

# **Eleven O'Clock**

**Howard Firkin**

## Eleven O'Clock

The clock on Dimmeys was an hour wrong. It was still on Summer Time when the rest of the state had moved back to Eastern Standard. Time is a confusion, like names are, but at least Richard didn't have to cope with time on his own. Other people had to struggle with it as well. With a name like his, of course, that was a small consolation.

An hour late by Dimmeys, eleven o'clock, he turned into the nondescript government offices, announced himself to a young man sitting behind a plate of glass pierced with a circle of small holes. The young man ticked Richard's name on the list in front of him and asked him to take a seat. Several others were sitting in the waiting room, perched uncomfortably on the blue moulded seats. Were they all here to change their names? Richard would have liked to have asked them, but it would have led to conversation and an explanation of his own presence.

He was turning over a New Idea when his arrival became known to the interviewing officer.

"Gavin!" hissed a young woman, audible through the plate glass, "This is one of yours, isn't it?"

Gavin denied it feebly. "No, it isn't. It isn't. He's here."

They were hunched together in the small booth, trying to remain inconspicuous to the people in the waiting room. The woman was stabbing at a manila folder in front of the young man.

"I warned you, you moron, if you tried any more of these juvenile stunts I'd report you. I've had it with you!"

"I didn't make it up, Maureen. His appointment's in the book. I'm just telling you he's here."

"Listen creep, this is not a joke, you know. I could report this as sexual harassment and you'd be gone."

"I'm telling you he's here!" Gavin's voice was becoming more desperate. He was also aware that they were being overheard. He motioned his colleague to the glass and pointed out Richard. "That's him in the blue windcheater. The scruffy one."

"Well then, he's as sick as you are. But I'm not giving you the pleasure of calling out his name. And if this is a joke... "

The door beside the inquiry window opened and Richard looked up. Maureen gave him a brittle smile.

"Richard, is it?"

He nodded and stood up.

"Come with me please."

She led him to an interviewing cubicle and stood by its door to let him enter first. Richard walked around to another plastic moulded chair on one side of a small ash table. A window looked out over Swan Street. Standing up, he could see people loaded with bags of shopping trying to board a tram; a busker and his dog making their meagre living; a woman weaving between the cars to cross the road. As he sat down, the world he had left disappeared. Only the familiar face of the Dimmeys clock hovered in his view. The interviewing officer sat opposite him and placed a slim folder with his name on it between them. She opened the folder to reveal Richard's application.

"My name is Maureen O'Donnell. I've been assigned to investigate your application, Mr... It is Mr... ?"

"Clitoris. My surname is Clitoris."

"Fine, and Richard is the first name?"

"Actually, it's Dick. But I prefer Richard. It's asking a lot of a stranger to have them call me Dick Clitoris. And I figure there have been plenty of Richards who called themselves Dick, so it shouldn't matter if one Dick calls himself Richard."

He smiled weakly and she responded in kind.

“I can understand why you would want to change your name, Richard. Were you born Dick Clitoris or have you changed your name before? We do get some pretty strange requests from time to time and occasionally people regret having made them.”

“No, Dick Clitoris is my real name. At least, that’s the name my parents agreed to give me. It was in the seventies...”

Maureen O’Donnell, herself named in the seventies, raised a querying eyebrow.

“My parents were pretty weird. They sort of discovered sex together and I was the product of some pretty torrid sessions. They were legendary in the commune. Everyone wanted to be involved in at least one of their... Look, I know this is difficult for you, but they saw my name as a celebration of human union. They thought it made sense... It’s just difficult for me to live with, that’s all.”

“I can believe that. Were your parents married? Legally, you know, your surname is the family name of your father or mother.”

“My parents went through a form of marriage, but I don’t suppose that counts. I don’t know what my father’s surname was – he left the commune when I was about four, although he used to pop back now and then and my mother’s name changed several times.”

Maureen was trying to decide if she was dealing with a nutter or a practical joker. Either way, she would handle him in a professional manner. A suspicion kept forming, however, that this might be one of Gavin’s mate; in which case...

“How do you mean, your mother’s name changed? Changed by deed poll? What was her original name?”

“I knew her first as Moonlight Radiance, but, as I’m sure I don’t need to tell you, I don’t think that was her real name. But that’s what I knew her as. She also called herself Ruby for a time, and then Jojoba Blossom.”

“Jojoba Blossom?”

