

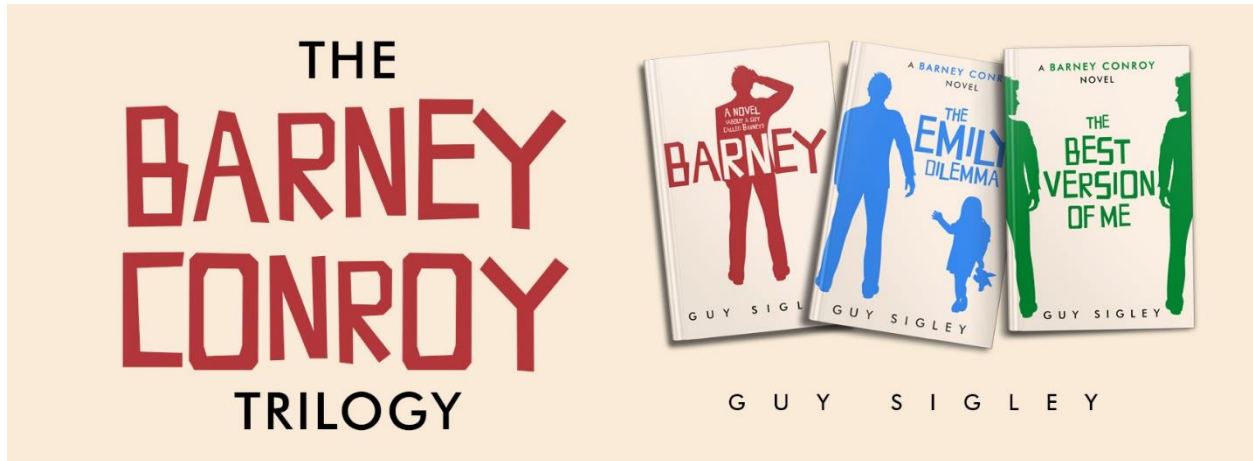
Also by Guy Sigley

THE BARNEY CONROY TRILOGY

Barney: A novel (about a guy called Barney)

The Emily Dilemma

The Best Version of Me



guysigley.com

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Greetings

As I round the corner, he bursts through the door like a king returning from a triumphant battle. This kind of confidence on exiting the men's toilets gives me chest pains. My survival instincts kick in, but as I turn to flee his regal eyes trap me.

"Barney, I haven't seen you in ages!" He says this with such obvious delight that I wonder if he's mistaken me for somebody else. He walks toward me. My ribcage tightens. He extends his hand. My spirit quails.

The handshake is, as a general rule, a territory so riddled with complexity and potential pitfalls that it should be outlawed. Or, at the very least, branded socially unacceptable. The handshake on exiting the men's toilets is another story altogether. That should be rewarded with one of those one-way tickets to Mars that ends with you fighting it out with Arnie and Sharon Stone to see who gets the last of the oxygen.

But this isn't Arnie. It's Ashby; a workmate. A colleague. A refusal to shake his hand would, at best, be considered awkward. At worst, I could have my corporate social club membership revoked. So I reach out.

And my nightmare becomes reality.

Ashby's hand is dry. Too dry. Nobody's hand is that dry if it's only just been washed according to World Health Organization standards. And he can't plead ignorance. I should know—after a long and protracted battle with Building Services, I managed to secure instructional posters in the toilets on every floor. But the WHO propaganda has failed me!

Ashby's a big man and his oversized hand has closed around mine like a bear greeting a raccoon. I actually *feel* the germ transfer and the subsequent riotous behavior of the microscopic diseases on my meticulously maintained skin. "How have you been, mate?" Ashby asks.

"Good, mate," is all I can manage. Our hands disengage and I'm careful not to let mine touch any other part of me; clothed or not. I have to get this baby back to my desk, stat.

"You got lunch plans?" Ashby asks.

How would I know? I'm in a desperate bid for survival here—I can't be thinking about lunch!

"Dunno. Need to check calendar." The germs have reached the speech cortex of my brain.

Ashby follows me back to my desk, which is partly a relief because I'm almost on safe ground, but partly catastrophic because his presence will compromise my sterilization plan. I can't use my keyboard with my contaminated hand—because it would contaminate my keyboard—but I can't let him see me enact my plan, either. I don't want him to think I'm some kind of *freak*.

So I employ a devastatingly foolproof tactic. "Ashby, can you do me a favor, mate, and grab me a pen from the stationery closet?"

He looks like he might challenge the request, given that he isn't my serf, but then shrugs his shoulders and trundles off.

I seize the day and pump a healthy dose of hand sanitizer into my palm. I rub my hands together like I'm trying to start a fire, and as the sweet, heavenly liquid dries on my skin, so the pain in my chest subsides.

I'm safe.

Ashby returns and throws the pen onto my desk. "You've already got three pens, here. What kind of stitch-up is this?!"

My devastatingly foolproof tactic doesn't extend to defensive maneuvers so I have to think on the fly. "Practical joke?"

Ashby laughs. "Practical joke! You're a classic, Conroy." He ruffles my hair in an appropriately masculine and comradely gesture.

My chest hurts.

Shake It Off

Sometimes a man just has to have a caramel milkshake. Right now is one of those times.

