

In the hot seat

by Matt Potter

“Mom said I was going to be something one day,” Stanley said.

I looked up from my notepad. “When did she say that?”

“Wednesday.” He paused. If we still allowed smoking inside — and he had not already given up — he would have taken a puff. And perhaps I might have smoked a pipe.

“My birthday,” he continued.

I sat in my high-backed armchair and felt my grey business shirt sink against the sedate plaid upholstery. “Did your mother ring you for your birthday?”

“Yeah, she called from the States. She's staying with my sister in Sausalito now 'til the fall.”

I took in his sandy features, the individual brows lengthening and thickening, the green eyes sinking deeper into his skull, the pale lips pink and dissipating. His Viking ancestry — by way of Minnesota — was becoming more evident as he aged. Only his short beard seemed new, a winter statement flecked with grey.

“She said she sent a gift but ... I'm not gonna hold my breath waiting.”

I smiled and nodded. I had come to know Stanley's mother well the last five years.

Stanley relaxed his big body into the black leather chair. Padded but austere, square seat and backrest, with chrome legs and elegant stitching, the armless chair — in fact, my entire office: sleek no-nonsense windows; spare masculine furnishings; metal and black leather and dark wood — rendered him out of place and hulkingly redundant. Stanley was, however — perhaps because he had spent so many hours in the chair — unaware of this awkward balance.

I smoothed my charcoal twill trousers over my knee 'til the cuff touched my polished black brogue.

“Why do you think she said that to you on your birthday?” I added.

Stanley sighed and like a cliché, looked out of the window. Through the trees, mid-afternoon cars sloshed through the rain on Hutt Street. "It was my birthday ... she said she'd sent me a gift but I don't think she has and she probably knows I know that ... and so she had to say something good to make up for it." He looked at his hands. "Hey, I'm not gonna get angry about it." He smiled crookedly, eyes grinning. He seemed so okay and so remarkably healthy.

I wrote on my pad, nothing legible, just furious scribble. It was all I could manage. My thoughts fell about in chaos as I wondered, was Stanley finally healing?

"And what do you think she meant by you being *something one day*?" I asked.

Stanley shifted his weight on the chair. "A writer. A successful writer ... a *published* writer." He drummed his fingertips on the soft leather beside his thigh. "You know ... the usual." He snorted, his hands placed back in his lap.

I wrote more on my pad, fevered scrawl now, hand screaming across the paper. My shirt felt sticky against my spine, and I was conscious that if anyone noticed, they would see a wet streak down my back. I looked up suddenly, tilting my head just slightly, a picture of nonchalant concern. "So how *is* your writing going?"

Stanley looked across at the shelf of books I kept behind my desk. "Good, I finished a story yesterday and I brought it in with me."

"That's wonderful, I'd be really interested in reading this new story," I said, uncrossing then crossing my legs again. "Because you seem really miserable now."

Stanley's sandy brows quirked.

"Almost," I jumped in again. "Emotionally dishevelled."

"But my writing's been going ... well." Stanley stroked his chin. "I've been feeling really good."

I turned to my pad and hunkered over it. My back felt relief from the sticky shirt now. Still talking to him, all Stanley could see as I hunched was the top of my balding head surrounded by a ring of stubble.

“Really?” I said. “You’ve spoken before about your writing going well *only* when you are emotionally well. In fact” — and here I looked up again and smiled — “you said that even being *middlingly troubled* prevents you from writing well.”

Stanley cocked his head.

“I’ve read your work when you are middlingly troubled, and it’s far inferior to anything you produce when you’re emotionally well.”

Stanley’s eyes lowered to his lap.

“And when you’re *miserably fixated*, there’s really no point you putting pen to paper at all. Or finger to keyboard, as it may be.”

Stanley bowed his head.

“I say this not only as your psychiatrist but also as a fellow writer who appreciates your talent and wants you to make the best of your unique ability.”

I turned my pad over and lowered it, craning to look under his face, to catch any tears that might be falling.

Stanley sniffed.

My voice sank almost to a whisper, calm and soothing and uncorruptible. “Your face is blotchy, Stanley, and your hair looks scraggly and unkempt. You’re in such a deep depression over your mother lying to you about your birthday gift, you haven’t noticed your deteriorating personal appearance.”

Stanley’s head snapped up. “But I don’t *feel* that depressed.”

I sighed and looked deep into his eyes. “There is nothing more powerful than denial.”

Leaning forward, I picked up a jug of water from the table beside Stanley’s chair and poured him a glass. And wiping the ring the jug left behind with my red silk handkerchief, I handed the glass to him.

“I understand why you wouldn’t want to remember all the hurt and distress your mother has caused you and ruin yet another birthday,” I ran on, lightly patting Stanley’s arm. “I know your terrible relationship with your mother was the main reason you moved to Australia.”

Stanley’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he drank the glass in one, then placed it quietly on the table. He looked at me again, then out the

window at the traffic on Hutt Street, and then back at me. "What do you do with all my stories I show you?"

His gaze was so strong, I looked down at my brogues.

"I keep them in the file I have, from all your sessions with me." I glanced across at the solid metal filing cabinet I always keep locked, beside the bookshelf. "Like I do with all my patients."

"I thought you might rewrite them," Stanley said. "And publish them on-line ... with your name on them."

I turned to my pad, my pen tearing across the page.

"What are you writing?"

"Anything written about our sessions is strictly non-identifying and would only ever be published in psychiatric journals," I said, with I hoped enough pat force and frost to still further questions.

Stanley watched me stand up.

"If you can't trust me, then your entire rehabilitation is in jeopardy."

I watched Stanley stand up. We were almost the same height. We stood eye to eye and it was then I realised his eyes weren't green at all. They were blue.

We stood, waiting. I thought he might kiss me.

Stanley reached into his jacket, unfolded three printed pages, and handed them to me. "My story," he said.

I breathed out as I took them. "Thank you, Stanley." I scanned the first page. "*In the Hot Seat*: an interesting title."

I smiled into his face again.

"I will read it after our session today."

The black leather sighed as Stanley sat down in the seat again.

"Now, where were we?" I said. And grinning with all my teeth, I sat down too.

But all I could think about as we resumed talking were the pages on the table between us, yet another brilliant story Stanley had wrested. I champed to read it. And with just a few changes and a new title, it would soon join all his other stories on-line, under my other name.

