

SHE'S HAVING A LAUGH

→ 25 OF AUSTRALIA'S FUNNIEST WOMEN ←
← ON LIFE, LOVE AND COMEDY →

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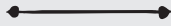
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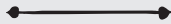
Annabel Crabb



Idiot 2.0



“It was only when I eased the oven door open that the faintly chemical smell nagging at the back of my sinuses began to make sense. Lying on the top oven rack, with a dreadful flabbiness, was an Apple MacBook. Not even mine, by the way. It was my partner’s.”





I've never been any good with communications infrastructure. Don't misunderstand me – I love it desperately. Every time some new gewgaw comes on the market, I want it with the intensity of a five-year-old lobbying for a guinea pig.

Unfortunately, any device unlucky enough to land in my lust-palsied hands is almost certain to meet a fate very similar to that of the guinea pig. I have slaughtered more laptops than I can remember. One of them died when an especially glutinous brand of iced coffee was poured with lethal accuracy into its innards – by me, I should add.

I accidentally dropped another laptop, in 2006, on the street outside a particularly fetid Cypriot motel as – six months pregnant – I fled the attentions of its manager, a full-time hospitality employee and part-time fat-lady fetishist. (The subsequent negotiations, whereby he found the laptop and delivered it by motorbike to the airport and I paid him about \$100 and forgave him even the most offensive of his peeping-Tom activities, I prefer to forget.)

By far the worst of the laptop crimes, though, happened in 2007, when – returning to my house after a family visit to my home state of South Australia – I felt a sudden and inexplicable urge to bake an apple pie. It's silly to resist these urges, so after setting the oven to preheat,

I sliced and sugared and rolled and greased for a busy thirty minutes or so. It was only when I eased the oven door open that the faintly chemical smell nagging at the back of my sinuses began to make sense.

Lying on the top oven rack, with a dreadful flabbiness, was an Apple MacBook. Not even mine, by the way. It was my partner's, which – in a moment of what even for me must qualify as quite extraordinary idiocy – I had hidden in the oven as we vacated the house a fortnight earlier.

What is going on in the brain of a person when she puts a laptop in an oven? I ask non-judgementally; I really am interested. Having grown up in country South Australia where hardly anything was ever locked, and if it was, the keys were always in the fuse box, perhaps I've never got over my feeling that, in the city, you need to make an extra effort. Just how this translates in terms of the oven scenario, I'm not sure.

The poor laptop was, as you would expect, in terrible shape after thirty minutes in a moderate oven. But it fought bravely: once it cooled to room temperature, it actually managed to get online and evacuate key files. You couldn't see much, owing to the screen's brown and bubbled state, but it definitely managed to rescue some pictures of my baby daughter, which is probably more than I could reasonably have hoped for under the circumstances.

But it's not just the hardware that gets me into trouble, to be honest. It's the whole concept of unsupervised electronic communications.

This was demonstrated brutally to me back in the year 2000, when I was in Canberra working for Adelaide's *The Advertiser* as its second-stringer federal political reporter. My Canberra stint for *The Advertiser* was a reward for the year or two that I had previously spent reporting on the South Australian Legislative Council, still one of the most ornately demented parliamentary institutions it has ever been my

privilege to monitor. Like many upper houses, the Legislative Council (with its forgiving electoral structure) was a repository for Australian Democrats, single-issue cranks and major party representatives who – while undeniably capable/worthy/owed a favour – could not possibly be presented as a candidate for a Lower House seat on account of the fact that they would frighten children.

My favourite was a Labor MLC called Trevor Crothers, a gentleman who combined the physique of Jabba the Hutt with the voice and sensibilities of Brendan Behan. Mr Crothers generally began drinking and smoking early in the day; by question time, his already treacly Irish brogue had broadened into something that would strike fear into the hearts of even the most intrepid Hansard reporters. But he was something of a poet, and a thinker – and, as he reminded me often, if somewhat incredibly, and usually through a blue cloud of fag smoke in his office: ‘I used to be an athlete of some repute.’ He once delivered an entire grievance speech on the matter of ‘Human Greed’. There was a widely told but poorly sourced story concerning a study tour he took to New Zealand, in which he set his hotel room on fire thanks to an incautious late-night cigarette; he is dead now, I am very sorry to report.

Anyway, in late 2000 I left *The Advertiser’s* Canberra bureau to migrate across the corridor to *The Age*. This was not a significant move in terms of geography, but in terms of culture it was a big deal; leaving News Limited for the pagan (and, it was whispered, hilariously overpaid) expanses of the Fairfax empire.

My *Advertiser* editor, Mel Mansell, responded sportingly to my defection. That is to say, he peppered me with calls advising me that my stories in *The Age* were limp, pathetic, poorly written and an

embarrassment. He delighted in alerting me to instances in which I had been beaten by a rival News Limited publication. The phrase 'Fairfax wanker' – ever a popular one in News Limited corridors – was regularly deployed.

