

M I C H A E L M E E H A N

A NOVEL

BELOW
THE
STYX


ALLEN & UNWIN

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For Sheila

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‘YOU ARE,’ SHE SAID, ‘A LOUSE.’ IT WAS THE WORD THAT HURT. IT WAS the word, indeed, that set the infernal thing—the blunt object in question—into its fatal motion. Her opinion, I was long aware of. I had lived with it long enough. She knew that the word would hurt because I once told her it would. As the arguments grow old, we grasp about for refreshment, for new ways of twisting the knife. Without great effect. It’s the old insults, the old jibes, lurking deep in their furrow, that really bite. The deep griefs of a long, sometimes intimate relationship. Intimacy! Therein lies the trap. You do admit, in fonder moments, the gaps, the lacks, the secret hurts. The mood then shifts, and all you’ve done is stockpile ammunition.

It was only after I came across her rummaging in my black plastic bags that she first used the word. Martin Frobisher, as louse.

The word 'louse', you see, has associations. It was an expression of my father. A louse was a person without principle. A human parasite. Always a louse, singular. Never the plural. Once you started talking about lice, it all got too close to the real thing. One 'flaming louse' after another, and a whole train of 'lousy rips', passed through my childhood; immoralists all of the darkest hue, but more usually parking inspectors, council employees, tax gatherers, hangmen and other forms of public service pestilence.

I struck her. Or at least the object struck her, with me, unfortunately, and as I have already explained in great detail to Clive Partington, attached to the other end of it. For this, I am in prison. This is the core of my story. The reason, in fact, for writing. The story of two sisters, my wife Coralie and Madeleine, the wife of Rollo. The story of my life.

The object was an epergne. What is an epergne? I hear you ask. If you had asked my father-in-law, Ernie, in happier days, he would have taken you aside, tears of gratitude welling in his eyes, and lectured you at fond and foolish length on the history of the epergne, its classical origins, its imperial antecedents, the growth of the native industry, the place of epergne design in the evolution of Australian decorative arts, the gradual use of native insignia, the sorry decline in the art of the epergne in the century of the common man. The epergne is, in short, a large, unwieldy object designed to suspend delicacies—usually fruit—above the table. Equipped with

a column (Doric, Ionian, Corinthian), it has a modest footprint, as I believe the computer people say, making table space available for other forms of clutter.

Old Ernie collects them. No more, I suspect.

I struck her. My hand reached for the nearest blunt object, and closed around the pylon. I did not raise the epergne above my head and bring it down mightily on hers. The long swing began at waist level, and became two-handed as I leaned into the weight of the thing. The motion of the epergne began to describe an arc that did indeed curve upwards, and which was less the motion of an arm—now two arms—than the movement of a whole body, turning with and perhaps even dragged along by, now that the momentum was taking over, the weight of the object in question.

My defence, Your Honour. Was it me who swung the epergne, or the epergne, once set in motion, that swung me? What if the intention to mangle and maim which had existed at the outset of the swing had waned long before the object achieved its target? Can *mens rea* still be said to exist? I insist that the jury should have the opportunity to test the weight of Exhibit A, preferably in a long swinging motion that runs from right to left, beginning roughly at waist level and running upwards to connect with the temple of a female of approximately average height.

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IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU, at least, have all the facts. For these, you have to go back. Stories are like that. You need the long trajectory, the full swing so to speak, if the whole truth is to be told. The accounts in the newspapers have all been far too short. They begin with the blow, and end in cautious speculation about trial dates. They deal in rumour and confusion, and generally play upon the most naïve of stereotypes. Accounts of the trial will also be short, full of gaps, topped and tailed to the point where the real truth will remain just about anyone's bet, with the journalists drawing on all the daemonic arts of suppression and embargo to set rich disinformations in train. The whole miserable saga will be a-dancing in the imaginations of daily readers through spicy denials and refusals to comment, with shadowy hints and deeper suspicions flowing like delicious treacle in and around the well-heeled participants, the expensive locations, the indulgent lifestyles, the fatal blow itself.

Ordinary is better! Ordinary is safer!

