

the  
Helpline  
Katherine  
Collette



TEXT PUBLISHING MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

# 1

The night before I started work, Sharon called. She was as encouraging as always.

‘You’re still planning on going? It’s not too late to change your mind.’

‘Of course I’m going. I can’t wait, I’m so excited.’ This was an overstatement but contradicting Sharon is a kind of compulsion. Like a form of Tourette’s.

She sighed. ‘You know, when that insurance place gave you the flick I hoped you’d see the light. Take some time out and think about what you really want to do.’

‘They didn’t give me the flick,’ I said. ‘I tendered my resignation, and they were quite upset about it.’

‘I mean, you’re not stupid. You’re not great with people, obviously. And you’re a bit of a self-promoter. But that’s the

Douglas in you.' She says it casually, like the Douglas family has been a feature of my existence, but that's not the case. I've never met my father, he left before I was born. I try not to take it personally; it was her he was getting away from.

I checked the clock. 'I better go. I have to...get to bed.'

'Now? It's seven-thirty.'

'The early bird gets the worm, Sharon.'

'Oh, please, not the early bird again. The one I feel sorry for's the poor bloody worm. That worm got out of bed early too, for all the good it did...'

I didn't hang up the phone, not officially. I put it face down on the table and left the room. Sharon could be very sympathetic to things like hypothetical worms. Not so much daughters.

It was raining in the morning, which I anticipated. I brought with me an umbrella that was very large, and very waterproof. When I got out of the car and walked towards the front doors of the town hall, it covered me, my disposable hooded poncho, the matching pants *and* my wheeling briefcase.

Unfortunately, my timely arrival had not taken into account the opening hours of reception and, as it was 8:57 am, the sliding glass doors remained stubbornly inert.

Lucky I had a sudoku in the inner pocket of my jacket. I wiggled one arm from the sleeve of the poncho and manoeuvred inside the plastic sheath to get it out. Then I stood and filled it in.

This was called: Making the Best of Things. I'd become a seasoned veteran of Making the Best of Things these

last few months. Specifically, since the day I left Wallace Insurance.

About a year ago, just after Easter, Peter called me in to his office. He and I used to meet there on Friday nights after everyone else went home. I'd stay back filing difficult claims and drafting advisory notes for my inferiors, while they laughed and joked over knock-off drinks in the kitchenette downstairs.

During the week Peter could be gruff. He was under a great deal of stress—as manager, he had a lot on his plate. But on Friday nights, between 7:32 pm and 8:17 pm (approximately), he was a different person. I'd sit in his chair and he'd massage my shoulders. He was a lazy masseur—maybe he'd lost some of the strength he once had in his hands—but it was nice to be touched. I'd feel my back soften, the knots unravelling, and then he'd say how much he liked me and how smart I was. 'Germaine,' he'd say, 'you're the only one with any intelligence around here.' He told me that *several* times.

But the last time I saw Peter was not on a Friday night; it was a Wednesday afternoon. And it was not only him in the office; Helen from the HR department was also present.

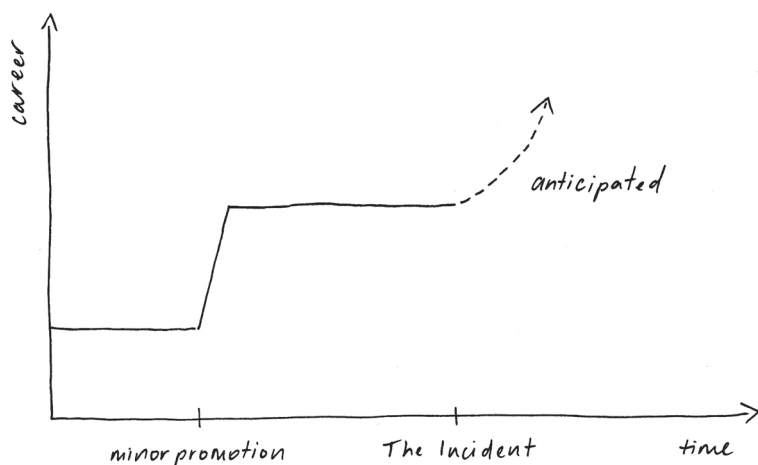
I wasn't worried. There'd been a recruitment process; I was pretty sure they were going to tell me...I thought it was good news, as shown in figure 1 (see over).

