling alley behind.

Bernie thought she might have been given a fabulous separation package, but I think it was leave or get the sack. It was that accent over the 'e' that turned things around.

Never trust a weak handshake.