Email was still a relatively new phenomenon at this stage, and at News Limited in the year 2000, journalists had only just received the computer upgrades that allowed them to use internet and email from their own terminals. Mansell was all over the technology; at least once a week, he'd triumphantly send me an email pointing out some crushing deficiency in a story I'd written and I would strike back with some withering denunciation of *The Advertiser's* seasonal obsession with the Crows, or similar. All very jolly. My new editor-in-chief, Michael Gawenda, was a man whom I'd met only briefly; as a low-ranking political reporter in the Canberra bureau, I was hardly on his radar.

One day, a journalist colleague of mine – Jason Koutsoukis, someone whose serial disregard for prudence may have contributed to his subsequent career as a foreign correspondent in the Middle East – showed me an incredible website. It was an email falsification service, effectively; a site that generated emails purporting to have been sent by anyone the user chose. Even Koutsoukis counselled caution in the use of this diabolical resource; he had never used it, he told me. But in the foolish recesses of my own brain, an idea was already taking form.

Several days later, on a Friday, having received delivery of a fresh electronic assault from my former editor, I took steps. I visited the evil website and punched 'Create Email'. Fingers quivering with the excitement that invariably accompanies a really excellent prank, I typed in Mansell's email address in the 'To' field.

I know what you're thinking. And no: I wasn't stupid enough to type my new editor's email address in the 'From' field. Good grief! What do you take me for?

No, the email address that I typed in the 'From' field was a shrewdly rearranged simulacrum of Michael Gawenda's email address. Close enough to look as though it might indeed be his address, but different enough (his Christian name spelt out, his surname capitalised) to avert disaster, should my quarry be impulsive or foolish enough to hit 'Reply'. As you will no doubt intuit from the foregoing, I'm not an idiot or anything.

In the message field, I inscribed the following immortal words:

Mansell! Stop bothering my fine new Canberra recruit, whom I consider to be an ornament to journalism. Having rescued her from your two-bit, laughable excuse for a newspaper, I would now be much obliged if you would cease your grubby attempts to malign her work. She's out of your league, squire.

You hear me, Mansell?

Yours sincerely,

Michael Gawenda

PS If you see me coming, you'd better run.

And then I hit 'Send'.

Perhaps you are ahead of me here. Perhaps you will already have guessed that even fifteen years ago, the Fairfax mail system was intelligent enough to redirect messages to recipients whose names had been even quite concertedly misspelt. Meaning, of course, that when an Adelaide newspaper editor received what appeared to be quite an

aggressive email message from a Melbourne-based competitor, and quite understandably replied to it with a one-word response ('Huh?'), the response winged its way – not to the comforting anonymity of the internet's dead-letter department – but with a horrible accuracy to the inbox of my new employer.

So confident was I of my ruse's utter watertightness that I tripped off for the weekend without a second thought, beyond the odd rich giggle as I pictured my old editor receiving the message. Even when he rang, reporting that he had received a call from Gawenda's office, I assumed that he was bluffing my bluff and proudly refused to rise to the bait.

It was only on the Monday, when *The Age's* Canberra receptionist cordially informed me that the red light flashing on Line One was the editor's office for me, that the penny began its southward trajectory. It was the managing editor, a tough but fair – and on this occasion, genuinely puzzled – man, who had hired me in the first place. 'Annabel,' he began. 'I'm sorry to trouble you, but a very strange email has turned up, and we're not sure what to make of it.'

As he described the exchange, I felt the primordial instincts of fight and flight do battle within me. Could I brazen this out? Could I ever look this man, or my editor-in-chief, in the eye again? Was it in any way possible that I could feign ignorance of the whole affair?

I'll never know if such evasive action might have worked. As soon as my interrogator drew breath, I cracked like a rotten twig and confessed. I told the whole story. I still feel a pink flush of blood to my pressure points, even now, as I recall my reedy and beseeching narrative; the way, in the face of his lengthening silence, I talked faster and faster.

‘It was this joke, really ... there’s a website ... never thought it would ...’ and so on. In the end, my ignoble tale told, the telephone line gave no clue as to its reception beyond an unpromising crackle. ‘I, er ... erm, does this mean I’m getting the sack?’ I ventured.

‘What?’ He sounded genuinely flummoxed. Probably by the evidence he had just received of the dangerous strategic weaknesses in his Canberra team. ‘Um. I don’t know. Why don’t you get back to work?’

I did, fervently hoping that some hideous national disaster would intervene to spare my mangy hide. Perhaps it did. I never heard another word, although the incident will always remain, for me, the high-water mark of my own idiocy. And such gauges are always useful.