I'll find a beginning for you. A chance meeting at breakfast, in a small Left Bank hotel in the rue St-André-des-Arts. A Dan-Air package tour, with a bus trip down to Dover, a quick sardine-packed hop over to the airfield at Beauvais and a further bus trip the rest of the way down to Paris. My appearance at breakfast was opportune. There was an awkwardness with *la patronne* about whether or not the breakfast was included. I came quickly to the rescue, all *petits*

malentendus sorted out in no time, and all parties, even the cranky *patronne*, left smiling.

Shall I tell you how they looked? An extraordinary thing it was, to come clattering down the rickety staircase in this tiny budget hotel and to hear the metallic ring of the Australian accent, unmistakable even in its mangled private school variant, scraping around the salon and clawing its way up the stairwell. Here were two sunny, golden-haired young women, greeting the gusty Parisian autumn with bare shoulders and the last trace of Australian tans, poring over maps, dragging them through the *confiture* and sending the breakfast apparatus flying as they furled and refolded and pumped and flattened, the two of them laughing and haggling their way through the day's prospective sightseeing.

I had seen them on the bus the night before, as we made our way down from the airport at Beauvais, though they hadn't seen me. They were asleep, fallen against one another. Jetlag, perhaps, or the legacy of some shrieking Earl's Court send-off.

One of them was, of course, my future wife, Coralie, who was to topple, in the moments to follow. Hopelessly in love? I wouldn't quite risk that. Hopelessly into a tangle of curiosity and intense amusement, I would say, of a kind that didn't quite manage to sort itself out before we tied the knot.

The other was her older sister, Madeleine.

I will describe them to you. Each of them, distinctly. Coralie

and Madeleine. In the earliest stages of our relationship, I would not have tried to do so. I would have described them as ‘the sisters’. The Australian sisters. A generic entity of taut and slender muscularity with blue eyes, blonde hair and slightly reddish face, flushed with excitement and enthusiasm for just about everything we saw as we walked the streets, the ‘French bread’, the ‘French cheese’, the ‘French windows’, the ‘French poodles’ and even, it seemed to me, the ubiquitous French dogshit that we wove our way around in our first negotiations with the city.

A generic entity they were, too, in the way they went about their touring—the frenetic exchange of banalities with anyone who would listen, the indiscriminate approval for anything that was vaguely old, for everything that was on record as ever having been admired by anyone else. The two of them swapped clothing, ideas, cameras, sunglasses, tanning oil, lipstick, maps and clichés, as they cheerfully and noisily tweedledummed and tweedledeed their way through all the prescribed tourist sites. Having ‘done’ Spain and Italy, they were now, God preserve it, ‘doing’ France.

Generic they were, until about three days after that momentous breakfast, that opportune descent, when they began to separate themselves into two quite distinct entities. Coralie started to distinguish herself by the sheer relentlessness with which she organised our days to ensure maximum ‘coverage’, with the drawing of lines across maps, the close consultation of timetables and opening hours,

the economies in both francs and foot leather that could be achieved through the proper arrangement of our visitings and viewings. Each girl's resources for awe and amazement, her capacity for admiration of all that was Fantastic and Wonderful, was carefully sequenced to ensure that the tempo of stimulation would be sustained throughout the day, and that every evening would go on to be just as Amazing and Fabulous as the day that it concluded.

Madeleine though, I gradually came to see, was actually quite interested in the historical detail. Through the froth and babble about all that was ever yet more Fabulous I did detect a real interest in exact details of the period and reign in which the side chapel was created, the precise phase in which the great work was painted, the actual order in which the *oeuvres* were published. We caught her more than once surreptitiously nosing through the more detailed sections of the Michelin guide, or tarrying to catch the tail end of what was being foisted on those who took the Guided Tour. Such dawdling, I also noticed, more than once put Coralie's careful sequencings at risk.

It all came to me in gentle stages. Those extravagant compliments and vacant superlatives actually contained coded messages, on the one side, about the near onset of boredom and of it now being time to move on. From the other, they hinted at a failure in appreciation, with each compliment and expostulation suggesting the need to tarry further.

The arm-in-arm progress through the galleries and *grandes maisons*, the Louvre, the Jeu de Paume, the Cernuschi and the Nissim de Camondo, just occasionally—I did begin to see it, even at the time—took on the character of hooling and shoving on the one hand, and dragging and slowing on the other; the interlinked arms actually said far more about divergence than kinship. And while nothing was lost of the shared accents, attitudes, clothing, makeup, cameras and clichés, there started to emerge not only two distinct personalities, but two personalities locked into deep and determined competition, with much of what had at first seemed engagingly generic arising less from deep kinship than from a knee-jerk determination, on the part of each, to hold, match and top the other.

