

# The VOTOS Solution

written by

**Fin J Ross**

*Contains  
explicit language*

# The VOTOS Solution

Jane and Linda could never have anticipated how successful their educational program for men would be. After several years working together at the family resources centre listening to women talking about their insensitive, lazy, good-for-nothing husbands, the two social workers had had a meeting of minds over end-of-week drinkies one Friday night. Then, after several months of deliberation, planning and a good deal of lobbying the local council, DOCS and State and Federal pollied, the pair had finally been successful in gaining a grant to put their course into action.

Their 'students' were welcome to join the program of their own volition, could be prodded into it by their wives, or could be referred from outside agencies such as police, the family court or DOCS itself. The multi-faceted program would draw on a range of subjects in a bid to turn errant, ignorant and abusive husbands into useful, loving and supportive ones – with the ultimate aim of salvaging impaired marriages. With a variety of guest presenters, topics would include 'How to communicate without resorting to condescension', 'How to make your wife feel special', 'How to read and react to potential spousal meltdowns', 'Situations to avoid', 'What impact does your appearance have on your relationship?', 'Spend a day in your wife's shoes', 'Planning and cooking a dinner fit for a Queen', 'You both own the remote' and 'Ten things guaranteed to infuriate your wife'.

Of course at first they'd agonised over what to call the program – both agreeing it needed a catchy acronym but also realising it needed to be something that would appeal to men in a basic, blokey way. It was, after all, blokes – not real men – who most needed their special insight.

'What about BAGH – Becoming a Good Husband?' Jane had suggested at another after-work drink session. 'Nah, too sappy and potentially likely to be used against their wives – as in the old bag.'

'I know...what about He Man?' Linda suggested, tongue in cheek.

'Which means what?'

'Um. Helping Educate Misogynists and Neanderthals maybe?'

When she'd finished laughing at that one, Jane offered, 'I know – what about, hang on – it's coming. HELP. Husbands Experiencing Love Problems!'

'Or HEMP – Husbands Experiencing Marital Problems.'

'Ha. No I reckon our prospective clientele would rather smoke it than come to a class.'

'Okay, so what about we just call it The PUB program, as in Precluding Undesirable Behaviour – the acronym makes passable sense and guys would identify with it – they could truthfully tell their mates they're going "to the pub" without any stigma attached and it would give the program a public persona,' Linda proclaimed. 'But, of course, we'll know what it really means.'

'Which is what?'

'Pathetic...Useless...Bastards.'

'Oh, of course. How did I not guess that?'

Jane and Linda had realised, very early in their planning, that they'd never get men to attend such a course if they looked, sounded or dressed like the men's mothers – or wives for that

matter. They had to ooze sex appeal – which they both agreed might be fun as a change from their so politically correct nine-to-five dress and behaviour code – and they had to make each guy think he was 'the one' commanding their attention. The concept, they acknowledged, was fraught with complications, especially when it came to dealing with delicate male egos and the intrinsic need for each man in a group to assert himself as the alpha male, but they figured that if they could save even one marriage it would be worth it. And it might be fun in the process.

In the two years since the program had been launched they were surprised to find that men were recommending it to each other and that some wanted to return for an advanced course. They even had a waiting list. Over time they had added other subjects to the course, including some of a more intimate nature in which appropriately-credentialed tutors (all of whom had to meet Jane and Linda's criteria of being enticingly-clad and appealing to men) presented their top ten tips on how to pleasure a woman, which had proved incredibly popular.

The best thing about this, from Jane and Linda's point of view, was the number of women they'd noticed around town who were smiling more than usual. It was apparent that their classes were having the desired effect – at least in some households.

But Jane and Linda were still perturbed to discover that some men were simply beyond redemption. All the classes and courses, grooming and cajoling, persuasive discussion and blunt observations were not going to save these men from their own complete, unmitigated fuckwittedness.

It was time for Plan B. Jane and Linda felt it was their duty to offer total satisfaction to the women who were on the receiving end of their husbands' recalcitrance.

