

The Marketing Messiahs

'It's a beautiful view,' Phil nodded to the horizon.

Tony imagined Phil's head imploding and his stupid face ceasing to exist forever. The imagery didn't work. The stranded signwriter shook his head and looked at the toppled ladder twelve metres below them.

'How can the Tonkin highway, a weed-filled median strip, and you be a great view?' At that moment, Tony despised working with Phil. He desperately wanted to unleash his frustrations on his colleague, but he had other concerns. Tonight, for the first time in months, he couldn't be late for his girlfriend's family dinner.

'Why didn't you tie the rungs on?' Tony didn't expect an answer, but then he saw Phil grimace. 'What?'

'I left the work bag down in the truck.' Phil bit his lip.

'With the –'

'– phone, yeah.'

On a stretch of highway far from anywhere, the two men sat suspended on a gantry twelve metres above the ground. Behind them, the massive advertising hoarding glared white in the late afternoon sun as they examined their predicament

'They should invent those things like in American movies,' Phil mimed an up and down motion.

'Fire escape ladders?'

'Yeah.'

'How about inventing brothers-in-law who aren't clumsy with the ladder and remember to bring the work phone?'

'We're not brothers-in-law yet,' Phil looked through his eyebrows at Tony.

'Sorry, mate.' Tony pushed back his cap and rubbed his forehead. 'I spoke to your dad, you know.'

'I think everybody knows. Including Susan,' said Phil.

'She's expecting me to propose tonight?' The colour dropped from Tony's face.

'She'll be fine.'

'You're her brother, Phil. She expects disappointment from you.'

'You know when I have a bad week, I go to the dentist.'

'Why on Earth?'

'It makes everything else seem enjoyable.'

'You might be right.'

Phil slowly nodded his head the way he imagined philosophical people might. Tony watched the highway traffic.

'Why wouldn't they stop and help?' Tony gestured towards the steady trickle of cars streaming passed them. 'They can see us. I mean, it's an advertising board. They're supposed to see us.'

'Do you ever look at these things once they're up?'

'I look at other jobs for the workmanship. Like that one over there for the apartment complex. Not one of ours, but a clean job.'

'Jesus, how much floor space are they offering?'

'That's the phone number, Phil.'

An hour and a half flew by with all the thrills of listening to his Susan's *Eurovision's Greatest Hits* playlist. Tony shifted his weight, the metal grating – slowly heating in the scorching sun – pressed up into his buttocks. He imagined each cheek looking like a waffle. Waffles reminded him of eating, and eating reminded him that family dinner drew closer with every wasted minute.

'We need to get off here, Phil. Your forehead looks like beetroot, and we're not going to make dinner.'

'We've tried waving.'

'And people beeped their horns.'

'What else is there? Light a fire?'

'We'd die, Phil!'

'We could get naked. That's bound to get attention.'

'Getting arrested for public indecency may be worse than not showing up when my girlfriend's expecting a *surprise* proposal.'

'Spray HELP on the sign,' Phil pointed at the billboard.

'Got any spray paint?'

'I've got a pen. If we scribbled big enough –' Phil stopped when he saw Tony shaking his head. 'We could rip the word HELP into the sign.'

Tony paused before saying, 'Without the ladder, we couldn't reach very high.'

'You could stand on my shoulders.'

Tony's eyes widened with fear.

'I could stand on *your* shoulders. I think that might work.'

The next half hour saw Phil attempting to rip letters into the billboard. Work briefly stopped when Tony asked Phil to remove his gravel-encrusted boots before standing on his shoulders. Shortly afterwards, Tony asked Phil to put his work boots back on. The odours coming from Phil's feet after a day in the sun were not pleasant. With hammy socks rubbing up against Tony's ears, he'd soon imagined dropping a shoulder and launching Phil into an unfortunate accident.

'It's like we're castaways, Tone,' Phil declared as he admired his work.