It was, it always seemed to me, one of nature's more desperate forms of loving. I have lived with it now for almost twenty-five years. Coralie, and Madeleine.



I HAVE JUST THREE VISITORS. There is Petra, my research assistant. Petra is the daughter of a former colleague of Rollo. She is writing a doctoral thesis at the university—I am not sure which university—on the Victorian government's plans for resisting invasion by the Russians in the second half of the nineteenth century. The forts, the

gun emplacements, the embryonic navy, the local militias. Obscure? One would have to concede that the plans appear to have been successful. I recall no such invasion.

There is my esteemed brother-in-law, Rollo, who arrives, always, in Cloth of Mourning. Discreet, judicious Rollo, who is known for 'sticking by' people, at least up to the point where the law declares them to be a blighter.

And there is my lawyer, Clive Partington.

He's a former associate of Rollo. He recently quit the ranks of Rollo's firm, Sawney Bean & Co, because, Rollo once darkly confided to me, he wanted to Help Mankind. Clive's promising legal career was thus cut off in its prime. Clive was a victim of the deepest of legal professional hazards, as when pharmacists start taking their own drugs, or accountants start fiddling their books, or sweet-sellers start licking the merchandise. Clive had suffered a mid-life attack of Justice. He'd decided that the firm of Sawney, Bean & Co attracted the wrong kind of clients. Faceless racks of interchangeable corporate suits, always looking for ways to sail just that little bit closer to the wind. Clients wanting to be helped, indeed, but only in the sorry business of keel-hauling or scuttling each other. Or, in finding themselves becalmed and sinking, to be towed away from the consequences of their own excess.

In a few moments, Clive will arrive. His shirt will be white, almost luminous in the dim light. He will arrive looking crisp and

clean, the whiff of soap by now at war with the musty and acidic odour of a long day of intense and sedentary work.

As my lawyer, Clive may come to my cell. It is gratifyingly modern. I am incarcerated by electronics—the door, the lights, the temperature, the levels of oxygen. My cell is small and clean, and has nothing in it with which I can harm myself. Other than myself. I have a bed, and a shelf for books, and an ensuite—an in-suite, rather—with a basin and a shining steel toilet bowl, which is my only companion through the long nights of solitary meditation.

‘Refresh my memory,’ Clive will say. ‘Refresh my memory.’

I will then supply poor fumbling Clive with all the memory he will ever need, all he needs in order to stand up and speak with conviction and authority for all that I am not. For my version of the whole story. I will sit and talk, and Clive will take his notes and wonder yet again how it could be that such a person had gotten himself into such a fix. How it was, as he would delicately and strategically put it, that she managed carelessly to stray within the range of a sweeping epergne. And why it was that I was not chasing bail.

Clive will survey me yet again with his practised trial director’s eye, and size me up for the stand. He will examine yet again those fabled Frobisher ‘boyish good looks’, just starting to look like idiocy and retardation, the fine blond hair now starting to run thin and silvered, the teeth starting to jostle one another for position, the spots, the wrinkles, the patches of dry skin, the grey creeping upwards

from the temples, the nostrils and ears starting to sprout. None of it grave, none of it against nature and, certainly, none of it making me look less improbable, less inappropriate in the dock and witness box, nor less likely to be seen at all points to be telling the Whole Truth and Nothing but the Truth.

I had met Clive once before, in the dim and distant world that lay beyond the remand centre, at one of Rollo's parties. Clive was the very model of well-fed legal decency, but already showing signs of foundering between the Rock of social conscience and the Hard Place of mortgage, school fees, club memberships, beach houses. I recall feeling the most exquisite and protracted boredom—Decency's abiding companion—while subjected to long and windy tales of the young Sarah's horse's bottomless appetite and the state of the gutters at Balnarring, with the other party guests soon shuffling their way to the far end of the room and no sign of help in sight.

Clive, who has nobly agreed to 'act' for me, who has no doubt more than once sat through Rollo's uncertain account of this whole miserable story—a version which would contain remarkably little real information (never have I so deeply valued Rollo's steady and reassuring inability to see his own nose in front of his face), but just the mystifying details of its rather gory end, the ugly void and puzzlement to follow.