Once again, they'd come to this realisation in the wine bar on yet another Friday-night post-work session. It seemed they made all their best decisions there. And it had been Gavin who'd given them the idea. They simply had to do something to put him out of his poor wife, Sue's misery. After six months on the PUB Program it was evident he hadn't learned a thing. They formulated a plan - henceforth to be known as Elevation to the VOTOS Solution - which would remain a secret between the two of them.

Gavin was a nuff nuff. Too stupid to have ever been allowed to become a husband - let alone a father. Unfortunately, he was that twice over. But being a nuff nuff wasn't his greatest problem. He was violent as well. He had started The PUB course, kicking and screaming, at the behest of the local magistrate who, in determining punishment for a minor domestic violence episode, deemed that it would be more beneficial to him than a jail sentence. Jane and Linda had taken him on board on the understanding that particular attention should be paid to his misogynistic tendencies. He'd been a handful from the get-go and had railed vociferously at Jane and Linda's suggestions about how a husband should behave - especially in the presence of young children. Jane and Linda were confident that without their intervention there was a real risk that, despite Sue's tireless efforts, her two sons would become Gavin-induced violent nuff nuffs too. Something had to be done. But it had to be something that would still see Sue and the boys right financially. Divorce was therefore not an option. Besides, a decree absolute simply wasn't absolute enough.

Jane and Linda had spent a lot of time trying to figure out what to do. VOTOS - Victims of Their Own Stupidity - was the answer. All they had to do was devise a death that was so stupid or unlikely that nobody would suspect it was anything other than an accident of the victim's own making. Then came the fun part. It had taken a bit of surreptitious research into Gavin's behaviour, but Linda had ultimately come up with the plan. She had never expected that, aside from being a violent nuff nuff, he was a sexually impotent nuff nuff as well.

When Gavin the Gormless suffered a mammoth heart attack after popping eight Viagras, the Coroner had labelled it Death by Misadventure. Linda and Jane agreed that that was a satisfactory outcome. It had been so easy. Linda had known that the best way to ensure a nuff nuff *would* do something was to advise them, in the most authoritative manner you could muster, not to do that something.

'No,' she'd said when he'd asked her during a private session, 'I wouldn't suggest taking more than two at a time or you might end up with a permanent erection'. How was she to know when she handed him the sample packets that he was also taking nitroglycerin to treat his angina? After all, most people should know the two didn't mix. And naturally he wasn't going to tell anybody else about such a private discussion.

It had happened quicker and sooner than even Linda had suspected. Just a week later, she and Jane were attending his funeral - to pay their condolences to Sue and the boys, of course.

Dick turned out to be almost as easy to dispatch. The MO might have been different but the applied logic was the same.

He'd only just started the program, but Jane had determined, in her preliminary interview, that his belligerence knew no

bounds. She'd asked Dick why it was that his marriage to Bernadette seemed to be such a struggle.

'I dunno. Nuffin I ever do seems to be good enough for 'er. Y'know I spend so much time tellin' 'er how to do things and she just gets stropopy. I mean I must've told 'er 27 times how to start the lawnmower and I seem to spend all my time pickin' what to watch on TV so we don't have to watch fuckin' wildlife documentaries and she just cracks the shits and disappears into the bedroom to read or talk to her girlfriends on her fuckin' facebook phone. And geez, when I told her that I thought I'd save us some money by not buyin' her a friggin' birthday present, well she just went fuckin' ballistic, y'know.'

'Hmm. So what so you do to help around the house?'

'Me? Well fuck nothin'. Why the fuck should I? That's 'er domain. Y'know I go out an' work three days a bloody week, why the hell would I do anythin' around the house?'

'Yes. Point taken.' Jane nodded as though she sympathised and understood perfectly where this useless excuse for a man was coming from.

'Yes I think you could benefit from our course. We can show you a few things that might improve your home life and score you some points with your wife. Now, just another question and excuse me that it's a bit more personal. But what about sex?'