The café is what you might call “über chic.” With minimalist décor and wait staff more attractive than shampoo and conditioner models, I feel like the kid in corduroy when everyone else is wearing denim.

And no, Mum, corduroy pants do not mark me out as more sophisticated than the other children. They mark me out as a target for cruel, heartless, and, I have to begrudgingly admit, rather witty jibes.

Once, you callous beasts. I wore corduroy pants on a school excursion once!

The joint is busy. Über busy. It’s what I imagine The Wiggles concerts might be like: lots of young parents desperately trying to look like they’re still enjoying their lives while their souls crumble within.

There’s one table left that hasn’t been commandeered by parents and their baby cino-drinking spawn. I secure it and a Pantene Pro-V advertisement appears. She smiles at me like I have a fascinating story to tell. I smile back, mesmerized by the reflected light from her shoulder-length hair the color of a desert sunrise.

“Brunch this morning, sir, or just coffee?”

Mesmerizing hair and impeccable manners!

“I don’t drink coffee,” I say. In my head, I sound kind of like a mix between Chris Hemsworth and Robert Downey Jr. So, basically, the coolest and buffest dude on the planet.

When the words come out of my mouth, though, I sound more like Jim Carrey in *Dumb and Dumber*. Not *exactly* what I was going for.

“What can I get you, then?” she says.

I’ve learned from bitter experience that there’s really no cool and buff way a man in his thirties can ask for a milkshake, so I just use my normal voice. “Caramel milkshake, please.”

Pantene Pro-V laughs. It sounds like the birds at the break of dawn. “Seriously? Just a caramel milkshake?”

“Yes, please.”

“Well, you’re a strange one, aren’t you?”

Is she flirting with me?!

Before I get a chance to contribute to this sultry repartee, she’s turned on her heel and is gliding away in her denim skirt. Denim skirt, Mum. Denim. Not corduroy! Her hair flows back over her shoulders like the gentle roll of the surf. I could stare at it all day.

Until, of course, a behemoth with a mass of curly hair tamed only by a topknot appears at my table. He's sporting an intricate sleeve tattoo that signals both a higher pain threshold and more creativity than me. "All right, mate?" he says with the kind of British accent you'd expect from the downstairs staff at Downton Abbey.

"All right," I respond, Earl of Grantham style.

"Sorry to bother you, mate, but we've just had a couple arrive and I need to use this table. You're alone, aren't you?"

Why is this British interloper trying to ruin my morning and my self-esteem?

"Yes, I'm alone. Quite happily, I might add."

He points to a solitary seat at the end of a four-person bench facing out the window. The first three seats are occupied by a man, a woman, and their male child—approximate age somewhere between two and seven. "Would you mind moving over there?"

A relocation will not be conducive to the continuation of my courtship with Pantene Pro-V, but just as I'm about to invent an excuse about being allergic to sunlight, she reappears. "Here's your milkshake, honey."

Honey! It's practically a proposal!

To impress my future wife, I move to the empty seat next to the child. He stares at me with the kind of unblinking intensity that would get him into a lot of trouble if he was of age. In a pub. Right now, though, he's just disconcerting and impolite. "What are you drinking?" he asks.

Despite having zero interest in conversation with the boy, I'm not entirely devoid of social skills. "Milkshake."

"What flavor?"

Don't push me, kid.

"Caramel."

"Can I have some?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because kids are full of diseases."

That silences him. He turns back to his dad.

I watch the surf caressing the shore.

"Did you tell my son he's diseased?"

What? Who's talking to me?

“Oi, mate. I’m talking to you.”

That settles it, then.

“Um, no, of course not. I told him kids are full of diseases, which is a fact.”

Another fact is that this man appears to be some sort of professional wrestler and/or lumberjack. This fact is revealed as he stands up to, I presume, wrestle and/or lumberjack me. “I think you better find somewhere else to sit,” he says.

“The café’s full.”

“Then leave.”

I can’t leave, of course, not without proposing, but the tide is suddenly turning decisively *against* me. WrestleMania Lumberjack’s wife is standing beside her husband, glaring at me as though I just insulted Taylor Swift. I can see where the kid picked up his manners.

Surrounding patrons have gone quiet and the tension is rippling out to the far reaches of the café, where I see Pantene Pro-V watching me. Though she is an ocean away now, I detect the slight nod of her head and narrowing of her eyes.

Sweet Shakespeare, she’s trying to protect me!

Her fearless devotion warrants an equally fearless response. “See you, kid.” I throw him a wink. “Nice knowing you.”

As I stride out, the tension flows with me and the satisfied buzz of the über chic resumes. Just as I’m about to cross the street, there’s a soft touch on my shoulder. It shines light into the darkest parts of my soul. Pantene Pro-V hands me a paper milkshake cup. “I couldn’t let you leave without this. It’s on the house.”

I take it from her hand. Her left hand that is bejeweled with an engagement ring. I nod like a vanquished, yet noble, foe who has been vanquished by the coolest and buffest dude on the planet: Hemsworth Downey Jr. “He’s a lucky man.”

She smiles. “Try not to pick any more fights.”

“It was worth it.”

She walks away.

I turn in triumph.

And immediately run into a stroller.