Rollo, you must understand, was and always will be the very epitome of decency, solidity and balance, and just about every other

quality—both Coralie and Madeleine were at one on this point, as on no other—that I have always so manifestly lacked. I could not, in the circumstances, use Rollo. Sawney, Bean & Co (known to the summer clerks as ‘Beanies’) had long given up their criminal practice anyway, and had passed on to a higher cleave of miscreant. But I do want someone like him. I confess it. I do want a real lawyer, or, at the very least, someone who *looks* like a real lawyer. I want the suit, the buttoned-up cuffs, the discreet tie with its escutcheoned hints of clubbability, the well-modulated voice, the gentlemanly attention, the lingering whiff of soap and assiduous early-morning scrubbing. I want the moderation, the balance, the patience. The insensitivity to human nuance. Even, at times, the genuine concern for Justice.

I want, in short, to be *represented*, and by someone who can be relied upon to dress.



THEIR MOTHER SPOTTED THE MICROBE as I came in the door. Dragged in, as 'twere, on her daughter's boot. I could see the spray-can finger twitching, but with no known disinfectant to hand, other than a chilling superciliousness. Which only served to temper her daughter's resolve, and to bring out all my powers of ironic contempt. She would have liked to eradicate me—I

do sometimes have this effect on people—in the same way that she eradicated all other intrusive house pests, all traipsers of life's muddier realities into the house.

The daughters marvelled at my resilience. No-one could have been more studiously, more consistently courteous than I, in face of all her ham-fisted disparagements. No-one could have been more patient, more conciliatory while taking the full brunt of her assaults. No-one could have scored so many tiny victories in return, invisible to all but their intended victim.

A fair time we had of it, their mother and I.

Their father was not much older, at the time, than I am now. He came into my vocabulary from that moment, though, as old Ernie. A decent fellow, by any account, the tragedy of whose life lay in its very success. Dear dogged, decent, irretrievably vulgar old Ernie, who had the simple misfortune to be good enough at what he did—rising from gardener to nurseryman to building and landscape supplier on a large scale—to bankroll his way into a world which, by and large, identified itself by denigration of his kind.

Ernie left life's major disinfections in the hands of his wife. By the time I'd sidled my way into the scene, he had retreated into his dogs, neatly kennelled far from the house. He had withdrawn into Rotary, where his particular brand of vulgarity was better appreciated, and into his unaccountable but passionate collecting of nineteenth-century colonial epergnes.

Gleaming silver epergnes, lovingly polished. Ernie's desperate grasp at the higher life. Ernie's shaft of light. Ernie's burning bush. Ernie's Sylvia.

Poor kindly grieving Ernie. For his daughter? For his bloodied *objet*? What does happen to the various exhibits, once they have told their story? What does happen to the torn underwear, the sneaker that matches the betraying footprint, the blunt and bloodied instrument, the odd buckled epergne? Where, oh where, is my own life's dark repository, my own *sanctum sanctorum*, my black plastic bags?

Utter superficiality, I've often noted, is one of the more fertile seedbeds for a complicated life. With Coralie and Madeleine, I could soon see, it was the attempt to take the rigours of domestic instruction—from home, kindergarten, and a range of private schools and colleges on the Nicer Side of Town—into the wider fields of living that led to the deepest complexities and conflicts in their lives. May I still risk some sort of collective comment about the sisters, now that age and experience have levered them apart? Now that the blonde hair has suffered various fadings and enhancements and the eyes in question look out through different shades of blue? It was the tension—between the disinfected vision of life that upbringing and education equipped them with, and the general human muckiness we are all pitched into, on all sides of town—that created some of their more spectacularly distinctive characteristics. Trying to live out the deep tenets of some eternal Fernwood Academy headmistress's

prize night speech. Trying to turn their mother's relentless domestic hygiene, the rigorous compliance models of potty training, bedmaking and wholesale disinfection, into some kind of Philosophy of Life.

All such comments will have far greater force and conviction, I can assure you, once I have spun my tale and let you a little further into its recesses, the secret lives of each.