But when I entered the room it had an air of formality that made my skin prickle.

'Germaine,' said Peter. His voice was stiff. 'This has been a very difficult decision. We had lots of high-quality applicants

and some of them had been team leaders before.’ His eyes wandered to Helen from the HR department, who gave an encouraging nod. ‘And I know you’ve been here before too, Germaine. I know you’ve been down to the last few more than once.’

### 1. Career Trajectory (Anticipated)



Four times, in fact, in the seventeen years I’d been at Wallace Insurance (five as Senior Mathematician). Once upon a time there were *six* mathematicians, one whole department, but the others had moved on and their replacements were statisticians and computer programmers. I was the last of the old guard, and it was my time, my turn.

And Peter knew that. We’d talked about it, of a Friday. He’d *intimated* things were about to change.

But now look at him. He was perspiring. Little beads of sweat had appeared on his brow, highlighting the silver regrowth at the hairline. ‘Did I say it was a difficult decision?’

It was a very difficult decision but *unfortunately*—’

I don’t know what he said after that because I stopped listening but I got the gist of it, and the gist was they were promoting Susan Reynolds from the Customer Service team.

‘But I’m older,’ I said, ‘and I’ve been here longer. I have seniority.’

‘Actually, no,’ said Helen. ‘Susan will have seniority.’

I looked at Peter.

Peter looked away.

‘We don’t want to waste your skills on managing people, Germaine,’ said Helen. ‘We want someone like you sitting in a room crunching numbers all day long. Not everyone can do the sums, you know. But you can.’

I said, ‘But...Susan doesn’t know basic calculus. Her appreciation of polynomials is worryingly limited.’

Helen used the soothing voice. ‘I know...It’s hard. And Germaine, you are a very valued employee.’

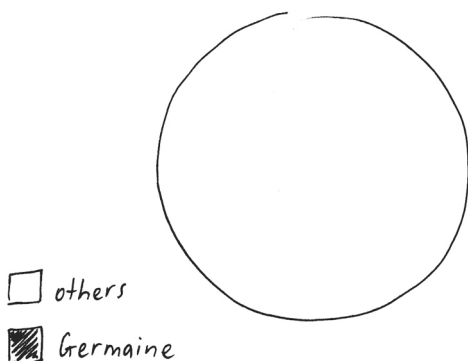
I said if I was so valued, maybe they’d like to give me a pay rise? Helen said they weren’t in a position to increase my wages but perhaps she could see about some movie tickets. To acknowledge all my hard work.

There was some conjecture about what happened next. As I recall, I expressed a degree of disappointment and asked them to reconsider.

Helen and Peter alleged I kicked the table over. They claimed I called Peter an expletive—a word I would never use—and exited the room in such a manner that the door required attention from the Maintenance Department. That

is not my recollection. For clarity, in figure 2, I have accurately apportioned blame.

## 2. Persons at Fault for The Incident



In any case, the next morning my security pass didn't work. Helen informed me through the intercom that they'd accepted my resignation and requested that I not contact Peter.

In the search for another job I approached every insurance company in Melbourne, Sydney and Adelaide, outlining my capabilities. I explained that given a few simple data points I could estimate the probability—using a calculator and pencil, no less—of any conceivable scenario. I could say with 93 per cent accuracy that a 68-year-old smoker (male) on holiday in Thailand would lose his wallet within a week of arrival. I could tell them a family of four from Melbourne en route to the Gold Coast was unlikely to miss a flight but highly likely to require medical assistance at some point. Age, place of residence, claims history—whatever the variable, I could make the numbers not only sing, but extemporise in

four-part harmony. I could devise algorithms that estimated the likelihood of an event occurring and cross-reference this against the cost of that occurrence. I could identify the sweet spot, the point at which we were insuring people for things that wouldn't happen and not covering them for things that would. 'I can save you millions,' I assured them—correctly.

