GREAT WESTERN HIGHWAY

A LOVE STORY

(CAPITAL, VOLUME ONE, PART TWO)

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For Kathy and Alex
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Part One
Nick swiped his keycard through the slot on the wall, waited for the glass doors to slide open, then joined the queue at the automatic teller machine inside the bank’s security foyer. A small group of young Italian couples crowded round the machine’s console. Dressed up for a night out – the guys in tight retro T-shirts and designer jeans, the girls in hip-hugging pants and low-cut tops – they laughed and joked as they squabbled over who would go first. The winner was a woman with black ringlets and gold jewellery that shone in the fluorescent light. She pressed her knee to the machine and, balancing her purse on her thigh, rummaged about for her keycard. The guys snorted and laughed and tried to knock her off balance.

‘Piss off, will ya!’ she shouted, enjoying the attention. They jostled her again.

‘Piss off and let me get on with it!’

As she redoubled her efforts, locks of hair brushed her eyes and dangled into her bag. Suddenly one of the guys pushed her, perhaps more roughly than he intended, and with an exaggerated yelp she lurched to the left, almost dropping her bag. She turned an indignant face to him and fired off a fresh round of abuse, this time more aggressive than amused. Her girlfriends
immediately picked up on her annoyance and scowled at the culprit, who, after pulling a defensive smirk, crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue. They all burst out laughing.

Nick clenched the brown leather wallet he held in his hand, then gave what he hoped was an obvious look at his watch. He was already running late for dinner with his ex-girlfriend, Penny. They hadn’t seen each other for nearly a month, and he didn’t want to keep her waiting. The young Italians, too busy cheering the keycard’s tardy appearance, took no notice of him. Nick looked at his watch again, this time emphasising his impatience with a hike of sleeve, but still it had no effect. He folded his arms and resigned himself to waiting.

Attached to the foyer’s pale yellow walls, just above head height, was a series of light boxes that housed the bank’s most recent posters, full-colour reproductions of typical customers. They shone down at Nick like figures in a stained-glass window, and he was reminded of the images that ringed the walls in the Greek Orthodox churches of his childhood, the paintings of bearded saints in white robes and sandals who held gilded bibles to their chests, the young warriors in medieval armour who brandished bloodied swords at dragons. Nick stared up at the cast of contemporary urban dwellers that had replaced them and scanned the titles that floated above their heads, lines of white type set into hot-pink boxes, each concluded by a big tick dashed off in yellow crayon.

The first poster, financial services for tertiary students, depicted three graduates in academic gowns and mortarboards – one Asian girl, two Caucasian boys – each cradling a ribboned scroll in their hands. They stood beneath the branch of a flowering jacaranda tree, their soft-focus backdrop a blur of sandstone Gothic. All were shod in black leather, the boys in full brogues, the girl in smart anklet boots. They smiled straight past Nick and into a future they had been taught to think of as a challenge, the yellow tick that danced above them approving of their optimism.
Nick heard bips and beeps, the music of computer keys. He listened to the woman with black ringlets enter her information, a melody that grew more and more dissonant as it became clear something had gone wrong.

‘The fucking machine is broken,’ she said. ‘It doesn’t work.’

Her friends groaned and guffawed: yeah, sure it was broken. She was so dumb she couldn’t remember her own PIN number, it wouldn’t be the first time, c’mon get on with it, we haven’t got all night…

‘Well I’m never gonna remember it if you keep hassling me, so just shut up.’

Her protest was met by even louder accusations of stupidity. She attacked the machine again, sending it into a new fit of beeping.

Nick wanted to join in the chorus of abuse, but instead continued looking at the next series of posters. All featured couples in their late 20s and early 30s, the males a regulation two inches taller than the females. The SAVINGS AND INVESTMENT poster showed a young couple snuggled together on an office chair in front of their home computer, mugs of coffee steaming on the desktop of their pine workstation. Dressed in lamb’s wool jumpers, hers lemon yellow, his baby blue, they happily gazed through steel-rimmed glasses into the screen, their torsos wedged together and the hands of their outer arms placed at either end of the keyboard as if they had fused into a single entity. Strewn about the desktop was a set of glossy brochures, their covers reduced-format versions of the posters. The most prominent, placed upside down, featured two tiny figures whose grinning faces Nick could just make out, the title above them lost in a haze of pink and white.

A moment later Nick realised it was the next poster in the foyer series: INVESTMENT HOME LOANS. Restored to their full-format glory, its couple stood before a sunny weatherboard cottage, leaning against each other and its white picket fence. In keeping with the cottage’s country feel, the wife wore shorts
and a tank top, the husband faded blue jeans and a matching singlet that showed off his tanned biceps. Nick found this couple different to their predecessors. Like the others they were good-looking, like the others they had neat hair and even features and eager smiles, but their faces had the thinness, their bodies a leanness that suggested a rigorous commitment to regular workouts and low-fat diets. There was also a self-satisfied glint in their eyes that had none of the modesty, none of the restraint displayed by the other couples, who seemed to be on guard against the complacency that the happiness of home ownership can bring. This Adam and Eve were letting themselves go, allowing a total, instinctive joy to shine in their faces.

