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AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING ROSIE TRILOGY



Creative Differences

AND OTHER STORIES



1

Scott

Flying into Melbourne—coming back to earth: time to face reality. It had been staring at me all night, in the form of the laptop sitting on my knee, waiting for me to engage. To invent, from thin air, plus everything that was in and on my mind, a story that would change people's lives. Not least, mine.

When I'd shut it down at LAX, it was displaying a farewell email from my American publicist: *I hope last night went great. I've attached a review from the Winnipeg Free Press—afraid it's another not-so-good one, but we might be able to use 'a promising premise' if we leave out 'despite'. I think there's still a chance a critic will say something positive, just to be different.*

The review was no worse than the others: *writing occasionally rises to the level of serviceable. Solera is sorely missing his co-author.* Any illusions I'd had about my ability to craft prose were long gone. Nor did I need

reminding that I was missing Emily. But the reviewer had missed the point. If the premise had been strong enough, the writing wouldn't have been a problem. Not for the kind of reader who buys *The Da Vinci Code*. And there were eight million of them. Trouble was, I'd had a lifetime to come up with the idea for my first book and only six months for the second.

My itinerary had read like the lyrics of a Chuck Berry song: New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Beaverton. The rock-star comparison ended there. Even on Emily's and my joint book tour, when the London *Telegraph* had called us the world's hottest literary couple and *The Girl* was riding high on the bestseller lists, the American leg had been a comedown.

This time, it had begun more promisingly. Barnes & Noble, New York: half an hour before starting time, almost all of the hundred-odd chairs were occupied. I'd grabbed the microphone—hand-held, as requested: it's a performance, not a lecture—and given my audience a preview.

'Welcome, everybody. I'm Scott Solera. I guess you're here for my book event. *The Assassin's Mistress*?'

Apparently they were here for the heating and wifi. My eventual audience was ten people, including Dana, my local publicist, and we achieved a respectable sales conversion rate of thirty-three percent: three books. 'Don't worry,' said Dana, 'there's a lot on tonight in New York. Two hundred booked in Connecticut tomorrow.'

There must have been a lot on in Connecticut, too.

Enough to make a hundred and ninety-four punters change their plans. Dana sent regular updates: *Expecting three hundred in Atlanta, Georgia; Seems we got the Tribune's reviewer on a bad day; Don't forget it's a 4.30 a.m. pick-up for the airport tomorrow.*

I dealt with it. 'Since it's a small group tonight, let's just sit in a circle and chat'; 'No, you've come to the right place—shall we wait to see if anyone else shows?'; 'Looks like we've got a night off.' The punters who did turn up were more interested in hearing about *The Girl* than my solo novel.

Emily and I should have written a second book together. The critics, our publisher and the ladies' lunch club in San Diego agreed. Everyone except Emily, who was at home writing the Great Australian Novel. Without any help from me. Creating art while I courted fame. Some people would have said we complemented each other, and for a while we did. But as writing together had united us, writing separately was doing the opposite.

Three years ago, in a blast of serendipity, I had found my calling and the person I wanted to spend my life with. Now I was in danger of losing both.

The middle-aged woman in the aisle seat closed her book—the latest Jane Harper. Now we were on final approach, she started a conversation.

'Going home?'

'Yep. Two weeks away. Different city every day.'

She didn't bite, so I pointed to her book. 'Enjoying it?'

‘I am. So often the first book is good and then you’re disappointed...but this is actually better.’

‘You’re a crime reader?’

‘Mainly.’

‘You might enjoy *The Girl*.’

‘Oh, that was fantastic. Didn’t like the film, though. Emily Blunt...’

‘You’re thinking of *The Girl on the Train*.’

‘Oh, sorry. Now I know the one you mean. We did it for book club. I gave it two out of five. I can’t bear books written in present tense. The two stars were for the plot, which wasn’t too bad.’

A part of me—not the part of me I’m most proud of—wanted to punch the air. ‘Well, the plot was my contribution.’

