

*Rumpole
of the
Sydenham Line*

**A short screenplay
By
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INT. LAWYER'S OFFICE - DAY

CLAUDIA, a well dressed lawyer in her late thirties sits at a modern desk in a leather armchair. Behind her through the window we see a pricey city view.

She sips her morning coffee from a styrofoam cup, staring at a piece of paper in front of her.

All we hear is the faint hum of the climate controlled environment and the distant ticking of a clock.

CLOSE UP: A stylish, demure clock on the wall. As the second hand ticks slowly around we see the time is 7 minutes to 10.

The door to the office opens and LYNNE, Claudia's young assistant enters.

LYNNE

Ms Davids

Claudia does not respond, still staring at the paper.

LYNNE

(slightly louder)

Ms Davids.

Claudia looks up, startled.

CLAUDIA

What ?

LYNNE

He's here.

CLAUDIA

Oh . Okay.

Beat. Lynne looks at Claudia, confused.

LYNNE

Should I show him in ?

CLAUDIA

Yes. Yes.

Lynne goes out of the door. We hear the faint murmur of voices.

Claudia stands. She goes to the window looking out. Suddenly she turns back in to the room, agitated. She puts her hands behind her back, striking a pose, looking at the door.

Lynne returns leading Graeme into the room.

Graeme is a gentle looking white haired man in his sixties wearing a simple shirt and pants and with his old brown shoes polished to a nice shine.

Graeme meets Claudia's gaze and stops. They look at each other in silence. An awkward pause.

Lynne looks at Claudia, wondering if something is wrong.

CLAUDIA
(not looking at Lynne)
Thank you Lynne.

Lynne exits, still a little confused.

Claudia and Graeme consider each other in silence. Then:

GRAEME
Claudia.

CLAUDIA
Graeme.

GRAEME
Why do you call me that ?

CLAUDIA
Because that's your name. Sit down.
Yes.

Claudia pulls a chair out for Graeme at a small modern conference table. On the table is one red manila folder.

Graeme makes his way over and lowers himself slowly into the seat, his joints sore from years of manual work. Claudia moves to the other chair, talking as she does.

CLAUDIA
You made it in okay ?

GRAEME
I'm late. Missed the train.

CLAUDIA
Well you're here now.

GRAEME
It was on the station as I was coming up. I saw it but I just couldn't get there in time.

CLAUDIA
Nonsense.

GRAEME
My legs - they're too old.

CLAUDIA
But you're here now.

GRAEME
Old.

CLAUDIA
Nonsense.
(sitting)
And that's why you've come to see
me. You don't mind, do you ?

GRAEME
Mind ?

CLAUDIA
If we get straight to it.

Claudia looks up at the clock. Graeme slowly follows her gaze to the clock.

CLAUDIA
I have a ten o'clock.

GRAEME
I understand.

CLAUDIA
It would be great to chat, to ...
catch up – but ten o'clock.

GRAEME
It's alright.

CLAUDIA
Good. Well then, it's as you said,
your problem is –

Graeme looks at her, surprised.

GRAEME
Problem ?

CLAUDIA
Trains.

GRAEME
I don't have a problem with trains.

Claudia goes to her desk and picks up the piece of paper. She holds it up.

CLAUDIA
Then they have a problem with you.

Suddenly they both begin to talk at once, overlapping.

GRAEME

The only problem I have -

CLAUDIA

(moving back to the table)

This was faxed to me this morning.

GRAEME

- is that I missed the one this morning.

CLAUDIA

It's from their solicitors.

GRAEME

When I was young I would've caught it -

CLAUDIA

These are serious questions.

GRAEME

A hop, a skip and a jump and I would've been -

CLAUDIA

Please !

Claudia slams the paper on to the desk. Silence, save the clock.

CLAUDIA

Ten o'clock.

Claudia sits. She slides the red folder towards her across the polished desk. She looks through the contents of the folder, not lifting her head as she speaks.

CLAUDIA

Now, if I am to understand correctly - you boarded the train at 9.45pm last Tuesday.

GRAEME

(nodding)

I was coming home from work.

CLAUDIA

You're still at the Golf Club ?

GRAEME

Tuesdays I stay till they finish the watering.

CLAUDIA

You entered the carriage in which Mr Grant was seated.

GRAEME
No. That's not right.

CLAUDIA
(looking up)
It's not?

GRAEME
I got on at Erskineville. He didn't
get on till St Peters.

CLAUDIA
(referring to folder)
That's not what it says here.

GRAEME
I got on at Erskineville. He got on
at St Peters.

