

MORGAN

A detailed illustration of a man's face, shown in profile and looking slightly to the right. He has short, dark hair and a serious expression. The illustration is rendered in a dark, monochromatic style, possibly using a digital painting technique like airbrushing, and is set against a dark blue background with scattered white star-like specks.

in the **Mirror**

A detailed illustration of a woman's face, shown in profile and looking slightly to the left. She has short, dark hair with bangs and a serious expression. The illustration is rendered in a dark, monochromatic style, similar to the man's face above, and is set against the same dark blue background with scattered white star-like specks.

C. C. Saint-Clair

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in the Mirror

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ccsaintclair@gmail.com

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Lazy Moon Productions,
Australia

“Morgan ... a likeable and credible character struggling with one of the most difficult personal dilemmas in the developed world.”

Susan James

He says, “I want you.”

She chuckles against his ear. “I know.” She nuzzles him. “Hey ... Morgan ... Tell me you have condoms. There’s no way I can make lo—”

His lips are buried in her hair. “Chris ... we need to talk.” He only whispers because he doesn’t dare speak any louder.

“Oh no, we don’t. Talking’s for later. So where d’you keep them, huh?” She urges him, hand pressed over his groin. “Condoms ... Morgan?”

He moves her hand away from him. “Christen.”

Aware of a shift of energy in his body, she opens her eyes. “What’s up?”

“Sit,” he says gruffly. “Please.”

She sits but, tugging at his belt buckle, she reaches for him again.

He detaches her fingers from his belt buckle, steps back, briefly crosses his arms before taking two steps towards the hallway and stops, as if in two minds, before reaching in his back pocket. He flips his wallet open, riffles through it to pull out a snapshot. He walks back to the sofa and holds the picture level with Christen’s eyes.

“Oh. Great. So why show me this now?” she frowns. “Your girlfriend?”

He shakes his head and drops his weight in the armchair behind him.

Christen peers at the fresh-faced woman. “So, who’s the chick, then?” Tall and thin in a white T, the camera has caught the girl leaning out of a window. Her hair, in short but loose curls, looks mussed by a breeze as she smiles squarely into the camera, seemingly amused by something the photographer might have said.

“That chick ... it’s me.”

Christen’s eyes snap to Morgan’s face. “What d’you mean?” Her lips hold on to the smile as she peers more carefully at the picture.

About the Author

In between her sixth and seventh novels, C.C. Saint-Clair has released a second edition of her first book. *North and Left from Here (Take II)* is more streamlined than the original. That debut novel introduced a series of trademark romantic and sensual plots, each centred around a strong lesbian character and her quest for love, the meaning of life and inner-contentment.

Though the sensuality of her writing appeals beyond label boundaries, her work quickly attracted the tag of 'the thinking woman's lesbian romance'. It is a description that captures both the sensual romanticism and the socio-political realism underpinning her storylines in which reflections on the choices we make, the risks we take and (un)resolved personal issues rise to the surface. Here enters Morgan, of *Morgan In The Mirror*, Saint-Clair's latest protagonist, a young female-to-male transgender, and his battle to define himself as a man.

Certain experiences have propelled Saint-Clair towards feminism: the influence of a strong mother, an early preference for the companionship of women, despite a Jewish/Catholic heritage, and a life of travel which forced her to become resourceful and resilient at a young age. Some of the moments and emotions experienced along the way have yielded indelible freeze-frame moments that have inspired some of her reflective, fictional narratives.

Though Saint-Clair is happy to go along with the tag that has cast her as a lesbian romance writer for the 'thinking woman', she says that, neither airbrushed nor glamorous, though admittedly attractive in their own idiosyncratic way, her 'women' are not typical romance heroines in that they do not need rescuing. They rescue themselves but not from any physical danger. Their quest is emotional fulfilment within their ordinary lives, not only as teachers, police women, veterinary surgeons and mechanics, but also as disengaged Gen-Xers.

“There are no fires, no shipwrecks, no murders. And the irony is that, within this simplicity lies the complexity of life and love’s role in defining it.”

Saint-Clair is as passionate about the sensuality of her writing as she is about exposing the readers of her brand of romance to the emotionally harsh landscape that she believes is the real life backdrop against which many women have to struggle, before they come into their own.

Born of French parents in Casablanca, Saint-Clair is a native French speaker, although she completed her formal education in the United States at The University of Texas, majoring in English Literature.

Like Alex Delaforêt, one of her main characters, Saint-Clair lives in Brisbane, Australia. However, unlike Alex whose feelings of loss, regret, anger and loneliness have been folding her inwards since separating from her younger lover, Tamara, Saint-Clair is happily settled with her partner of many years.

Just returned from a challenging trek inside the jungles of Sarawak, Saint-Clair is already planning the sequel to *Morgan in the Mirror*.

Also by C.C. Saint-Clair

North and Left from Here (Take II)

Benchmarks

Silent Goodbyes

Risking-me

Jagged Dreams

Far From Maddy

Visit ccsaint-clair.com.au for F.R.E.E. author's cut extracts and to explore C.C. Saint-Clair's spiritual writing on All Matters of the Heart and Soul.

The time to Rethink Thinking is Now.

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Part I

Morgan's Story

PROLOGUE

On their way to the far end of the Queen's Domain parkland, the five Skinheads had met at the top of Elizabeth Street to 'glue' the neighbourhood with posters of *O!!HOB*, the best local approximation of a punk metal band.

Tall and rangy, number one buzz neatly parted above her left temple by the pale trail of a scar, Morgan feels big. Big inside the flight jacket made even bigger by the large black and white patch of a Trojan helmet sewn on the back. Big inside her oxblood DMs. Purple laces threaded the 'trad' way, in horizontal rows, jeans turned up a couple of inches above the ankles, at fifteen, she is the quintessential teen Skin on the prowl.

The tacit understanding being that shaking is never cool, not even from the frosty wind blowing across the park, hands tucked under their armpits for T-Rex and Bag, warmth inhaled from her incandescent cigarette for Morgan, the lads struggle to keep their breath steady. Finally they hear it—Kurt's signal—the caw of a crow.

T-Rex and Jimmy hiss a satisfied 'Yes!'

Sucking a cigarette butt too close to the filter, Morgan peels herself off the tree trunk against which she has been leaning. If the bonehead responsible for Fredo's broken arm has just passed through the north entrance to the park, he'll come into view any minute now.

Bag, as in 'It's-In-The-Bag', the fresh cut shuffling next to her, is nervously snapping his braces. Snap. Snap. And again. The tight, popping sound is getting right up Morgan's nose because she envies the lad's ability to do it—to snap his braces against his chest—to have them make that clear, sharp, snapping sound. If she stretched and released her own braces, the non-snap would be a thud muffled, not only by the layered combo of T worn under shirt, but also by the binding wrapped tightly over her breasts.

Surreptitiously, she assesses the new recruit. The skin on the youth's skull is opaque-white under the moonlight. If his cut's more than a couple of days old, Morgan thinks, she'll fucken start zig-zagging her bootlaces. Short and squat. Low centre of gravity. Convenient for ducking and rolling. Shit ass for running, she concludes, briefly pondering the whim of Nature. What if I'd had the choice, huh? Tall and dickless or short with a fat one? Mmmph, she groans silently.

"Hey, punk," she growls, "ease up on the rubber bands, will ya?"

The lad looks up, lip curled, ready to snarl, but he changes his mind.

Kurt had already warned him: "You do as you're told, buddy. Fresh cuts don't flap back, no matter who, no matter what. Not till you've proven you're one of the crew. So, Gumball ... Did I hear you say you want to combat that downtown racial shit and all? Make Hobart City minority-friendly?" The boy had nodded eagerly. "I bet you also wanna strut around with Hobart S.H.A.R.P. stitched on that virgin bomber of yours. You do, don't you?" The lad had nodded again, eyes even brighter. "Sweet! Little dude, sweet," Kurt smiled benignly. "But no way none of that's ever gonna happen if you don't think clear, you hear? If you don't think and if you don't follow orders, you're nothing more than a wannabe gutter punk with no place on this crew."

On the off chance that generating a little aggro might get her warmed up from the inside, Morgan persists. "Hey, ice-cream boy!" Her eyebrows are screwed up in a convincing glare. "Why don't you like, run your butt back to The Milkshake Hut, huh, if that's getting all too scary for you." The boy looks at her warily.

A movement in her peripheral vision makes her look twice. The mark's just emerged from the shadows, alone as expected, and despite the distance that still separates him from the group, she can discern the cap worn backwards and the baggy crotch that reaches almost to his knees.

"OK, guys," T-Rex cheers quietly, fist held out for a knuckle rap with everyone. "Boot-scootin' time! So, Jimmy, what say you and me, we move into that two-men pincer thing and what with Kurt closing in from behind—"

"What the fuck!" Morgan points. "A chick. How come it's only now she pops in the picture?" She zips up her flight jacket. Even the binding under her T doesn't insulate her chest from the icy-cold night air.

“Squatting for a leak?” Bag’s suggestion.

“Phroar! Bet old Kurt got himself an eyeful, then. Lucky sod.”

Jimmy blows on his fingers to loosen them up and sticks them back under his pits. The knuckles will feel less brittle when the crunch comes. “That’s ‘bout the only moonin’ he wouldn’t boot back to the moon, I reckon.”

Hearing the girl’s running footfalls behind him, the young male in the rapper gear turns around and holds out his hand. As the girl grabs it, he spins her into a hug.

“Shit. That’s his bitch.” T-Rex nibbles the inside of his lip. The couple is still a good hundred metres away but getting closer. “Never mind, dudes. We fix two for the price of one. Let’s just not hit her in the jugs,” he says, always the gentleman.

Forehead tense, Morgan shifts uncomfortably. It’s one thing being a lookout for the good cause when, as has always been the case so far, the recipient of the ‘lesson in urban conscience’ is a male. It’s an entirely different gig, one she hadn’t previously thought about, if a chick’s gonna be involved. She briskly sniffs back the cold droplet that teases the tip of her nose.

“T ... look. That’s like, not right, that ... booting the girl and all. So seriously uncool, man.” Tall and straight, chin tilted for emphasis, she sniffs again. “I say we catch up with him some other time when he’s solo. We got no beef with *her*.”

The approaching couple is blissfully unaware of the group clumped among the tree trunks. Staccato-fast, T-Rex argues, “She’s probably got the same views as him, huh? If she hangs with him? Am I right or am I right?”

“No. Not fucken right at all, T. Guilty by association? That’s not one of *our* Four Points of Challenge.” Morgan moves out of the shadows. “Watch me spook ‘em out of here, T. I just gotta!”

There is *one* rule of engagement that Morgan knows T-Rex and Kurt will not contravene. ‘When the unexpected happens, desist immediately. Just pull back and disperse,’ Kurt always reminds the new boys. ‘None of that half-cocked, limp-dick action. Never. That’s a sure way to get you, and me, and everyone around, where nobody wants to go—hospital, morgue, or cop shop.’

Morgan lopes towards the couple.

“Off you go, fuckwads!” she calls, shoos them away. “Off our fucken turf, you mongers!”

C. C. Saint-Clair

The vision of the Skinhead jumped out of nowhere propels the young male forwards—a flight on the wings of Queen Adrenal. Morgan chuckles quietly at the sight of him—the one hand hiking up the baggies that hang half-way down his butt, the other yanking the girl behind him.

T-Rex catches up with her. “Morg? You cunt!” Breath warm against her ear, he snarls, “What’s with the confusion, huh?” His hand is hard around her arm. “What’s up with you, dude?”

Morgan and Christen

Her lover's tongue is warm and insistent. Maddy smiles into the kiss but she wiggles away from under Jo to straddle her buttocks. With strong, freckle-splattered fingers, she explores again the narrow span of her lover's shoulders, the nape of her neck, gracile under uneven tufts of short dark hair. Eyes closed, she reads her lover's spine with the sensitive accuracy of someone reading Braille.

Her hand runs across Jo's lower back and cups the angular contour of a hip. The curve of her lover's buttocks against her sex is keeping her clit humming nicely. *Jo's OK*, Maddy grins silently. She's made it back. All the way back. She slides a hand under her lover's belly and rolls off, taking Jo with her, inside her arms. Snug and safe against Maddy's chest, ear against her heart, Jo throws an arm across the breadth of her lover's back.

Her sex is wet against Maddy's hand now that Jo has shifted enough to accommodate the gentle intrusion between her thighs. Maddy responds to the soft glide of her lover's lips and tongue as she traces the shape of Jo's clit with her fingertips. Her lover's breath catches against her ear and though her tongue blends and melts, hips loose against Jo's thigh, Maddy is focused on awakening the tiniest, most secret of all spots that might bring Jo to orgasm.

When she understood from Christen's account that Jo, squatting the garden of a deserted house, had resumed a heavy bong-smoking habit, Maddy had almost given up from fear of never, but never again, feeling Jo safe against her, safe and trusting against her lips, safe and trusting against her fingertips. When Jo had insisted on staying in the park even after weeks of living rough, Maddy had thought her lost. Not lost just to her, Maddy, but to the world. Lost even to herself.

Like a bungee jumper—half a heartbeat past the point of balance—and fluttering on the edge of orgasm, Jo moans against Maddy's lips. Fused to the beating of her lover's heart, she knows a molten, pulsating emotion that blurs the confines of her physical boundaries.

Belly against belly, legs entwined, muscles softened by their lovemaking, Jo and Maddy lie still under the sheet. There isn't a thing

they need to do, not just yet, but let weightless thoughts drift, float and fade into the morning sunlight. Sunday! Nirvana, thinks Jo. Doze off. Chill some more, thinks Maddy. And so, the forehead of one against the lips of the other, they drift off into a post-orgasmic bliss.

Tinkle! Tinkle, tinkle! The little bell attached to the back gate calls out to Maddy.

“Mmm,” she mumbles. “We’ve got a visitor.”

“Who’re you expecting?”

“No one.” Maddy caresses the thigh Jo has draped across her belly. “Only Christen ... but like, not before lunch or anything. Babe, let me up.”

Jo reluctantly shifts her leg away from Maddy’s stomach. “Hey ... don’t be long. I like this ... this lazy Sunday morning thing with you.”

Maddy’s lip loop glints silver. She pushes back the rat-chewed strands of hair that have fallen over Jo’s eyes. “I’ll be right ba—”

“Still in bed, you two?” A male voice outside, just beneath the window-sill.

Sheet brought up under her chin as if expecting the intruder to pole vault through the window, Jo sits bolt upright. “What the fuck!” Her grey eyes are slits of irritation.

“Hey, Maddy? *Jo*? You in there?” the voice persists. “It’s me ... Morgan.”

Jo jumps out of bed and pokes her head through the curtains. Brown curls below.

“And lookee here, Maddy,” she whoops, “if it’s not the man from the Tasman himself!”

Brown curls tilt backwards, brown eyes look up. Jo’s buddy, from the Fairfield House days, grins back.

“Morgan, you mongrel! When d’you get back?”

“A couple days ago. Thought it was time I looked up my two fave girlfriends.”

“In your dreams, buddy,” Maddy replies chirpily from behind Jo. “In your dreams but, hey ... don’t just stand there like a goose. Come around to the back door.”

In the days that had preceded Jo’s disappearance in the middle of the night, she was simply renting Room 8 at Fairfield House, a boarding lodge in Annerley.

Morgan was in Room 5 across the hallway. He wasn't there long, but during the time they overlapped at the lodge, Jo had bonded with him in an uncanny sort of way. Uncanny, because the law of averages indicated that Jo didn't bond with men, not even with young ones her age. Not even if they were cute and domesticated, not that she often came across any that she would readily place in the category of the Domesticated Male though some, she conceded, could be sort of cute but, "Too ... emotionally challenged," she once told Maddy. "Besides, it's just so weird the amount of space they take up. It's really weird how they do that, how they just ... spread. Even the weedy ones."

Maddy, herself, didn't have much to say that would contradict that thought. She had a good working relationship with Drew and the other mechanic at Terry's All Treads although, since she'd become an A-Grade mechanic, something that also involved supervisory responsibilities, things weren't as happy-go-lucky between them as they had been in the past. Drew still had to be reminded, too often, that a pace had to be kept on the workshop floor: not too fast, not too slow.