They were, to a person, unconvinced. It seems people no longer understand what mathematics is and uniformly fail to see the possibilities it presents. 'We've got computers for all that,' they said. And: 'Can you do Twitter?'

I had to broaden the search, sending letters for positions in finance, bookkeeping, payroll and real estate but it was all for nothing. Not one phone call; not one interview.

I went for a job in the café down the road.

'Why should we hire you, Germaine?' said the manager, whom I'd hitherto avoided because his lattes were always lukewarm.

'Well, Graham,' I said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster, 'I think you know what a people person I am.'

The arsehole hired some other people person.

As each month passed, life seemed to get bleaker. It wasn't just that no job meant no money, and not going anywhere and not speaking to anyone. It meant...no Peter.

I sat on the couch watching old sudoku competitions on YouTube and eating beans out of the can.

Enter (eventually) Cousin Kimberly.

'Auntie Sharon says you're having a breakdown.'

'I can't hear you, Kimberly. It's a terrible line.'

'Might be able to get you a job at the council. I know the



mayor. Verity and I go way back.'

'Something in management? I'd like to be a team leader.'

'You'd have to promise not to fuck it up, Germaine. Promise you won't be weird. No asking questions and no arguing. You just shut up and do whatever it is they tell you to do.'

At eight minutes past nine, the disposable poncho and pants had been removed, folded, slipped into a ziplock bag and secured in my briefcase. *Then*, the doors to reception finally slid open. Two women had appeared and were sitting at the desk. Neither looked the slightest bit sheepish. 'Hello,' called one. She smiled brazenly. 'You're early,' said the other, without a hint of irony.

I gave a chastising smile, which, in hindsight, was probably too subtle. The women were oblivious.

'I'm Germaine Johnson,' I said. I expected they would have heard of me, being the cousin of the mayor's oldest friend, but their faces remained blank. Perhaps this was their default position; it was difficult to say.

'Here for Francine Radcliff,' I added. Francine was my new manager. She was in her fifties and had frizzy hair and big teeth. In my interview she'd worn a brown dress and the kind of ergonomic shoes you get at the chemist, the ones with the built-in orthotics.

With what appeared to be considerable effort, the one holding the phone receiver placed a call and Francine appeared a few minutes later, sticking her head through the security doors like a turtle peering out of its shell.

‘You’re here,’ she said.

‘I’ve been here for ages. Since at least a quarter to.’ We went inside.

I’d been in the staff area for the interview but this time it seemed smaller and sadder. Low partitions formed a corridor and on either side were cubicles. Neat little boxes, one after the other.

‘We’re a bit short on space at the moment,’ said Francine. ‘We used to be down the other end but last week they decided to move us. The team’s still adjusting to the new layout.’

We turned a corner and wound our way through the partitioned maze. I kept waiting for Francine to stop and point out my seat. I was prepared to appear enthusiastic or, at the very least, not horrified when this occurred but she didn’t stop. She didn’t slow down, and it struck me that perhaps the mayor had moved the team, anticipating my arrival? Perhaps she felt I ought to sit somewhere a little more salubrious? It wouldn’t be the first time I’d had an upgrade.

At Wallace I’d had my own office—I wasn’t really senior enough but Peter said it was better that way—and I loved it. Often I went in early just to soak it up. I’d sit in silence and imagine the future, spending time perfecting each part of the fantasy, restarting when I came up with additional good bits that needed to be slotted in. One day, I’d have a whole team that reported to me. One day, the people upstairs would say things like *Don’t know what we did before you, Germaine*, or *What a great idea, Germaine*. I’d have special open-door times when people could come and ask me questions or get my

opinion on things. I'd be the one with the answers if there was a problem. *Germaine will know*, they'd say. *Germaine should be able to answer that.*

As it was, no one much did come to visit. I kept the door open permanently so I could participate in conversations but the people around me seemed to talk in whispers. I had to come out and tinkle a bell if I wanted to make an announcement or tell a funny story.