Jane wanted to vomit the moment Dick opened his mouth.

'Oh geez, I don't know what's wrong with me. I just, you know, I just can't get it up it any more. And doesn't that just drive her mental. Y'know I'll try to get on 'er in bed 'n'all and she'll just kick me off. Tell me I'm useless.'

'Hmm. So, what about foreplay?'

'Huh. You've gotta be jokin'. I'm not havin' anyone else get in

bed with us. It'd be pretty fuckin' crowded with four.'

*Jesus. A total moron. Looks like the full treatment is the only option. We have to save the poor woman from this complete Neanderthal. Don't even need to discuss this one with Linda.*

'Dick I think I know just the thing for you. Now I don't know whether you're into crystals and all that stuff, but I have a friend who's an amateur gemologist and she swears that since her husband started handling some of her minerals, he's...shall we say, transformed. He'd been a bit, you know, disinterested shall we say and a bit on the limpish side. But since he's started rubbing one particular mineral each day he's, without giving away any personal secrets, he's become – as she calls it – a stud muffin. It only took a week or two. She's really impressed, believe me.

'You're kidding me. So how can I get hold of some of this... mineral or whatever?'

'Well, as it happens, I've got some here. Just between you and me and the gatepost,' she whispered to him conspiratorially, 'I thought I might get my husband to try it too. But hey, I can get some more.' She opened the bottom drawer of her desk and plucked out a small plastic bag containing a shard of pretty blue rock. 'But on the understanding that you don't tell anyone about it, because naturally, I don't have any clinical expertise in this. You know, I'm not an expert.'

Over drinks that evening Jane told Linda about their new VOTOS candidate. Linda understood perfectly that Jane had made what was clearly a necessary decision without consulting her.

'Of course I didn't tell him what it was, in case he got it in his head to Google it. I've seen him in there in the library on the

computer sometimes and Bernadette told me that's because he's too stingy to buy his own computer. Stupid bastard. Of course I told him under no circumstances to lick it. That that might be tantamount to an overdose of Viagra.'

'Ha ha. So you think he's hooked?'

'Totally.'

'How long do you think?'

'I'm guessing not very long.'

Linda smiled. 'You know, I can't help feeling we're doing a real good. We ought to get a medal for services to humanity.'

'Yeah, or huwomaniy, more to the point.'

Two weeks later, Jane found her regular parking spot blocked by an ambulance when she arrived for her Tuesday afternoon counselling session. Linda emerged from inside the community-cum-library centre with a solemn expression on her face and Verity, the centre's bookkeeper, by her side.

'What's going on?' Jane asked.

'Oh, haven't you heard about the body in the library? It's just awful,' Verity had blurted. 'It's that guy that comes to your PUB classes.'

Jane looked at Linda quizzically.

'Dick Freeman,' Linda said with a who-would-have-guessed face. 'He just dropped dead sitting there at the computer. Nobody even noticed for a while. It's weird though, apparently his tongue was sticking out and it was bright blue.'

'Really?' Jane tried hard to feign astonishment.

Most of Dick's family were perplexed and intrigued by the Coroner's report, several months later, which determined that

he had died of copper sulphate poisoning. The coroner had been unable, however, to determine why Dick had been sucking Chalcantinite and from where he had got the extremely rare and toxic mineral.

Jane and Linda had breathed a sigh of relief. Fortunately nobody had connected the dots and learned that Jane's late Uncle Fred, an eminent geologist, had left her his collection of volcanic stones. They knew however that this methodology in implementing the VOTOS Solution could only be a single-use application in such a small community, otherwise people might get suspicious. But Jane and Linda knew they'd done Bernadette a great service. She was already in another very fulfilling relationship with a veritable SNAG, and, it seemed, never stopped smiling these days.