It knocks me backward, my fall broken by a bin. I lose my grip on the milkshake and the sweet caramel nectar crashes onto the shore of my underdeveloped chest.

The woman pushing the stroller gasps. “I’m so sorry! Let me buy you another one.”

I consider her offer.

I glance back in at the über chic.

I decline.

Because, as The Beatles famously said, you can't always get what you want.

Friends Forever

It's the most magnificent beard I've ever seen. In fact, to call it a mere *beard* is a travesty. Beautifully developed, expertly shaped, and lovingly manicured, it's like a piece of art that's actually worth paying for.

I haven't seen Marco since the day we finished high school. He was the guy everyone wanted to be, or at least be seen with. If you were genuinely his *friend*, well, I've got four words for you: Dawson from *Dawson's Creek*. We've had no contact since then, but from the look of him, Marco either went into Formula One racing, aftershave modelling, or hosting Club Med parties; something *super exotic*, at any rate.

And now, here he is again, staring magnetically at me because Mark Zuckerberg reckons Marco and I might know each other. Marco has 2,682 Facebook friends (no surprises there), and his photo gallery resembles a decade of Cannes Film Festival after parties.

I really want to be 2,683.

Not because I need to live vicariously through a sweet-smelling, race-car-driving, Club Med employee or anything. My life is great. Amazing even. I'm almost due for government-funded long service leave—not everybody can say *that*. But it's good to be friends with a variety of people—even just on Facebook—because it helps expand your horizons. And that's important because...no way, there's a picture of me in Marco's gallery!

It's a shot from our old school days—somebody's eighteenth birthday party, by the look of my casual Stussy pants and roll-neck sweater. I'm not tagged in the photo, but that's probably because I'm only half in the frame, walking in the background as three young men drape their arms around each other, smiling like they have futures full of hope and girlfriends and increased muscle tone. Not my experience to date.

I hover over the "Send him a friend request" link. I haven't been this nervous since I tried to ask Caitlin Cleaver to the prom. I hung up forty-seven times between dialing her number and hearing the first ring before eventually reaching her answering machine. Channeling the same courage that finally got me through to Caitlin's dad's recorded voice, I click the friend request link.

Over to you now, dear Marco.

Staring unblinkingly at a computer screen isn't always the best *action tactic*, but it gets me through most days at work, so I employ it now. Just as my eyes are about to crack from fatal moisture deficit, Zuckerberg smiles on me and MARCO ACCEPTS MY FRIEND REQUEST! He's online right now, which is a perfect excuse to post on his wall. I go for a "yo, sup, I just flew in from Hollywood" kind of feel:

Hey Marco, man. Saw your Throwback Thursday photo. Reminds me of the old days. Hope you're well, brother.

I think about using an exclamation mark but decide it would make me look needy and desperate, two words that are definitely *not* associated with flying in from Hollywood. I settle for refreshing my screen every 3.6 seconds to see if he likes my wall post.

Refresh. Refresh. Refresh.

Notification alert—he likes it! Given that we are now officially rebuilding rapport, there's no way I can stop now:

Looks like you're living the dream, man. You still chillin' with Farley?

Farley was another of the high school elite. I should really be friends with him, too.

Refresh. Refresh. Refresh.

Nothing.

Marco's probably waiting for a follow-up post, so I'll show him that I'm still cool enough to be keeping up with pop culture, even though I work for the government:

Did anyone ever tell you that you look just like the guy from the film Made of Honor?

Then I realize I'm the only man I know who has seen, let alone owns, a copy of this 2008 classic. So I post again to clarify:

I mean Patrick Dempsey. He's also in Grey's Anatomy.

I've never actually watched *Grey's Anatomy*—on too late at night—but a quick Google search reveals that there are a number of spectacular three-day growths among the cast. This is a potential point of confusion, and social media is about exactitude, not ambiguity. So I copy and post a photo of Dempsey at the height of his beard-rocking powers.

And then I sit back and look at my five posts on Marco's wall, ending with a picture of a devastatingly handsome man who's wearing scrubs and looks like he's about to diagnose you with something not even Dr. House can pronounce.

I am overcome by the exact same feeling of nausea and self-loathing that assaulted me after leaving my eighth message on Caitlin Cleaver's answering machine.

Refresh. Refresh. Refresh.

The wall posts disappear. Marco has unfriended me.

Thanks for nothing, Zuckerberg.

Remedial Therapy

I'm pretty sure she just leaped onto the table. I can feel her creeping up with the soft paws of a leopard just before it disembowels you. It's unconventional and disconcerting, but I remain silent and stoic, primarily because I'm lying stomach-down with my face jammed into a gap the size of an iPhone. And I'm not wearing a shirt.

Because I can't see what's going on, my other senses are super-tuned, transforming me into a cross between Edward Cullen and Forrest Gump. So I know with absolute certainty that it was the ball of her foot that she just worked up underneath my shoulder blade. She adjusts it into position. I screw my eyes shut.

The pain is like childbirth. If I still possessed the power of speech, I'd call for an epidural.

"Breathe," she says.

I try, but I think she's punctured my lung. My brain, vainly clinging to some hope we're going to make it through this, has gone into survival mode. It's activated every sweat gland it can find and commandeered all my body's other glands—whatever they do—for some heavy-duty ad hoc sweating.

