

Sally Franicevich – Open Division, 2nd Place

The Consolidation Phase

Steve Stirling, National Outputs Manager, eye-sweeps the room.

“The consolidation phase will call for focus on three key factors.” He gives it a beat, an in-breath. “Acuity, attention and resolve.” His gaze arcs again, chin-led, demanding something. “What do we mean by acuity, attention and resolve?” he says.

At a conference table towards the back without being totally at the back, Seamus’s phone blinks. His sister’s name flashes up. He considers another mid-session visit to the toilet. No, he thinks, wiser to wait. He’ll grant himself another bathroom visit during the afternoon session. You have to parcel these things out, he thinks, set yourself goals. He saw a movie once about a mountaineer with broken legs, or a broken leg and a broken neck, who dragged himself inch by inch back to base camp by setting himself tiny goals. Scrabbling to one rock after another. Small achievable goals, rock by rock.

At the front of the room, Steve Stirling slashes an electronic pointer at three orange triangles on his PowerPoint slide. “Acuity, attention and resolve,” he says. “Can I throw this one out to the group? Let’s hear some ideas.”

Seamus picks a toffee from the bowl on the table. His phone blinks again. He slides it closer using a forearm motion that could be part of a postural readjustment. It could be him just repositioning himself to a more upright and attending way of sitting.

Coconut. The toffee is coconut. It’s his least favourite and has been for as long as he can remember. He used to suspect his sister, Bron, of putting sand in the coconut ones; of opening up a proportion of toffees, rubbing sand into them and carefully resealing them. It was at a time in his life when nothing seemed beyond Bron’s powers.

“What about you, Zac?” Steve Stirling’s tone is glassy. “What’s your view on this?”

Steve Stirling has a thing about Zac. The thing he has isn't good or kind. Seamus once told Zac that Steve's thing about him is because he, Zac, has a cute butt. He said Zac should put on weight, get a paunch and a big strong girlfriend. He was only teasing. Steve's thing about Zac is nothing to do with anything like that. Now Seamus feels bad he ever teased him.

He snaps his jaw free from toffee. "Attention to detail," he mutters to Zac, who sits next to him, sharing his conference table. "Perseverance."

"Attention to detail," Zac calls out loudly. "Perspiration."

Steve Stirling nods. His chin bunches up into a little hill of pock marks. He looks surprised. "Exactly," he says. "You've got it." He stares at Zac, as if he might be reassessing him.

A murmur of a seating readjustment rustles around the room.

Seamus thinks: sitting here, waiting to be called on for answers, what's the difference between this and school? We're pathetic. The toffee catches at his jaw again and clamps it shut. He works it until, in a wash of grit and sweetness, he's free again. He uses the moment of seating readjustment to poke at his phone so he can read Bron's last text. *Dad had trust fund*, it says.

No, he didn't, he thinks. Dad had nothing of the sort. Dad didn't even have a job. He flicks his attention back to the front of the room and Steve Stirling, alert for more questioning.

"Make no mistake." Steve Stirling slaps his thigh with his electronic pointer. The electronic pointer has a bulbous rounded tip. The visual effect of the thigh-slapping is unfortunate. "Make no mistake. This is a new era of..." Steve pauses midway seeming to forget for a moment what the new era was "...professional accountability," he says finally.

"Another fucking restructuring," Zac mumbles, hand over mouth.

Seamus suspects Zac is right. He had the same thought himself as soon as Steve's presentation began. Triangles are never a good sign. "Could be," he mumbles back. Not committing himself.

Seamus's phone blinks again and Bron's name floats along the screen. Zac widens his eyes at it. It's a "Naughty you! You're breaking the rules!" expression. Seamus palms the phone into his pocket where it lights up the side of his trousers for a moment.

Bron's been texting him at this rate since the day of their father's funeral. He's not pulling his weight. He knows it. According to Bron, he never has. She sends him a dozen texts a day. What day is he free to see the lawyer? Can he call the undertaker and discuss the bill? Don't worry about the bill now, it's all sorted. Has he been in touch with Mum today? This morning? This hour? Don't worry, it's OK, Mum's just picked up her phone and says she's fine. We can all relax again. I know you're as worried as I am.

