

**Open Category – Highly Commended 2020**

**ANDO GETS PLASTERED**

**By Cate Kennedy**

I was finally dropping off to sleep when the phone dinged. Three texts in quick succession, and then the ringing. I thought it might be the hospital, so I groped for it and picked it up. Down the line came noise and bonhomie.

“Julie! Sorry, did I wake you up?” Not the hospital. A voice from the past. Stephen MacIntyre, my ex-boyfriend's best mate.

“ Steve, it’s 3 a.m.what do you think?”

I could hear music - AC/DC, the Golden Years - switched off abruptly.

“Oh, right,” he said. “I thought... you’d be up studying or something.”

Sure. I waited, yawning. Soon Stevo and the boys would launch into what they wanted. Back in the days before Siri and Alexa - both, I notice, programmed with obliging female voices on call 24/7 - I was the go-to information channel for these guys. *Julie!* Listen, does three of a kind beat a full house? *Julie!* What’s the punchline to that joke about

*the skindiver on the desert island? Can you pick us up in the morning, Jules? Getting a cab home.*

It was no use protesting that it was the middle of the night, or that I wasn't necessarily up and wakeful from a round of nightshift, or on Earth solely to settle one of their moronic bets. In their script, I was the one wearing a sign saying Good Sport.

"Hey, why don't you come on over?" they would invariably add as an afterthought. "Don't tell me Ando didn't invite you?"

Although Ando wouldn't have invited me to this little shindig, since it was his buck's night. And since tomorrow, Ando, until five months ago the man of my dreams, was getting married. Not to me, obviously. To Kourtney. With a definite 'K'.

The imminent wedding was the reason why I'd been holed up in bed since 8.30, drinking steadily more potent hot toddies and sneering my way through some chick lit. I drained the dregs of my last drink as Steve cleared his throat.

"Ahh...Jules? Are you there?"

"Yep. What is it this time?"

"Look, I wouldn't be phoning at this hour unless it was an emergency," he started, and I waited. This was the script and here came the favour.

"Could you come over? There's been a bit of a...ah...an accident."

"What kind of accident? Aren't you guys at Ando's buck's night?"

"Yeah."

"So what is it? Has the stripper slipped off the cake?"

Steve laughed, a discomforted yelp. Since Ando and me split, none of his mates knew whether I was joking or not.

"Ha, ha. No, it's Ando, actually. He's...um, knocked himself out."

"Jesus, Steve. Throw cold water over his face. Take him to A&E."

Here there was a pause where in a better script my line would have been: *Stuff you and the horse you rode in on.*

“When you say knocked himself out, do you mean he's hit his head?” I blurted. Julie, you pathetic pushover.

There was a silence, and when Steve spoke again his voice was sheepish. “It’s a bit...ah... delicate. See, there’s the ..ah... the wedding in the morning and...well, he’s had a bit to drink...he’s fairly plastered, actually.”

I ground my teeth.

“Julie?”

“What.”

“You’ll see what I mean when you get over here.” There was another silence between us.

“Where are you,” I said. It came out a weary statement, and his relief washed over the line.

“You bloody champion,” he said, and gave me the address.

Oh, I was a bloody champion. Yes. Good old me. I checked my bag for supplies, swearing. What would happen when I was finally registered? Would they be calling me out to make a 3 a.m housecall when they need a panadol? Wake me in the middle of the night to settle some medical dispute they’d had over something they’d seen on 'Embarrassing Bodies'?

I slammed the car door and checked my reflection in the rearview mirror.

My red-rimmed eyes looked back, startled. *This way!* called the lighthouse beacon of my nose. *This way, to the jilted moronic martyr!* I jammed the car into reverse and then took off down the deserted dead-of-night street.

Ando. Mr. Life of the Party. We’d been together three years before he scored a big promotion, doubling his salary and halving his free time. Never mind, I remembered smiling over celebratory drinks. With the hospital internship running me ragged anyway, I’d throw myself into my work as well. We’d emerge at the end of the year with enough saved for a house deposit, easier shifts at the hospital, maybe even a job at a small practice out in the country, picture you upon my knee, a girl for you, a boy for me. We had it all mapped out.