"It's a bit like with that Barbie girlfriend of yours," she had teased, thinking her analogy might hit the mark in a way her previous and more subtle attempts had not. "You lose the rhythm and before you know it, someone'll be stepping in for you. Except here, on the floor, there's a lot more at stake, Drew. Here, it's all about keeping the *clients* satisfied." Anyway, back in Jo's boarding days some eight months earlier, the breakfast menu offered limited variety: bread or toast. Honey, strawberry jam or Vegemite. Baked beans and, of course, the ubiquitous cereal.

This dude's different, Jo had thought, as she kept finding herself, half asleep, in the same early morning queue as Him-with-the-brown-eyes, but Jo had first noticed Morgan because he kept to himself and kept his voice decibels down. One minute he was there, quietly spooning his sippy breakfast, the next he was gone.

One night, as she came home from a late evening shift at the hospital cafeteria, Jo had found Him-with-the-brown-eyes seated in a dark recess of the front porch while the boarders, in for the night, were already sprawled in the communal lounge, in front of the TV set.

"You're on your way out?" she had asked lightly, as she made to walk past.

“Nah. Can’t say that I am,” he had replied softly. “I’m about as far out as I’m gonna get.”

Jo liked that answer. The double entendre that the guy couldn’t possibly have intended made her grin. “So ... why you hanging out here in the dark?”

“Same reason you’re often out here yourself.”

“Ah, right. Well, tube watching’s not my sport. Not a lot.”

“Not mine either. I’m more into rock climbing,” had replied Morgan. “I’m not good in confined spaces.”

“Oh. So ... how you finding your room, then?”

“That’s why I’m relaxing *here*, as opposed to relaxing in it. So small, it makes me feel like a battery hen without the battery.” Wryly, he had added, “It takes all the rooster out of me.”

Jo decided she liked the guy enough to flop on the plastic chair next to his. “By the way, my name’s Jo. I’m in 8,” she had said, by way of introduction.

“Morgan. 5,” he had countered, as if slapping an ace on a card table.

From then on, separated by the incessant buzzing of their separate thoughts but still connected by a silence that was easy because they had chosen the other to share it with, they’d often sit on the front porch. The rest of the lodgers thought them to be lovers. That was until a few weeks later Morgan left Fairfield to move into a self-contained flat on the ground floor of someone’s house. He said he couldn’t stand it any more at the lodge because he couldn’t get any work done.

“Not an ounce of spare space in those box-sized rooms,” he complained. “Nowhere I can spread my shit.” That was before adding that he really, really, couldn’t stand the communal toilet block anymore either. Jo understood all of that but, back in those days, she had her own reasons for staying put in Room 8.

A few weeks later, she had drifted into the bay at Terry’s All Treads. The front tyre of her old rusty-nail of a bicycle had punctured half a K up the road and the sign outside did say *All Treads*. One of the mechanics there had kindly given her a lift back to Fairfield because it turned out that her tyre was too far gone to take a patch. Besides, at *Terry’s All Treads*, they sold and fixed all sorts of tyres, even those of semis, but they didn’t carry anything that would suit a bicycle. The helpful mechanic turned out to be Maddy who had felt the need to rescue her from Drew’s sarcasm.

“Duh, lady” he had said. “We handle *real* tyres here. Not any of that thin garden hose stuff you’d need for a bike. Like much, much bigger. Much, much harder too.” His tone had made Maddy wince but in those days, she was only his offsider on the floor, not yet his supervisor.

When, weeks later, Jo had got around to introducing her boarding buddy to her new lover, Maddy found him cute. “Self-contained,” she said, “Doesn’t take over the airwaves. A gentle sort of guy. Cute, too.”

Then, Morgan announced that, one term shy of the completion of a Bachelor of Engineering in Environmental Management, he had decided to put his studies on hold. He had to get back to Melbourne. He’d be away for a while.

“I’ll stay at Jar ... at *Jerry’s*, my sister.” He couldn’t have explained, right there and then, why the impulse of smudging Jarryd’s gender had seemed necessary but he moved on, fingertips teasing his goatee, adding that he’d look them up, Jo and Maddy, the moment he was back. And there he was, back on a lazy, sunny Sunday morning, some five months later.

Beer in hand, knees open wide in the basic male sofa-slouch, Morgan is happy to give Jo and Maddy a very simplified version of his time in Melbourne: cheering, either at the stadium or in front of the tube, for the Collingwood Magpies, the AFL team Jerry is fanatically passionate about. Melburnians are totally fanatical about the sport they’ve named Australian Football League, a misnomer. Yes, it is exclusively played in Australia and yes it involves men, exclusively, and a ball shaped like the one used in Rugby, but there the comparison ends. AFL is a fast paced aerial game. Big men jump to mark and the passes are mostly overhead. Melbourne is to AFL as Mecca is to the Muslim or the Castro District to gays. And it’s as popular with women as it is with men. Short shorts and uniform singlets that show off the players’ muscle-hard arms might have something to do with that.

“So, yeah. We did a lot of that, it being the season and all and then, of course, I had to get—” He hesitates, averts his eyes and doesn’t resume his thought.

Jo looks at him thoughtfully. “Morgan, dude, what else’ve you been up to out there? Meat pies and sausage rolls? You’ve put on a bit of weight, haven’t you?”

Sure have! he would have liked to reply. A bit on my neck and a bit on my cheeks, 'cause that's where guys store it. But, then again, he almost blurts, there's some 402 grammes on the right of me and 435 grammes on the left of me that are like, gone!

"I'm fine," he grins simply, though his hand travels across his chest. "It's my sister. Jerry, she's like, really into her food and ... " He shrugs. "All I need is a bit more of that good old Queensland tan and before you know it, I'll be ready for the cover of *RALPH*," he over-explains, though neither Maddy nor Jo require more explanation as to why, five months unseen, Morgan seems somewhat altered. "It's the Melbourne weather, you know. Crappy as." Most Australians, but not necessarily most Melburnians, agree that the Melbourne weather is terrible. Too hot, too cold, too unpredictable. "Yeah, and I'm a bit tired too but, hey, it's good to be back. So, what've you two been up to then?" he asks, eyebrows arched.

Maddy looks at her lover sunk deep inside a beanbag before glancing sideways at Morgan. Though Jo's grey eyes are offset by thin strands of hair that she's decided to razor-cut herself, and Morgan's is a tangle of short brown curls, both hover around the five eleven mark—Jo in a borderline anorexic sort of way, Morgan in a wiry sort of way. Though shorter by quite a few inches, at twenty-five, Maddy is their elder by a couple of years.

"So when's your next climb?" she asks, remembering that Morgan is a rock lizard.

He runs his thumb across his chest. "Not sure as to the *when*, but the *where* will probably be Insurrection Wall. Not sure, just want to get into some slabs and overhangs in a serious way. I mean, there's nothing better than hanging upside down under a ledge like a possum on a phone wire, with all that air under you ... But first things first." He sounds very mature. "The C for cash comes before the C for climbing so, girls ... from here on ... Yo! I want you to think of me as Mor, the-hard-hat-man."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning that my priority is to pull in some good money quickly, like now, before I get back full swing into my last term at uni. So there's this big construction site that's just set up near Sandgate, right? So, who's the dude behind the wheel of one of 'em big-ass milkshake trucks?"

They both look at him fuzzily. "Milkshake truck? Like Mr Whippy or something?"

Beer can wedged between crotch and thigh, Morgan smiles wide. “You’re not seriously thinking that I’d be in on *that!* Think of my image. P-lease!” He beams. “The big deal is that I’ve scored the honour of running a mixer from the quarry to the site and again and again.” With the flushed excitement of a little boy for his Tonka toy, he adds, “It’s a bright yellow Mack, with an eight cubic metre wet concrete outpour. It’s dusty as hell inside and out, fucking loud, too, but like I said—the money’s real sweet. Some five hundred buckeroos nice and clean ...” Fingertips tap the palm of the other hand, “... right here, every week, come the end of the Friday shift. So, yeah, the rock will wait. It’s for later, like the reward, right?” He squints at Maddy, in mock suspicion. “Why the question about my next climb, Mad? You want to be my larry? Crew for me?” he teases.

Maddy rakes freckle-stained fingers through her hair. “Crew for you? What if I want to do my own slab, huh?” she asks cockily. “And none of that zero altitude bouldering stuff.” She sits up. “Listen, I bet that if you show me what to do with the cams and carabiners, I’m sure I can haul myself up there. Well,” she reconsiders, “not to the top, maybe not, but a fair way up. Don’t you reckon?”

“Mmm. There’s a lot more to it than packing good muscles, Mad.” Morgan teases the patch of fuzz on the tip of his chin, the only area on his face where male hair deigns to grow meaningfully. Trimmed into a neat, vertical rectangle, the goatee looks manly enough to absolve the permanent absence of a five o’clock shadow. He reaches towards Maddy to play-feel the well-defined thickness of her biceps. “Actually, all things being equal, a lean frame works better ‘cause it’s lighter to haul up. But, yeah, your upper body power is like, so good, and you’re not butt heavy at all so ... Yeah, we could start you on some of the easy angled slabs at Beerwah, and basic hand jams and smears, even the short-ass that you are.”

Maddy slams her hand playfully against his stomach. “Don’t you start calling me short-ass, you dork! Five six is just fine for a chick. Not everyone needs to be of the string bean variety, you know.”

“True. Actually, if you, and Jo over there, could morph into one, between the two of you, you’d have the perfect climber’s body. What with her reach and your strength ...” Morgan looks thoughtfully at Jo, narrow hipped, long legged inside her black jeans, still cocooned inside the beanbag. At fifteen, *he* was a Skin moonstomping to the 4 Skins. At fifteen and with a mother bent on a downward

spiral, Jo, a disenfranchised Gen X kid, had just discovered the Seattle Sound Grunge culture that became the emotional insulator she needed to survive. At twenty-three, reed-like inside all that had been worn soft, she still dressed the part. Anything laddered, frayed and unravelling, any genuine, preloved garment that could pass for neo-grunge on the set of the Nebuchadnezzar hovership was her thing. “Hey, Reed Girl!” Morgan teases, chin tilted toward her. “What’ve you got to say for yourself, huh? You’re even skinnier than back at Fairfield. Doesn’t Mad feed you enough or what?”

Jo rolls her eyes to the ceiling in lieu of an answer and Maddy takes up the slack. “Buddy, you’ve missed one massive excitement while you were cruising the Melbourne scene. *Miss Reed*, over here,” she nudges Jo’s combat boot with her foot, “she gave me the fright of a lifetime. Actually, now that I think of it, I could’ve done with you here, you know.” She tilts her head towards Jo, “I guess we *both* could have.”

Morgan cocks his head. “What’s that rap about? Jo?”

Jo loops her long arms around her knees. “Look ... it’s history really.” She picks at the frayed hole that crowns her kneecap. “OK,” she sighs, “let’s just say that I went through this phase where I got totally lost in my own plot.” The look of concern in Morgan’s eyes makes her feel it’s OK to roll out a couple of her own headlines. “It’s like, it all started that one night when I totally blew a fuse. I needed to ... process ... life ... solo.”

“Process what life?”

“Shit and stuff.” She stops picking at the tear to meet his eyes more squarely. “Things like what we talked about, remember? On the porch of Fairfield—”

“Your mum? Like the way you knew she’d ... like, kill herself and how you found her ... too late?”

“Yeah ... it started off with that but ... it ended up getting all tight and twisted in my head. Anyway ... I thought, Fuck the pretending. Out of the rat race. I didn’t want to like, have to prove myself to earn the privilege to be loved and then be all vulnerable when that love gets taken back. I didn’t want Maddy’s love either.” Jo brings her knees closer against her chest. “Especially not hers ‘cause I loved her too much.” Long fingers delicately pull a thread from the tear. She peers at it before snapping it off. “I needed to feel how it felt to just be

without—Oh, look ... Morgan, buddy?” She flops back into the beanbag. “Some other time, huh? Too long to explain just now.”

Morgan turns to Maddy. “Right,” she says, with a little shrug, drawing in the lip loop that glints silver while she decides how best to fill in for Morgan the blanks that are the easiest to fill. “Some three weeks after Jo disappeared into the night, I get this call from the police. They’d found her in a park. Living rough, right? And when I actually hook up with her, there, in the park ... she doesn’t want to come home. Doesn’t want to go anywhere. Thing is, living rough, as long as you’ve got a couple of bucks in your pocket and you’re not creating a disturbance, it’s not an offence. So the police found her but it had to be up to her to decide to actually leave the streets and, like ... reinsert, you know ... uh ... mainstream.”

The beanbag rustles and spreads as Jo works her body deeper into it. Lying almost parallel to the ceiling, she breaks in, “But I didn’t really *sleep* in the park, did I?”

“You’re one mad chick, Jo, you know that?” Little doubtful shakes of the head to accompany a frown indicate Morgan’s difficulty at imagining the chain of events that had pushed Jo to cut herself out of the loop in this weird way. “So, where did you sleep, then?”

Jo answers the ceiling. “Under a ... tree. In someone’s garden.”

“What? Day in, day out? Under a tree?”

“Night in. Night out. Daytime, I was in the park.”

Hand flat against his chest, long fingers splayed, Morgan exclaims, “Well, fuck me!” Beer in hand, elbows on knees, he leans forward. “Jo, you could’ve been aggressed, right there in the middle of your best dream. Even street people get aggressed, you know. Some even get set alight. There’s weirdos on the prowl out there who think it’s great fun. You could’ve gotten seriously sick, too.” He takes another mouthful of beer. “Jo, that sounds like one fucked up thing to do, that.”

The beanbag rustles again. “Easy, buddy.” Jo sits up. “Don’t you come in with the big bro act and blast me, huh! I’m fine, right? I survived. I had to do what made sense to me ... until it no longer made enough sense. Some, but not enough.”

“And now what?”

“And *now*, I’m back at Fairfield.” She uncurls an index finger. “I’m seeing a shrink, that’s to reset my brain. Thursdays five to six-thirty, I’m with Bernice—that’s the shrink—without fail and on time.” She

uncurls another finger. "I've quit the hubblebubble shit. I don't blow cones anymore. In fact, I don't blow much of anything anymore." Another finger joins the first two. "And, see?" She points four fingers at her lover. "Maddy and me, we're ... cool together. All's well, bud. The show's over."

"Yeah, well ... " Morgan adjusts his position on the sofa and the fit of his jeans over his groin.

"No, look, I tell you, it's cool. Really. Maddy, you tell 'im."

Maddy nudges Morgan and nods. "She's fine."

"What? That's it?" Jo struggles out of the smothering hug of the beanbag to jump, boots and all, on the sofa where, crouched like a lemur on a branch, she snuggles hard against Maddy. "I'm like, just *fine*? Only just fine?" She makes a show of peering into her lover's eyes.

"Right." Maddy pretends to push her away. "You're safe. You're healthy. You're still hanging with me. It's all good. Happy, lover?"

Jo nuzzles Maddy's hair and moves to wrap an arm around her neck but Maddy drops to her feet, swiftly pulling Jo's boots from under her.

"What the—"

Already in a squatting position between Jo's knees, Maddy warns, "Ready or not, here comes! Hi-ho, Silver!" Hands wrapped around Jo's wrists, she straightens to full height, lifting her, balanced on her shoulders.

Morgan splutters the mouthful of beer he had just taken at the sight of Jo, legs folded high like a jockey on a racehorse, pulled right over Maddy like a carapace.

"Frog went a-courtin' and he did ride ... uh-huh," Jo intones at the top of her lungs, "with a *crop* and a *shovel* by his side, uh-huh."

Maddy's theory seems to be holding. Stepping in time, she joins in for the chorus.

"Uh-huh. Uh-huh."

In the time since Jo's return, she's worked out that, when her lover gets all tied up by thoughts from the past and knots not yet undone, she can sometimes disconnect her from them by involving her in physical play and they play a lot together. Of all the games they play though, Horsey, to the tune of Dylan's rambling ditty about frogs, snakes and beetles, is her favourite, closely followed by pillow-fights

and, on sunny days, mad chases around the garden with the garden hose turned on full blast.

Maddy prances and bucks like a deranged Lippizaner while atop her swimmer-wide shoulders, Jo waves an imaginary crop with the easy grace and abandonment of a fairy princess her wand. Shaking his head in disbelief, Morgan is laughing so hard that his voice box pitches higher than usual. Though Maddy can't see it, the little girl smile that makes her feel warm all over when she sees it on Jo's lips is there—two tiny creases at the corners of her lover's mouth.