So, they had to get more creative. They had a new candidate on the list for elevation to the VOTOS Solution. John Hiscock – an appropriate name really, since that was all he ever thought about. John and his wife, Ella, had not long moved into the town, but Linda had come across the hapless wife in a café one day. Linda could tell that Ella had been crying and approached her cautiously and with genuine concern to ask if she was all right. Two hours and three chai lattes later, Linda had gleaned that Ella too was a victim of HISS – Husband Invoking Spousal Stupidity.

'It's just so frustrating,' Ella had confessed to her new-found confidant. 'You know, I'll ask him to help me do something and he'll either tell me what to do or worse, he'll try to re-invent the wheel. He'll never simply roll up his sleeves and get in and help. And unfortunately, he resents me for being smarter than him so he devises all these irritating things to make me look dumb, especially in front of other people. He also seems to just

like antagonising me into an argument. I think he thrives on it. I know I shouldn't take the bait but sometimes I just can't help it. It's so irritating.'

'That's sort of like small man syndrome,' Linda had suggested.

'Dumb man syndrome's more like it,' Ella had said with a laugh. 'But that's not it really. It's the sex. He never stops thinking about it, talking about it, watching it...'

'Doing it?'

'Well not with me, thankfully, because frankly I'd rather watch paint dry. But he does seem to spend an inordinate amount of time in the toilet and bathroom, usually with magazines. You know...'

'A wanker then?'

'In every sense of the word.' Ella had put her hand to her mouth as though covering the unseemliness of making a joke.

So Linda made a suggestion to Ella and she readily accepted the offer but was cautious about how the subject could be broached with John.

It was decided that Linda would visit them at home one day, like a friend dropping in for a casual visit. She'd made sure that she looked tarty enough to attract John's attention, which had immediately had the desired effect, and she'd observed how he condescended to and demeaned his wife without even realising he was doing it. She'd managed to get him alone – following a pre-arranged signal that sent Ella to the bathroom – and had suggested in her most seductive manner how he might benefit from becoming a part of her special program. It would help unleash the devil in him, she'd promised. He was hooked like a flaccid mullet.

He religiously attended all the PUB sessions, making Jane

and Linda cringe with his sexual innuendos. Why was it, they wondered, that the ugliest men always thought of themselves as sexy – as God's gift to virility? God, the man had barely any hair, dreadful taste in clothing, half a complement of teeth and even less machismo. On the Don't-Even-Think-About-Coming-Near-Me scale he was a nine-point-five at least. And on certain days, when it was evident he hadn't cleaned those picket-fence teeth, he ranked a nine-point-nine.

Poor Ella. All the grooming in the world wasn't going to turn John into a likeable human being – let alone a sustainable husband.

*What to do?*

Over more chai lattes on a Friday morning off, Linda gleaned some useful information from her now firm friend Ella. Aside from his pre-occupation with sex, John's secondary vice was hunting. He and his troglodyte mate, Kevin, satisfied their bloodthirsty tendencies once a month when they absconded together for a weekend camping-hunting expedition which usually involved loading Kevin's ute with their rifles, ammo, tent, loaded Esky, Primus and cans of stew and baked beans and pissing off into the bush. They didn't much care what they shot – deer, rabbits, wild dogs, wild boar, ducks, kookaburras. Anything. As long as it had a pulse it was fair game in their book. Mostly they were too pissed to give a shit.

*Hmm.*

Linda passed this information to Jane and they conspired. Maybe they might be able to save some defenceless wildlife into the bargain.

At the Thursday night PUB session before his next hunting foray, John had inadvertently provided Jane and Linda with

a possible, albeit by no means infallible, strategy. Despite complaining of a head cold all night, John had been yabbering on excitedly about the fact that his usual weekend trip was being extended to five days, since both he and Kevin had managed to get time off work. Linda remembered something she'd read, or maybe seen on the news, some time ago. It was worth a try. Having wised-up Jane so that she wouldn't put her foot in it, Linda called John aside after the class and invited him to share a scotch 'with the teachers'. He thought all his Christmases had come at once. He was the 'chosen' one. Little did he realise what he was being chosen for. He'd been fascinated to learn from them that not only was Tylenol excellent for relieving the symptoms of colds but it was a little-known fact that it greatly enhanced the effects of alcohol and, in the right dosage, could lead to unimaginably heightened sexual pleasure; especially if one was on one's own... It was just a suggestion.