He doesn't blame her. He knows it isn't fair. She's as hen-pecked by her job as he is by his. It's not like she doesn't have other things to do. She's taking ANNUAL LEAVE in block capitals today to visit the solicitor and discuss their father's will. He's NOT, in block capitals. He's used up his bereavement leave and his additional-discretionary-leave-in-exceptional-circumstances. If he takes any more leave he will have to use his annual leave and he doesn't want to. He just doesn't. So there we are. He has plans. What an asshole.

It's the grief, he thinks, letting himself off the hook. Well, it's partly the grief, so letting himself partly off the hook. He just doesn't want to think about it anymore: Dad's death. Dad's sad life. Dad's years of doing nothing. Dad's milling about the house with the *Dominion Post* trapped under his arm, squeezing his black transistor in front of him like the business news bulletins had anything to tell him. Mum's efforts to make him feel important. *He's in his study. Let's not disturb him now.* The way he padded around the house with a half-smile, trying to keep out of everyone's way.

He was about the age Seamus is now when he had his first breakdown. Or his last breakdown. Or his only breakdown. No one seemed to know if there was more than just the one. No one seemed to know anything useful. His father just couldn't work anymore, that's all there was to it. One day he was striding off to the office in the morning (probably smiling, probably full of confidence. Seamus couldn't remember) and the next day (more or less) it was: *Daddy's going to be at home with us more often from now on.*

Seamus had been past the age where he called his father "Daddy", so there was a sign of something right there: adults using baby talk to whip events to the right mushy consistency to feed to the kids.

He remembered wordlessness in the house. Not the superficial kind of wordlessness. Their ever-beaming mum whistled and hummed and chirped. This was the kind of silence that sat lower down in the truth of things. It might have been caused by shame or fear. Or it might have been completely in his imagination and not there at all.

The conference session breaks for lunch. The food is laid out on long tables; a group of conference attendees twinkle around Steve Stirling. They hold their red mini-napkins up to their faces and nibble their mini-quiches and mini-burritos and laugh without spitting.

"I can't do it alone," Steve Stirling is saying to them. "I need your help to join the dots." The group hums and joggles at him in agreement.

Seamus stands by the table with the coffee jugs and the hot water urn and the box of different sorts of teabags. Zac walks over, holding a boot-sized slab of cake on a plate. Zac has his eyebrows and eyelashes dyed every five weeks. He has his back and neck waxed. Seamus knows these things because he and Zac have been drunk together many times. Zac has broken up with his girlfriend and is looking for a new one. He believes a high standard of personal grooming will help. He's holding his breath and waiting for the right person to come along. He's using Tinder. He's hoping for somebody very beautiful and also nice. He wants

kids and Christmas barbecues and a paddling pool and brightly coloured bikes to trip over on his deck. He wants camping holidays that finish with him taking down a tent in the rain. He wants bored kids scrapping in the car on the way home. He wants to say, "If there's any more arguing I'm going to take that off you, I mean it, Hal." He wants to say, "Gretchen did you hear what I just said?" He wants to spend 200 kilometres playing I Spy with a six-year-old.

"So what was all that about?" Zac nods at Seamus's phone which is now out in the open for all to see.

But, standing next to the coffee jugs and the hot-water urn, Seamus is stiff and numb. He has just read Bron's latest text. He has read it twice, three times, but the meaning slides away from him. He feels his face has been slapped plain. He can't smile or grimace or do any of the things his face usually does. He has no expression. He is a man standing in small waves transfixed by the horizon, without thoughts, with nothing but his own long gaze.

"Family stuff," he says, making the first decision, of many, to conceal. He slides the phone into his pocket and then wonders why he doesn't say more. Zac would pat him on his unwaxed back. He might hug him. Seamus isn't ready for hugs. He isn't ready for anything. He's fighting through the bubbles suspended in the air in front of him. He might fall down or he might ascend. Meaning, the actual impact of things, still dances away from him. He isn't worried yet about trying to catch it. He needs to say something, so he says, "Excited by the new phase?"