"Well, he rode up to Miss *Maddy's* door ... "

"Uh-huh ... uh-huh ..." they chorus, as Maddy sashays past Morgan and looks about to drop her charge right on his lap.

"Nah ... man!" he hiccups, one hand against his ribs. "Can't breathe!"

Though Jo and Maddy's cavorting is, indeed, a hilarious sight, their antics have triggered a memory that Morgan thought he had forgotten—that of Dan, his father, bouncing her on his shoulders until, podgy little hands buried in his hair, she'd squeal with delight. When he'd had enough or had to get back to work, he'd 'dismount' her by toppling her upside and swinging her three or four times by the wrists. Flushed and giggly, Morgan would look at her father, reach out for more fun, but Dan had a business to run.

"Hey, Mor!" Jo calls out from her perch, fingers buried in Maddy's hair for anchorage. "The thing is that my Maddy here ... she reckons that any pain ... that's lasted that long ... like, since you—" She shrugged. "I mean, since I was a little girl ... She reckons ..." Hips loose on her bucking horse, she lurches forwards and backwards with each of Maddy's manic moves. "She reckons that ... this sort of pain can't be an easy ... pain to get rid of. She says it'd have to be more difficult than wiping down a kitchen top ... like to get rid of grime. What'd you reckon ... about that ... Mr-soon-to-be-an-engineer?"

"No pain worth the name goes away easily, Jo," he answers quickly, perhaps too quickly, though laughter is still shiny in his eyes. "It always takes time. It just has to." He gets up from the sofa. "Good girl! Hey!" he calls out, arms open wide as if to block and soothe a brumby on the run. "Whoa!" Head tucked in just below the ceiling fan, Jo's face is still higher than his and he has to tilt his chin to meet her eyes, sparkling and grey between blade-shaped strands of black. "It'll take time," he repeats, as if to himself, though his hand is flat on her

thigh, “but eventually, there comes a day when you look at yourself in the mirror and say, ‘Hey, Mirror, look at me, inside and out.’ Total control.” He pirouettes on his heels. “When you get to feel *that*, Jo, you know your pain’s all gone.” For the moment.

Maddy puts one knee down to topple Jo on the carpet. “Tell you what ... you guys,” she calls out, somewhat puffed, “why don’t you ... like, get a life and buzz off to the garden, huh? I need to get a few things done ... before Christen gets here.”

“Christen who?”

Jo raises herself on one elbow. “Christen-who, you ask? Dear boy, Christen ... she’s the cop who found me.”

“She’s not the *cop* who found you. She’s the Detective Sergeant who cared enough ... to stay in the loop *before* you were found.”

Rolling her eyes comically, Jo replies, “Oh yeah! And, Mor, get a load of this; Christen is the same DS who gets this idea that Maddy had to be the one female on the planet, right, that could like, cure her from life-long heterosexuality.” Hand on her heart, she lets herself drop backwards in an operatic swoon. “Duh! As if there weren’t enough dykes in the Queensland police force. Right?”

Already at the back door, Morgan clears his throat. “I’ll be damned!” he chuckles, “but I’m pretty sure the two of you are even madder now than last time.”

Looking beyond Maddy’s head, Christen squints through the kitchen window. “And who’s the toy boy busy dismantling your lounge chair, then?”

She has just arrived for lunch, bringing, as she always does, a bottle of good wine for the ‘wine closet’ Maddy has recently set up under the staircase, and butcher-paper-wrapped parcels of cold cuts from the local deli.

Maddy moves out of the hug. “Toy boy! Spoken like a true ... *older* woman, Chris,” she chides. “Should watch yourself.”

“Hey, my outlook on age has nothing to do with anything. To someone *his* age, I can only be an *older* woman. So, how *young* is this young male, then?”

“Younger than me. Younger than Jo, but only by a couple of months.”

“Right! I knew it.” Christen crinkles up her nose. “Kind of cute, though. Needs to bulk up a bit but he seems to have a good body.”

“He’s a climber of the rock-climbing variety.”

“Oooh ... yeah! A rock rat! So, who *is* he? Got a name? A story?”

“Morgan’s the name. No story. Jo’s buddy from ... from before. Just come back from Melbourne. A few months in Briz, a few months in Melbourne. Drifts in, drifts away.”

“Oh right. So that’d explain why I haven’t seen him around.” Christen turns back to Maddy. “So, you’re going to introduce me?” She smiles. “Or will you make me do that on my own?”

“Christen! I thought you were like, you know, off guys a bit. Like since ... us.”

“Since *us*?” Christen cups Maddy’s chin to make her look into her eyes. “Oh sweet-heart! You mean since the one fuck in the stairwell and our threesomes ... in bed ... with Jo’s ghost?”

Maddy steps away, shaking her head. The sandwich halves she had begun arranging on a platter are still waiting for that to happen but, round blue eyes tight with frustration, tufts of rust-red hair standing on end, silver lip loop glinting across her bottom lip, she is coiled. “Don’t rattle, Chris. You know damn well why *that* was all we could have, you and me.” Already back then, months earlier, she had felt that she wasn’t doing the right thing by Christen but, then again, months earlier, Christen already knew the deal.

“Oh, baby, I’m not teasing.” The spray of freckles over Maddy’s cheeks makes Christen smile again. “I’m glad you and Jo are back together. You know damn well I mean that. But ... I also need to be honest about the rest. About how I feel about ... you.”

Maddy looks through the window. Jo and Morgan, laughing, are pulling at opposite ends of a PVC tube that they seem intent on separating.

Christen, too, is looking at the young people on the lawn. “If things had been different, you and me ... ”

How different would *things* have been, Maddy wonders as she occasionally does, if, early one morning, Jo hadn’t materialised on her back steps.

She had returned accompanied by a woman who had handed Maddy a business card. Made dumb by the sight of Jo, healthy and *here*, Maddy could only stare from the card to the lover she had

thought lost to some greater and very dark power, before glancing again at the card. Grey eyes smudged by dingy shadows and framed by dusty strands of black rat-chewed tufts, Jo had stood at the woman's side, bone-thin in her stained army greens and crumpled T.

"Maddy," the woman had begun softly, "my name is Tamara Townsend. I'm with the domestic violence cell downtown but," she added hurriedly, "that's not why I'm here."

Shifting her weight to the other foot, she positioned herself slightly behind Jo. "Jo will explain the whole thing much better than I could ever do, but the thing is that she's ready to move on from New Farm ... She made that very clear last night and ... here she is."

"Last night? She called you?" Maddy had asked as if Jo had become autistic.

"Yes, last night."

Maddy bit on her lip loop. "It's 6 a.m." Why didn't she call *me*, last night? Maddy wanted to ask.

"It is," the woman replied quietly. "Jo said you usually got up around that time. Jo?"

Jo's long arm had darted forward. "Mad ... I can't do this anymore. I need you."

Maddy grabbed her thin hand almost in mid-flight. "Oh ... oh ... shit. Jo ... Come in. Tam ... Tamara, you said?"

"Tamara Townsend, yes. Jo needs to rest ... a lot ... but she's fine. You have coffee?"

"Coffee? Oh yes, coffee. Jo?"

Fingers busy stacking sandwich halves on a plastic platter, Maddy shrugs the memory away as she shrugged away Christen's unfinished thought. "No, don't go there, Chris, please. Leave it alone." She runs her fingers through her hair. "Tell me about you, about you *now*." She tries on an easy smile. "So ... sounds like you're still into guys, huh?"

"Listen, life-long habits die hard, right?" Christen straightens her shoulders. "But I don't really know any more. Not for sure." Eyes focused somewhere beyond the kitchen window, she pauses. "Could well be that I fell in love with you because of the way we met, that night at the station. Little girl lost looking for a lover gone AWOL. Maybe that—my ... attraction to you—maybe it has a limited range, huh? Maybe, just maybe, it doesn't include the entire female species. But, yeah, one thing for sure though, since I've tasted ... you, I—"

“Give it up already!” On tiptoes, Maddy reaches for Christen’s cheek. “Please, Chris? Let it rest.”

“OK, OK. I was only answering your question.”

Maddy shoves the platter of sandwiches into Christen’s hands. “Tell you what. Why don’t you go introduce yourself, huh? Can do?”

“Can do, will do.”

“Grab yourself a beer on the way out. I’ll bring the others out in a minute.”

Through the window, Maddy watches her stride towards Jo and Morgan who, still squatting on the lawn, have effectively taken apart one of the lounge chairs with the idea of ridding it of all its creaks. After sunset, any sunset of the week, when Jo spends the night at Maddy’s, they like to lie on the same lounge, the head of one cushioned against the shoulder of the other, Maddy’s leg over Jo’s thigh. Sometimes, too, at night, under the canopy of the large poinciana, they make love on that one lounge. But the thing creaks so much that Maddy is convinced the neighbours can’t help but be aware of their love games, and though the idea doesn’t bother her, not as such, the thought that someone might actually be peering through the fence totally unnerves Jo.

Palomino-blond hair glistening in the sun, dark-green T-shirt loose over khaki shorts, chunky socks spilling over trekking boots, Christen Jensen looks more like a Nordic Ranger than a Detective Sergeant in the Queensland police force. Platter down, she passes her bottle of beer to the other hand and shakes Morgan’s hand. He had stood up as she approached. A tall woman herself, almost matching his height, she squarely meets his eyes—brown and smiling.

Back in the kitchen, hands flat against the counter, Maddy sighs. She stretches her spine and deltoids bunching against the muscles that pad her shoulder blades; she links the fingers of both hands behind her neck to force her elbows wide, wider apart. She breathes in a deep-chested breath and holds on to it as if to make it last.

Though the policewoman is a bit of a babe, even Jo said so after she stopped being cut up about her ‘thing-with-the-cop’, Maddy’s capitulation to Christen’s need had had more to do with a desperate need to cut loose momentarily from the image of Jo zoning out in a park, than an uncontrollable lust for the thirty-five year old.

She had first fucked Christen standing up on the steps that lead to the basement. She hadn't even kissed her properly. Even later, days later, when they had finally made love in a bed, Maddy had not let Christen come any closer to her, not emotionally closer, no.

"But that's only because I never stopped loving Jo," Maddy whispers to the window-pane. "That's got nothing to do with Chris. That's not because ... That's not because ... *anything*," she mutters, moving away from the kitchen window, but her thoughts keep unfolding. That's just the way life does things, the way it pans out. It's not always neat and tidy. She grabs the salad bowl and, between fingers, she jams three Cascade Premiums before bounding, two steps at a time, down the back steps.

Morgan

Morgan flicks on the bathroom light, undoes his fly, shuffles his feet nice and wide, lifts the glans to better slide the medical grade plastic cradle between the bigger cunt lips and right against the urethra. He relaxes his shoulders.

“Ah ... man!” he sighs, as the flow of urine arcs towards the middle of the bowl.

He had intended using the toilet at the BP station where he had stopped to fill up the ute, but one look at the broken lock dangling from the Men’s convinced him to hold on till he got home.

He shakes the last drop out of the tube, gently scraping the plastic cradle against his slit before pulling out the ‘peeing-thing’. The paradox: more often lately, or so it seems, a manly stand above a toilet bowl or a urinal triggers in him memories of his first attempts at peeing standing up. That’s because I’ve become so good at it, he thinks. So good at peeing standing up that he can afford to smile at clumsier attempts as he allows them to float upwards.

Morgan is only very young, not more than four. She loves to run around the yard with Jarryd. Her older brother, her only sibling, is already seven years old, and their mother has yet to accept that it was her fate to give birth, not once, but twice. No matter how her husband, Dan, had tried to soothe her at the time, Mary had found it difficult to connect with baby Jarryd, and whatever ounce of maternal instinct she had managed to squeeze out of her breasts and heart had just about dried up by the time she found herself pregnant a second time.

“Who, on this sick planet, would want not one but *two* children? I mean, this is a serious question!” Often, she challenged her husband. “You’re a man, for Christ’s sake,” she’d tell him, face drawn, eyes flinty. “So ... you come and you go as you please. I’m the one who’s stranded in this hole. And ... what d’you care?”

As it was, Dan Maddock cared plenty. He thought his little daughter was very lovely, first because of her wide-eyed silent stares, later because of her shiny brown curls and large brown eyes, that some said were just like his. Beyond all of that, it was his daughter’s

pluck, back in the days the family lived in Tullah, Tasmania, population two hundred and fifty, that had won his heart.

A son and a daughter, he'd often ponder, when he'd try to pin down his wife's unhappiness, what's not to like? When you're married? When you're healthy? Unable to counter these questions in the way only Mary could, but feeling twice as much responsible for each of Little Mor's gurgles and smiles, Dan would hold her by the wrists, making her airborne for three or four spins before lowering her down for landing. At four years of age, Morgan already loved her father more than anyone else in the whole world. *He* didn't tell her off about her scraped knees. *He* didn't remind her to behave like a young lady. *He* didn't send her off to bed, not even when Mary said he really should, because she had freed the dozen spiders Jarryd had been keeping prisoner inside a Vegemite jar. Morgan loved her father more than anything in the world but it was her mother's love she was craving.

The Maddock family lived on acreage in the hamlet of Tullah, in the middle of nowhere Tasmania. Dan ran the general store and, because he also owned a handful of horses, nightfall almost always preceded him home. Mary hated her isolation. It was fine for her husband to be gallivanting around all day, in his truck and on horseback, but all she felt was stuck and isolated.

Sometimes Dan would take Jarryd with him but Morgan, three years younger, was still too little to leave the house to bounce around in a truck or be let loose near horses. Sometimes days went by without the little girl seeing Dan, or so it seemed to Morgan.

Protective of her, as instructed by his father, but not dismissive, Jarryd was, more often than not, a nice brother to his little sister, and with the older local children, they roamed the great open spaces together. There is a period of grace when children, still too young for tunnel vision and prejudice are, unlike their parents, spared the small town mentality of the adults who, unchallenged for the most part by the low intensity of a lifestyle in the hills, often turn on each other for lack of anything better to do.

Whiling away time in between father-engineered moments of great fun spent fishing by the lakeshore or camping at the edge of Cradle Mountain, Jarryd and little Morgan would hide inside the thick garden shrubs, make bird huts out of twigs that couldn't possibly stay in place, and played with Jack, the bitser dog, that had adopted the

Maddocks. Though three years younger, Morgan could actually do all of what Jarryd could, but for two things. She couldn't yet climb a tree like he did and she couldn't tinkle like him.

That one particular ability of her brother's must have been working away at Morgan because even twenty years later, last month, when Morgan had spent time with her brother in Melbourne, Jarryd still remembered the day his little sister had rocked up to him while he was "taking a leak by the chicken coop. There you came and scooted right up next to me. Then you pushed your knickers all the way down and, feet as far apart as you could manage, you just ... peed, right there, standing up. Then, of course, you started bawling because you had wet your knickers and Mum was going to get you for that." Jarryd had chuckled at the memory. "All wet they were, what with the pee having gone right through them." Though their mother had not been amused in the least, Dan had shaken his head in amazement. His daughter had attitude, he had to grant her that.

Jeans accorded around his ankles, Morgan listens to the radio sounds coming from the living room. He looks at the mirror. No acne flare-up in sight. Just like the doc said, he grins. The acne and the awful headache, all that shit, it goes away after a while. Second puberty's over and done with ... Way to go!

He feels the skin of his cheeks. Like shadow-clouds cast on a sunny day, minute islands of darkness dot areas of his jawline without connecting. He won't need to shave for another two or three days. He shrugs. As long as the hairs concentrated in the middle of his chin remain dense enough to shape into that neat and rectangular goatee, the rest doesn't matter much.

"So, Mirror, say again: What is a man, huh?"

His reflection grins, "Whoever has facial hair and walks leading from the shoulders." He runs thumb and fingers along his cheeks and tweaks the goatee on his chin.

"And so, Fair Mirror, say again: What is a woman, then?"

"Someone who packs boobs we, men, get to play with. Oh yeah!"

Morgan runs a hand across his flat chest. "Ha! Mirror, you *are* a clever one. I like your answers and because I like your answers you shall be spared to live another day." He winks at his reflection but from where he stands, the mirror is too high and not long enough to bounce

his genitals back at him. The mirror cannot bounce back at Morgan the part of him that is incongruous with how he feels on the inside.