She took a moment to work it out. ‘Oh, my goodness. I’m sorry. But it’s your fault—you didn’t tell me. You’re Emily Glass’s co-author?’

‘Scott Solera. Her name goes first because...alphabetical, and she’s my partner.’

‘I heard that. Lucky you. Do you have children?’

‘No. Not yet. As I was saying, I do the plot and Emily writes the prose.’

‘So, she is the actual writer.’

The put-down aside, there was some truth in what she was saying. Emily was nothing if not a writer: dedicated to her art, sitting at a computer that I sometimes visualised as a manual typewriter, waiting for the drops of blood

to form on her forehead. Tortured. Undernourished. And, until our collaboration, forced to rely on work beneath her station to keep herself fed at all.

We landed, and I turned on my phone to check the Amazon rankings. The ‘excitement generated by my visit’ didn’t seem to have motivated anyone to buy the book.

My companion passed me her novel. ‘My book club will be quite excited to hear I met one of our authors. I had no idea. I mean, we don’t know what authors look like. Except Tim Winton, of course. Could I ask you to sign this?’

‘You don’t want to wait in case you run into Jane Harper?’

‘I can’t imagine I’ll find myself sitting next to her in economy.’

That little blow to my ego set off a train of catastrophising in which I imagined that my fears of Emily having used our time apart to reconsider our relationship had been realised. The thought stayed with me through customs, immigration and the airport bookshops (seven copies of *The Girl*, none of *The Assassin’s Mistress*), to the door of our inner-city terrace. When I opened it, quietly, thinking Emily would still be asleep, there was an envelope marked *Scott* waiting for me on the hallway floor.

2

Emily

Dear Scottie,

I want you to read this before you burst into the kitchen and start telling me about your tour and before I tell you about the problems with the air conditioning and the dishwasher. I'm not great at verbalising my feelings and you don't always give me space to find the right words.

It was good when you called: good to hear your tales of delayed planes and crazy ladies and malfunctioning microphones. I didn't want to say anything that would undermine your energy and joy in doing what you love.

But I've been paralysed without you, sitting at my desk, frozen (though not literally, courtesy of the aircon not working).

I need your help to find my way again...

~

The time between Scott's turning his key in the lock and bursting into the kitchen isn't enough for him to have read the four pages of my letter.

I wanted it to be a buffer, something that wasn't about my writer's block. Except it turned out to be all about my writer's block. I tell myself: *Talk about something else first.*

He hugs me, kisses my head and we look at each other. He's crumpled from the flight, in polo shirt, slightly-too-formal jacket and unfaded jeans. Smiling like he's happy to see me, which is what I should expect, but it still surprises me.

My unlikely man: unlike me, unlike my father, unlike anyone I've been close to. A little awkward, with a hint of hesitancy that he pushes through, but certain that everything can be done, anything overcome, with learning and effort. Smart, full of facts, yet able to be conned into using our first royalty cheques to pay off his conman of a father's debts. With my acquiescence. I must love him.

Part of me wants to tell him that, and I know it would be a good thing to do, but instead I say, 'You skimmed.'

He smiles. 'I read the first page. I guessed there wouldn't be a twist.'

'Very clever. But there's a lot more. Explaining.' I half-laugh at what I'm saying. It's just more of the same.

'I promise I'll read it. But you've been doing it harder than you let on.'

'It's been awful. That letter is the only thing I've written that I haven't thrown away.'

‘Blocked again?’

‘Completely. And you’re the only person who can...’

‘Unblock you. You want me to unblock you. Like a plumber.’

‘Subtle.’

‘Let’s get a coffee first.’

I already have a coffee. In a mug inscribed *Enzo & Sophia 25 years*, which I found in an op shop. One day, I’ll use it in a novel: a small, evocative detail. Scott would build a whole plot around it, then leave out the mug.

‘I’ll make you a coffee,’ I say.

‘We’re two hundred metres from some of the best coffee shops on the planet. In New York I had to walk fifteen blocks to get a decent espresso. We don’t know how lucky we are.’

‘I’m not dressed.’