Francine and I kept walking. 'How's the mayor today?' I said. I thought Francine might have a special message for me but she didn't seem to.

'The mayor? Fine, I guess.'

Our feet padded softly against the carpet.

'You know,' said Francine. 'You won't even notice the space after a while, Germaine. You'll be too busy answering the phone. Some days I think every senior citizen in the country is trying to get through.'

When Francine had called and said they had an opening for someone interested in working with old people I thought it was a joke, some elaborate Gotcha. 'Very funny, Kimberly,' I said and went to the mirror to fluff out my hair. I didn't want a flat bob if cameras appeared and started to film my reaction.

But it was not a joke.

At the interview, Francine explained the position was on the Senior Citizens Helpline, which was a number old people could call if they needed help showering or cooking or whatever it was they couldn't do for themselves. This initial description made me shudder. I didn't want to clean toilets or towel anyone's crevices dry.

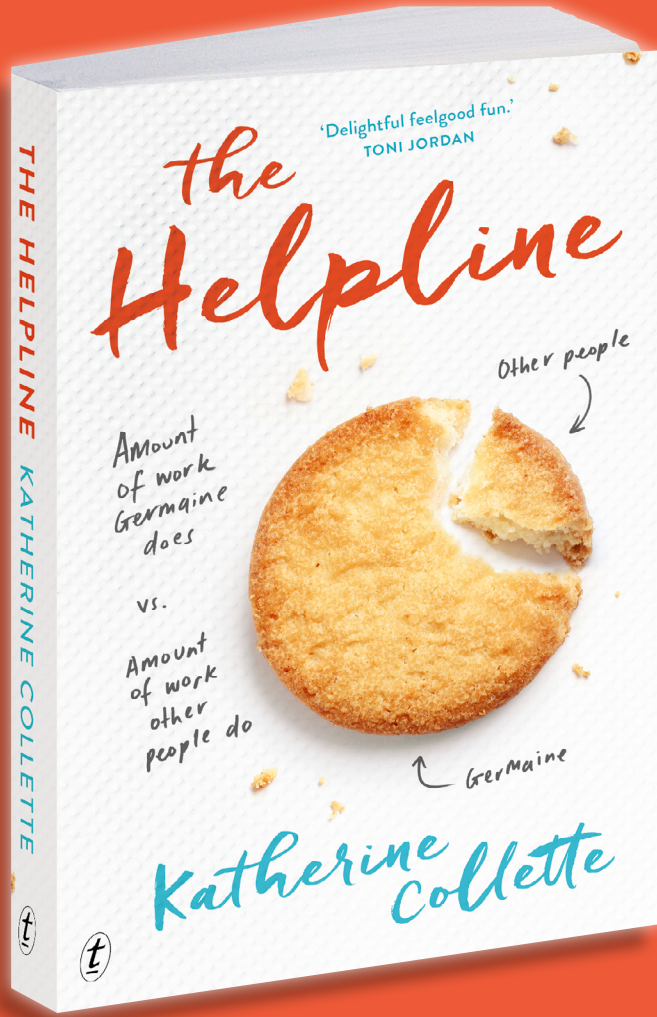
But Francine said that wasn't how it worked. I wouldn't have to *do* the things that needed doing, I just had to organise for them to be done.

'And a lot of people don't even need anything,' said Francine. 'They're lonely and they just want someone to talk to. In fact, that's probably the most important skill you can have in a position like this: the ability to listen. And empathy. People really open up over the phone, they'll tell you all sorts of things. You get someone's whole life story some days.'

'And what would my key performance indicators be?' I said. 'Do you operate on a bonus system? I'm very motivated by incentives.'

I heard Francine swallow. 'The pay is twenty-five dollars and twenty-seven cents an hour,' she said.

I accepted the position.



## Loved this extract?

Learn more at [Text Publishing](#)

Taken from *The Helpline* © Katherine Collette, 2018.  
First published in Australia by the Text Publishing Company.