The metallic box is set near the basin. "Love to hate it. Take it, can't leave it," he grumbles, chin thrust at his mirrored self. He flips the lid open to retrieve a syringe and a needle. Then, fingers feeling blind, he hooks them over one of the rubber-topped vials tucked in a recess of the vanity. Before warming the ampoule under his armpit to 'thin' out the sesame seed oil, he holds it up to the light, delighting as always at the Testosterone Enanthate magic potion that has changed his life.

An ice cube popped out of the plastic tray slides around the palm of his hand. It is cold. It is not hard. It is not soft. Only cold. He tilts his hand, moves it under the cube. The cube follows the movement. It slithers and slides and, finally, Morgan's skin feels the cold, wet bite. Fist closed over the piece of ice, he shakes it free of water over the basin. Still shackled by his jeans collapsed around the ankles, dick dangling, he needs to rub the ice cube on the outer edge of his thigh, looking for the sweet spot to penetrate.

When Morgan was five and Jarryd was eight, their father took the family camping to a new spot on a hill near Roseberry Lake. Dan knew the area well and Jarryd was kept busy detaching contorting fish from the hook before tossing them in a plastic bucket. Morgan would then hold her father's rod for Jarryd whose next task was to thread pale slivers of fishmeat on the hook.

Mary, their mother, had remained at the campsite, but she made short shrift of gutting and filleting all the trout her husband had landed, and by the time dusk had begun darkening the clearing, she had already thrown a couple on the portable BBQ. Rainbow trout and hash browns served next to a salad made up the Maddocks' early evening meal.

Morgan had watched in awe as her mother's fingers, shiny with scale, grubby with blood, sticky with guts, offered each fish's stomach cavity to the silver blade to slide it back up to 'his chin.'

"Darling," Mary replied softly. "A fish is not a *he*, it's an *it*. Besides, fish don't have chins."

"So what's that, then?" Morgan asked on tiptoes, poking under the fish's mouth.

"It doesn't have a name. It's just part of its underside."

“So, I say it’s a chin.”

Mary smiled. “Why are you so stubborn, Morgan? Jarryd’s not half as stubborn as you, you know. And he’s quite a bit older.”

“That’s ‘cause he’s a boy. Being a boy’s much better than being a girl.”

Mary’s knife had sliced open another fish. “Well, yes,” she sighed. “Being a boy is often better than being a girl. Won’t argue *that* point.” Mary glanced at her daughter. “But not for everything, you know. Only for certain things.”

Morgan chewed her bottom lip while considering her mother’s reply. “Mum,” she began tentatively, “when you knew ... that little boys are better than little girls ... ” She frowned to help the words along, “Why didn’t you make me into one? Into ... a baby boy, you know ... before I came out of your belly?” On tiptoes once again, she poked a podgy finger at the fish’s underside, right near the tail, and before Mary had a chance to reply that it is never up to the baby’s mother to decide whether the baby should come out as a boy or a girl, Morgan had returned to her initial preoccupation, that of labelling accurately all of a trout’s nooks and crannies. “Is that his weewee hole or is that his belly button? Mum?”

The tip of Mary’s blade was poised on the opening. “Mor, get your finger out of the way, will you?”

Morgan obeyed but her eyes remained on her mother’s fingers and the dance of the silver blade on the pale pink flesh before returning her attention to the ‘Indian’ stick she had been whittling with the blunted blade of her father’s discarded pocket-knife. Morgan liked the Red Indians tucked inside the yellowing pages of Dan’s childhood books. Best of all, she liked the ones who lived in the plains, not warriors like the Apaches because it would be very scary to think that on any given night she might get yanked out of her blankets to be scalped by a horde of enemy raiders. When she’s all grown up, Morgan’s already decided that she’ll live just like the nice Indians of the Plains, in a tepee by the river. She will be a carver. She will fossick for bits of bones and bear claws. She will barter for beads with which she’ll make stunning necklaces for all her girlfriends.

Later that afternoon, Dan took the children, Mary too, on a walk through the forest and up to a little cove he had spotted earlier that morning. The still-water cove would provide the children with a safe area in which to practise swimming. Mary let the children run ahead.

The shallow water, dense and blue, beckoned Morgan and she kept running until her little legs, impeded by the water, could run no more. She flopped waist high in the water and squealed with delight.

“Look at her, Dan. You’d think she’d be old enough to know better. I didn’t bring them any change of clothes, you know.”

“Mary, it’s only water, for god’s sake. She’ll dry off.”

“No, she won’t. She’ll be cold when she comes out. And if she gets sick, huh, it’ll be me, not you, who’ll have to stay home to look after her.”

“I work, Mary. I can’t stay home and look after the children. They have a mother for that.”

“Well, have you ever thought that maybe I could work too, with you, at the store? Have you ever stopped to think that being a mother is just not that exciting? D’you think about that sometimes, when you’re not too busy yourself?”

“We’ve already had this conversation, Mary. Maybe next year when Morgan goes to kindy.”

Mary snorted as she strode to the waterline. “Morgan Maddock, you come back here, right this minute. And don’t you go catching a cold, you hear?”

The late afternoon breeze was already raising goose bumps under Morgan’s soggy clothes. A dripping mess, she stood drenched and shivering by her mother’s hip. “I’m not ... not cold, but Mu ... Mum, it ... t ... t’was fun.”

“Right, Miss Clever Pants! And what’re you going to do with yourself now, huh? Look at you, shaking like a half-drowned pup.”

“Mary, don’t spoil the moment, OK?” Dan crossed arms over chest to slip the T-shirt he was wearing over his head. “Here. Rub her down with that,” he said, handing it to Mary, still warm from his body. “She can wear Jarryd’s top for now. He’ll be right.”

“Oh, Dad ...” Jarryd whined. “Why d’you want me to give her my stuff, huh? It’s her fault she’s all wet. She should just—”

Mary freed her little daughter from the clinging cold peels of her clothes.

“You’re going to help your sister, Jarryd,” Dan warned quietly. “You’re a boy and that’s what boys do when they have a little sister, they help her out. And there’s no need to pull a face.” He play-punched his son’s shoulder. “Good lad for having had more sense

than her though. Good lad,” he repeated, large hand tousling Jarryd’s blond hair.

Mary bunched up her husband’s T and ran it briskly all over Morgan’s body, in between her legs, and under her arms, till she was red all over. Then she slipped her son’s sweatshirt over Morgan’s head and swiftly wrapped the damp T, turban style, over her wet mop of hair. Jarryd’s top was warm and fleecy-soft against her skin. Brown eyes wide and shiny, she beamed, both arms crossed over her chest.

“I really wish you’d use your head a bit more, Morgan. I really, really do. I wish you weren’t always so blissfully unthinking—”

Dan’s voice cracked. “Mary!”

The children looked at each other, all senses on alert, like rabbits at the report of a gun.

“She’s got to grow up, Dan. She needs to start thinking. I mean, she needs to start using her head before deciding to do or *not* do something.”

“There’s plenty of time for that, Mary. She’ll come around to that when the time’s right. Just leave her be.”

The children were sent to bed right after dinner. They didn’t get to play with their toys by the campfire though Jarryd had brought his collection of Ridatons and Mary had brought two dolls for her daughter who never remembered to bring any, no matter where she went. Just because she doesn’t play with them at home, Mary reasoned, doesn’t mean that she won’t want to play with them camping.

As it was, snug inside her little sleeping bag, Morgan had begun playing with the funny little Y-shaped pocket that opened in front of her brother’s underwear. She’d taken the garment on impulse, to make a set with the sweatshirt she was still wearing. She hadn’t asked anyone for the undies, she didn’t have to. She knew where she’d find them, inside one of her mother’s bags, the blue one with the four pockets on the outside, along with Dad’s, Mum’s and hers.

Earlier, Jarryd had asked for his sweatshirt back, but Morgan had crossed her arms across her chest again and had not relinquished it. If he wanted it so badly, she said he’d have to take it off her himself. Too aware of his parents’ mood, Jarryd had decided not to press the issue on that one.

Snug inside her little sleeping bag, warm in her brother’s sweatshirt, Morgan kept fiddling with the funny little flap. She knew what it was for. It was so that Jarryd’s willy could come out when he

tinkled. She wished she had a willy, too, one she could hold when she went to the bathroom.

Morgan's fingers eventually slid through the cotton flap. First, she was surprised to feel warm skin on the other side of the cloth, her own soft skin. Next, she realised the part of her she was touching was her own 'wee-wee hole'. With a frown of concentration, she felt the edges of the fold. She felt the inside of the fold, and she found a little bump tucked inside the fold. It was then that Morgan, aged five, understood the difference between little boys and little girls. Little girls had a little bump. Little boys had the same, except that they could stretch theirs out. At that moment, she also understood what Jarryd was doing when he thought no one was watching. Morgan was going to find out how to do that, how to stretch her wee-wee hole so that she, too, could have a wee-wee hose.

His back to the bathroom mirror, Morgan wipes a moist cotton ball on the top of the rubber cork and mounts a 22 gauge drawing needle on the syringe. Through the rubber-corked ampoule, he pulls back the plunger and allows in an extra 1/3cc of air.

There had been a time, a bit over a year, when Morgan needed two needles for each injection. Once the drawing needle goes through the cork, it becomes somewhat blunted, which meant that he had to jab it harder to penetrate the muscle and not bounce off. It hurt and it bruised the flesh around the puncture. But, so many injections later, not unlike a junkie, Morgan has become immune to needle pain.

He injects all of the air inside the syringe back into the vial. Then, checking that the needle end is actually deep in the oil but not touching the glass, he firmly draws back the plunger and smiles at the tiny air bubbles trapped inside the glass. Morgan has always liked bubbles; bubbles of any sort, be they soap bubbles, water bubbles, chewing gum bubbles or air bubbles inside the vials of Testosterone Enanthate.

One hand gripping the edge of the console, careful not to blunt the needle on any part of his skin, he pushes it high on the outer quadrant of his thigh, checking on pull back that he hasn't hit a blood vessel. Index finger pressed against the puncture hole, Morgan sighs. Why does it take all that junkie paraphernalia to be the man I was always meant to be, huh? Insane!

The phone had rung one day, after Morgan had finally been enrolled at kindergarten. It was Miss Stiple, Morgan's kindy teacher. Everyone on the ridge knew Miss Stiple because Miss Stiple was one of only four teachers in the area. Tullah, population 250, had only a one-room kindy and sixty-two older children attended a three-classroom primary school. Children of high school age had to go up north, to Devonport, but once they completed Year 10, that was the end of that line. Should they or their family desire further schooling, which was not usually the case on the mountain where manual work was plentiful, going to high school often meant that the families had only two choices—a relocation to Hobart, an eight-hour drive away down to Queenstown and across Cradle Mountain, or sending the teenagers off to either a relative or, sometimes preferable, to a boarding school.

It was true to say that if everyone knew Miss Stiple, so everyone on the ridge knew Mrs Maddock, wife of Dan Maddock, owner and manager of the one and only general store in the area. So, when Miss Stiple said, "I hate to mention it, Mrs Maddock, but I think there is something about our little Morgan that you might want to consider," Mary had felt her features tighten over the bones of her face.

"And what might that be, Miss Stiple? What has *my* Morgan been up to?"

"Well, it is somewhat of a delicate matter although perhaps it needn't be—"

"What is?"

"Mrs Maddock, it has come to ... hmmm ... my attention that, at least on some occasions, rare as they may be, our little Morgan comes to school wearing what I assume can only be her brother's undies—uh ... his undergarment."

Mary tightened her clutch on the phone. "I beg your pardon?"

"Yes, well, I'm sure the little one is only confused about what is hers and what is her broth—"

"Miss Stiple, I can assure you that Morgan is not left to her own devices when it comes to ... when it comes to what ... undergarments are hers. I'll have you know that I, personally, decide what both of my children are to wear on any school day and that includes socks *and* underwear. I'll add that I, myself, lay it all out for each of—"

"Mrs Maddock, please, don't feel you have to explain ... It's just that—"

“Now what is it, exactly, that Morgan has done? I’m afraid you’re confusing me!”

“Mrs Maddock, our little Morgan hasn’t done any more than what I’ve already explained. The undergarments she occasionally wears are of the Y-front variety. You see, if they were boxer shorts, like some girls prefer to wear ... Anyway, when I ask why she has on boys’ undies which, by-the-by, are quite too large for her, Morgan simply shrugs—”

“She does, does she?”

“Well, she’s only very young and—”

Little Morgan didn’t totally understand her mother’s upset over her wearing Jarryd’s underwear to school, only sometimes, but then again, she kind of knew that wearing them wasn’t quite right either. She kind of knew that because of what she did, always, when she had them on.

It wasn’t at all like she’d ever set out to do it or anything like that, but on the days she was wearing the Willie Pouch, sooner or later, her fingers would begin teasing the little flap, then, after they had teased the edge of it for a while, her fingers would find *her*—first, her skin so warm and much softer even than the inside of Patch’s, the pet rabbit’s, ears, and next the little bump that didn’t seem to be growing any, no matter how she rubbed and pulled at it. The little bump didn’t grow, but rubbing and pulling it made Morgan feel all melty and sparkly from the inside.

One hand on the wash-basin, Morgan sighs, withdraws the needle, separates it from the syringe, slides the protective cap over the point and tosses the whole thing in the bin.

He shuts his eyes. The air inside the bedroom is still and heavy though the window is opened as far as it will go. With fingertips, he prods the tightness in his neck, circles the hollow at the base of his throat before feeling blind for the irregular contour of his chest. The hard skin of his hand catches against a nipple. Morgan runs the flat of his hand over it, and again. It still doesn’t get hard but at least sensation has returned, a tickling sort of sensation. The other nipple is still insensate. Never mind, he reminds himself. What’re a couple of nipples, huh, in the greater scheme of things? Lightly with both hands now, he caresses the flat plane of his chest, smooth for the most part. Almost all smooth even over the pale suture lines. Nasty irony: though

chest hair has yet to materialise on Morgan's chest, a couple of stray ones have chosen the newly healed tracks underlining his new chest as their coming out platform, becoming painfully ingrown. Twice daily, he swabs the areas with tea tree oil, hoping to dry them up before they become boils. How ridiculous can this get, he groans. From his GP to the Endo, to the shrink and surgeon, all the medical staff who know him as an FTM are in Melbourne and, perhaps understandably so, Morgan doesn't fancy the idea of giving up stealth, if only for a local GP, to lance a couple of boils. Too undignified, he grins in the darkness. His fingers glide over the ridges of his stomach and through the fringe of pubic hair to settle on his shaft. He cups a hand around it to better feel its weight. Again, he sighs as, with his other hand, he begins to stroke the area underneath.

A moment later, Morgan has to turn over on his stomach to indulge his erection. Somewhere far behind his eyes, his tongue dips again inside Christen's mouth. It tastes of sweet wine grapes. Warm under him, she guides him further into her.

Maddy and Jo

“Hey.”

“Hey to you, too. Whassup?” Jo looks away from the perspex strip that hangs from one of the poinciana’s overarching branches. The garden lights trapped on the clear surface curl upwards, giving the strong optical illusion of a spiral, of shiny, elongated bubbles materialising out of the air below to rise languorously in slow succession, only to die and disappear back into the nothingness at the other end of the long spiral. Again and again.

Jo remembers how, when she had blown on it the first time, a long time ago now, it had travelled upward and downward, sparkling bubbles of shiny water cascading the length of the spiral.

“I’d like you to hang it right there,” she had told Maddy, pointing at the hanging branches directly in front of the only lounge chair. “Just so that ... like, you know, when you’re out here gazing into space, this thing, the way it catches the light, twirling it around and all, well ... I’d like to think that it’ll bring your thoughts back to me. On the nights we’re not together.”

Maddy shifts her shoulder away from Jo’s neck and cranes her head, the better to look at her. “Well, did you notice anything, I mean, while we were making love?”

“Notice?” Jo’s eyes slide away from the spiral. “No, but hey, yes, I found out something about you.”

Maddy giggles. “Oh right. Like what?”

“Like ... you know penetration’s not really your thing, right?”

“Mmmm.”