We had it calculated. I use that word because that's how Ando described his affair. After I confronted him.

“Sorry. Miscalculation,” he'd said, palms up, supplicating. “Jules, it's just what happens in the corporate world. Everyone does it - it's practically in your duty statement. She doesn't MEAN anything to me.”

Not much, no. Just enough to move out on me, and move in with her. Sorry, miscalculation. Actually, turns out, funny story, he wanted to *marry* her.

You can't turn off a devoted heart just like that. I met her, the fabled Kourtney. When Ando suggested dinner together, I was weirdly too thrown and too miserable to resist.

‘After all, I want us all to be adult about this,’ he'd said. And craftily chose a crowded restaurant where I couldn't make a scene. Ando in gold cufflinks - bloody *cufflinks!* And my usurper a vision in windswept coiffed hair and one of those femme-fatale business suits, one hand on her mobile phone and the other clamped on Ando's knee like a vise. I was going to be needed a vise myself by the end of the evening, to unclamp my jaw.

What's adult, I wanted to scream, about his and hers numberplates? But I carried it off. I was a sport. As I left Ando sprang up and enveloped me in a chaste hug, reeking of mens' cologne, to tell me so. We used to laugh together over the advertisements for that aftershave, Ando, I wanted to whisper back, you Judas, you untrustworthy shit, you complete try-hard. But I hugged him back and smiled a warm smile, the smile which was the sportive veneer that disguised my frenzied plotting to get him back, after he came to his senses again. I was clinging onto that, still flying a small and tattered flag for Ando, needless to say. Even after he sent me an invitation to his wedding, as if he knew I had no pride.

And no doubt you will ask me why I was still here, racing to his side in his hour of need. Fair enough. It was complicated, but I was working through those stages before serene acceptance of being dumped, and was up to humiliating bargaining. I was up to going lay-down misere with a hand of cards that held nothing above a seven.

Because if I'm honest with you, in some small embarrassed corner of my mind, I visualised the shamefaced doubt of his mates at the buck's night, if I was the one to turn up and fix everything up. *She's one in a million, that girl*, I wanted them to say hesitantly. *Hope you're making the right decision, mate.*

And maybe Ando would have the troubling thought that they were right, and this final example of my extraordinary generosity of spirit would fill him, at last, with unbearable regret and remorse. Would wreck the rest of his life, basically. Maybe he'd be so overwhelmed with this guilt that he'd be grovelling back on my front lawn in six months' time, weeping and clutching a wilting bunch of flowers from the 7-11. *You're one in a million, Jules. I've made the worst mistake of my life.*

Too bad, loser, I could say, snapping off the porch light and slamming the door.

At least, this was the current rewrite, now screening nightly in full high definition sensoround in my head, to keep me sane.

I pulled up outside the house and the boys hustled me inside. Actually, not boys. These were fully-grown men, holding a party in a rumpus room. Under a table amid a chaos of streamers and corn chips lay Ando, out for the count. He had, it seemed, been dancing on this table when he'd slipped on a coaster and gone down. The others had thought it best to leave him where he lay, because they had seen many TV shows about spinal injuries, and anyway, here was Julie, who was almost a fully-qualified doctor, so hey, it was sorted.

Ando, my beloved! His hair, trimmed for the wedding, revealed a blue lump where he'd struck the table corner. Would he be concussed when he opened those come-hither eyes? Would he gaze at me, lovingly administering to his wounds, and croak: "Julie! I've been blind, blind! You're the only one in the world for me!"

Even as I looked down at him, I knew the scene was for the cutting-room floor.

Alcohol fumes were coming off him like marsh vapour. I'd never seen him drunker. And stark naked, except for the fishnet stockings and stilettos.

"You can see why we didn't want to take him to Accident and Emergency," said someone with a nervous, sobering-up guffaw.

"Well, spare me the details." I said.

Ando's mates stood around muttering, looking anxiously at him like he was an expensive vase they'd broken while Mum was out.

"Is he going to be OK?" whispered one as I examined him. My hand, checking each familiar contour for sprains and fractures, stopped on his right foot.

“He’s broken his ankle,” I said.