“She had an interest in a jojoba plantation. It went bust.”

Practical joker, she decided. Had to be.

“Couldn’t you call yourself Richard Blossom, then?”

“Well, of course I could! I could call myself anything I wanted to. I’ve used plenty of names in the past. How else could I ever get a job? But the thing is I want to change my name officially. I want to have a normal name. Even Richard Blossom would do...”

Maureen was almost touched by his plea. Perhaps he was genuine.

“Have you got a copy of your birth certificate, Richard?”

He shifted uneasily in his seat. He wondered briefly whose bum had been used to determine the shape of these seats. It must have been a very different shape from his. Perhaps it had been a woman. Maureen seemed comfortable enough.

“No, I don’t have a birth certificate. Natural birth. At the commune. Witnessed by many; recorded by none. Although Sven Berensen wrote a song about it.”

“Am I meant to know Sven Berensen?”

“No, sorry. When I said “recorded” I suddenly remembered that Sven had put out an LP with a song on it about my birth. He was quite a gifted guitarist who used to blow in and out of the place. He sang it to me a few times. ‘Birth of Dick Clit’, it’s called.”

Nutter. No question. Getting his rocks off on talking smut to a woman in a suit.

He could see the mention of Sven had been a mistake. He’d been winning her over until then. He tried to clarify his position.

“Look, I didn’t mean that you’d have heard it or anything. I was just trying to explain the sort of place I grew up in. My mother was opposed to all forms of government regulation. She was very suspicious of the bureaucracy. She wanted me to be invisible to the state. But I’ve had enough of that and I’d like to be visible again.”

“And so you have no birth certificate. Presumably though, you have a tax file number. You said you’d been working...”

“Tax file number?” he interrupted eagerly, “Sure. Several. Each time I used a different name I got a new tax file number. I haven’t got the numbers on me, but I can get them. Or get them from the tax office.”

“You’re only allowed one tax file number.”

“Well, yes, but because I used a variety of names, I thought it would be easier to have different tax file numbers for each. I just didn’t want to have to explain myself each time.”

“I’m sure that was more convenient for you, but it’s illegal, and it does nothing to help establish your identity.”

Maureen pushed the manila folder away from her a little. The action wasn’t lost on Richard. Strangely, it irritated him even more than the condescending tone she had used from the start.

“I’m not terribly interested in establishing an identity. I already have an identity, and it doesn’t rely on some shiny-arsed government clerk accepting it to make it real. I’m here to change my name. That’s all – just my name. Given that my name is Dick Clitoris,” he spat his surname at her, “I don’t think it’s unreasonable.”

“Neither do I, Mr Clitoris.” She parried the thrust of his name, articulating every syllable, proving she wasn’t afraid of any body part she had and he didn’t. “But you must understand that I have a responsibility to establish your identity. A name is nothing. It’s just a label: something your mum sews on your undies. That’s why we allow people to change names. We don’t care what label you use, but we do need to know who we are granting the label to. I can’t allow everyone who walks in here to walk out again with a new name. You can imagine the sort of problems that would create. Now, you claim your name is Clitoris, but you have no birth certificate. You claim to have several tax file numbers. Are any of them in the name Dick Clitoris?”

“Of course not! Who’d employ anyone called that? I had to use believable names. That’s why I’ve got tax file numbers for Richard Hawke, Richard Hewson, Richard

Howard, and Richard Keating – no one questions your surname if it's the same as a politician's."

"So we have no documentary evidence of anyone called Dick Clitoris?"

"No, but I'm here. I may not be documentary evidence, but I'm pretty hard to deny anyway."

"Yes, you are. But who are you? Before I can help you change your name, you will have to prove what your name is. You claim it's Clitoris, but on the strength of the evidence you say you have, there is more likelihood that your name is Richard Hawke, or Richard Hewson."

"But my name is Dick Clitoris. I want to change it. I want an official name so that I don't have to make up names for the tax office. I want to have a name that I can use on a passport. I want to be able to have a birth certificate issued for me. I want to be normal, Maureen."

Maureen O'Donnell breathed fiercely through her nose. He wanted to be normal; so did every other lunatic in Melbourne. A normal name wasn't going to make him normal.

"Is there anyone who can sign a stat dec to say that they have known you as Dick Clitoris? What about your mother? Where is she now?"

"I think Jo may have drowned."

"You think she may have drowned. Death certificate?"