"Very," says Zac, "very excited indeed. Joining up no end of dots. If I see a dot, by Christ, I'm going to join it up. And tell me," Zac waves a red mini-napkin, flapping it open from its tight square, "what the fuck happened to these things? Is this a fucking bonsai napkin?" He flaps the napkin again. "Where's the rest of it? Doesn't exist, that's where."

Steve Stirling looks over at them, attracted by the napkin flapping. "You'd agree with that," he calls out over the heads of his inner circle, "wouldn't you, Seamus? About the

distinctions between acuity and attention?”

“Oh, absolutely, Steve. There’s an inherent synergy there,” Seamus says. He challenged *me*. Not Zac. Not anyone else. Me. This is how quickly it begins. Pheromones. Something floating through the air.

Steve’s attention retreats back to his group, the arc of his chin through space suggesting he has a concern he has yet to put a name to.

Seamus imagines saying the words, *You can shove your job up your arse, Steve*. He imagines calling it out, over all the other noise, in that single perfect phrase. He stares at Steve’s face, his eyes wandering over the bones of it. Feel the pheromones now, buddy. He hears how his perfect words would chime out. We were never meant to be this fully dominated, he thinks. We were never meant to have our will so broken; to have other people make up our words, make up our thoughts for us.

He thinks about his dad again. He imagines being there, at the crucial moment, when the thing happened. The nervous breakdown or whatever it was. Did his father fall down? Did he cry? Did he have to be taken somewhere? To be manhandled? The thought of anyone manhandling his father makes him angry. He’s never dared to think about any of this before.

The circle of attention around Steve Stirling breaks up. The attendees scrunch up their red mini-napkins with their smears of mayonnaise and leave them on the table next to a pile of plates. Everyone moves back towards the conference room, Steve in the lead.

“How tall is that man?” Zac whispers to Seamus. “Seven foot? Is that what seven foot looks like? Do you think it’s part of the job description, being that tall? Do you think they breed them? Like there’s some sort of a puppy farm somewhere for National Outputs Managers?”

Tall? New Seamus looks at Zac. What does tall matter? Tall doesn’t matter. Smart is

what matters. Smart. Really, really, smart. Not even work matters. Just smart. A transistor held up like a talisman matters; a transistor held up like a holy cross bearing down on enemies and hellfire, making all flee before its white-hot and holy smartness. The business pages in a perfect fold, tight corners, clamped under the tricep. The soft gait down the hallway, the crease of beige trousers in perfect undulations, the small clipped sound of the lever handle as the door shuts. *Don't disturb your father. He's in his study. Don't disturb your father. He's busy at the moment.* The thread of a smile that's not a shy rictus after all, but something else. Something lit from inside.

Steve Stirling takes his place again at the front of the room. He tells them to break into groups of three and discuss their action plans for the “consolidation phase”, which is the phase, he tells them, they are in now. In 20 minutes, he says, one person from each group will give a short summary of their priority action points. Top three action points only, he says. No more than three, he says. Three maximum. Could be less, he says. Summarise. Keep it brief.

Seamus swivels his chair towards his table-mates, Zac and Linda C. This is not their first conference together.

“I'm not taking the notes,” says Linda C. “Just putting that out there so you know.”

“Going forward,” says Zac, “I'm envisioning some of these learnings cascading into high-performance work streams.”

“Maybe try shutting up,” says Linda C. “Mr. Smart-Arse. If you can't be any help.”

Seamus stretches out his hand for his glass of water. His wrist quivers between the reach and the grip.

Zac crooks his thumb and pings a toffee at Linda C. It hits her in the upper boob.

“Stop being a dick,” she says. “Just stop.”

I love you, Seamus wants to say. I sort of love you both. Thank you for having me. It's been. What had it been? And was that a decision made? Did that constitute a decision?