‘Put on whatever you need to put on and I’ll get my metaphorical plunger ready. Outside, walk, coffee. Have you been getting out?’

‘Not a lot.’

I’ve barely left the house, living on instant noodles and occasional deliveries of vegetables. I’m probably approaching a pathological level of isolation.

‘I’ll wear what I’ve got on. But I don’t want to spend all morning there.’ I can feel myself sounding petulant. At not being able to sit in front of my computer doing nothing.

Scott leads me to the door. ‘If it works, we’ll do it every morning. Start enjoying where we live.’

This is what I told myself I'd been missing. But now it feels as if he wants to organise our lives into coffee shops in the morning and galleries in the afternoon and bars in the evening, with no time for writing.

'Smile,' he says.

'You know how cold it was in Minneapolis?'

We're in the cafe courtyard, it's a blue-sky spring day and my partner, home, wants to tell me tales of his travels—tales that evoke our best times. I try to push back the anxiety. To put the manuscript aside.

'What was your best moment?' I ask.

'Coming home. It's okay—tell me about your writing.'

'No, you first, so I can feel like someone who's capable of a normal relationship.'

I can see Scott wondering whether to reassure me or tell a story. He makes the choice I'd expect.

'A woman drove to Boston from way out of town—not a young woman, maybe late seventies—so she could tell me that she read *The Girl* to her sister while she was dying. She said her sister kept herself alive to see how it ended.'

Scott's trying not to choke up and again I'm reminded that we're so different. I want someone to tell me that the poetry of my words illuminated her sister's final moments; Scott wants the dying woman to hang on to see whether the girl will make it across the flooded river before the stalker spots her. I wonder if she bothered to stay alive for

the epilogue.

‘You had fun,’ I say. ‘Touring.’

He’s about to protest, but he knows I’m right. ‘I like being a writer,’ he says. ‘Touring goes with the territory. Now, what about you?’

‘I started something new.’

‘You got about thirty thousand words into *An Abandoned Life* and...abandoned it. Right?’

His guess at where the words stopped coming is gallingly exact. He must have read some study: *Unfinished Works: At What Point Do Writers Acknowledge Failure?*

‘It wasn’t going anywhere,’ I say.

‘It was for a while. But you ran out of story.’

‘Whatever. But I can’t even get started with the new one. I look at the screen and...I just despair.’

‘Maybe that’s your subconscious telling you that the approach you’ve been taking isn’t working.’

I have to laugh. ‘Subconscious?’

‘So, we try something different. A outline, a beat sheet...’

‘I’m not going to...’

Scott puts his hand up, a stop sign, but obeys it himself. He takes a deliberate breath, in, out, and I’m spared another repeat of *How to Write like a Screenwriter*.

‘I’m guessing it’s about a woman who can’t bring herself to leave an exploitative husband.’ He says it kindly, not mocking.

‘I didn’t say it was totally new. I’m trying a different angle.’

‘Great. But no traditional story. Your mother—the protagonist—*is* the story. Right?’

‘The story is her journey.’

‘Her psychological journey. She doesn’t actually go anywhere. Like, leave. And if she doesn’t change, you can’t call it a journey. Or a story.’

‘I’m just asking for some help in getting it moving. I’m not asking you to tell me what’s right or wrong with it.’

‘And I’m telling you that you won’t get it moving until you fix what’s wrong, which is that it doesn’t have a plot. It’s like...’ He stops. We’ve been here before.

I look at him, dog-tired behind the coffee and adrenaline brightness. His book isn’t doing well, and I’ve nothing to offer him in exchange for the help I’ve asked for and am now rejecting.

He puts his cup down and does a little walk to the counter, then back to the table. Tries another tack, into the wind of my intransigence. ‘What’s the biggest decision this character is going to make?’

‘She doesn’t make any big decisions. She’s stuck.’

‘Biggest action?’

‘I told you. She doesn’t shoot anyone.’

‘But there’s conflict. With her husband.’

‘The conflict’s internal.’