Then, as she switches feet and moves to the sore shoulder that actually brought me in here, my struggle for survival is joined by the battle not to cry. Not *cry out*, but cry. Actually, literally cry. I can't go back to work with bloodshot eyes after a thirty-minute lunch break—not again, anyway—so I hold back the tears by thinking about the Roxette concert I went to last week.

Eight years later, it ends.

"Thank you, sir. Finished now." Her voice is soft and musical in my ears now that the threat to life has passed.

"Cheers," I say, trying to sound like she's just handed me a cold beer. My voice, perhaps caught off-guard because it didn't expect to be required in the afterlife, cracks like a schoolboy's on a first date.

Despite my masseuse's obvious attempts to inflict grievous bodily harm, the pain in my shoulder is gone. By the time I get back to the office, I'm pretty confident I could throw a speed ball...if I knew what a speed ball was. I check my hair in the mirrored wall of the lift and my newly relaxed shoulders immediately seize up. On my forehead is a giant, rectangular imprint. I'm marked for life, and I'm supposed to be in a client meeting in five minutes!

Back at my desk, I devise and execute a devilishly clever plan that involves the strategic use of leftover campaign merchandise: a corporately branded "Department of Healthy Living" cap.

My boss, Margaret, walks into our open-plan slice of heaven and glares at me. "Barney, what do you think you're doing?"

I think quick. "Being sun smart."

Margaret's even quicker. "You're inside."

"Can't be too careful."

Margaret is what you might call a straight shooter. "Stop being ridiculous. You can't wear that to a client meeting. Take it off."

I follow Margaret's orders and her expression turns from disdain to horror. "What on *earth* happened to your head? You look like you fell asleep on a baking tray."

Truth is my only option here. "I've got a serious shoulder condition and I had to have an emergency massage."

She looks at me with her all-too-familiar *how did you ever get a job?* face. "You had a *massage* at lunchtime?"

"Well, technically, it was remedial therapy. And in my defense, I thought I'd be sitting in one of those big chairs with cushioned head rests...with my shirt on."

Margaret gathers up her notebook and looks straight at my mark of shame. "You're not meeting with a client looking like that." She charges away from our desks but turns back just before she's out of earshot. "Barney," she calls.

Could this be a reprieve? Has she realized the inherent value of having me alongside her despite my indelibly imprinted forehead?

"Put your hat back on. You'll scare the junior staff."

I need a massage.

Appendectomy

“This is much more civilized than a meeting room, don’t you think?” he says.

No, I don’t, actually. I would much prefer the safety of a poorly ventilated room that has a defined escape route; namely, *the end of the meeting*. But because I’m having lunch with a member of the executive leadership team, I do what you should always do when answering a question from someone with his own car park.

“Absolutely, Geoff,” I say, with a *how lucky am I?* grin. And then, because he’s grinning back at me, I get a rush of blood and try a bit of corporate humor. “I’ve always said the problem with meeting rooms is everybody has an *agenda*.”

He laughs. It seems genuine.

We’re building rapport!

A waitress appears. Geoff orders something I can’t pronounce, let alone visualize, and I go for my standard Margherita pizza.

“Margherita pizza?!” Geoff says, and for a moment I wonder if he’s going to start performance managing me. “This is a top-notch restaurant, Barney. Order something more exotic.”

“I like pizza.” I say this to the waitress while giving her my *get out of here before we both lose our jobs* eyes.

“Would you like a drink?” she asks.

Can’t you see my eyes, woman?!

“Just a Coke, for me,” Geoff says. “We’re in the public service.”

What?

“And you?” she says to me.

This is my chance to impress a man who has actually seen the inside of the CEO’s office. I activate my Italian accent, modelled primarily on Luigi Risotto, the belligerent restaurateur from *The Simpsons*. “I’ll have a chin-ar-toe.”

“A what?”

You’ve failed me, Luigi!

I point to the word “Chinotto.”

“It’s pronounced *kin-otto*,” the waitress, who is more Australian than the Sydney Harbour Bridge, informs me.

Geoff cringes. “Sorry about him. He can get a bit carried away.”

You told me to be more exotic!

The pizza is everything I had hoped for. Simple, predictable, edible. Geoff's meal is a steaming pile of flavors and colors and spices and shells and Luigi knows what else atop a tangled disaster of pasta strands, each as thick as a stick of Big Red chewing gum.

Geoff puts his head over the meal and breathes it in like it's an old-school cold-and-flu remedy. He'll be ordering leeches next. "Oh, Barney, you have to try this," he says through his first mouthful. And then he offers me his plate.

My appendix, until now a seemingly useless organ that has contributed nothing to my lifelong physical mediocrity, suddenly begins to ache. "Thanks, Geoff, but I'm alright with my pizza."

"Go on. Try it, Barney. I insist."

I don't ask for much in life. I really don't. I just like to order and eat my own meal. Is that too demanding? Is it too much that I don't want to dip my fork into another man's over-flavored saliva sample?

But Geoff seems to like me. And I want him to keep seeming to like me. So I have to act like I'm normal.

Come on, Barney, just until the end of lunch, just try to be normal. Try to be like everybody else. Try to be seemingly likeable.

