

# Walking the line

Darryl Dymock August 2012 (QLD)

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With practised eye, Colin watched the gold-capped bottles trundle their way towards the cartons that would soon gently fold them in, two dozen at a time, ready for dispatch to thirsty drinkers across the nation. He liked the gentle clink the stubbies made as they jostled each other on the conveyor, hemmed in by stainless steel, nowhere to go but straight ahead. From the corner of his eye, he saw the considerable bulk of the production manager shuffling his way down the two flights of steel mesh steps towards him. Wonder what he wants, he thought, eyes still on the beer. Seeing the manager on the floor was like seeing the Pope at an unscheduled appearance in St Peter's square.

'Colin. How's it going?' The voice was a growl, raised a notch over the underlying thrum of machinery.

Colin turned, his eyes wide with feigned surprise. 'Mr Fenwick.' He tried not to look at the three chins.

The production manager pointed at the passing parade. 'We can hardly keep up with demand. Thank God for long, hot summers.'

Colin thought the only god Fenwick worshipped was probably the one responsible for company profits. 'Production's going well,' he replied. 'No problems with the line.' As he spoke, he was watching the passing bottles and suddenly snatched one up, held it up to the light, and showed the manager a fine crack in the lower neck.

Fenwick nodded. 'You know we think highly of you. You're smart, keen, reliable. Hardly take a sickie. Bit different from a few others around here.' He tossed a thumb carelessly over his shoulder.

Colin put the flawed stubbie on a metal table with a few others, and turned back to his manager. Where was this conversation heading?

The manager's chins wobbled. 'Some of the older guys are retiring. A few team leaders have moved up to manager. We'd like you to nominate for a team leader course. You've knocked it back in the past. Here's another opportunity.' He adopted a look that Colin knew was intended to indicate he meant business, but only succeeded in making his eyes look even beadier between the folds of fat. 'However, this could be the last offer.'

Colin felt his chest tighten. He tried to keep his voice calm. 'What would it involve?'

The manager smiled. 'It'd mean attending a ten-day course, spread over a few months so you're not off the line too much. I know you like being with the boys on the



team, but you've been here 14 years now, since you left school. This is a chance to move up, make a career for yourself with the company. You've got a couple of kids, haven't you?

Colin knew Fenwick had been looking at his file. Otherwise the manager wouldn't have known how long he'd worked at the company or if he was raising children, rabbits or exotic weeds. He stared at the production line, knowing Fenwick was waiting for an answer.

The other team members would really give it to him if he volunteered for the leadership course. He'd seen it with other workers. 'Too good for us, are ya?' 'Sucking up to management.' 'Why would ya want to do that when you've got the best job in the world here?' And they weren't in jest.

But it wasn't fear of his mates that held him back. He turned to Fenwick, who now had several frowns rippling across his forehead. 'When would the course start?'

'Soon as the company gets a big enough group together to make a course worthwhile. On present indications, about June.'

Six months, Colin thought. Beside him, the gold tops blurred their way past, pushed inexorably towards their destiny. 'Can I get back to you, Mr Fenwick? I'd like to discuss it with my wife.'

The production manager's mouth hung open for a moment, as if such an idea had never occurred to him. 'O, yes, yes. Of course,' he said, recovering quickly. Then he wrinkled his brow even more, and the ripples of fat ebbed and flowed across his forehead before finally quivering to a halt. 'Zara, isn't it?'

So that's what the tsunami of fat signified. Fenwick had been trying to remember his wife's name from the file. 'Zelda,' Colin said.

'Ah, yes. Zelda' Fenwick turned and headed towards the stairs, then swung around as quickly as his bulk would let him, like an oil tanker changing direction. 'Can you give us an answer by Friday? We need to lock this in. Or try someone else.'

Colin nodded, the tightness in his chest now a sharp pain next to his heart. He knew what it was.

That evening he sat down for a drink with Zelda. 'How was your day?' she asked, as she always did.