'I think I'll be cast out of the family. You know dinner is starting now.' Tony looked up from his watch at Phil's efforts. 'The L is too big.'

'It just kept ripping, so I thought, the bigger, the better, right?'

'I thought someone might have stopped to help before we'd finished.'

'I still think getting naked would draw attention.'

Not for the first time, Tony ignored Phil and frowned at the traffic.

'Look at them. No one cares. All those drivers and nobody wants to help.' Tony leant forward on his knees. 'Susan thinks I'm unreliable. It's not my fault! SOMEBODY GET US DOWN!'

The traffic meandered forward like a motorized trail of ants, indifferent to human plight.

'What are you needing, son?' A faint voice shocked the duo into excitement.

'It's an old man,' Phil pointed at an elderly gentleman. He stood looking up at them from below. An umbrella rested over his shoulder, keeping the heat off his back.

'Old?' The stranger seemed taken aback.

'Ignore him. He's got sunstroke.' Tony waved Phil away and smiled down at the man. 'The ladder fell. Could you prop it back up so we can get down?'

'Why have you torn an image of the Lord into the poster?'

'Pardon?'

'Did you fabricate those tears?' The elderly man pointed upwards, seemingly quite impressed.

'Phil ripped the cover sheet. It says, HELP.'

'No. I can't say that it does. That's our saviour Jesus Christ.'

'That's *our* saviour, the word 'HELP'. Could you put the ladder back up?'

'I'm sorry, son. Not with my shoulders.' The man retrieved a water bottle from his pocket and took a swig. 'You know that really is an extraordinary depiction.'

'Tell him to get our phone,' Phil suggested.

'Could you go to the car and get our work phone, please?' Tony yelled down from the gantry with as much politeness as possible.

'Aren't you boys hot out here? You need to keep up your liquids.' The man tottered over to the van, stopping once to look back and admire the billboard.

'Is that girlie magazine in the bag?' Tony gave Phil an urgent stare.

'You bought it.'

'Because you asked.' Tony looked back at the man who was head and shoulders inside the van. 'He'll have a coronary if he finds porn in the van.'

'Is this it?' The man held the phone aloft.

'Yeah, perfect!' Tony stood with excitement and relief, 'Now call work for us. It's in the address book under –'

'How would I turn it on? The buttons are rather small.'

Tony's speech slowed as though he was talking to a deaf tourist about astrophysics, 'Press the green button and then zero, four, zero –'

'It's not working.'

'Is it on?'

'Great, saved by Mr Magoo.' Phil slumped back on the gantry.

'I'm not deaf, Sonny,' the man said without looking away from the phone.

Phil scratched his head like a boy waiting outside the headmaster's office.

'Just dial the number zero,' Tony persevered.

'No. I'm getting the eight and nine.' The man held the phone at arm's length, his head cocked. 'I think someone's calling?'

'Answer it, answer it.'

'Hello? I think I hung it up.' The man shrugged an apology. 'It says Susan on the screen.'

'This is impossible,' Tony sighed. Yet as he turned to check on Phil, he noticed two cars pulling up at the side of the highway. A man and a woman walked briskly towards the sign.

'Yes, come and help. Phil, get up.'

As the couple got closer, they started taking photographs on their phones.

'Is it funny that we're stuck?' Tony muttered to himself before shouting, 'Could you let us down. There's a ladder.'

'Did you two create this?' Asked the woman with an air of incredulity in her voice.

'They said they did,' the elderly man answered. 'It's incredible, isn't it.'

'Truly,' the woman stood gaping at the billboard.

'Could you let us down? My friend is badly sunburnt.' Phil and Tony both pointed at Phil's scarlet brow in unison, 'And my girlfriend expects me to surprise her with a proposal tonight.'

'You can't leave? No, you mustn't,' the woman urged. 'You have to meet Father Patrick. I'll call him.' She turned to the second driver, who nodded with enthusiasm at her wide-eyed suggestions. They both started to make phone calls.