WHAT WERE THE SISTERS REALLY like? It's not so easy, after such intimate and ongoing acquaintance, to wrap them up in a few quick lines. Even for you, Your Honour, for whom Human Nature is no doubt an open, if somewhat disreputable, book. Always, there is the temptation to read later conflict, later disillusionments, back into those first moments. Always, when things have not gone well, there is an easy refuge to be had in retrospect, the truncated wisdoms and epigrammatic malice of long hindsight.

It's much better, I think, simply to reveal these people as we go. As they did the things by which we got to know them. I want this story to have that kind of rhythm to it. Like a newly opened conversation with a stranger. Straying from topic to topic and every now and then pausing a while where there is a point of interest.

I have hinted, for example, of prettiness. It doesn't tell you much. Nor, to be fair, did either of them set much store by it. Both

were, in the estimation of all, admirable young women. Coralie's features were always cleaner, more sharply defined. Running mildly hawk-like as she swept into gracious middle age. It's one of those intriguing questions to which there is no real answer, whether the tone of thinking moulds the features, or the features mould the tone. In any event, Coralie did steadily begin, in God's good time, to look more and more like Coralie.

She had always been known as a straight talker. The blue eyes were, and remained, large and attractive, though the word 'piercing' might, in more recent years, edge its way in. Whenever they lighted on you, you knew without a word being spoken that some further explanation was required, some justification, so to speak.

'What on earth do you *mean*, Martin?'

After all the efforts I had put into disguising, deflecting, colouring, texturing and generally blurring whatever it is that I wanted to say. Coralie's was, distinctly and relentlessly, a plain English version of the world. A word stood for a thing. If the thing was not there, then the word had no place being there either.

Coralie was most at home in silk blouses and severely tailored suits. Increasingly. It was when she slipped into something more comfortable that tension levels began to rise. Wide-eyed, Coralie was, but wolfish. Outdoing all others in a carnivorous, omnivorous appropriation of just about everything upon which everyone else had ever been known to place value, pillaging the Tate, the Uffizi,

the Louvre, the Prado, the National Portrait, the Hermitage. Soaking up, imbibing, collecting, consuming, with all of 'Europe' as some kind of appreciable object that could be shipped back home.

The blue eyes would rove across the terrain, in deep awe—but more in awe, I do now deeply suspect, at the impression she would make in Armadale, Canterbury, Mont Albert on her return than at the rich aesthetic worth of what she saw.

Her older sister, Madeleine, was of softer mien. The blue eyes were, at first blush, less exacting. Even at the time of our first meeting, the corners were showing the sore toll of gaiety and laughter. Her gaze was more inward. Her features were always gentler than her sister's, the skin less defensively drawn against life's ambiguities. Both skin and features responded, in the time that followed, to the years of bland compromise and flaccid indecision, to the pampered boredom of life with Rollo, in a softening that wasn't just born of alcohol and ease and overeating. Madeleine's openness, her general accessibility, were marked in a face, a body that might be said to have gone a touch flabby, were it not that most of her was undetectable beneath the layered clothing, the swimming caftans and floating scarves to which she had become addicted.

The soft looks were misleading.

'Martin,' she would say, at increasingly frequent intervals as the years wore on, 'you are such an all-out fool.'

We met in Paris. Coralie, Madeleine and I. We were all out of our own water. We were all well out of our depth. Had we stayed in our native suburbs, no such meeting, no such exchange would have happened. Paris went on to heighten everything we did. It gave us something to let slip in conversation; how we met in Paris, in Paris of all places, and how I saved them with my command of French.

Let me tell you though, Your Honour, I was a good sight more adept at ‘doing the French’ than in really speaking French. My fabled ‘gift for languages’ is in fact a gift for *looking like* someone with a gift for languages. My simulations and my gestures were picked up by the dozen as each day went by, just by watching what the French did in the streets, and doing likewise.

All passed so pleasingly with these two sunny travelling companions though, with the *patronne*, to her eternal credit, doing nothing, even by a gesture, to dispel the marvellous impression I was clearly making on the two of them. Even, indeed, the infernal Madeleine, who seemed to see what was going on from those very first moments when I sat myself down at that breakfast table in the rue St-André-des-Arts, announcing that I recognised the accent, and offering my assistance.