Colin paused, began to open his mouth to say something, then quickly covered it by lifting his glass and taking a long drink of his company's best-selling product. He wiped the foam off his lips. 'The usual,' he said. 'What about yours?'

Zelda told him about rumoured layoffs by the new government which, according to its own spruikers, was the only one in the western world able to grasp the fundamentals of economic management, a feat clearly beyond its predecessors if the figures were to be



believed, which Colin doubted. He managed to keep the conversation in that direction, and the evening unfolded as it usually did: dinner, television, Zelda reading bedtime stories to the two boys, more television, and then bed.

While he and Zelda were sitting in the lounge room, his wife looked across at him. 'What's wrong with you tonight? You seem jumpy. Fidgeting around as if you've had too much red cordial.'

Colin shrugged. 'I'm okay.' He tried to settle down, but his mind was awlirl, re-running his conversation earlier with Fenwick. Being a team leader had been a goal for years. An unattainable goal. Now the opportunity had come again. The muscles across his shoulders tightened and pulled, as if he was coming down with the flu.

Later, when they went to bed, Zelda propped herself against two pillows and began reading a magazine. In the soft glow from her bedside light, Colin made no attempt to go to sleep. Zelda put down her magazine. 'There *is* something wrong with you tonight,' she said. 'What is it?' She turned towards him, resting on her elbow as he lay beside her in his pyjama shorts.

He looked up at her from his pillow, then turned on his back and put his hands under his head. 'They've asked me to do a team leader's course again. Said it might be my last chance.'

'So that's it. I knew something was up. What did you say?'

'It was Fenwick that asked me. I said I'd discuss it with you.'

She gave a short laugh. 'You know what I think.'

'But Zel. You know what it means. All that reading and writing. I've seen what the other guys have had to do. They give you written tests. Multiple choice, but you still have to be able to read the questions. I'd make a fool of myself.'

Zelda ran her fingers along the inside of his outstretched forearm, and his skin tingled. 'We've been through this before. You know you really want to do this. The only thing stopping you is you.'

Colin sighed. 'But even if I got through the course, which I won't, team leaders have to do all sorts of reading and writing. Managing a team, and all that.'

She circled her fingers on his stomach, and he shivered from her touch. 'When does the course start?'

He grabbed her hand to stop it moving. 'Probably June.'

'June. That's six months away!' She pulled her hand away and wriggled down beside him, her lips close to his ear. 'Six months is enough time for you do that program we saw at the community centre.'

'They'll think I'm an idiot too.'



Zelda kissed his ear, and smiled when he jerked his head away. 'Of course, they won't. They'll give you whatever help you need. And you're smart. You'll pick it up quickly. And I'll help you.' She kissed him again.

Colin stared at the ceiling. 'I remember when it started,' he said. 'It was in year four. Our school got too big. Not enough rooms. So they moved two classes into a hall with two teachers. 60 kids with two teachers. We did a lot of art and bits and pieces. I probably started off in the middle of my class, but by the end of the year I was struggling. And it went downhill from there.'

Zelda frowned. 'What about your parents? Didn't they know you were struggling?'

'My parents didn't really push the homework thing. They believed school was for teaching, and home was for family and doing things around the place. Just like in their day. So in primary school I just cruised through under the radar. The teachers gave me a bit of help and they kept putting me up to the next grade. Then I hit high school.'

'What happened then?'

'Humiliation. Total humiliation. Other kids in my class would say, "Oh, if you can't spell, you must be dumb." I got pulled out to go to special classes, and the other kids would say, "Where you going?"' Colin felt himself flush at the memory. 'So I just hid it.'

Zelda pushed herself back on to her elbow and looked down at him. 'How'd you do that?'

Terry smiled knowingly. 'Oh, you get to work out different ways of getting by. You avoid having to read out loud in class, and you never ask questions. Keep a low profile. Go to the toilet. Skip classes where you know you won't be missed.'

He turned to look at Zelda. 'I hid it from teachers, I hid it from everybody.'

'You even hid it from me for a while,' Zelda said softly.