The effect was electric. They jostled round, hushed with befuddled admiration. “Jeez, Ando,” they said, “you bloody *maniac*.”

“You’re going to have to take him down to A&E so he can get this seen to by a doctor,” I said, standing up and brushing Twisties off my knees. There was a short silence. I was the girl with the glue to fix the vase. I could get them out of this.

“You’re a doctor, Jules.”

“Not quite, mate.”

“Yes, you are. You’ve probably set heaps of broken ankles in plaster. Probably do it every day in that hospital, don’t you?”

“Yes, but that’s not the point.” I said. “You’d be better off postponing the wedding and coming clean about tonight.” Even as I spoke I could tell it wasn’t sinking in. The crew regarded me glassily.

“We want you to do it, Julie. We can’t take him in like this, they’d think we were a bunch of...you know. Look, if it was you on duty tonight in Emergency and we came in, it’d be the same, wouldn’t it?”

I hesitated and, as the saying goes, was lost. I did have everything I needed in my bag in my car. I stared down at Ando's inert form, not quite so boyish now. Pretty damn solid through the gut, if I was being honest.

“Are they going away for their honeymoon?” I heard myself saying.

“Yeah.” They exchanged worried glances. “To Port Douglas. Ando’s had it booked for months. He’d lose a packet if they backed out now.”

I stared down at my ex-lover. Port Douglas, was it? I’d been flat out getting him down to Lorne for the odd weekend off. And booked for months?

“Get a sheet to lie him on,” I said finally, “and get those fishnets off him. I’ve got to get some things out of the car.”

By 5 a.m Ando lay on the couch, beginning to toss and mutter but as yet unaware that his right leg was encased to the mid-calf in fresh white plaster. I packed up quickly. I didn't want to be around when he awakened to the awful truth.

Putting an old-style plaster cast involves a period of keeping everything still while the plaster heats and then sets, so it helped that Ando was unconscious. The plaster cures and hardens. Like concreting in the building trade, this process is called going off. I'd spent five terrible months eating my heart out thinking my existence was in tatters without this man, but let me tell you, as I sat there waiting for it to happen, I'd gone off Ando. I can't explain it. My feelings had just warmed then cooled, hard as a rock. I looked down at him dispassionately, marvelling at the ordinariness of his jawline, the lardy paleness of his stomach. Bye, Ando. Good luck tearing off the garter with your teeth.

"Now look," I said to Steve, scribbling some notes, "Go to St. Pat's this morning and pick up a pair of crutches from this person, OK? And tell Ando to get an X-ray as soon as possible." I handed him some painkillers. "He can take no more than four of these a day for the pain. And no alcohol whatsoever, is that clear?"

Steve nodded, a chastened and hungover best man. "I don't know how to thank you, Jules."

"Yeah, right. Well, you'd better get this place cleaned up. Have a good wedding."

I went out, closing the door behind me. Drove home, stood under the shower until the hot water ran out, used the expensive leave-in conditioner. Climbed back into bed with my book. All the time I tried to imagine what was ahead of the whole lot of them that morning. Ando waking up. Ando groping for the first of the painkillers and wanting to wake up again. Ando telling his adorable fiancée.

At about 10.30 I checked the clock and visualised him standing at the altar, his new black suit-trousers slit up the leg to accommodate his cast. One polished black shoe, one white club foot. I imagined the congregation recording it all for posterity, the slow procession out down the aisle with the crutches, the bride's eyes at the reception filling as they played a bridal waltz she and Ando couldn't dance to. Manoeuvring into the expensive hire car long after the confetti and congratulations had run out.

Then the plane to Port Douglas (aisle seat please), and then ...well. Ando's leg hanging awkwardly out of the jacuzzi in the wedding suite, wrapped in a plastic bag.

I would send them a text on Monday, I thought. Or maybe about Wednesday.

“Sorry - misdiagnosis!” it would say.

And maybe, finally, Ando would get an X-ray.

It would be one of the boys, not me, who would get the outraged phonecall from Ando, or possibly Kourtney, and I hoped it would be late at night, long after they had gone to bed.

“I never thought Jules would have had it in her,” he would rant.

Well, hold onto your hats, boys. Also, I've changed my number. Got a much better plan now. Much, much better.