There were other couples shining down at him, their smiles dazzling with the aid of backlighting: a couple entertaining in their leafy garden, watering down a carafe of orange juice with mineral water; a couple sitting on the front steps of a suburban bungalow; a couple hugging on the threshold of an inner-city terrace, its newly painted gable shining heritage maroon against a clear blue sky. Nick couldn’t help notice that in each of the photographs something was missing. There were no children. While the posters told a story that foreshadowed offspring as the inevitable climax, they also suggested that it was a bit premature to think of starting a family. First things first: a degree, a partner, a deposit, a home loan and, after a certain sum had been paid off, then the children.

The Italians had started to argue.

‘Whaddya mean it isn’t working?’ said one of the guys, clearly the boyfriend. ‘You forgot your number again!’

‘It’s not me, I’m telling you, it’s the fucking machine!’

Nick looked at them closely for the first time. The girlfriend was beautiful in her anger: flushed cheeks, flashing eyes, she was a real stunner. The boyfriend’s face was placid and handsome, at odds with his thick, sneering voice.

‘How could it be the machine? You’re always forgetting your number.’
‘Look, I’m telling you, it’s the machine.’
‘Don’t give me that bullshit.’
‘It’s not bullshit.’
‘Here, let me have a go.’
‘Rack off, I’ll do it. Just leave me alone.’

Nick was tempted to leave, but decided to stand his ground. His bank did not have another ATM nearby, and he was tired of paying access fees to the competition.

‘Whaddya mean it’s eaten your card?’ the boyfriend shouted.

‘What the fuck do you think I mean?’ his girlfriend shouted back.

‘It’s you, not the machine, you stupid bitch.’

At the word ‘bitch’ the group fell silent so suddenly that this last syllable seemed to echo around the room.

‘Don’t call me a stupid bitch, shit-for-brains,’ the girlfriend spat. The boyfriend paused before replying, realising she had the upper hand. He let her glare at him for a few moments, then said in a more gentle, but still belligerent tone:

‘Well, what the hell are we going to do now?’

‘How the fuck would I know? Don’t you have any money? What do you think you’re doing bludging off me all the time anyway? Sponge.’

It was his turn to be offended.

‘Don’t call me a sponge!’ he yelled. ‘Don’t you call me a sponge, you fucking bitch!’

Then they all started shouting.

Nick tried to discern a pattern in the exchanges of insults, in the volley of reproaches, claims and counterclaims. But it was no good. All he could do was ride the storm that was playing itself out in the tiny room he was more or less trapped in, given that they were blocking the entrance.

‘C’mon we’re gonna be late,’ one of the guys shouted.

And in a flash they were leaving as if nothing had happened. The boys, a pack of lone wolves, swaggered out first, the girls
whispering and giggling as they followed. They hadn’t even taken out any money.

Nick stepped over to the ATM and into the mist of cologne and perfume the Italians had left in their wake. He smiled politely into the lens of the security camera he knew was staring at him, but before he made his withdrawal he picked out a handful of the discarded transaction receipts that spilled out of the stainless-steel box underneath the console. Eighty dollars was a night out clubbing. Twenty dollars was a night in a cheap restaurant. One hundred dollars was a birthday dinner for two with some good wine and flowers. Fifty dollars was petrol, last-minute grocery shopping and a couple of videos. Three hundred dollars was tomorrow’s rent money. Nick stuffed the cards back into the slot and began his transaction.

The machine’s console was brand new, the commands printed on its keys crisp and clear, not yet worn away by the touch of countless fingers that, in older machines, exposed the shiny membrane of metal underneath. On its high-resolution screen Nick saw yet another poster of a couple. This pair was in late middle-age, at the height of the careers they would soon be leaving to enjoy an active and fulfilling retirement. Below the headline CASH MANAGEMENT CALL ACCOUNT, an attractive woman in a beige suit jacket smiled in response to the comments of the handsome, grey-haired executive-type sitting beside her, his head tilted towards her in loving complicity. Like her, he wore a beige jacket, his purple and gold tie mirroring her gold and purple scarf. The screen’s fresh new pixels made them look as if they had been freeze-framed in mid-sentence, as if they could come to life at any moment and carry on their conversation about portfolio diversification, superannuation yields, about the loan their son or daughter may need, conveniently explained in the FINANCIAL SERVICES FOR TERTIARY STUDENTS brochure that lay on the table in front of them.

Nick decided to take out three hundred dollars, enough for the coming week. The slot of the machine grabbed his
card and a moment later the older pair vanished, replaced by a sober menu of transaction possibilities, glowing green letters on a matt-black background. He began his withdrawal, pressing the braille-encoded keys in response to the screen prompts. After the machine had pondered a moment, no doubt seeking authorisation further up the automated hierarchy, the comforting whirr of gears and rollers sounded deep within and his cash peeped out of its slot, ready for the taking.