'Yeah,' he said, and smiled. 'Until I decided I wanted to marry you.' Then his face became serious. 'But no one at work knows.'

'But can't you see that now it's holding you back?' she said. 'You really want to do that team leader role, don't you? And you'd be good at it. The other guys respect you. And you've been there so long you know the production business inside out.' She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. 'Could probably give that Fenwick a run for his money.'

Colin rolled on his side towards his wife, and put his arms out. 'Come here,' he said, smiling.

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When he woke next morning, Zelda was already up, and he could hear the children's channel on TV. He'd seen Zelda reading with the boys, and knew that already Hunter had begun to pick up patterns, running his eyes along the rows as he read. Kane won't be far



behind, he thought. Sometimes, when no one else was around, Colin tried to read the boys' books for himself, stumbling over the words, and looking at the pictures to give him clues to what the story was about.

He lay on his back and stared at the ceiling light, wondering how all the dead moths inside the dome had managed to squeeze through the insect mesh covering the windows and doors. Zelda is right, he thought. It's only me holding myself back.

He imagined himself in the team leader job, no longer doing all the hands-on stuff on the floor, but guiding and leading and helping the team achieve its potential. But when he thought about the course, and having to go back into a classroom, his hands trembled, and a thin film of sweat settled on his forehead. He imagined the others laughing at him when he stuffed up the reading and writing tasks. His stomach churned.

During his shower, he made a list in his head of the benefits of doing the leaders' course, alongside a list of the downsides.

Zelda looked up as he entered the kitchen. 'What are you going to tell Fenwick?'

'Haven't decided,' he said, taking out a bowl and a box of cereal.

'Colin...'

He'd been married long enough to recognise the tone, and he turned to her wide-eyed. 'I've got until Friday,' he said earnestly.

She shook her head. 'I'm not going to say another word. But if you do decide to get some help, here's the phone number.' She slipped a small newspaper clipping across the kitchen bench.

He nodded, but said nothing. By the time he left for work, he still didn't know what answer he would give Fenwick.

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That afternoon, he could see Zelda was dying to know what he'd decided, but all she said was, 'So, how was your day?'

He'd been waiting for her to ask. 'Chaos,' he said. 'Absolute chaos. The line jammed. Bottles piled up everywhere. Fell on the floor. Lost a few hundred before we could turn it off. Never seen anything like it.'

Zelda eyes widened, and she put down her glass and sat forward in her chair. 'Oh, no. How did that happen?'

He took a sip of beer. 'One of the bottles found a new way to try to get off the line. There's a point where the conveyor branches to put the bottles in single file before they go into the cartons. One of the stubbies tried to evade the steel finger that diverts them and headed off in a different direction. Got stuck. Jammed the mechanism. Stopped the line.' He shrugged. 'Simple as that. But it's never happened before.'



‘What did you do?’

‘It was all hands on deck. Once we’d stopped the line, me and the boys sorted it out. Fenwick was running around like an out-of-control keg, wringing his hands and being absolutely useless. But I knew what had to be done. Just a case of getting ourselves organised. And I saw how we could not only prevent the same problem happening again, but a way of speeding up production when we need to. I think they’re going to implement it.’

Zelda picked up her glass. ‘And so, mister fixit, did that experience show you that you’d make a terrific team leader, and that you should do the course?’

He smiled sheepishly. ‘I know this is going to sound dumb, but what really helped me make up my mind was the bottle that caused the problem in the first place. When I went to retrieve it, it looked for all the world as if it had decided not to follow the ranks of all those other gold-topped stubbies marching along in rows towards their fate, but had tried to jump the fence, go its own way.’

Colin could feel his face going red, but Zelda nodded, egging him to finish the story.

‘That bottle didn’t break, and as I picked it up, I thought, that’s what I want to be like. I’ve been marching along with all these others for years, but I’ve got more to offer than that. It’s time I made a break. Tomorrow I’m going to tell Fenwick I’ll do that course.’

Zelda stood up, walked over, kissed him on the top of the head and smiled down at him. ‘That phone number’s on the bench.’

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