His phone flashed with another text.

“Aren’t you ever going to put that thing away?” says Linda C.

“Sure,” he says. He slides his phone out of sight again. “Probably just my sister. She’s sorting through the…” The what? The estate? Is the word ‘estate’ a giveaway? “Lawyer stuff. My dad’s will and that stuff,” he says.

“Oh, God, sorry,” says Linda C. “Oh, God, I didn’t realise. I didn’t mean…”

“No problem,” he says. “It can wait. No urgency.” He can make these judgment calls now. He can decide what’s urgent, what isn’t. “All good,” he says.

“How’s your mum coping?”

“Oh, you know,” he says. “She’s coping.”

Linda C nods at him like she knows exactly what he means when he says, ‘she’s coping’. Like he’s described his mother’s state of mind perfectly with every detail filled in and now, the two of them, Linda C and him, have a shared understanding of the situation with width and depth and colour to it.

Linda C has two teenage sons and no husband. Her husband left her for a colleague from the real-estate office where he worked. The colleague wasn’t even better looking than Linda C. Some people (Linda C’s sister and mother) even said she was worse looking. Quite a big backside, Linda C told Seamus one lunchtime when they were alone in the staff lunchroom, both eating leftovers from plastic containers. “And not ‘big’ in a sexy way, if you know what I mean. Not in a Kardashian way. More in a pull-down-your-tee-shirt-at-the-back way. Short legs.”

It would have been easier, she told him, if Gareth had taken up with a gym bunny or someone like that. Because at least then, she’d have a reason. She’d be able say to herself, OK, fair enough. Body like that. He’s a man. They’re dicks.

She’d waved her fork at Seamus. “No offence.”

Seamus knew, when people told you this kind of thing, you should just listen and do so in a way that made it clear that you weren't waiting to jump in with a story of your own. This approach suited him fine because he couldn't think of any stories of his own and didn't want to make the mistake of saying anything about bum sizes.

"She even has two kids of her own," Linda C. said. Knowing that had made her think, gee, I must be pretty terrible. I must be really really awful, for someone to leave me for just as much work (i.e. the two kids) and just as many saggy bits and, arguably, a bigger bum. She said she wondered at first whether it was because her husband and the colleague were in the same line of work. Shared interests and all that. But then, it turned out, the colleague was part of the communications team at the real-estate office and didn't have anything to do with real estate per se.

"The thing is," Linda C said, "what all those sex-and-love hormones are for, Seamus, and you listen to this, their purpose is to carry you through to the point where, oh whoops! You wake up one day and you've got a two hundred and thirty-eight-thousand-dollar mortgage and, oh hang on a minute! You can't just say, fuck this and sell up and fuck off and live on the beach, no, because you've got these two kids, who you love more than anything, and who are relying on you to support them through to adulthood.

"I'll tell you what," she'd said, leaving her fork stabbed upright in something firm, maybe a potato, or a largish piece of chicken. "I'll tell you something. Down at my sister's over Christmas, we saw these vans along the beach, right? A couple of biggish ones. Smack bang in the middle of the trees. Gorgeous view. Best spot on the whole beach. A guy there with his coffee, sitting in one of those chairs, reading a book under the trees. I thought, that looks not bad. That looks not bad at all. I said to my sister, that's not a bad place for a holiday. You could do worse than that. And she said, no they're van people. It's not a holiday. That's what they do all the time. And I thought, well aren't I a fucking idiot? Aren't

I just a big fat fucking idiot? Aren't we all, all the rest of us, just big fat fucking idiots? I looked over at that guy reading his book under the trees and thought, you, my friend, are probably the smartest guy in the universe. You are the Steve Jobs of actual living. You are a very, very smart guy."

In the foyer, on the way back from his mid-session bathroom break, Seamus sits down in an armchair and rings his mother.

"Hang on," she says, "I'll just turn off the oven. I'm making myself a shepherd's pie. I had a nice piece of lamb left over from the other night and I thought, why not? I can't think when I last made shepherd's pie. Not that I'm hungry. I can't really eat. What are you going to have?"