CLAUDIA
(looking at him)
Are you absolutely sure ?

GRAEME
Yes.

CLAUDIA
Absolutely ? It does change things.

Beat. Graeme nods.

CLAUDIA
So you didn't sit next to Mr Grant?

GRAEME
He sat next to me.

CLAUDIA
Then why do they say you sat next
to him ?

GRAEME
You need to ask them that.

CLAUDIA
But why ? Why in a completely empty
carriage - would he choose to sit
next to you ?

Graeme leans forward, smiling.

GRAEME
Maybe he wanted some company.

Claudia looks at Graeme, cold.

CLAUDIA

Now, you were already drinking at that stage.

GRAEME

It was only a beer.

CLAUDIA

It's still alcohol.

GRAEME

They gave it to me at the club. I was hot.

CLAUDIA

That doesn't change the law.

GRAEME

But it was only -

Claudia holds up her hand stopping Graeme. Beat.

GRAEME

Your ten o'clock.

CLAUDIA

Thank you. Now you were drinking the beer and what happened next ?

GRAEME

Well I could see him, watching me. Sort of - out the corner of his eye. He was watching what I had in my hand. The beer. Watching me bringing it to my lips. He had little crinkles on his head. And he was sweating.

CLAUDIA

And what did you do ?

GRAEME

Well I guessed he was thirsty. So I turned to him and asked him if he wanted some.

CLAUDIA

If he "wanted some" ? What were your exact words ? Please be precise. It could be important.

GRAEME

I'm not sure.

CLAUDIA

Try.

Graeme thinks.

GRAEME

Well, he was watching me so I turned to him and I raised the beer a bit. I had it in a brown paper bag. I pulled down the paper

CLAUDIA

You pulled down the paper ?

GRAEME

So he could see what it was and then I said ...

CLAUDIA

Yes ?

GRAEME

I said ... "You look thirsty. Would you like some ?"

CLAUDIA

You pulled down the paper ?

GRAEME

Yes.

CLAUDIA

And you said -

GRAEME

"You look thirsty. Would you like some ?"

CLAUDIA

You are aware that it is illegal to drink alcohol on trains ?

GRAEME

It was only a beer.

Claudia stands, muttering to herself now, walking around the office. Almost unaware of Graeme.

Again the dialogue comes quickly, overlapping. We intercut between both their faces - Claudia, self contained and Graeme, trying to connect with her.

CLAUDIA

(to herself)

Ignorance is not a defence anyway.

GRAEME

I didn't think he'd mind.

CLAUDIA
Do we have a defence ?

GRAEME
Don't see why it's such a big deal.

CLAUDIA
Why did he sit next to you ?

GRAEME
Why'd he have to go and report me ?
I can't afford no fine.

Claudia suddenly turns towards Graeme. She is furious now.

CLAUDIA
(advancing on him)
Fine ? Do you think if it was just
a fine I'd bother to get you in
here ? He's suing you. Mr Grant is
suing you for a very considerable
sum of money.

GRAEME
I was just drinking a beer.

Still talking, Claudia moves swiftly to her end of the desk. She opens the red folder and starts laying large colour photos and documents out - side by side in neat row, slowly filling the desk.

CLOSE UP: Large colour photo of a bedraggled and dazed MAN in his forties, looking at the camera.

CLAUDIA
Mr Grant is an alcoholic. He was a
recovering alcoholic. He'd just
spent three weeks in a very
expensive treatment facility -

Claudia places down what looks like a medical bill.

CLAUDIA
Paid for by his employer -

She places down an invoice.

CLAUDIA
And was on his way to some meeting

She places down a photocopy of a street directory page.

CLAUDIA
To celebrate a month without
drinking -
(looking up at Graeme)
(MORE)

CLAUDIA (cont'd)

which is meant to be some kind of a landmark or something.

GRAEME

That's why he didn't drink any beer.

CLAUDIA

No, not then. But the thought of that beer stayed in his mind so when he got off the train he didn't go to the meeting as planned. He went straight to a bottle shop -

She places down a photo of a bottle shop.

CLAUDIA

And brought two large bottles of Vodka.

She places down a thin receipt from the Bottle shop.

CLAUDIA

He consumed those within the next several hours -

GRAEME

(impressed)
Two whole bottles.

CLAUDIA

Where after he staggered to his car

She places down a luxury photo of a BMW.

CLAUDIA

Which somehow he managed to locate and drive to his home.

She places down a picture of a comfortable family home.

CLAUDIA

But on reaching the home he mistook the front path for the driveway and drove his car into the living room, destroying the car and the living room.