“Well, I think you actually got into a bit of a rhythm. That was after I switched from licking you and—”

“You think?”

“Yeah, I think. I definitely do.”

Maddy rolls her eyes comically. “Wow.”

Jo scrunches up her eyebrows. “So ... what d’you think I should’ve noticed then, if that wasn’t it?”

“No creaks.”

“No crea— Oh shit, you’re right! We did it!” she whispers loudly against Maddy’s ear so the neighbours wouldn’t hear them, not

even now that they had finished making love on the lounge chair that hadn't creaked.

"Good job, you did, the both of you. So what's fixed it?"

Jo sits up and pulls the cut-off T back over her small breasts. "No idea. We just took the whole thing apart. Morgan thought we should sand a couple of the connecting bits, but only like, you know, for good measure and we put it back together again."

Maddy points at the other lounge. "One down. One to go."

"No problem. Maybe next weekend. So, you think this time he's going to hang around for a while?"

"Maybe he's got a little action going there that we don't know about."

"Nah. He'd have let me in on that." Jo is categorical. "No girlfriend. Besides, Morgan's not the type to go buzzing all around the countryside just to hook up with a chick."

"Well, it doesn't look like he's got one here either."

"That's cause and effect. He's not staying put long enough to."

"Mmmph."

Jo snorts back, "Mmmph, what?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing what?"

"Listen, I was just thinking that maybe there could be a potential thing developing between him and Christen."

"You think?"

"Uh-huh. Just a thought."

"A good thought or a bad thought?"

"An in-between thought," Maddy replies lightly, "but I won't say any more for now."

The night settles over the garden. Maddy and Jo stay wrapped around each other as they talk in whispers about the day's events and the plans for the week ahead. Jo says that she'll spend the following night in her room at Fairfield, but that come Wednesday, she'll be back, some time after five, to spend the night.

"You'll come with me to the Featherhard gig, next Saturday? They'll be at the Push."

Maddy cocks her head and draws in her lip loop. That pub, extremely crowded, extremely smoky because extremely small, is not one of her favourite hang-outs but she'll probably go anyway, just to be with Jo, just to do something mindlessly painless on a breezy

Brisbane evening. She reasons that it might, after all, be as good a way as any to kick-start the weekend.

One of them returns the conversation to Morgan and his plans to climb the east face of Mt Tibrogargan, in the Glass House Mountains, and how it was so good that he was still serious about finishing the last term of the last year missing to his Bachelor of Engineering.

“I mean, really,” Maddy says, “one term to go and he just put the whole thing on hold. You’d think that, so close to the end, he’d have stitched that up real quick and, later, flit in and out of Melbourne or wherev—”

“He never said he’d given up. He knew he was just putting it on hold.”

“I know, but sometimes ... ” Maddy sits up too, “if you don’t follow through to the end and you take a break, before you know it ... you just can’t crank it up anymore. Gone. Too late. The break lasts forever.”

Peering at her through vanilla-pod strands of hair, Jo retorts, “Yeah, well ... Look at me. I’m finally doing it, the architecture thing. Who would’ve thought, huh? One whole term down and I’m still laughing.”

“True, true, Lover!” Maddy pulls Jo back against her. “That’s such a totally huge thing, what you’re doing!”

In spite of her mother’s mental deterioration that had culminated in her suicide, and the erosion of Jo’s emotional landscape, at twenty-two she was back on track, one term into the degree on which she would have otherwise embarked at seventeen.

Her graduation present, Maddy has already decided five and three-quarter years ahead of time, will be one of those fancy brass plaques that she will affix, herself, outside Jo’s consulting rooms. The Brenner chambers would be, she could almost see them, in a big, old, renovated Queenslander.

Wide verandahs would wrap themselves around it, as if to protect Jo from the outside. Tall shutters would keep the festooned ceilings as far up from the brushwood floors as possible. Stained-glass windows and large pot plants would give the place a cheery, old-world feel, while a few tastefully chosen pieces of artwork would attest to the architect’s penchant for the understated. Joanna Brenner’s inner sanctum, Maddy had decided, would be private and safe behind

a solid oak door, and it would be a few inches below the doorknocker that she will affix the plaque that would read:

**Joanna Brenner
Architect**

Jo had reminded Maddy that just surviving a six-year degree would only qualify her for the unenviable status of newbie prowling for a practice.

“No rush, babe,” Maddy replied. “No rush. Just feel good about what you’re doing. One day at a time. It’s like how Aunt Ida used to say, you know, how looking after your cents made your dollars grow. Something like that.”

Under the overarching branches of the poinciana tree, with Jo tucked in, safe, against her, Maddy asks about last Thursday’s session with Bernice O’Brian, the psychiatrist.

“Look ... from week to week, you know ... it’s same old, same old,” Jo answers cautiously. “Like ... there are times when it feels like ... Look, if what I’m doing with Bernice was like a race against ... against a snail, right?” she pauses.

“Uh-hum.”

“Well, I’m sure the snail would get there ... wherever ... way before me.” She moves out of her lover’s arms and scoots around the lounge to face her. “Like, it always comes back to the same thing: Isabelle. Mind you, not so much Isabelle as my mother, but me as her daughter.” Jo lowers her eyes to focus on the rip in her stove-pipe jeans. “Look, it seems to all boil down to how I resented her, like for years, you know, even before she died—just for *wanting* to die.” The construction into words of what transpires during the weekly sessions with Bernice O’Brian is often difficult for Jo. “I resented her for having made it so that *I knew* all about it. I knew all about her wish to die, her wish to ... abandon me. Me ... like I was only fourteen or so ... whenever it was ... when she started hoarding the morphine. And she ended up doing just that; she did leave me ... behind. All alone.”

Moments made intense through a thought, the dawning of understanding lose, for Jo, their sharp-edge connections to the past the moment she tries to put them into words for Maddy. “But the big deal is that I now understand that what I’ve bypassed altogether, all these years, is my *mother’s* own emotional pain; she was afraid of the

remission not holding. She would've been afraid of dying, for sure, either from her cancer or from her morphine overdose. I mean, like, who wouldn't, right?" Maddy nods. "And because she loved me, because she and I had had the loving relationship that we used to have ... before all that kicked in ... and on her good days, the more lucid days, Bernice suggests that Mother would've been terribly distressed at the thought of abandoning me. Particularly in that way. That would've maxed her out badly."

"So ..." Maddy hesitates on the obvious question. "Why did—"

Like a child internalising a lesson deemed worthwhile, Jo needs to vocalise the text to the last word. "Look, what I was thinking all along was that, if she loved me, even only a little bit ... then, she'd have wanted to hang around ... just to see me grow up. To see me become that brilliant architect we had dreamed up together." She snorts in self-derision. "Is that selfish or what? Huh? I mean me, totally disregarding *her* reality."

"Uh ..." Maddy hesitates before pronouncing on such a delicate matter. "Maybe ... When you put it that way, yes. Wanting her around no matter the cost to her could be seen as a bit ... selfish. No, Jo, not selfish ... more like ... unaware. You were only a little girl, Jo, when her cancer kicked in. Don't be too hard on yourself—" The tightness fluttering on her lover's face makes Maddy reconsider what she had been about to say. "Uh ... so ... is Bernice saying that maybe your ... your resentment of the way your mother chose to cope was like a needy sort of thing?"

"Yeah, something like that." Jo swallows hard. "I despised her, like in my head, for not giving up the vodka, for not throwing away the morphine, for letting herself be *so* weak as to go down that spiral. But, what I'm realising is that I was so caught up in my own fears that, not even for one minute, did I stop to think how *horrible* the whole thing had to be inside her head."

"You did suggest she should see a therapist, I mean like, at the time?"

"Oh yeah, I did suggest that but ..." Jo shrugs dismissively. "It's like if anyone at school had said something to me like, Hey, Brenner, you're a bit weird, why don't you go see a shrink, huh? I mean, how useful is that, huh?" Jo absent-mindedly traces the freckle clusters on the back of Maddy's knuckles. "Bernice says that demands, my *silent* demands on Mother, under the circumstances,

might have amounted to ... How did she say that?" Jo pushes the hair out of her eyes. "Can't remember her exact words but it was something like me ... inflicting additional ... emotional trauma on her. Something like that."

Maddy inhales slowly. She feels for Jo, so borderline anorexic, still. So raw, still. Even after three months of therapy. "So ... is any of that helping you or is it all theoretical shrink-talk?"

"Nah, it's good. Bernice is good." Jo attempts a reassuring grin. "But, you know, understanding all this like, at an intellectual level, that's one thing. That's kind of easy. But, fixing it inside my heart or inside my ... my core, getting rid of the old thoughts and patterns, that's where the damn snail would get ... wherever ... faster than me."

Christen

The phone rang four times before Christen picked up. She wouldn't have said that she had slid into a daydream, as daydreaming suggests a lightness of thought, ethereal feelings that create a whimsical disengagement from the moment. In fact, her thoughts had been very connected to the moment, to her awareness of Morgan, though she hadn't seen him since the afternoon they had met at Maddy's.

She had left at around 4 p.m., claiming a backlog of paperwork to shift before the inevitable Monday-morning-back-at-the-station, but the truth was that, by then, she had had all she could of trying to figure what, in the young man, a mere boy really, made him so strangely attractive to her.

What is it about *him*? she was still wondering. He's just average height for a guy. She projected Morgan against a wall tape and, relying on visual memory, she shook her head—not a hair taller than five eleven. Sinewy, yes, maybe, but definitely on the thin side. Whatever had turned her on that afternoon, whatever thoughts have, for the past month, spun through her like candy floss, couldn't possibly be triggered by his physique alone.

When it came to the bodies of potential lovers, Christen's penchant had, until she came across Maddy, seemed irrevocably fixed. From Tommy, her high school sweetheart to Mike, her most recent ex, each looked predictably like the preceding one: tall frames with thick muscle mass and, more often than not, their hair was dark. Not into the bear thing, though, a chest rug never got the guy who owned it very far. When it came to body hair, for Christen, less was definitely more.

Reality was that with the men she inevitably came across in her wide-reaching duties as a Detective Sergeant in the Queensland Police Service, and the men who paralleled her workout circuits at the gym, she never had to search long before spotting the next handsome specimen of manhood. So, besides thick muscles and dark hair, she wondered, what else did she register as a turn-on? Nice hands? A nice mouth? A smile? Ah yes, but only a clean sort of smile. A smile that was not only genuine—beginning inside the eyes to curl up the lips—but it had to be a healthy smile too. Clean teeth, yes, of course,

but there are mouths that still look grubby even when the guy's just gargled with Listerine.

She arched her eyebrows on that thought. So that was it about Morgan? His smile? He did have that clean, healthy, little boy sort of smile, like someone out of a chewing gum ad. That's it, isn't it? she checked with herself. Yes, she admitted for the time being, when he smiles, his whole face lights up like, whatever is behind that smile is too good to keep locked up, too good to express with a mere curl of the lips and a baring of teeth. Christen felt much better for having elucidated the origin of her attraction to Morgan. And now what? she wondered, as she reached for the ringing phone.

She recognised Maddy's voice. "Hey, whassup?"

"What's up is that I need a favour."

"Ask away, the worst I can do is say no."

Maddy explained in her ear that Jo had just called her from a phone booth. She was still at the St Lucia campus with Morgan who had gone there to pick her up on his way back somewhere. Except that his old ute wouldn't start, though it sounded like there was heaps in the battery. Maddy suspected a coil burnt out or points stuck together.

"He insists on driving that grunt '63 Holden. You would've seen it parked in the lane, last time you were over. Totally cool if you happen to know something about engines, but he knows as much about cars as Jo, which amounts to zilch, zip and nothing at all. Of course," Maddy rambled on, "I could jump in my car, drive out there with a coil, but that means peak hour traffic on the Riverside Expressway, through Toowong and Taringa. Anyway ... Listen, Chris, they're a lot closer to your place than mine, so ... "

Christen grinned into the phone. "So?"

"So ... how about you pick them up?" Not hearing a reply, Maddy plodded on. "Look, to make it worth your while and all, what say we tuck into some Domino's when you all get here and we all chill in front of a vid or something? I got *The Hunger* with Sarandon and Deneuve. Classic women, right? Whadda ya say?" The line crackled. "So ... what will it be, huh? Either I end up owing you one, or you just stay home and miss out on our most delightful company," Maddy chided. "Which will it be, huh?"

Christen senses more than she hears the smile in Maddy's voice. "OK, here's the deal," she finally said. "If you tell them to meet

me at the Swann Street roundabout in ...” Christen glanced at her watch, “say twenty minutes, the one closest to the Schonell side, I’ll pick them up from there. But what about Mogan’s ute?”

“Oh, it can sit there for the night. It’s not like it’s likely to be taken for a joyride or anything, not in the state it’s in. Anyway, I’ll hop over there in the morning, like before work, and get its old ticker going again or whatever. Not a problem.”

Morgan, Jo, Maddy and Christen, greasy cardboard boxes splayed in front of them, are still picking at pizza remains and sipping fluids. Beer for Morgan and Maddy, red wine for Jo and Christen although Christen is, as always, taking the sipping real slow.

She leans back into the armchair with Morgan in her peripheral vision. Head resting against the sofa, knees wide apart, short sleeve T worn over a long sleeved one, black combat trousers, dusty work boots flat on the floor, he is the image of the young male home from work. Eyes closed and feeling the time has come to drive herself home, Christen brings up the image of Morgan, while he is still close enough to touch. She sees him listening, as he sometimes does, head cocked to one side or, like he was a minute earlier, long body draped over the cushions more in tired abandonment than sinking into them, arm loose, hand relaxed on his thigh. Maddy’s voice blends with the sounds of glasses being cleared away. Maddy has that grace too, she remembers, eyes still closed. Maddy has the grace of a young *male* gymnast.

DS Christen Jensen had been in her office when the young redhead had stopped by the duty desk, at the Burleigh Heads police station. Christen remembers how she had looked, red hair standing on end, round blue eyes made for laughing, the silver lip loop notwithstanding.

Somewhat intrigued as to what sort of assistance the young woman thought she needed at 2 o’clock on a Monday morning, the policewoman had followed the exchange, from a distance, between her and the officer on duty until it became apparent that John, Constable Comino, had decided to indulge in one of his graveyard shift, dickhead routines.

Christen read the confusion in the round blue eyes. She saw the spike of frustration paint pale the smattering of freckles as the young woman struggled to keep her calm, urging the constable into

action at the same time as she was blurring the nature of her relationship with the missing friend, someone called Jo, whom she feared had been aggressed or worse, left for dead, somewhere between the apartment block where they were renting a holiday unit and the beach where they had had a nightcap.

Constable Comino, who kept calling Maddy 'young lady', was tut-tutting. "Now, now, you might not know this young person well ... uh, well enough. I mean, not *intimately* enough to know all about the plans she might have made for the rest of the night. Have a word with her boyfriend and see if *he* wants to report her missing ..."

Christen recalls how Maddy had drawn in the silver lip loop that split her bottom lip right down the middle. Forehead tight, she had stammered between clenched teeth, "I'm her lover. *Me*. There is no fucking boyfriend."

Christen sighs. Even in spite of the tension that had held Maddy together, in spite of the width of her shoulders, as uncommon in a woman as the well-defined muscles of her arms, there had been that definite gymnast's grace about her.

From her cocooned position inside the beanbag, Jo is attempting to organise Morgan's sleeping arrangement for the night though the arrangement, by nature of Maddy's little worker's cottage, is minimal. He will sleep right where he is on the sofa. It will work out just fine and come morning, Maddy will drop him back to his ute, at St Lucia.

"Mor, I'll even throw in a lesson in survival mechanics before you get back on the road." Maddy adds, "Which should be some time around 8."

Startled out of his beer buzz, Morgan sits up, having just remembered that he needs to already be inside his cement-mixer come 7.30 a.m. In order to get there on time, they'd have to kick themselves out of the house around 5.30 a.m. Morgan doesn't want to impose that on Maddy.

Jo, though willing, could be of no help at all, as she only ever rode her rusty-nail of a bicycle, though it was as good as new since Maddy had totally restored the chassis and replaced all the age-old parts with new ones.

The conversation spinning around the living room penetrates Christen's consciousness as water does a porous surface; not in floods, not in rushes, not even in drops, but the distilled essence of

the words floating by slowly stirs her into cognisance. She straightens up in the armchair, brushes the hair out of her eyes and blinks. *She* would drive Morgan home.