They could never have dreamed that their plot would take out two dodo birds with one stone. When Ella, and Kevin's wife Sarah, reported to police the following Thursday that their husbands hadn't returned home from their hunting trip, the search was on. They were found by two park rangers the following day. They were both lying around their long-dead campfire. Flies open and flies humming around their comatose bodies. Surrounding them were two slabs worth of empty Jim Beam cans and a pile of empty packets of Tylenol. They'd had a lot of fun...until they'd both started feeling decidedly seedy.

Kevin died of liver failure in the ambulance. John's liver gave out the following day in hospital. Their deaths hit the news big-time. For weeks afterwards current affairs programs reported on the dangers of mixing alcohol and prescription medicines.

The results of their inquests were foregone conclusions – Death by Misadventure.

Ella and Sarah were united in mourning. For all of about a month. Then, they joined the tennis club together, they took out gym memberships, they spent a day in a day spa having make-overs, they joined a book club and a bush-walking club. They went to the movies together and were planning a holiday together. They got a life. And from all reports, they never looked back.

For a while, there was some speculation in Jane and Linda's community about the coincidence that three of the PUB Program's 'students' had died in peculiar circumstances in a relatively short period of time. Jane and Linda were at a complete loss to explain. They, it appeared, were just as surprised and perplexed as everybody else. But they decided that maybe the VOTOS program should hibernate for a while.

And it did.

For all of seven months.

Then Craig appeared for his preliminary interview. Jane and Linda had decided to conduct the evaluation together. Within two minutes, there was a tacit agreement between them. Craig's answer to almost every question they asked was, 'dunno'. Definitely not a thinking man. If he'd maybe answered 'I don't know' at least once they might have given him credit for having one marble rolling around in his vacuous head. They wondered whether he'd ever even tried to make a decision. Like using a condom maybe. They decided that Forrest Gump's expression 'Stupid is as stupid does' should have been coined for Craig. He actually made Gavin the Gormless look clever.

‘There should be a law against idiots like that being allowed to procreate,’ Linda had said afterwards.

‘Yep,’ Jane had agreed, ‘but then Carol’s no mastermind either’.

‘You’re right about that. Any mother who thinks that Macca’s is a healthy diet for anyone, let alone infants, and whose favourite pastime is dressing her kids’ teddies while watching cartoons in her pink fluffy-bunny flannelette pyjamas – in the *absence* of her kids – is no Mensa candidate.’

‘Oh, now you’re just getting bitchy,’ Jane laughed, casually slapping Linda on the arm. ‘I happen to love my pink fluffy-bunny flannelette pyjamas.’

‘Ha, the day I see you trading your sexy negligees for flannelette fat-Albert coveralls is the day I’ll have to commit you to a funny farm for faded floozies.’

‘Nevertheless, I feel we have an obligation to save Carol. Don’t you?’ Jane asked.

‘It shouldn’t be too hard. Craig should be easy to dispatch. I’m surprised he even remembers to breathe. If it had to be a conscious decision I doubt he’d have made it past the age of eight.’

So the women were back into research mode.

They were able to glean that Craig’s only interest was playing video or Xbox games and that it was not uncommon for him to sit in front of the T.V. (not the same one Carol reserved for her cartoon-watching) for hours on end fighting fights with predictable two-dimensional enemies. Apparently, his only forays into the big, wide ‘real’ world were his Friday ‘disability pension day’ grocery shopping expedition with Carol and his, now regular, Thursday night PUB classes.

The former gave Jane and Linda no inspiration and the latter would be too suspicious, so the women had to think a bit laterally.