Coralie had smiled and made all the room for me that I could ever need, while Madeleine moved her things out of harm’s way and looked at me from a cautious distance that brought on, of course,

the worst itch of all: the itch to show, to perform, to ring the inner rattle out into open forms of living. I needed, in short, to impress. To impress, and desperately. I called to the *patronne*, in what I knew would sound to them like more than passable French. With a splendid gesture that I had just seen executed by a native Frenchman seated at another table.

The sisters cooed and billowed. The *patronne* saw what was happening, and smiled indulgently.

‘Have you been here long?’



I HIT HER, THOUGH ONLY after provocation of the severest nature, with an epergne. This is not an excuse. Certainly, it is not a defence at law, unless the fact that the blow was struck with so awkward and expensive an object is itself some evidence of lack of aforethought. Unless the fact that the blow was struck with so precious an antique—part of the National Heritage, indeed—might somehow indicate to our twelve citizens good, true and probably heavily mortgaged to boot, that we are here talking about a *crime passionel*, unpremeditated, unplanned and, above all, entirely uncosted.

I offer you context. Perspective. So that you will see the thing in all its colours. I tell you this because, in a sense, it is the motion of the epergne that will guide us through, its little residual ring of dust on

the table probably a greater cause for pain, I do suspect, in the grimeless sites of Coralie's and my existence than the actual blow itself.

The swing, the blow, you see, is the only thing in all this narrative that actually amounts to a *story*, in the way that you would normally anticipate a story to run. It began at a certain point and ended at an even more certain point, linking cause and effect and action and consequence and intent and outcome. It distributed itself along a neat chronological trajectory, which, while entailing no more than a split second—perhaps a full second if we include that grasping about behind me for a suitable blunt object—could happily be told, from 'Once upon a time' through to what we might loosely call 'Happily ever after', once this *crime passionnel* was abruptly concluded and the unfortunate hate-object in question most smotingly epergned into deepest oblivion.

I'm now persuaded, after long discussions with my lawyer, that the killing of one's fellow man or woman is indeed part of one's public rather than one's private life. It marks a point in one's life where others are entitled to show an interest. I did knock her down, though with an enthusiasm that had wilted well before the weapon reached its mark. She bled profusely. Head wounds, I've always been told, are like that. The copious amount of blood not necessarily a sign of any great hurt. That much I confess. That much I have never denied. Even after gentle suggestions by Clive Partington, always on for a good tussle with the facts, that even this might be softened in

various ingenious ways, if not altogether denied, I continue steadfastly to confess it.

The blood rose to my head. My thoughts ran to what was in that plastic bag. It was a combination of this unexpected nakedness, together with the word 'louse', that was more than I could bear. My fingers, casting about in distress, closed around the reassuringly solid fluted column of old Ernie's precious epergne.

I have confessed the sudden want, the urgent need to have her face gone from in front of mine. All in a second. It is the cushion, though, that is the mystery. The autopsy said that she had been suffocated. It was the bloody cushion, propped under her head when the ambulance arrived—by which time I had long since fled to the beach house—that had almost certainly been the instrument of death, and not the epergne after all.

Because the truth is, I did not smother her with a cushion. I struck the blow, though I insist it was with as little force as I could muster once the thing was in full flight. I rang for the ambulance. I recall it distinctly, the long wait as we ran through the interminable telephone rituals of customer relations, risk management, personnel development, the warning from that infernal woman with the laughing commercial lilt in her voice that my call would be monitored for quality assurance purposes, the specific number I was directed to press—'If you have just spattered someone's brains across the room with an epergne, press six.'

I recall the blood on the phone, disguising the numbers and making them slippery, the fumbling with key, phone and gears. All the while, I knew that I should have been up there with her, and not on my way down to Sorrento. That even if the wound was not particularly serious, I should have stayed to make sure that the flow of blood was properly staunched. To fetch such cups of tea as might be needed.

I could already see that this whole business, when it was over, would require some very tricky explanations.

Most of all, I found myself wondering where on earth the blow came from. I tracked back through childhood and youth and middle age, looking for some sign, any sign, of the roots of that violence which had emerged in the instant when my fingers closed about the shaft of the epergne, with the very idea of it already shifting into horrified denial and a flood of excuses, even as the heavy epergne sailed through the air, Your Honour, its own momentum at least three parts deciding the issue.

Law, yes. Ethics, yes. But the laws of physics, Your Honour?