With long faces, Tony and Phil watched as car after car pulled over and the congregation grew. People set up tables, brought food, and posed for photos, but nobody offered to help the men down. Instead, the jubilant throng ate and drank while the two signwriters sat parched and hungry. Meanwhile, the elderly man had become a celebrity with the crowd.

Phil muttered idle comments. Whether he had meant to write HELP or create an image of Jesus, *he* was the unsung artist here. He strained to remember Galileo's name and work it into a sentence about being an imprisoned genius, but he caught Tony's eye and thought better of it. Tony had the appearance of a man trying to solve a Rubik's cube mentally; a Rubik's cube submerged in golden syrup and with several stickers missing.

In response to the woman's call, Father Patrick arrived. He brought several cases of photographic equipment, pamphlets for upcoming market sales, and a pre-prepared speech about, 'The miracle in our own backyard.'

'I don't know whose backyard has this much traffic,' Tony sulked.

'Would you boys mind standing way over to the left so we can get a clear photo?' Father Patrick called.

'What if I ripped it some more because you wouldn't let me down?' Tony gestured to the flock below. 'I'll wreck it!'

'That's not the spirit, Antony.' Father Patrick opened his palms to the heavens. 'If only you could see it from where we're standing.'

'I'd love to. Why can't you let us down?'

'Ok, let me get some pictures with you boys in it before the light fades, and then we'll see about getting you down. The Vatican will love this, and I'll be the one talking with them.'

A thrill buzzed through the crowd.

'You know we could always Photoshop it if the light isn't perfect,' one lady suggested.

'Is that so? Haven't we got some fantastic tools –'

'The photo!' Tony screamed in a poor attempt to politely hurry things along.

'That's blasphemy, son.' A new voice, a sterner voice, a familiar voice rose from the crowd. Tony squinted through the evening light to identify the speaker.

'Dad!' Phil stood up with anticipation. 'Dad put up the ladder.' But his dad was only interested in berating Tony.

'And why does my son's head look like a haemorrhoid waiting to burst while you're wearing a cap?'

Tony pressed his lips closed, afraid to make the situation worse with a misplaced comment. Phil's dad – or more importantly – *Susan's* dad, continued.

'You don't think of others, do you? I mean, where are you supposed to be right now? What did we talk about? Is there any chance of this being an important evening in Susan's life? Have you thought of who you might have to impress if you want to marry my daughter? Do you think this stunt is –,' he pointed at the hoarding, '– what is this?'

'That's a lot of questions,' muttered Phil.

Lost in a tempest of thought, Tony could only wonder how Phil's sunburn could be seen from so far away. Yet, looking at his colleague's tanned pate, he noticed a peculiar glow in the dying light. He doubted there was enough aloe vera in the state to help those burns. Phil looked radioactive.

The woman who had called Father Patrick stood shaking her head in response to Susan's dad's last comment.

'This can't be a stunt. That rendering is amazing.' She gestured to the hoarding as if holding a heavy beach ball in her hands. 'It's a miracle.'

'These boys are ignorant. They're pranksters and non-believers. Tony would have done this as a joke, and if not for the ladder falling, he'd be calling the news about a spontaneous miracle. I'm sure.'

'They have pornographic material in their van, too,' the old man's voice came from within the crowd.

'That's terrible,' the woman looked at Tony with sadness. The throng, equally unimpressed, began booing and scolding the pair.

'Shame!'

'Pigs!'

'You can spend the night up there, assholes!'

'This is insane,' as Tony spoke to Phil, the glow from his friend's head didn't look so much radioactive as *halo-like*.

Panic rushed through Tony's veins as he saw another opportunity for the throng to become further enraptured. Later, Tony would tell the police that he had felt something break deep inside, and for a moment on that gantry, he'd let sanity slip through his fingers.

'Phil,' Tony stood with the resignation of a man walking to the firing squad, 'let's get our pants off.'