I calculate which portion of the meal Geoff is *least* likely to have contaminated. My white blood cells paint their faces blue, William Wallace style. I make contact with the petri dish, somehow managing to get clean away with a single strand of Big Red looped around my fork. I might just make it out of here alive.

I start eating.

Or I might not.

My taste buds are in mutinous revolt. It's like somebody emptied the contents of a storm drain onto what would otherwise have been a perfectly serviceable bowl of pasta. My gag reflex earns a pay raise. "Delicious," I say.

Geoff nods at me like he's my high school guidance counsellor. "See what happens when you just try something new. Now give me a sip of that Chinotto."

My appendix bursts.

Speedo

The water is being churned into a hotbed of bacterial infection by a writhing mass of flesh.

Welcome to the public swimming pool, Barney.

I shut down the part of my brain that has been trained, over many years of discipline, to help my body avoid both physical contact with other people *and* life-threatening water-borne diseases. It goes into hibernation with my dignity; I had to turn that off before I hit the men's change rooms. The only concession I did make was to purchase swimming shorts rather than an actual Speedo. Let's be honest, there are only three acceptable reasons for a man to wear a Speedo:

1. He is an Olympic swimmer;
2. He is a world champion Ironman;
3. He has lost all self-respect.

Although I'm skirting number three, I'm not there just yet, so I tighten the drawstring on my shorts (nobody wants a repeat of the horror of my eighth-grade swimming carnival), pull down my goggles, and prepare to embrace eternity.

Until I notice the lifeguard walking toward me. She's patrolling the pool like a lioness watching over her cubs, pacing along the side of the water, her eyes flicking over each lane, each swimmer, each potential rescue. Her dedication is both reassuring and, dare I say it, unexpectedly alluring. I've had very few women care about my life before, let alone be prepared to risk their own to save it. So when she draws level with me, I feel like the honorable thing to do is to let her know she is highly valued. "You're doing a great job," I say.

She looks up from the water. No doubt she's surprised by my gallantry. "I'm sorry, are you talking to me?"

She is surprised! This is going well!

"I just wanted to let you know you're doing really important work."

She smiles.

I try to flex my stomach muscles. My bladder aches.

"Thank you," she says, and then steps away from me, back on the prowl.

But I can't let her go yet. Not while we're getting to know each other! "I'm here because my physio thinks a swim will be good for my back." I make a wincing face as though I'm currently experiencing back pain and pull my shoulder blades together to give physical accompaniment to my words; a classic conversational technique.

Then I realize that by pulling my shoulders back, I'm thrusting my chest at her, which is probably the beginning of some sort of mating ritual in the animal kingdom. I don't want

her to think I'm a hairless primate, so I throw in some self-deprecation; another classic conversational technique. "I'm not active like you, of course. I'm just your typical desk jockey. Except the only race I'll be winning is the one to osteoporosis!"

She looks a little bit like the Angel of Death just appeared behind me. "Okay. Well, I'll keep an eye on you, then."

"Fabulous! I'll keep an eye on you, too!" I say to demonstrate that we're all in this safety gig together.

I hit the water invigorated by this positive exchange with a woman and, after the first five strokes, start cursing myself that I haven't been doing this all my life. I feel so light, so carefree, so...much like I'm ABOUT TO DIE!

My arms are in rebellion. After three long decades of neglect, they're now schooling me in the art of reaping what you sow. Oh, the burn! My lungs are like an obstinate balloon that won't go down to let more air in. My legs are trailing behind me as uselessly as a "Be treatwise" label on a packet of Party Mix candies.

One thing motivates me to keep going. Her. The lifeguard whose name I forgot to ask.

A modern-day miracle occurs. I make it to the end of the pool and scramble out of the water like a baby turtle climbing the Empire State. Because I can't manage breathing *and* standing at the same time, I kneel in a growing puddle of tepid water next to the "Slow Lane" sign.

My lifeguard crouches down in front of me. Perhaps she was impressed with my determination, my will to survive, my tenacity in the very face of death itself. Maybe she thinks I'd make good lifeguard material.

"You should consider a lesson," she says. "Beginners classes run every weekend. For now, how about you call it a day?"

Time to buy a Speedo.

The Split

It doesn't make a sound; not one that I hear, anyway. But, like the rending of your heart when she tells you she doesn't want to risk compromising your *amazing* friendship by introducing romance, the feeling is brutal and unambiguous.

My suit pants have just split. On my lunch break.

Time to go easy on the caramel milkshakes.

I stand up from tying my shoes and conduct a subtle inspection of the damage. It's worse than I feared; I can actually feel a draft. And I'm in a shopping mall.

A quick scan of the store directory leads me to my salvation: Stitch in Time Alterations. With such a lyrical name, I'm expecting Stitch in Time to be staffed by the von Trapp children. Or perhaps Hanson. Instead, I get a lady who looks like my mate Demetri Constantinides's ever-smiling mother. Without the smile.

The store consists of two sewing machines, a counter, and one black curtain that is doing a poor impersonation of a change room. Mrs. Constantinides greets me from her five-foot-zero vantage point with impassive eyes.

I take this as an invitation to begin negotiations. "Hi. I've split my pants."