“From there, Morgan,” she explains, “you book yourself a taxi say, for 6.30 a.m. That’s plenty of time to get to Sandgate and inside that truck of yours. Maddy can pick you up at the end of your shift. That’ll work out well since she clocks off at 4.00, and you 4.30, you’ll just have to hang around for the time it’ll take her to drive to Sandgate. Anyone with a better suggestion?” she asks, already standing up.

“Nah. Sweet,” Morgan grins. “Maddy?”

“Yeah, sure, but I’m like really pissed off with myself. I mean, if I had just jumped in the car to pick you guys up earlier, you’d have your rig right here and ... all would be a lot simpler come tomorrow.”

“Hey, look, don’t hit yourself with that. It’s my fault, right?” Morgan is quick to reply with a grin that, to Christen, definitely has a source in his eyes, beyond his eyes. “I should’ve been clear in my head about tomorrow. It’s my gig to plan and I screwed up.”

“Right, everyone! Party’s over,” Christen calls out. “Let’s get phase one underway.”

Morgan smiles and follows through with a mock salute. “Yes, m’am.”

“Spoken like a real cop,” Maddy quips, silver loop glinting a silent thank you to Christen. Never an early-riser by choice, she struggles out of bed at 6.30 on workday mornings, but the idea of getting up even an hour earlier had seemed somewhat daunting.

“Well, hey, I am a real cop.” Christen turns her attention to Morgan. “So, you’re coming or what?”

“Hell, m’am, I’m ready.”

She squints at him. “Maybe you are ... ready, but unless you drop the ‘m’am’ crap, you’re not going anywhere with me.”

He stops fooling. “Uh, right. Cool.” Arm linked under Christen’s, he drags her gently forward. “Let’s hit the road then.”

Jo and Maddy wave them off before retreating back inside, arms around each other’s waists.

A little way down the road, Christen’s fingers hesitate around the sound system. Music or no music, she wonders. Although she and Morgan have spent the last few hours chatting at Maddy’s, the conversation struck around the pizzas and beers had been fragmented, with everyone dropping in bits of thoughts like desiccated fish food in an aquarium.

Maddy and Christen's taste in music being one hundred percent R 'n' B had been quickly dismissed as 'bo-ring' by the other two. With Jo still fixating on the Seattle grunge sound of Soundgarden and Pearl Jam, and Morgan, an ex-post Clash hardcore OI! fan of Pressure 28, now tuning out with Greenday and Madball, the both of them had agreed to disagree on neutral ground—the guttural intensity of the Australian band, Powderfinger, and their return album, Vulture Street. Morgan didn't get into their mega riffs but quite liked the gruff, testosterone edge of some of the tracks.

"Oh, right. And that takes us full circle back to the bloke thing: testosterone and groin music!" Jo teases. Morgan's boot had connected across the floor with her rubber-soled Converse. "But yeah," she snorts good-humouredly. "Some lines are quite like, incisive, you know, about how our federal government is so sliding into conservatism and how we all kind of sit around on our butts, like really apathetic pathetic. So, yeah ... that album, it's got a couple of fine tracks. But more because of the message than the musical arrangement."

Then, perhaps because no one in the room was into rap, everyone had agreed to disagree about Eminem's ultimate contribution to the genre. Christen had suggested that some of his lyrics, like in the *8 Mile* song, were in fact quite thoughtful in a Rite of Passage sort of way, and all had ended up agreeing that, in terms of verbal energy and poetic lyrics, not necessarily of the romantic sort, the rapper was really way out there, though everyone unanimously dismissed the heated marble floors of his twenty-bathroom mansion as seriously over the top.

"But again," someone said, "what the hell! If it was already there when he bought the place, huh? Maybe he fell in love with the gardens or the playroom. So who's the crazy dude that's going to turn the house into a crater just to remove the heating system, huh? and make little people like you and me happy?"

At some stage, Jo had mentioned the headline in *Semper*, the university rag, concerning the two Chechen women who, after being refused entry to a music festival somewhere in Russia, had become suicide bombers, taking twenty people out with them. The argument, for a while, spun around whether these women should be called terrorists or simply, as Maddy put it, 'Material Overlooked for Lobotomy'.

"I guess it really depends on why they actually blew themselves up. I mean, if it was to spite the ticket office," Jo said, "that's

like Mad Max manic-erratic mad, but it's like there'd have to be more to the story than that."

Blue eyes round, Maddy rubbed a thumb over her rust-splattered knuckles. "What if they were pushed back because they looked like hardcore dykes and the goons at the door didn't relate?"

"Ah well," Jo had whooped. "That'd make them freedom fighters, then!"

With Morgan strapped into the passenger seat, Christen wanted to indulge the urge to find out more about him. Him as a little boy. Him and his family. Him and what really made him tick. Finger hit the ON pad. Triple J radio. A bit of everything for everyone, she thinks as she shifts into fourth. Background noise is more comfortable than awkward silence.

The traffic is pleasantly fluid that time of night. Morgan is quick to start up the conversation. Shoulders braced by the window and the backrest, he faces her as much as the confines of her Focus can allow. He asks whether she lives in Briz or on the coast where she's based.

"I used to live in Burleigh but a couple months ago I decided to try the commuting thing. It's pretty good actually. I don't necessarily travel peak hour. Besides, living here opens up the social scene a bit more."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. No one here knows I'm a cop so," she grins, "I get treated on my own merit, not on my stripes."

"But aren't the stripes ... you?"

"Meaning?"

"It's not like you found them in a pack of Doritos, right? Not like those little spinning tops. So, if you've worked hard for your stripes, they'd be you, wouldn't they?"

"Damn right." Eyes on the road, Christen nods. "I've had to work hard to move up the police ranks. It's not all that easy to do in this particular neck of the woods but ... after hours ... I want to breathe a different air, you know. No matter what they say in the movies, cop talk gets stale after a while."

"I bet."

Driving Morgan home meant that Christen had to make a sizeable detour but she didn't mind. She's always enjoyed driving that time of night, and she likes having Morgan to herself, finally.

She asks him about his family, so he talks about his sister, Jerry, who lives in Melbourne. She's three years older than him, he says, and they get on great. "Always have."

Christen asks about his parents. "Who are you closest to? Your mum or your dad?"

"Now, I kinda think Dad's it for me." He shifts position on the seat.

"Spoken like a true boy." Christen grins at him.

Back flat against the backrest, he is looking straight ahead. "It's more like a no contest, really. Mum, she never even wanted me."

"She didn't want another child or she didn't want—"

"Yeah, well ... " he hedges. "OK, it wasn't me particularly. She just didn't want children full stop but, to me, it kind of felt like she took one look at me and said, 'Yikes!'" Morgan shifts again. His knee brushes against Christen's hand on the gear stick. "She's never been the cuddling sort."

"Right. What about your dad? He loved his son?"

"He did. He loved his son." Aware that his answer might sound somewhat cryptic, Morgan adds quickly, "but I'm not quite the kind of boy he wanted either but ... it's like he's never held that against me. Not like Mum. I've always been a great disappointment to her."

"Oh, Mor, surely she doesn—"

"Christen, believe me, it was ... it's like ... It *is* like that." Morgan's tone rings sharp inside the cabin and, aware of his altered mood, Christen keeps her eyes tactfully on the open space ahead. "But that's cool. I'm all grown up now. So let's just say that, my parents ... they're fine but I don't see much of them these days." He shrugs and peers through the window. "Dad's good though. Can't really say otherwise. I'd really like to see more of him, but you know what it's like, they're in Tasmania and I'm here and time goes by and ... time just ... goes by some more."

The radio sounds fill up the otherwise silent cabin. Morgan shifts again. "One thing that happened is that Mum, she made me grow up as quickly as she could just so she could get the mothering thing done in record time."

Christen glances in his direction. His profile is sharp and dark against the streetlights. "She took short cuts?"

"That's one way of putting it." He nods. "Short cuts. Yeah, not like Dad. He always stood up for me and all, and we spent a lot of time

together, but ... you know the irony of it?" Christen shakes her head. "It's really her I loved best when I was little." He pauses. "Can't say why really. But ... yeah. I did love Mum best. Weird!"

"Have you lost her?"

"What d'you mean? Lost?"

Christen looks at him squarely. "Has she ... passed away?"

"Oh hell, no. She's healthy as can be but, so many years later, it's like I've never made her proud of me. Jarr—Jerry could, but not me."

Christen downshifts and, obeying a yield sign, brings the car to a brief standstill. "So ... like, how old were you when you really felt that?"

Morgan is silent for a brief moment. "That would've been during my high school years. Yeah, that's when I really gave up. You see, I've been thinking about this for a while now, and what I reckon is that I wanted to please her so much but like, still be me, wired in my own particular sort of way, if you know what I mean." He peers at Christen. "Just like being myself," he adds quickly. "But she really went off, like totally ballistic, when she found out I had become friendly with the local S.H.A.R.P.s."

"The what? Sharps?" She glances at him. "Nothing soft and cuddly, I presume."

"Well ... yes and no," Morgan hedges again. "Uh ... it's like we were Skins but—"

"Oh right. Well ... I'm not a mother myself," she grins quickly. "Not in any great hurry to—but I'd probably go ballistic, too, if my boy—"

"Ah, but the A.R.P. in S.H.A.R.P. makes all the difference, you see." Brown eyes warm, he grins. "It stands for Against Racial Prejudice. And I looked real mean like, fifteen-year-old-lean-and-mean, if you know what I mean," he chuckles. "Shudda seen me, like awesome in my flight jacket and that Trojan patch on the back."

"Skins against prejudice? A bit contradictory, isn't it? Peace Skins?"

"Ah ... didn't say non-violent. Just said against R.P."

"Against Racial Prejudice."

Morgan nods. "That was us. There's still plenty around ... worldwide."

"So ... let me get this straight. You did do the boot party thing? You kicked in heads but ... all for the good cause. Zat it?"

“Pretty much.”

T-Rex had rocked up to her one afternoon after sport—Morgan didn't do sport on Wednesday afternoons with the rest of the Year 11 cohort. The text of the exemption written on one of the letterheads she had stolen from Doctor Nolan's desk stated that Morgan Maddock had to be permanently exempt from all sport-related activities because of a cardiovascular deformity.

'You know the bonehead dude that beat up Fredo? Kurt, he knows where to find him, so tonight, it's fuck'em boot party time at the Domain. You be there?'

'I be there.' And, indeed, Morgan had been there.

Christen's voice lays itself over T-Rex's, over it and over the moment that had begun a playback inside Morgan's head.

“Well, as I said ... I'm not in a hurry to be anyone's mum. Not even sure I'd be any good at it either ... ever. So ... what else was *wrong* with your mum, then?”

“See ... Me, I was always on her side. Unconditional love,” he snorts. “Must've been ... fucken ... unconditional 'cause ... she really didn't give back much at all. But my father, sometimes ... she'd get on his nerves. What's true is that she never stopped whinging about how hard it was, for her being a female, and all that. Like being stranded with kids and not free to just come and go like my father?”

“Didn't she work?”

“Nah, not really. She did help my father at the store, but ... she was right, you know. It's like, even if she works, a woman is never as free as a man.”

“Well, I beg to differ,” Christen chuckles.

“You're not married. My mother was. Still is. Hey ... you never said ... What happened to your last boyfriend, then? Did he want to get married and you said, Hello ... dude! Wake up and notice! Job first, you second.” Her hand is already cradling the gear stick in readiness for the next downshift, he taps it. “I bet you said something like that.”

Christen stifles a giggle as a quick blush colours her cheeks. She clears her throat awkwardly and explains quickly that Mike had been, and probably still was, a nice guy but that he had become somewhat too demanding of her and definitely too much of a jock cop. “And, yes, marriage was on his mind.”

Morgan slaps his thigh and whoops. “Ha! See? I told you!”

“Yeah ... well, that stuff happens a lot.”

“So ... what was the problem?” Morgan asks seriously. “You didn’t want to get married to him, like not enough love there? Or ... plenty of love, but didn’t want to do life hooked up to a cop? Or ... What? All of the above?” Hand flying like a rapper in battle-mode, Morgan keeps going. “What, none of the above? You didn’t want to get married, not to anyone ... ever, or not just then?”

“Take a guess,” Christen mocks but, glancing at him, she notes a childlike hesitation on his brow. “No, never mind. I’ll tell you.” She shifts gears again. “Let’s just say that, after all was said and done, there wasn’t all that much in common between us.”

Morgan’s hand is resting loosely on his thigh, almost brushing the gear stick. What else she notices is his pack, the lovely bundle under the thick stitching of his fly, just below the buckle of the loose seat belt. She straightens her shoulders, clasps both hands more firmly around the steering wheel and rivets her eyes on the tail-lights ahead. “And so?” she asks lightly, “what did you do with *your* last girlfriend? Left her in Tasmania? No, that would’ve been in Melbourne, right?” She steals another glance sideways. Morgan is still looking straight through the windscreen. “Oh, right!” she teases, “Afraid of leaking out too much information, huh?”

“Nah ...” he shrugs. “Not that. It’s just that ... You know how each girl has a thing about ... about men, right? Like *their* man, he’s got to be this way and that way and dress like this and sound like that and ...” He crosses his arms. “Well, let’s just say that I’m looking for the girl who’ll love me, inch for inch,” he grins, “just as I am.”

“Like Jo.”

“Yeah, like Jo. If she wasn’t a dyke. Jo’s real cool for a chick.” As an afterthought, he adds, “The way things hang, I’m like her older brother. I like looking after her a bit. Differently, you know, than what Maddy can do.”

“She’s very fond of you, Jo is.”

“And so she should be. I’m a real nice dude.”

“No one’s questioning that.” Christen pats him on the knee. He fingers his goatee.

Red lights, stop signs, yield signs, pedestrian crossings. The traffic slips in and out in front of the Focus and inside the cabin, the conversation moves just as fluidly, in and around gaps and silences, while Morgan explains his temp job as the driver of a cement-mixer.

“The thing is, I got the job ‘cause ... I just happened to walk in when the foreman got news that one of the drivers would be out on

workers' comp for at least four weeks and I still had a union card from my last stint as a forklift operator. But the truck, it's so fucking noisy, you know, while it mixes the batch. It does it in transit from the quarry to the site, and it's dusty like you wouldn't believe. It's like, I come home and there's dust, like flour, all over me, inside my nose, inside my shirt, even inside my ear holes. Yeah, what keeps me behind the wheel is the money. Too good not to grab it." He looks at Christen, words hard against his teeth. There's something he'd like to tell her. Something about what he's got planned for this money, but he closes his mouth. Radio words take over and Christen doesn't notice.

The Triple J announcer is plugging the local music scene. "Don't let the unfortunate cancellation of Othercrowd mess with your head. Make sure you make it to the Zoo come Saturday night. Free beer for the ladies and—"

"The crew," Morgan starts again but on a tangent, "well, let's just say it's not only cop talk that goes stale. Those guys, there's a couple of real bad asses out there, but most of them in the team ... they're nice enough. It's just that they have a freaky sense of humour and they just spin the same crap around—"

Christen upshifts into fourth. "What, like Wendell defecting to Sydney and the quinella sweep? How they got tanked during the weekend and how their old lady won't ease up, not respecting a bloke's right to drop off his load after work?" Christen chants, thumbs beating a syncopated rhythm on the steering wheel, "and how they rammed their old lady last night ... " Morgan is once again facing her and his grin makes her tingly. "Or how they didn't get to fuck anyone last night because a) she was on the rag, or b) she threw him out, and how the girl next door has boobs you could roll in all day and, ah, yes, I almost forgot, Regie-with-the-voice-like-a-blender, the *Big Brother* cross between Pauline Hanson and Kim of the *Kath & Kim* sho—"

Morgan slaps his thigh. "Wow, lady!" he exclaims. "What, you've done time in a road gang yourself or what!" The cheer, she notices, is inside his eyes, beyond his eyes.

"Can't say that I have," she grins back, hand closed on the stick shift. "But it's like you said, dusties and cops ... Not that different, really."

"Except for the hard hat."

"Except for the badge."