She places down a picture of the BMW now crashed through a wall of the house.

CLAUDIA

His long suffering wife,

She places down a small snapshot of a tired looking WOMAN in her forties.

CLAUDIA

Who had up until then – I can't fathom exactly why – promised to give him one more chance said enough was enough, took the children and promptly filed for divorce.

She places down a petition for divorce.

CLAUDIA

This was all too much for poor Mr Grant so he went on a real bender and two days later arrived at his place of work.

She places down a photo of a small office block.

CLAUDIA

His long suffering boss,

She places down a photo of a WELL DRESSED MAN in his 50s.

CLAUDIA

Who had also up until then given him one more chance, took one look at him, said enough was enough and promptly fired him.

She places down a copy of a letter of termination.

CLAUDIA

Mr Grant became so enraged at this that he attacked his employer, pushing him down the stairs

She places down a photo of a set of stairs.

CLAUDIA

Whereon said employer broke both legs and his jaw.

Finally she places down a photo of the bruised and battered boss in a hospital bed.

She stands back, looking at Graeme. Graeme leans forward and looks at this last photo. He looks up at Claudia, smiling.

GRAEME

Probably should've taken that beer.

CLAUDIA

(exploding)

It's not a joke ! Do you think it's a joke ?

She thumps each photo or document in turn.

CLAUDIA

He's suing you for the car (THUMP),
the house (THUMP), the job (THUMP),
the injuries to his boss (THUMP),
the emotional trauma to his wife
and children (THUMP) and his own
suffering – both physical and
mental (THUMP, THUMP). It will run
into millions of dollars.

GRAEME

But I wasn't driving the car.

CLAUDIA

But you were drinking on the train
– where you were not meant to be
drinking – and you set in motion the
whole unfortunate chain of events.

Beat. Graeme looks at her.

GRAEME

Is that what you think ?

CLAUDIA

It doesn't matter what I think.

GRAEME

It matters to me.

Claudia looks at Graeme.

CLAUDIA

My ten o'clock.

Beat. Claudia slumps into her chair. Graeme is concerned.

GRAEME

So what are we going to do ?

CLAUDIA

I have no idea. Maybe somebody at
the Golf Club will lend you the
money.

GRAEME

I just work there.

CLAUDIA

(glaring at Graeme)

It was a joke.

(beat)

In cases like this I usually try to
counter sue but I have absolutely
no idea what to sue him for. All he
did was get on a train.

GRAEME

That's all I did too. It's not my fault. He sat next to me.

CLAUDIA

As you said.

GRAEME

I was just minding my own business.

CLAUDIA

(standing)

Yes ... yes you were.

GRAEME

I was minding my own business -

CLAUDIA

(excited)

And he came and sat next to you. He initiated the contact.

GRAEME

That's right.

Claudia prowls around the office now as if in the court room.

CLAUDIA

The carriage was empty. You had the reasonable expectation that he would sit somewhere else. But he didn't. He was at fault. That's why they said you approached him.

GRAEME

But I didn't.

CLAUDIA

Of course you didn't. Yes ... This - lunatic, this - anti-social animal, this - *alcoholic* blundered over to you and nearly fell on your lap. He violated your personal space. He harangued you until in self defence you offered up the only possession you had. A tiny can of beer. He got what he deserved. He got what was coming to him.

GRAEME

He just sat next to me.

CLAUDIA

And for that - he will pay.

Claudia hovers over Graeme, elated. Graeme looks at her, a little awkward. Beat.

Claudia breaks away from him. She goes to the door and opens it.

CLAUDIA
I'll draw up the letter. Lynne will see you out.

GRAEME
Is it going to be alright then ?

CLAUDIA
Let's just say there is some light at the end of our very dark tunnel.

Claudia moves back to her desk. She sits making some notes on a pad. Graeme moves slowly towards the door. He turns around.

GRAEME
I'll be going then.

CLAUDIA
(not looking up)
Thanks for coming in. And give my love to Janine.

Graeme looks at Claudia, shocked.

GRAEME
Claudia, your mother and I haven't lived together for two years.

CLAUDIA
Of course. Well ... you should probably give her a call.

Graeme looks at her dumbfounded. Beat. Claudia points to the clock. She looks down again, writing.

CLAUDIA
Well see you soon ...

Graeme looks at Claudia but she just continues to write. He turns slowly and exits, closing the door behind him.

Claudia looks up hearing the door close and realises Graeme has gone. She gazes at the door for a moment then:

CLAUDIA
(softly, to herself)
Dad.

She continues to gaze at the door for a moment longer then she once more lowers her head and begins to write. End film.