The bills were like articles of old clothing that had been ironed without being washed. Nick fanned them with his thumb, six polymer notes the deep yellow of pineapple skin, an engraving of Edith D. Cowan, politician and women’s activist, printed on one side, David Unaipon, full-blood Aboriginal writer and scientist, printed on the other. One note repeated six times from a supply of identical notes stored in the entrails of the ATM. Perhaps one of the notes Nick held in his hand would eventually return to this same machine, ready to be withdrawn by him again in the future. The fifty-dollar bill he had used at the delicatessen next door would wait a few days in a cash register, then be deposited in this very same bank. He may well have used the same note over and over again, a rider on a carousel of plastic notes that flowed through wallets and purses, through tills and cash registers and the top pockets of small businessmen, through bank vaults and security vans and ATM machines, then back through purses and wallets where they would once again pause briefly before some want or need pushed them onto their next phase of orbit.

The machine beeped a reminder for Nick to remove his keycard. As soon as he had taken it the transaction menu slowly dissolved and a new poster seeped into view. It was yet another image of a couple, only this time accompanied by the missing ingredient that made it a family: a child. There he was at centre stage, a young boy, flung over his father’s shoulders like a bag of laundry. His face flushed with delight, one hand pulled at the hem of his brick-red T-shirt to stop it from falling while
his free arm dangled against the sky, a rich blue climaxing in a deep purple. Against this dazzling zenith his smiling father, clad in blue denim everything, was ready to hurl the yellow kite he held above his head. Weighed down by his son, the father advanced up a grassy slope towards a horizon line so distorted by the camera’s wide-angle lens that he seemed to be striding towards world’s end. Standing close beside them a young woman in a yellow T-shirt beamed a Madonna smile down at her son. With one hand she held him steady, the other tickling his stomach with her slender fingers. Strands of her long black hair had escaped her red velvet ribbon and, along with the kite’s green and purple tail, floated behind her in the breeze.

Nick was so absorbed by the image that for a moment he forgot he was cocooned within a bank foyer, a stone’s throw from the hiss and roar of Parramatta Road; he forgot he was on the way to one of those sad, inescapable evenings that reminded him once again that he was a failure in love; and he saw himself as the ecstatic little boy in the brick-red T-shirt, his brown fringe flopping into his eyes as his father took one giant step after another up the grassy hill, the muscles of his back straining with effort, his mother laughing in his ear and tickling him, the three of them pulled along by the great arc of string that cut through the air, the kite dipping and soaring until it became a tiny yellow diamond losing itself in the sky that towered over them, that shook and trembled with every step his father took higher and higher up the grassy knoll until finally he could no longer stand the rush of blood to his head, the pounding of the laughter that threatened to shake him to pieces and he begged to be let down, to stand on his own two feet in the Nike sports shoes that, with their bulbous curves and tinted-mirror insets, looked more like giant insects than footwear.

Who wouldn’t want to be the father of such a child, Nick thought as his fingers brushed against the cold metal of the ATM keys. Who wouldn’t want to swing him over your back, to feel him squirm and flail as his feet kicked the air inches from your
face? Who wouldn’t want to be his mother, to tickle his stomach and hold up his shirt and stop him from falling? Who ever forgot those afternoons on grassy knolls, those weekends at the beach, the smell of a breeze or the riot of a sunset forever fixed in your mind by parents hell-bent on staging your happy childhood memories? Who could fail to be moved by such an image, even when the scenario was performed by actors paid to be optimistic on cue, even when it had a title that said HOME LOAN INSURANCE, the tick that fizzed at the end of this headline breaking free of its hot-pink background, its yellow tail stabbing the taut, flawless sky under which the young family played. How could you call yourself human and not be moved by images like these?

The machine bipped impatiently and the family was replaced by another message that requested Nick to dispose of his transaction record responsibly. Nick took it from the slot, slipped it along with his cash and keycard card into his wallet, then walked away from the machine, trampling the squares of card that others had simply abandoned. The red eye of the door’s overhead sensor flashed as he approached and ordered the glass panes to slide open.

Out on the footpath the arguing Italian couple, now alone, was getting into an expensive blue sedan. Painted onto its side in large black cursive letters were the words ‘Rick Damelian BMW’; most probably it was a company car. The boyfriend paused as he opened the door, and over the roof said to his girlfriend in a loud, cold voice:

‘You call me a sponge in front of my friends again, and that’s it.’

His girlfriend, also opening the door, slammed it shut so hard the car rocked slightly. A white pool of light, cast by the overhead streetlight, gleamed on the car’s metallic blue roof.

‘I called you a fucking sponge because you are a fucking sponge.’

The boyfriend opened his mouth to respond, then closed it.

‘Just get in car,’ he snapped. ‘Just get in the fucking car.’
A moment later they were pulling away from the curb, their sour stares fixed on the windscreen. Nick watched the BMW nose its way into the creeping traffic of Norton Street, its tail-lights threading themselves onto the garland of glowing red eyes that flowed down Parramatta Road and into the city.