Morgan opens the door and, though he briefly ponders the weird scripture that still encourages a nice guy to let the woman walk in first, he moves aside for Christen. But sure enough, as she doesn't know where the light is, he has to brush past her to do the 'let there be light' thing. As he does, she feels his hesitation. Her hand goes to his chest. More a brush than anything else, but he steps from under her hand even before it touches him and flips on the light switch. He could have turned on one of the side lights that cast a soft glow about the living room, but he doesn't.

Christen had half-formed the idea of a bachelor pad, grunge and all, but there aren't any empty bottles of beer stacked by the sofa and there aren't any clothes strewn anywhere. No CDs scattered on the floor. The furnishings are sparse but curtains hang on the windows, a handful of framed art prints hang on to the walls and a bushy pot plant sits placidly in the corner.

"Hey!" she exclaims, not hiding her surprise, "it's kind of homey in here."

"Like someone said..." Arms open to encompass the small living room, Morgan replies grandly, "my home is my temple."

"The same someone who said, 'My body is my temple'? Or is it someone else who said—"

He hesitates. "Nah, I guess I got it wrong. My mistake, but it doesn't matter 'cause it's a load of crap, that body is a temple thing."

The brittleness of his tone makes her blink. "Why? I didn't take you for a fast food junkie."

Morgan looks at her, mouth open to speak but changes his mind. He shrugs and, instead, flips on the jug. Christen feels awkward. His invitation to come in had been spoken as an afterthought and he hadn't even suggested what for. A nightcap? A coffee? A fuck? She spots the loo across the hallway, goes towards it and locks the door.

I can't read this guy, she sighs. Question is, Why am I even trying to read anything, huh? He's only twenty-three for god's sake. What's there to read! I mean, really.

Morgan leans back against the kitchen wall. One hand on his chest, the other on his stomach. What he needs is for his heart to settle.

"Oh fuck," he whispers. "Oh ... fuck!" Eyes closed, he feels each of the pulsations that fill and harden his clit. He feels them, one stacking hard against the other and the other, so much so that he

imagines his balls are aching. Christen's hand is cool on his shaft. Uh-huh, he startles, the moment I feel her hand, it'll rip right through me and I'll blow. "Oh fuck."

He slips a hand against his belly and under his belt. Fingers curled, he feels around and below his prosthetic. "How fucking surprising," he groans again. His clit's as hard as an AA battery. "I can't. Not tonight. Not with her," he whispers like a frightened child. Not now. Too soon! I'm not ready for this.

Deftly, he presses hard enough to ease some of the ache away and, bringing his hand back up to his chest, he feels its uneven contour. Though he can't feel them through the double layer of T-shirt cloth, he knows exactly where the scars are and how they look. Even after nine weeks, the muscle tissues still had a lot of settling to do and, if the ingrown chest hairs that had threatened to turn to boils inside the follicles had finally dried up, the scars, though minimal, were still a very noticeable shade of weird pink. The Melbourne surgeon had warned him that, if aesthetics rated high on his list, then he could do worse than wait some twelve weeks before showing off his new chest to a prospective lover though, by then, he should have resumed a normal, pain-free life.

Morgan feels hollow though his lower belly is absolutely aching because Christen's breasts are against him. All of her is tight against him, soft against him, strong against him. He can almost feel her breath on his face, her moon-pale hair, feather-soft against his belly. No! He thumps the back of his hand against the kitchen wall to clear his thoughts. She'll be back from the bathroom, in the flesh, looking at him, any minute now. He *could* excuse himself. He could jerk off in private. He'd feel better if he did. He'd be a better host if he did, but the idea of masturbating with Christen on his mind while Christen, unawares, is in the flat, seems a bit sick. Somehow, it really doesn't seem right at all.

He knows he needs to shift his thoughts so he tugs at the finger-thin goatee that splits his chin. He imagines himself leading her to the sofa.

"Oh fuck!"

He's back in the loop, can't shift her. Can't shift his thoughts. She's too close on the other side of the wall. He imagines undoing the buttons of her shirt, slowly, one by one. He imagines licking the hollow of her throat, and behind her earlobe, and the corners of her lips

and her hair. Yes, he imagines kissing her hair, that blond, moonbeam hair of hers. He inhales its fragrance. Peppery. He feels her breast under his hand, soft and full. A nipple stands up firm against his palm. His tongue melts around hers and she holds him tight against her and— His eyes snap open. The toilet is being flushed. He pushes himself away from the kitchen wall that's kept him propped up, eyes squeezed tight against the white tendrils of electric ache that rip right through him. Again, but this time over the cloth of his trousers, he squeezes his groin with one hand, fingers hard against his clit.

Christen's footfalls place her on the way to the bathroom. Running water. He wants his heart to stop pounding. He wants the ache in his groin to stop throbbing. He wants his fear to stop.

Christen's hair shines like pale wheat in the sun. Maddy used to say, 'Blond like a Palomino's mane.' The kitchen light is hard on her eyes. She squints at him in the middle of the kitchenette, all arms and legs, rangy. She heard the kettle reach the boil a moment ago, but Morgan hasn't yet brought out either cup or mug. She feels she should go. She doesn't want to make a fool of herself with such a young guy, a friend of Maddy's.

She moves to turn away but Morgan's hand reaches out for hers and pulls her against him. Iridescent rips of desire skittle and break through her belly. She leans into him. Fly against fly, her clit settles snugly against his groin. He moans into her hair. She wants to look at him because she knows he wants her. She wants to kiss his eyes because that'd be like kissing his smile. She pulls herself back, unaware of the pink flush that's tinting her cheeks.

His hands, one in the back of her neck, the other strong against her lower back hold her tight. Lips against the soft skin of his neck, she feels again the explosion of desire she had felt the first time, every time, she had kissed Maddy, the first time, every time, her lips had nuzzled the hollow of her throat.

Morgan hard against her, she also remembers the smoothness of Maddy's small breasts and she blinks. This is not Maddy. This is not a chick. Christen already knows that but, thoughts confused by the softness of Morgan's skin, her tongue lingers on his collarbone, on what of his collarbone she can access. She wants to lead him by the hand to make soft, gentle love to him though he would, no doubt, prefer it hard and thumping. She wants to touch his chest, the flat plane of his belly, the hard angles of his hips. She wants to caress the soft

part of his thighs and, yes, she wants his shaft, erect, between her breasts. She pushes away from him. Not tonight. She needs to think about this. She's not a teenager anymore. She's not after a fuck and a handshake. She's not even on the prowl. She's doing just fine on her own. Not once, in the past four months, had she even thought of replacing the memory of Maddy's body with another.

Christen pulls away from Morgan's mouth, from his tongue. Pulling away from his lips proves more problematic. They feel the way they look when he smiles, warm and honest. Gentle but sexy as hell. She runs her hand over his bulge. A new surge of desire rips through her. She squeezes him, notices he's not yet hard, struggles with the urge to make it so but, again, she pushes away from him.

"Mor ... listen. I need to be going." Brown eyes shiny with desire, he looks at her. "If I stay, it's to make love with you." Her hand has moved to his belly. "I feel it ... strong." Her hand needs to slip against the skin of his belly, beneath his belt. She blushes again, hearing herself speak words she doesn't remember ever having spoken before. "But ... I need to think about this. I'm not sure why it's happening. OK?"

His chest is heaving. He pushes off the wall as if to reach for her, mouth hungry for another kiss, but instead his hand falls back on his groin and he palms it, only briefly, to ease the ache underneath. She sees him wince. He nods at her, but doesn't trust himself to speak.

"Let's take a breather on this, huh? Mor? We keep it fluid for now."

"No other way but," he answers tightly.

Back in her car, Christen sits in the darkness. She wants to wait for the throbbing in her clit, the heat in her belly, to subside before heading home. Her thighs are hot. She's hot.

"Fuck," she whispers in the stillness of the cabin. "Oh baby ... if you're half as hot in bed as you are standing ... Oh fuck."

She remembers his hand, strong, against her belly. Strong against her breast. She feels the hollow at the base of his throat. Quickly, she surveys the street through the tinted windows of the cabin. Quiet, dark, not even a pedestrian walking a dog. Slowly pushing rivets through buttonholes, she undoes her fly. Eyes already closed, she settles more comfortably against the seat.

It's only once up the highway that the flash of the capped syringe floats back up to Christen's consciousness. She had glimpsed it, ensconced as it was, in the paper bin into which she had just dropped the tissue used to remove a faint mascara smudge. What with her head already full of colliding warm ripples, the awareness of the syringe had remained blurred. She stretches the seatbelt away from her chest. A needle? What on earth for? she asks herself. 'Quick money.' She remembers his words. 'Too good not to grab.' Her brow tightens but, quick to dismiss the possibility that Morgan might be shooting up, she shakes her head—none of the signs and besides, he's too grounded, too ... too ... fucking sweet. She shakes her head again, more slowly this time, as a Cheshire cat grin settles on her lips.

The construction site was almost deserted. Come 4.30, the men, tired and dusty, drive through the gates and out of sight but, though Team 4 had finally finished the 456 m³ pour for a slab needed to support one of the individual tower cranes, some were hanging back for a birthday cheer. If it hadn't been for Jim, one of the ironworkers, the gang would already be at the pub down the road, but they all knew how Jim's wife has warned him. If he makes one more detour by the pub on his way home, he's toast.

"Hate to admit it but the old bag, she's no fool," Jim had explained. "Y'all know how I can't help myself. First come the beers, then the Keno, then the pokies and before I know it, it's the day's wage what's blown. So ... lads, if you love me like a brother," he had admonished, "you tie a bit of rope 'round me neck and you don't let me loose within cooe of that friggin' pub, awright?" His large hand had slapped the front of his shirt, chasing a cloud of dust out of its folds, "Cause if you do ... don't count on me to be the grateful sod 'cause I need the old girl. And don't you guys go on bagging me about that," he growled, "because ... far as I know, it's not gonna be none of yous, big mouths, that'll keep me warm and fed when she drops me like a used condom."

So there they were, all three of Jim's best mates on the site, a couple with their hard hats still perched atop their heads, seated on an odd arrangement of spools and blocks and reinforcing steel, singing at the top of their lungs, 'For he's a jolly good fellow'.

Morgan had already remarked that the beers couldn't be 'more than one degree below piss temperature', but that hadn't stopped the lads from tossing back the tinnies and getting stuck into a metre-long Kabana sausage that John, the laser screed operator, had brought in lieu of a birthday cake. Someone with an eye for detail had stuck three candles in it, for Jim to blow out on this, the day of his thirtieth birthday.

The atmosphere around the little group is as light as the banter being bounced around: construction site news and gossip; a complication with the Team 6 tilt-ups; someone called Bob, whom Morgan didn't know, had yet to return to work after a forklift injury to the head; and someone else's wife was allegedly 'preggers' for the third time.

"I dunno how they do it, these blokes. With what I bring home," Robert says, "it's like I'm flat out feeding my one and only, what with Arlene not workin' and all."

"Some think with their head," Morgan quips, "others think with their dick head."

Robert, the slab polisher, slaps him across the back. "Spoken like a real Shakespeare, young Morgan." His arms are almost as thick as an average man's thighs but, because he subsists exclusively on beer, meat pies and sausage rolls, his gut, Morgan's always thought, has got to get in the way of his dick. For sure. Eyeing the length of the Kabana remains, Morgan chuckles.

"Talking about out of control ding-dongs," John breaks in, as if tuned into Morgan's boy's-humour thoughts, "d'you know that a whale's dick is about a metre long?"

"Yep. Old news," they reply boisterously.

"Oh. Right, clever dicks. And d'you know that the biggest mammal on earth can't even keep his bazooka in place when he's doing it? So when it blows, it just about misses the missus altogether and some 300 gallons of spoofo get, like vaporised in the sea every time one of them blows."

Up on his feet in the stance of a race car driver frothing up a magnum in front of his crotch, John shouts, "And here goes blast number 1, ladies and gents! Wooosh! 300 gallons!" he shouts jubilantly. "Sweet flood!"

The lads clap and whoop.

“So, did anyone catch that whale rescue on the tube last night?” Morgan asks, once the din has subsided. “It’s like, a juvenile humpback—”

“Oh yeah,” Jim breaks in. “Got caught in a shark net, somewhere around Surfers. Must’ve been blinded by all that cum floating about—”

“Fuck, that’s gross!”

“Listen, that’s a real story,” Morgan retorts. “Took six hours before the marine experts could cut him loose.”

“Free Willy that’s got the mad willy!”

Morgan rolls his eyes. He had expected to bail out of this birthday banter, but the message passed on to him a moment earlier was to the effect that Maddy was held up at work and that she could be more than an hour late picking him up.

“That the girlfriend?” the foreman had asked.

“You bet.”

One month into the job and Morgan felt comfortable enough with the men on Team 4. A crew is a crew and the average crew concept was familiar to him. The mateship rules of engagement were simple enough: do your fair share of work, know how to cover for a mate, never dob anyone for anything and never, ever look like you’re even thinking about stroking the foreman.

‘A different breed from us,’ Jim would say. ‘Can’t trust them the moment they get that promotion. Goes to their head.’

With each team functioning somewhat like a self-contained pod, there wasn’t opportunity for much interaction with the other guys on the project, and Morgan thought things were just fine that way.

He stands for a stretch. A tug at the back of his leg. “Hey, Mor!” John asks. “Aren’t you hot, all fucking day, inside those long ones?” Brisbane workers, from bricklayers to plumbers and taxi-drivers, favour wearing shorts on the job, and rather short ones at that, because of the clemency of the weather; beautiful one day, perfect the next, even in winter. “I reckon short dacks are less of a hassle to wash.” He pinches a wrinkle near the crotch of his own *Hard Yakka* work shorts. “Should try. Can’t say that I look after me own washin’ or anything, but for a young dude that don’t have a missus at home ... you might want to consider.”

“Who needs a missus at home,” Jim retorts, “when there’s the girlfriend who’ll do just as good and with less bitchin’.”

"I reckon that young Mor, here, he don't like his tender flesh tanned like hide, not like that." Like the hopeful contestant on a quiz show, Robert grins expectantly, slapping his naked near char-grilled thigh.

"Not enough hair on his legs, that's what makes him leg-shy," Jim suggests. "I bet our boy don't have enough fuzz on him, not anywhere, to knit into a moustache, you know, to match that neat little chin piece of his."

"Oh, c'mon, guys," Morgan says, moving past him.

"No way. I say, look at his fingers. C'mon, Morgan, show us!" Obliging, Morgan flashes him his middle finger. "See? Long like drumsticks, right? So, my bet is that it's on account of his tackle being so ... long, it'd dangle out of his shorts."

"Hey, what d'you reckon, Mor?" Robert guffaws. "Who's right? Me or him?"

The banter ripples good-humouredly but Robert insists, "So what's with the long johns? Hey, Mor?"

"Nothing's up. Nothing's down," he answers easily. "Just don't like them, that's all. Maybe it's a reaction to my old man wearing them," he adds as a throwaway. "So anyway ... they've hired you as the dress police or what?"

Stuck in his little groove, Robert perseveres, "Well, I'll be buggered if it's not because of his nob."

Perhaps because Morgan has already moved to the periphery of the group, two more men stand up, preparing to head home; John, tapping his hard hat further down his head, as if he never contemplated removing it; Jim, rotating his back, once, twice before palming his groin over the crumpled crotch of his shorts.

Robert punches Morgan on the shoulder. "Huh? Huh?" He lets out a beer belch, "If you're not saying, that's 'cause you agree."

Morgan, hard hat in one hand, begins gathering his gear with the other.

"Wouldn't know about *him*," Jim offers, "but there was this dude I knew, a brickie. As weedy as Mor, but when he'd brace for a leak, right? King Kong, himself, rolled over in his grave. A big, King Kong dick, but pink, is what this dude had. King Kong long, I tell yo—"

"Yeah, well, guys," Morgan speaks over his shoulder, "I hate to disappoint you but—"

“So ... Yo, dude!” Robert is undeterred. “How long you reckon you’d be, huh, all stretched out for the girlfriend?”

A forceful knock in the back of his knees makes him buckle under and before the others realise what John has done, he is already on top of him.

“Yeehah!”

“What the fuck, man!” Morgan spits, mouth hard.

“C’mon, you pussies!” John whoops. “He won’t bite. C’mon! Take a peek at his size.”