She beckons me to the side of the counter, takes the torn remains in her hands and pulls them apart. There's the draft again, but now it's adequately counterbalanced by the heat of my EXTREME HUMILIATION! Demetri's mum talks in short bursts as though she's a surgeon who's just opened up my chest. "Bad tear. Two days to fix. Thirty-five dollars."

I spin around to face her. "I can't leave my pants here for two days. What am I supposed to wear back to work?"

She shrugs, turns away, and sits down at her sewing machine, apparently unaware that I am continuing to exist as a potential customer, or even just a fellow human being.

How does this woman still have a business?

"Can you do a patch-up job while I wait?"

She doesn't look up. "Fifteen minutes. Sixty dollars."

"What?! It's thirty-five for the full repair."

She shrugs again.

She's an extortionist. A criminal mastermind. That's how she still has a business.

I take my pants off and hand them to her from behind the curtain. In exchange, she gives me a pair of purple sweatpants that, from the size of the waistline, may or may not have belonged to Shrek. "Put these on. Wait out here."

Is this a joke?

“Why can’t I just stay behind the curtain?”

“It’s a change room. Customers need it to change.”

The pants are so enormous I feel like I’m on the starting line of a potato sack race. Trying to ignore the fact I’m wearing communal clothing (two words that should never be uttered together), I lean on the counter like I’m at a hipster bar and effect a bored, *do this all the time* kind of look in case I see anybody I know.

And, because The Universe hates my guts, Jennifer from Finance walks straight toward me. Now, I don’t really mind looking stupid in front of most people; if I did, I’d do quite a lot of minding. But Jennifer from Finance is an exception. Smart, funny, and just a little bit terrifying, she’s the reason I learned how to format an Excel spreadsheet. If Billy Joel was here, he’d write a song about her. And I’d play it on repeat for the rest of my life.

“Barney, what are you doing?”

Her concern, though mingled with horror, fills me with the hope of salvation. “I split my pants.”

She throws her hand to her mouth and I wait for the inevitable, mocking laughter. “Oh, you poor thing.”

Hang on a minute.

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Ask Danny Ocean over there to go easy on me.”

Jennifer laughs.

A genuine laugh! To an obscure and not particularly relevant Ocean’s 11 reference!

“Fair to say you’re about to get stitched up,” she says.

Amazing! We’re a bona fide comedy duo!

I continue the routine. “True, but I do get to model the latest fashion from Big Man’s Pants 1987 collection.”

Jennifer laughs again, which makes this the greatest lunch break of my life.

When Mrs. Constantinides’s shakedown is complete, Jennifer and I walk back to work together, and I try out one of my latest Excel gags: “I know why they call them cells. Those spreadsheets are always taking me prisoner!”

In the lift, Jennifer drops her security pass. I forget everything that has happened in the past thirty-seven minutes and bend down to pick it up. This time I hear the sound. Very clearly.

I long for alien abduction.

Instead, I feel Jennifer's hand on my shoulder. "I'll tell Margaret you felt sick," she says. Her lie is the stuff of love songs and dedications.

Billy Joel rides with me all the way home.

Baby Love

Fatherhood has changed me. Whereas once I would have entered a hospital room full of hesitation and self-doubt, today I don't want to enter at all. Beyond this door is a baby. And what do I know about babies? This: they're odd looking and they break easily.

The door swings open. "Barney!" my best friend, Mike, says. "Don't just stand there, mate. Come in and meet my son!"

Mike is effecting the obligatory *I'm an over-the-moon new dad* persona with admirable gusto. But I've known him since we were six years old so I see the fear in his shining eyes. I recognize the terror at the corners of his over-smiling mouth. I smell the panic seeping from his paternal pores. Fatherhood has changed Mike as well.

He's turned into me.

Mike leads me into the room, which is making a valiant attempt at impersonating a hotel suite. The betrayer, of course, is the bassinet at the end of the bed. And Beth, Mike's wife, who looks like she's just been through the Apocalypse. "Hello, Barney," she says.

When she smiles, it's not clear whether she's conscious and/or *compos mentis*. She's sitting up in bed wearing some kind of sleepwear, so I maintain a safe distance. "Congratulations, Beth."

I turn to Mike and hand him a gift-wrapped, 1926 first-edition, leather-bound copy of *Winnie-the-Pooh*. "This is for Oliver."

Mike unwraps the present, examines it without a word, and hands it to Beth. Then he sniffs at a volume too reckless for a man with a sleeping newborn and wraps me up in a hug so fierce, I wonder if life is about to exercise a one in, one out policy. "Thank you, Barney."

"I know he's a bit young for it now, but it was either that or a keg of beer!"

Beth glides toward me.

"Shouldn't you be resting?" I say in a desperate bid to keep her pajama-wearing body at bay. I am simply *not* equipped with the social skills to hug women in their bedclothes.

Because she knows me so well, Beth takes my hand in hers and squeezes it tight. "It's a beautiful gift, Barney. Thank you." Then she walks over to the bassinet.

This isn't looking good.

"Come and meet Oliver," she says.

"Oh, no, I don't want to wake him. I'll just admire from a distance." I put on an appropriately appreciative face, even though all I can make out from here is a pile of dubiously laundered hospital rags. "He's quite the handsome young thing. Obviously got his mother's looks!"

Beth lifts the rag-bound bundle out of the bassinet.

I take a step backward.

She advances on me.