‘Why is he on the disability pension?’ Linda asked Jane.

‘What condition does he have?’

‘Nothing serious that I know of. Just fat and lazy I think’.

‘Simon plays some of those video games doesn’t he?’ Linda asked, referring to Jane’s 15-year-old son.

‘Half an hour a day. That’s all he’s allowed. And he’s not allowed to have the Xbox in his bedroom – only in the lounge. But he’s pretty good. There’s no way on earth my reflexes could ever be that quick. His latest game is *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. He’s only had it a week but he’s already up to level six – so he was bragging at breakfast this morning. I had to look interested and impressed of course. Anyway, what have you got in mind?’

‘Hmm. Thinking, thinking. What would rile a 35-year-old Xbox addict more than anything?’

‘Being beaten by a 15-year-old would be my guess.’

‘Exactly.’

‘But how...?’

‘Well Craig’s flabbier than a Right Whale with enough chins to fill a Chinese phone book, isn’t he?’

‘Yep. And he chain smokes.’

‘So...if he happened to be lent a copy of *Dragon Age: Inquisition* and happened to be told that your 15-year-old son reached level six in – shall we say – two days, what do you think he’d be likely to do?’

‘Play it non-stop until he gets there too. But I don’t see how...’

‘Ever heard of deep vein thrombosis? It’s just a vague possibility, but you never know.’

‘Hmm. Good one. Nobody would ever suspect anything.’

Linda spoke in a suitably mortified voice the following Monday when she received a panicked phone call from Carol.

'I can't believe it Linda,' she'd confided. 'That he could be sitting there perfectly all right one minute and then the next minute, he gets up and keels over. Dead. Just like that. I mean, he was only 35. It was only because the pee bottle he'd kept beside him so he wouldn't have to get up was full and he didn't have any choice, since I was in the laundry doing the ironing with my earbuds in and didn't hear him calling.'

'Unbelievable,' Linda had commented. 'Who'd have thought? But how long had he been sitting there?'

'From five o'clock Friday afternoon until when it happened at about seven o'clock last night. The ambos said it can be that quick. They reckoned the clot must have gone straight from his leg to his pulmonary artery. Bang. Just like that.'

'So, 50 hours. But what possessed him to sit that long?'

'He was absolutely determined to get to level six of that stupid game someone lent him. Bugged if I could figure out why. Waste of bloody time if you ask me.'

Despite the tragic loss of Craig to society and the bodily hole it left in the current PUB Program line-up, his passing had little impact on the success of the course.

Women were now stopping Jane and Linda in the street to expound at length at how their lives and relationships had improved and on the new-found virtues of their heretofore antagonistic, lame husbands.

They began to wonder about the potential of franchising the PUB Program. It would take a lot of effort to get off the ground, with training programs to establish and marketing literature to produce. And it would require a highly-confidential interview

process to find suitable candidates to roll out a nation-wide program, but the idea certainly had merit. And who knew? Maybe some of those new co-ordinators might realise, in their own good time of course, the need for an advanced solution. And maybe, just maybe, Jane and Linda would let them in on their secret.

Some time later, Linda and Jane were sharing a morning coffee in their office when the phone rang. It was Jess, co-ordinator of the PUB Program at a northern Queensland community centre. Linda turned on the speaker phone for Jane's benefit. Jess advised her mentors that two of her students had died in very peculiar circumstances, within a month of each other. One, for some inexplicable reason, had overdosed on Viagra. The other, it seemed, had been poisoned by a strange stone he'd been sucking. Her community was awaiting the coroners' inquests. Jess acknowledged that she was at a complete loss to explain it.

Linda consoled her and told her not to worry. In fact she told Jess that, by extraordinary coincidence, one of the programs in WA and another in South Australia had recently reported not dissimilar turns of events. It was baffling. Those inquests had already been held and the coroner's findings? Death by Misadventure.

Jane and Linda merely looked at each other and wondered why no coroner had coined the acronym VOTOS.

## Fin Ross

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