I can guess how this sounds to a screenwriter: *Nothing to see here*. It probably also sounds humourless and obsessive and boring. Like the person who’s saying it.

Scott doesn’t give up. ‘She at least thinks about leaving

him. Give us a moment where she has a chance, and the reader's rooting for her, but she can't bring herself to take it.'

'I don't know if that's going to happen.'

'Of course it is. And every reader will relate. Will I leave? What would my new life look like? What's he going to do when I tell him?'

'It's not that dramatic.'

'It is for her. Write that scene. It'll be great.'

'You can't write bits and pieces all over the place.'

'I do it all the time. If you did an outline—just a beat sheet—you'd know what needed to be written and where the scene would fit. You could be a bit non-linear. Start with that, do the rest in whatever order you want. Check them off as you go. And one day you're finished.'

'You make it sound like a construction project.'

He nods. That's exactly how he sees it.

Novelists can be divided into those who plan and those who write by the seat of their pants, letting characters and story and themes emerge organically. I'm a pantser: it's a way of being, acknowledging that there's something magic about writing that sets it apart from the professions Scott would liken it to: engineering, building, *screenwriting*.

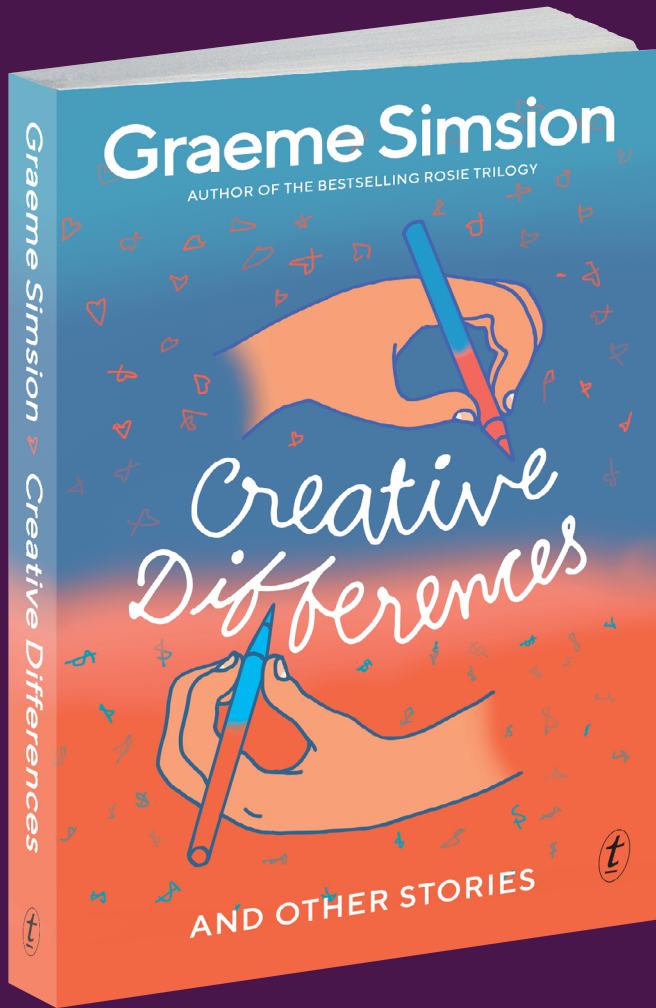
We pantsers have a sense of what we're going to write, but not in the technical, prescriptive, *formulaic* way of screenwriters—including those like Scott who've reinvented

themselves as novelists. Laying it out and locking it down, knowing not only the ending but every big moment, every *beat*, before they write the first sentence.

The media portrayed us as a perfect match: Scott the planner, shaping the story, and me the craftsperson, writing the words. I felt like a painter who'd been reduced to colouring in Scott's outlines.

Now, as I try to find my own way, in my own way, it's becoming apparent that the help I've been counting on will only come if I do it his way.

But afterwards, when Scott has set out on his daily walk, I think about my character weighing the possibility of leaving, imagining a new life, and it feels like something I could work towards. Organically.



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