Richard rolled his eyes. Things were getting worse. Now he would have to start explaining his mother. He spoke with a weary resignation.

"Jo wanted to move the commune to New Guinea. She thought the northern coast of New South Wales was becoming too crowded. She talked a couple of the others into it; they bought a boat and sailed north. The plan was to keep Australia on the left until it ran out and then to keep straight on until they hit New Guinea."

He watched her eyebrows rise in scornful disbelief.

“Look, I know it sounds crazy. It is crazy. I’m just telling you what she did. There seem to be three possibilities: one, they are still keeping Australia on the left and are endlessly circumnavigating the continent; two, they are living in primitive bounty in a tropical paradise; three, they are feeding the fishes. If I had to put money on it, I’d plump for the fish food theory.”

“Didn’t anyone look for them?”

“We didn’t know when to start the search. They went missing as soon as they set foot on board, really. I mean, there were six of them, and not one of them knew how to sail. I’ve told you the extent of their knowledge of navigation. When were we meant to notify anyone of their disappearance? A day after they left? A week? A month?”

“Well, you must have notified the police eventually.”

“Come on! Can you imagine the cops mounting a search and rescue operation for six old hippies in a leaky boat called ‘Invincible Sperm’?”

Maureen’s face hardened with distaste. She had let herself be distracted by his outlandish story and he was starting to talk dirt again. She returned to the application.

“Is there no one else who can identify you? What about the doctor who delivered you?”

“Doctor?” Richard laughed. “Jo thought western medicine was the greatest evil in the world. I was delivered by a group of well-meaning junkies who read a book about it while it was going on. That’s probably why my brother died.”

“He was also born on the commune?”

“Nearly. I was a twin, but someone mistook him for the afterbirth and buried him beneath an aloe vera plant. By the time the mistake was discovered, he was dead. Jo always swore by the curative powers of that particular plant, however. Put it down to the life force of my brother.”

“I wonder if we are getting anywhere with this. Is there anyone who can reliably swear that you are Dick Clitoris?”

“No. Not reliably...”

“And you have no other family?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Then I don’t see how I can help you. It is not the responsibility of the state to provide its citizens with an identity. It’s up to the individuals themselves to do that. Until you can prove who you are, I cannot process your request to change your name.”

Maureen closed the manila folder firmly and stared defiantly at the applicant.

“There must be provision for people like me...”

He wilted before her cool scorn.

“Well, all right, my situation must be pretty uncommon, but there must be provision for people who have no documentary evidence of their ‘identity’. What about aborigines in remote settlements or living in the bush? They can’t have documentary evidence.”

“People wishing to claim aboriginality must be recognised by members of the aboriginal community as aborigines.”

“I don’t want to claim I’m an aborigine. I’m just saying you must have provision for dealing with them. Couldn’t you do the same thing for me?”

“Are you aboriginal?”

“No, of course not.”

“Then I don’t see how that would help. Besides, aborigines have a very strong sense of identity and a complex clan system. They’re very particular about these sorts of things. They’ve always got kin who can swear to their identity. And this is Melbourne. We don’t have any remote settlements here. But as you’re not aboriginal, I don’t really see where this is getting us.”

“What, so that’s it, is it? You’re refusing my application?”

“That’s correct. Until you can prove your identity, I have no choice in the matter. It’s up to you.”

Maureen pushed her chair back as if to stand up. He slapped his hand hard on the table.

“I have a right to a name!” he shouted. She leaned across the table and spoke in an exaggeratedly measured way.

“No, Mr Clitoris, you don’t. You have a right to apply to *change* your name, and I have a right to refuse you. If you want to know the details of the appeal procedure, I will tell you, but I can assure you that without an identity, you haven’t got a case.”

“You are condemning me to the name Dick Clitoris, are you?”

“Apparently your parents condemned you to that, Dick, but we only have your word for it. Come back when you can establish who you are, and you can have any name you like, but as long as no one knows your identity, you remain Dick Clitoris, a fiction of your parents’ making. Good day, Mr Clitoris.”

She walked to the door and held it open for him. He was numbed. He had expected difficulties, but hadn’t considered being refused outright. A change of name seemed such an understandable request. A movement through the window caught his eye. He watched in fascination as the clock on Dimmeys was adjusted and the hands turned backwards until it was eleven o’clock again. He stood and looked down on Swan Street, and couldn’t say if anything else had changed.