It reminds him of his childhood, waiting for a gap in the conversation, his throat full of unsaid stuff, important stuff. *How can you talk about shepherd's pie at a time like this?* is what he expects himself to say, but what comes out instead is, "I'm at a conference, remember? I might just get room service." Hotel garlic bread, he thinks, cement crust, white-hot interior, shards of tinfoil in the butter.

"So what's this trust thing, Mum?" He forces himself to speak the words. His voice is shaky, almost a stutter. Truh...truh...trust. "What's the story?" He has a sense of breaking through something, of breaching a barrier that had been there all along but invisible. Invisible to him, at least.

"It's what your father wanted, for the two of you to have a leg up."

A leg up? Is this what she thinks a leg up looks like? Does she even know how much it is? What it will mean?

"It's a hell of a surprise, Mum." Now his voice shakes properly. More than shakes, he's crying. A leg up, he thinks. The thing making him cry is hard to name; a release from the

breath-holding of adulthood, an unwinding from a spiral so tight and painful he couldn't allow himself to feel it before this exact moment. Something about his father that was more than lost, that was never seen.

He ends the phone call and rests his head on the back of the armchair. His eyes are closed. He can hear the rhythm of Steve Stirling's voice from inside the conference room. In his head his special phrase plays again: *You can shove your job up your arse*. How perfect it is, that phrase. How momentous. How eternal. How he would love to say it, to speak it out, to hear the notes of it ringing in the air around him.

He returns to his seat in the conference room. The tables clack with conversation. Steve Stirling paces in the corner, talking on his phone.

My father, Seamus thinks, looking at Steve, was an investor. He weighs out the thought slowly and it wallops him from the inside. His genetics have been revised. He comes from different stock now. He's the son of a rich man, a canny man. A man who made the system work for him. A winner.

Linda C. says, "Well I'm not doing the reporting back, just so you know." On the conference notepad in front of her are two dots, the word *focus* in cursive and a drawing of a sunflower.

Zac puts on a small child's voice. "He hates me, Linda. He really picks on me, Linda."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," Linda C says, "that was your own stupid fault. You and your stupid emails. What about focus on outputs? Shall we say that?"

"What actually *is* an output?" Zac says.

"It's a result," Linda C says. "Something you've actually done. You probably haven't come across it." She begins to fill in the centre of her sunflower with dots she's making by

stabbing the notepad with the tip of her biro. Seamus can see she plans to stab in hundreds of tiny dots to fill in the whole centre of the sunflower. The effect, he thinks, will be textured and interesting and probably the best thing to come out of the whole conference.

“What if your output is something really awful?” says Zac. “A crap result. Does that still count as an output?”

“For God’s sake.”

Seamus puts his hand into the toffee bowl. The conference people put the toffees in a bowl on your table and you eat them or, alternatively, you stop yourself from eating them. If you stop yourself from eating them, there’s your mental energy expenditure right there, all spent on not-eating toffees from the toffee bowl. Your day is more about not eating the toffees than anything else. It’s your focus. It’s your output.

He frills his fingers inside the bowl amongst all the different toffees. It’s not just the distraction and the sweetness he’s after. He wants the lucky dip of seeing what he’ll get when he doesn’t look, if he just lets his fingers land wherever they like. Egg and Cream used to be his favourite. They’ve probably deleted Egg and Cream knowing his luck, and then he stops himself and thinks again: *his luck*.

Zac says, “Do you remember if the last National Outputs Manager was as tall as Steve? I have a theory.”

Malt. The strongest tasting toffee of the entire selection. A catch of molasses in the throat. Not his favourite, but not coconut.

“I don’t care about your theory,” says Linda C. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Zac is going for a toffee too. Seamus looks at the furry wrist poking out of his shirt sleeve. Where do you stop waxing, once you start? he wonders. Do you leave no stone unturned and go for it and just leave the hair on your head?