Mike intercepts her charge.

I give him a nod of thanks.

“Just wash your hands first, mate,” he says.

“What?”

“Wash your hands before you hold Oliver. We don’t want him picking up any infections.”

I’m torn between asking Mike what infections he thinks I’m carrying, exactly, and congratulating him on his vastly improved appreciation of diligent personal hygiene. It’s a welcome development in a man who thinks sanitizing your hands after travelling on public transport is optional.

When my ablutions are complete, Beth gives me a crash course in how to hold a baby. I’m not listening, of course, because I’m preoccupied with visions of dropping said baby about a billion different ways. So I let her position me with a crook in my elbow to support Oliver’s absurdly small head. She places him in my arms.

Nothing happens.

Well, that was an anticlimax.

Beth draws back the cloth covering Oliver’s head. He looks like an overcooked potato with a receding hairline. “He’s beautiful, Beth.” I look down at his frowning face. “Hello, little friend.” Oliver gives me nothing so I just stand there watching his eyes track back and forth beneath the closed lids; feeling the almost imperceptible rise and fall of his chest; hearing each gentle, whispered breath.

Mike and Beth are watching us, which puts me under extreme pressure to say something profound. I traverse the breadth of my wisdom to find the sagest advice I have for somebody about to embark on the terrifying, soul-crushing, mediocrity-ravaged journey we call life. “Don’t be like me,” I whisper.

Oliver opens his eyes. They’re milky and unfocused. Yet, to my rapturous surprise, they are utterly majestic.

Mike and Beth flank me on either side. Beth puts her arm around my shoulders. Mike ruffles my hair. I get carried away and plant a kiss on Oliver’s forehead.

“Easy, Barney,” Mike says. “No kissing his face.”

Fatherhood makes madmen of us all.

Barney and Juliet

“So, you’re a friend of Beth’s?” I say, leaning on the bar like I’m *not* terrified of small talk with women.

“It’s just Beth, actually.”

What’s she talking about?

“You don’t need to say ‘of Beth’s.’ The ‘of’ already attributes possession, so the possessive ‘s’ in ‘Beth’s’ is redundant. Or perhaps a tautology, even.”

She’s a maniac. Beth has sent me on a blind date with a grammar-obsessed maniac.

“You’re clearly a keen language student.”

“Sorry, it’s just a nervous habit. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

We’re ninety seconds into our relationship and already it’s getting awkward. Time for a salvage mission.

Enter humor.

“I wouldn’t say rude. Grammatically speaking, I prefer ‘impolite.” I follow this mood-lifting gag with a mood-lifting smile that lets her know she’s forgiven.

She looks at me like she’s eternally condemned.

We both check our drinks glasses, longing for a diversion from what is fast turning into an embarrassing story at her next dinner party. They’re both as full as they were before the Grammar Incident, so I take action. Hopefully, she appreciates a man of action. Which, in this case, is me chugging my gin and tonic. Which gives us a legitimate excuse to stand in silence while I flag down the barman.

“Same again?” he says.

“Please.” I turn to my date. “Katie?”

“I’m good.” It’s pretty clear from the abject horror in her eyes that she’s not, *in fact*, good. Beth has set her up with an illiterate boozehound who can’t control himself around a simple G & T.

Truth be told, I hate gin and tonic, both for its taste and its effeminate overtones. But I thought it might help me exude a *diplomatic corps, lazing by the Zambezi River in a Panama hat* kind of feel. Exotic and intriguing, like I just stepped off the set of *The Gods Must Be Crazy*.

“Beth tells me you work for the government,” Katie says.

Why do you hate me, crazy gods?!

It's tough to be exotic and intriguing when people know you're a public servant. My best defense now is humility, followed by the classic attention-reversal technique of putting Katie in the spotlight. This will give me the opportunity to demonstrate that I'm an attentive *and* fascinated listener; qualities I learned from Antonio Banderas in *Take the Lead*.

"Yeah, I've done a few years for the government. But that's *completely* uninteresting. You know what they say: only hacks and has-beens work in the public service!"

Now I go all Banderas, raising my glass, taking a sip of G & T, trying not to grimace. Time for the *I'm devastatingly intrigued by you* line: "What do you do?"

"I'm a public servant."

The tonic catches somewhere between my epiglottis and trachea, while the gin executes a scorched-earth policy on the inner wall of my lungs. I cough directly into Katie's face and drop my glass at her feet. Tears well in my eyes; partly due to the act of choking to death, and partly due to the act of dying of humiliation.

Katie shields herself like she's Helen Hunt in *Twister*.

"Sorry," I gasp, wondering if this word that sums up my life will also be my last. Will it be my epitaph as well? *Barney Conroy: Sorry*.

Perishing this early on in the night would reflect poorly on Beth, though, so I find the will to survive. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to almost die on our first date!" And then I sense an opportunity for romantic discourse. "But if I *had* died, I would have been happy to take your face into the afterlife with me."

It's probably fair to say I've still got a bit of work to do to win Katie over. But the combination of intense socializing and heavy drinking has begun to exert irresistible pressure on my bladder. Time for more action. "I'm going to the bathroom. You finish that drink and I'll buy you another one when I get back."

She looks like *she* wants to perish.