He remembers Zac in the meeting they had with Steve Stirling after the whole

inappropriate email thing that caused all the trouble. He remembers Zac pushing his sleeves up slightly and saying, “Absolutely Steve. Point taken. Understood and accepted.” He remembers the sweat that collected on Zac’s lip. He remembers thinking, OK, Steve, you’ve made your point, but not saying it and wondering whether a ‘support person’ should do something more than what he was doing, which was nothing.

Steve Stirling kept on telling Zac it was all about commitment. That it was *the group* that Zac had let down. Not him, personally. No. He had broad shoulders. It’s wasn’t about him.

Seamus had thought, Oh yeah, you’re bionic. You’re superman.

After the meeting, Zac was drained of all his sweet silliness. He had withered all the way down to half-size. That was when Seamus made the joke about Steve fancying him. The thought seemed to cheer Zac up. The two of them had gone up to the Apothecary Bar and got drunk together, and the afternoon had gone from embarrassing and scary to cool and inexplicably the best thing ever. They were lit up with future. There was no end to how good and interesting their lives would be. Now that they stopped to think about it, weren’t they in fact at the golden point in their lives, poised on the brink of adventure? Drunk, they anticipated every sip of celebration to come. Zac asked Seamus if he wanted kids. Seamus said he didn’t know. Zac said he’d had such a great childhood himself that he wanted to give his kids the same thing. Long summer holidays, driftwood fires, tree forts.

“You’re going to tell me you had a pony soon.”

“Labs. No ponies. Dogs. Bouncy bloody labs. One gold and two chocolate.”

“You’re probably going to have to be nice-ish to a woman for a bit, if you want kids.”

Zac was solemn. The booze had washed away his fear and had taken him from lip sweat and convulsions of agreement with Steve Stirling to considering the big sweep of his life on the broadest possible scale.

“Did you know that a man’s fertility goes down when he spends time with men who dominate him?” he said.

“No.”

“True. Apparently. They’ve done a study. The dominant man’s fertility goes up when he’s dominating other men. All his little sperm swim harder. Nice to think of it. Me and you making Steve’s sperm swim harder.”

“Please.”

“That’s what I think when I see him now. Swimmy, swimmy.”

Zac lived close enough to walk home after their session at the Apothecary Bar. Seamus Uber-ed. They hadn’t mentioned their conversation in the bar again; not, Seamus thought, because they were embarrassed, or not only because of that, but because the conversation had been too important. It was the kind of drunken sharing that had to stay where it was and go nowhere else. Maybe they’d talked like that just because they were drunk. Or maybe they’d got drunk especially so they could talk like that.

A day later, Steve Stirling summoned Seamus in for what he described as ‘a word’ in his office. “It might not be fair,” Steve said, “but to some degree we’re all judged by the company we keep. All of us.”

Seamus was surprised by how affronted he felt. If we’re going to play bloody soldiers and officers, he thought, where’s the honour in that suggestion? Abandoning a friend because he wasn’t the right company to keep? But he’d said nothing.

“I’ll do the reporting back if you like,” he says to Zac and Linda C.

“Good man.” Zac plants himself further back on his chair, away from the table and Linda C’s sunflower.

“I’ll say, our first action point is to double down on focus. I’ll say that means giving

each client interaction 200 percent engagement. How's that? I'll say..."

"Something about detail," says Linda C. "You need to say something about detail."

"OK. I'll say, the next action point is to re-invent attention to detail as a key goal.

Third will be ..." He looks into their eyes as if for inspiration. These are the people of my life, he thinks. I know these people. "Seeking team growth rather than individual achievement? Sound OK?"

"Fine. Good." Linda C is stabbing hard. The pattern of textured dots is growing. The sunflower is looking good.

He rises to his feet.

Steve Stirling turns to him. There's an, 'oh here we go' look on his face when he sees that it's Seamus who's standing to speak.

Seamus waits. He waits long enough for the previous speaker to nestle properly back in her chair. He waits for all the small necessary noises to die down, for the whisper of hands in toffee bowls to fall away, before he speaks.