When I return to the bar, Katie appears to have taken a short leave of absence herself. Her drink stands untouched, so I finish mine and wait for her to come back. I call the barman over.

"Did the lady say where she was going?"

"She gone, bro."

Lucky she wasn't here to suffer that grammatical atrocity.

Although this is disappointing news, at least I can now order something a little less embarrassing than a gin and tonic. "All right, then, mate. I'll have a Cosmopolitan. And I think you'll find it's '*she's* gone.'"

"Get out."

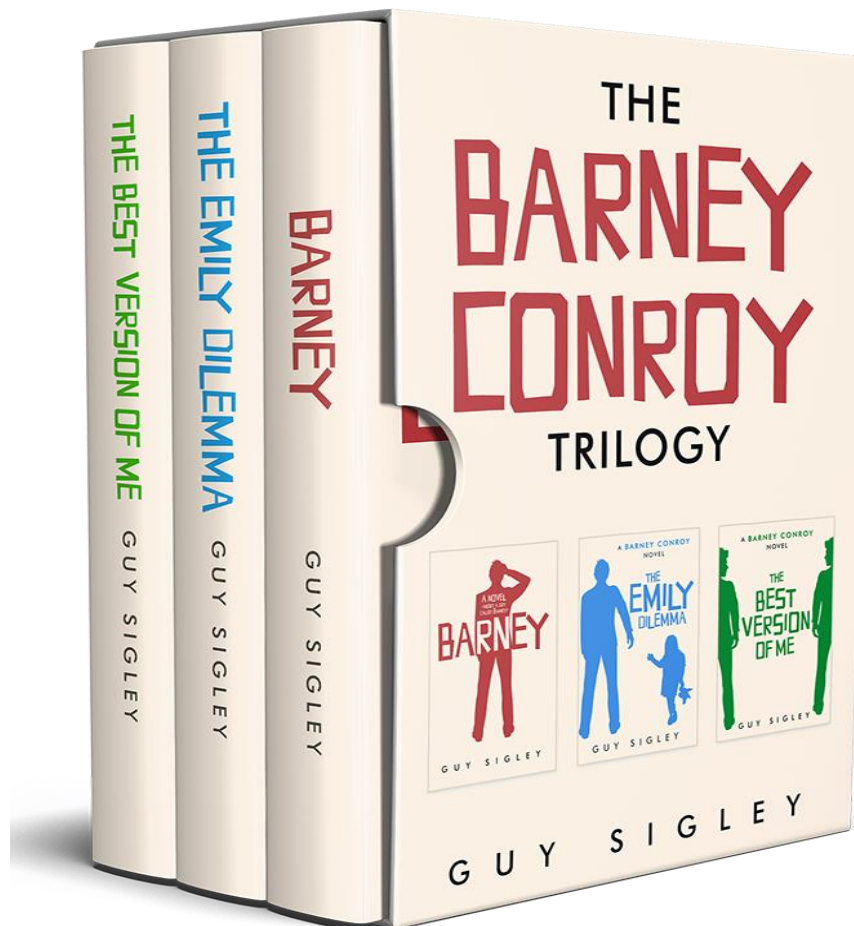
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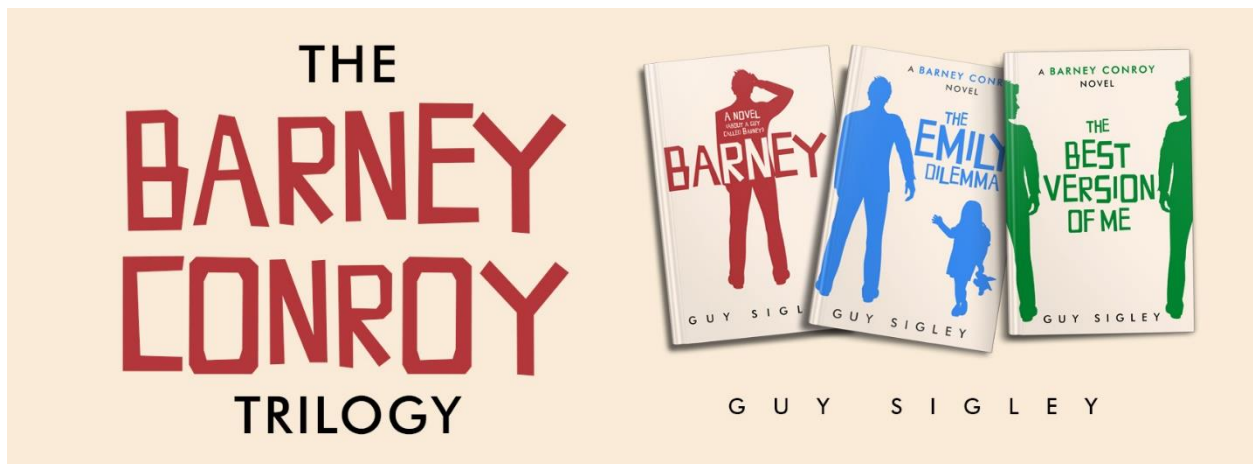
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About the author

Guy Sigley lives in Melbourne, Australia, with his wife and three children. He is the author of *The Barney Conroy Trilogy*, which took a mere six or seven years to write and publish. He's now working on being more productive.

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