Ribcage flattened under John’s weight, arms flailing and dazed by the turn of events, Morgan kicks wide. Taut muscles chord his neck. “C’mon, guys, ease up,” he yells.

Buoyed by the rough play, Jim and Robert lunge at his shins to pin them down.

“Get *off* me, you fuckers!” Morgan’s voice cracks. “Off! *Now!*” The side of his boot connects with something soft.

Robert growls. “You little fuck!”

A hard tug at Morgan’s hips. “Ok, here goes. Snow White unveiled!”

The breeze feels odd against Morgan’s thighs.

“Awh! Fuck!” Like a cork popping, the expletive fires out of Jim’s mouth, hard and fast.

“What?” asks John, still straddling Morgan.

“Sick ... *cunt!*” Jim’s voice.

John swivels his hips. “What’s with you guys?”

“It’s a ... ” Robert’s voice is shrill. “It’s a fucking *freak!* Jesus!”

Intrigued, John dismounts Morgan. “What the—”

A boot connects against Morgan’s hip. Another, against his side, almost lifts him off the ground.

Others

The young constable is intent on her driving. Had it been a male superior she'd been assigned to chauffeur for the afternoon, Constable Nikki Beckett would have replied when spoken to and would have attempted humour when appropriate, but the proximity of the woman who sat silently, head no doubt full of weighty matters, had her tied up in knots. Nikki had, of course, come across DS Jensen many times in the months she has been attached to the Burleigh Heads cop shop, but seeing her around the station was one thing; having her so close, so silent, and so damned sexy in her full uniform, was another.

Surreptitiously, Constable Beckett glimpses Christen's profile. The Nordic blond hair, pulled away from the cheekbones in a strict eight-strand braid, is offset by the stark navy-blue of her jacket and chevroned shoulder boards. Hat held loosely on her lap, Christen reminds her of a showjumper mentally rehearsing the course ahead.

A chime rings and rises above the crackle of the comms. Though muffled, it startles Constable Beckett who is already on the edge of her seat, looking like anything but the assured driver that she normally is, assigned to drive the DS to the inauguration of the new sports complex. DS Jensen stirs, pulls the ringing mobile out of her breast pocket, squints at the text, punches a series of keys, brings the phone to her ear. "Christen Jensen here." She listens and smiles, recognising Maddy's voice. "What's up?"

Constable Beckett blushes at the thought that the DS might actually be talking to her lover. Everyone at the station, and beyond, knows that Christen Jensen is not married. Everyone also knows how she's ditched Chief Constable Rogers, a.k.a. Cute Buns among the female officers, and that he is, still, so distraught by the way she pulled the plug on them that he's taken to womanising in a big way. Mike Rogers' mates explain it away as a compound knee-jerk reaction and a reassurance to himself that, never again, will he let a female get as 'to him' as Jensen had, but that he'll *soon* get over 'the whole damn business.'

"Maddy, slow down. Say that again ... Morgan? ... Why not? Why won't he go to the hospital if ... Wait, wait, wait." DS Jensen

drops her hand to her lap, turns to the driver as if to say something, looks out of the car window instead, before bringing the mobile back to her ear. “Mad, how d’you even know he’s hurt? The driver said that? OK, look, stay put and I’ll ...” She listens some more. “I can’t believe this!” she exclaims in the tone of one who can quite easily believe what she’s hearing but hates to think it might be for real. “Look, I’ll send a car over there and—No? Why not?”

Constable Beckett sneaks a glance and notes the little muscles on the DS’s jawline bunching and unbunching. Christen draws in her top lip in strained concentration. “Listen ... Maddy ... I’ll call you back. I need to think about this.” DS Jensen interrupts the call and leans heavily into the backrest.

The silence in the cabin hums against Constable Beckett’s eardrums like high wire voltage.

“A problem, Detective Sergeant?” she has to ask, if only to stop the humming.

“Could say that.” Christen smiles but the smile is tight and her thoughts are visibly elsewhere. On impulse, she asks the driver to pull up and, mobile in hand, she steps out of the car, momentarily unconcerned by Constable Beckett who, not very differently from the hat left on the passenger seat, will await her return. Thrusting her head back inside the cabin, Christen says gently, “I won’t be long.”

Constable Beckett blushes. “No problem, Ma’am. I’ll be right here.”

The heavy car door slams shut. Constable Beckett watches the DS stride to the corner and disappear around it. Gently, pensively, her fingers touch the hat that’s been left toppled on its side. She lays it on its base and strokes the crown. Index and middle finger, more confident now, tap dance on the blue and white checkerboard band and fiddle with the badge affixed to its centre. Morgan ... Maddy. She remembers the names: two female names. Ah ... no, she checks herself, Morgan as in Morgan Freeman, the actor. Definitely a guy’s name. So, she wonders, what’s up with the Maddy-Maddison lady and Morgan-the-man, then? Whatever they’re up to sounds like deep shit.

A moment later DS Jensen is back in the car, hat on her lap, seat belt flat, pressing against the brass buttons of her uniform. If Morgan didn’t want to go to the hospital, the stupid jerk, she thinks through a thin smile, well, I’ll get a doctor to him. But, fuck! What the hell’s really happened to him? Even Maddy didn’t know much. When

Christen had called her back, all she had to say was that around 5.00 p.m, the driver of a car had stopped to help a 'young lad,' Morgan, who was staggering along the road on the north side of that huge construction site at Sandgate. He said the guy was clutching a hard hat, that's why the driver stopped. By the dust on him and his general demeanour, the driver guessed that he was one of the crews sinking the huge apartment complex foundations on the other side of the link fence.

"But these guys knock off early," he said on the phone, "and there doesn't seem to be anyone else in sight."

"Sir, you were saying? About Morgan?" Maddy had asked evenly, and the man finally got to the part Maddy needed to hear about. Morgan had had an accident of sorts, but he had refused to tell the driver anything.

"Not much of a talker," the man said to Maddy. He had offered to call an ambulance "but he threw such a turn," he explained further, "about not wanting anything to do with an ambulance" that the man had begun thinking that, maybe, he had made a mistake in stopping. "All I know," he explained, getting side-tracked again, "is that when I'm hurt, the one thing I want *is* an ambulance and all I know is that the damn thing can't get to me fast enough."

So it had been with great relief that the man had punched the number Morgan had finally given him. "Yours, I guess," he said to Maddy, but he warned her that he couldn't be expected to stay there forever, could he now? And that he'd be off as soon as he'd hung up, so if anyone could come and deal with the lad ... He'd done his bit.

Christen, unsure as to what Maddy was expecting of her, and unable to just shoot some ninety Ks up the highway at the drop of a hat to get to Morgan, had first thought of placing a call to Brisbane to ask a couple of the boys there to organise a casual extraction. They would take Morgan's deposition, drive him home and she, Jo and Maddy would take it from there later.

"No!" Maddy had replied sharply. "No cops."

"And why the hell not? If it's a job-related injury and there's no supervisor on site, he needs to report the circumstances, that's first and foremost. If he's been assaulted, for whatever reason, then the details have to be fed to C.R.I.S.P—"

"Christen, get off the gung-ho cop thing, please. I did talk with Morgan, a bit. The dude who helped him put him on. You're with me?"

And besides asking for me to, please, come and pick him up, the two things he was one hundred percent set about was, no hospital, no cops. So, Christen ... you got to respect that.”

“Oh, fuck, Maddy. I can respect just about anything ... That’s provided I know what’s to be respected and know why *not* call the cops—”

“Look, I’m sorry ... I don’t get it either. What could possibly have happened to him, huh? In broad daylight, a few metres away from the site. Jo won’t be home till late. It’s her evening with Bernice O’Brian ... you know, the shrink. She doesn’t have a mobile and, in any case, there’s nothing she can do that we can’t, right?” She pauses for breath. “Listen, I’m still at work, phone in one hand, shifter in the other. I’m looking at a fuel problem in a V8 that’s either in the holly or the pump. So I need to test drive the sucker. Could be worse, mind you, it’s a ‘71 Mustang convertible that’s holding me up.” Christen hears Maddy’s chuckle. “So, it could be that by the time he gets home, the whole thing will have sorted itself out. But what if he needs medical attention and doesn’t get it?”

Christen had suggested that, if he could be zeroed in, she might be able to despatch a doctor who’d have a look at him and run the first round of checks before dropping him off at Maddy’s. However, if neither Maddy nor Jo were likely to be home, maybe she could cut her appearance short at the sports complex, and depart immediately after her speech and a couple of handshakes with the members of the local council. Once linked up with the doctor, she could time it and be there to let them in herself.

“After all,” she reminds Maddy, “I still remember where you keep your spare key.”

As it turned out, Old Doc Maloney owed her a personal favour and, most likely, he’ll need another one after that, sooner or later, regarding his daughter’s habit. Dovetailing interest outcomes, Christen reasons darkly. I can live with that. Head back, she allows herself a sigh.

“All sorted out now?” Constable Beckett asks.

“Yes, thanks for asking,” Christen replies pleasantly. “So, now ... Nikki ... what say we get to where we’re supposed to get, huh? No more distractions from me. Promise!”

Constable Beckett looks in the rear-view mirror and shifts into a higher gear. “Not a problem, Ma’am. I don’t mind at all. Wouldn’t want you getting there late, though, that’s all.”

Maddy had agreed; an off-the-record emergency check-up would respect Morgan's request and see him safe at the same time. "If he's really in a bad way," she continued, "then it'd be best if he didn't stay alone in his flat, right? And Jo will love playing nurse for a while. Besides, that dude's real strong and I say he'll be back on his feet before we even know what's happened, right? That's if he ever tells us what did happen."

The needle in the waste paper basket. "And ... oh ... wait, wait," Christen had called out almost as she hit the END pad. "Maddy! You there? Oh good," she sighed in relief. "I've just remembered something really important. You're listening? Look, you've got to talk that Good Samaritan into standing by till the doctor gets there. You have to tell him to absolutely make sure he tells the doctor that Morgan is a diabetic, that's in case I don't get to tell him myself. Even if I do ... twice is better than once. It's very important. I'll explain later."

"Diabetic? How d'you know that?" The line crackled. "OK, you tell me later. I'll pass on the message and I'm ready to bet the Good Samaritan will sit tight till that doctor rocks up. I'll just be upfront with him and let him know that if he bails on Morgan, not only a good buddy of mine in the police will find him and kick his ass till it drops, but also that I'll personally sue him for ... what's the expression? The abandonment of a person in distress ... Something like that."

Christen had chuckled. "Sure, go for it, he's all yours." Then she had dialled an ex-police doctor. Twice, Christen had kept his teenage daughter out of lock-up. Her half-baked kleptomaniac tendency and the worst sense of timing imaginable, had led Christen to believe that the girl was probably more intent on getting her parents' attention than on indulging an irrepressible urge to grab stuff she clearly didn't want, just to check out the odds she'd get nabbed on the other side of the shop front.

When Morgan came up the stairs, propped up by old Maloney, Christen's heart went to her mouth. Dishevelled, shirt ripped open over a blood-smeared, long sleeve work shirt, as dusty as a feather duster, he didn't even raise his head to look at her. One arm clutching his chest, he ambled like a man much older than Maloney himself.

She moved towards him but with a limp wave of the hand, Morgan signalled her to hang back. Maloney helped him to the sofa.

The doctor's first diagnostic was that 'the boy's seventh and eighth ribs were most likely broken midline.' The doctor had duly noted how the lad had kept a hand high on his side, as if to keep most of his shirt in place during the auscultation but, though torso shyness was uncommon in males, he was much more preoccupied by the lad's silent suffering. Still, since strapping ribs had gone out of popularity as a means to induce mending, the doctor simply handed Christen a prescription for painkillers.

Once he was gone, she walked up to Morgan. *The boy*, Maloney had called him. She squatted, knees braced against the sofa, and smoothed out the front of his shirt.

"Morgan, hey ... " she began, and though the movement made him wince, Morgan moved his hand to cover hers. He winced some more as he pushed her hand away altogether.

"Morgan, hey ... " Christen said again. He averted his eyes. "Look, I don't know what they've done to you, but ... Mor ... hey ... *Please!*" The last time she had seen him, he had been leggy in his combat trousers, wiry and hungry for sex. She remembered how she had all but literally melted into his kiss. How all of her had ached for the stroking of his fingers. "Morgan ... hey, dude," she urged playfully. "Talk to me." She noted the movement of his Adam's Apple.

"Jo," he whispered. "Where's she?"

"Jo? She's with Bernice, her shrink. She'll be here a bit later. Maddy's held up at work. So ... *me* is all you got for now." Hoping for a smile, she made to remove a bit of grit from his hair.

"Don't! Don't touch me," he grunted. "Just don't!"

His refusal of her touch made her testy. She peered at him. "*Morgan?*"

A dark shadow was spreading from the corner of an eyelid, but fresh blood had stopped oozing from his nose.

Still on her knees, Christen persisted. "Mor, listen." To make it easier for him to see her, she positioned herself more diagonally to the sofa, closer to his knees than his face. "I didn't happen to just walk by, right? What I did was cut short a work commitment ... to be here for you ... Maddy called." Morgan kept his eyes riveted to the ceiling. "OK. I tell you what. I'll leave as soon as either Jo or Maddy rock up. For now," she straightened up, "I'll be in the garden. Actually, I might

even do a little watering while I'm at it. So, if you need anything ... just holler. I'll hear you."

Days went by in a falsely anodyne manner as Christen went about her business, but only she knew the thoughts that kept travelling back to Morgan like a bobbin on a loom—Morgan in his kitchen, sex-taut and wanting her—Morgan as she had last seen him, stitched up and strapped—Morgan, as she had last heard him, telling her, 'Just piss off, will ya!'

The days went by, they always do, but not following a pattern Christen could recognise—not in the way they had following her break up with Mike. Not in the way they had after Jo had returned from the streets and to Maddy. Not in the way they had followed from that Sunday afternoon after she had first come across Morgan in Maddy's backyard. No dash of tenderness, not a lingering connection, not even an ellipse of regret for what hadn't passed between them, nothing Christen had ever felt, while on a down curve, seemed appropriate. *Their* moment in his kitchen had been vaporised and she felt sick. Sick with the awareness that what had seemed totally irrational, but somehow possible, had become hard-and-fast inaccessible in a murky sort of way.

There had existed, for one magical moment, the possibility of something different from all she had known before—not because of their twelve-year age difference, no. The difference lay elsewhere, in a part of Morgan, in a part of herself that had, unpredictably, deflated prematurely—a wicked wizard had, with a single wave of his swizzle stick, zapped away what connecting thread had begun to grow between them.

She had heard that Morgan was fine, that he had spent only that first night at Maddy's. Christen had asked whether he said anything about the aggression. 'No idea,' had been Maddy's reply. 'Even my torque wrench makes more of a sound than he did last night.'

One evening, just as Christen had popped a frozen slab of lasagne in the microwave, the phone rang, putting an end to the disconnecting string of days. Morgan wanted to apologise for 'having been such a prick,' and, if Christen hadn't yet deleted him off her list, he really wanted to see her.

“That’s one thing I’m clear about, but I’d also like to try and make it up to you,” he said. “So ... if you’re OK with the idea ... There’s this hole-in-the-wall just around the corner from my place and they make real mean pizzas, so ... Christen? Look, just say you’ll jump in the car and ... ” His tone was so earnest that his voice cracked like that of a boy still struggling with puberty. “I *could* come over if you gave me *your* address ... but ... Look, I’d really prefer to see you at *my* place than ... anywhere else. It’s like, sort of, a long story.”

Christen tossed the frozen slab back in the fridge, grabbed her keys, and her shoulder-bag, and slammed the door shut behind her.

Tall and lanky, only marginally shorter than her brother, Morgan is about to blow the fourteen candles that decorate her birthday cake. The camera has caught Jarryd, peaking comically from behind his sister’s shoulder and Mary, their mother, almost off camera, but looking on.

Mary Maddock peers into her daughter’s eyes; brown and wide, they haven’t been passed on from her line of the family. She looks at Morgan’s short curls and, thumb rubbing over the oblong face and wide forehead that are her husband’s, she settles on the idea that the curly brown hair is the only ‘frigging’ trait that her daughter has not rejected from her. Even with his blondish hair, Jarryd, her elder, looks much more like her than her daughter ever could. Mary looks up from the picture—the last one of Morgan that she has preserved inside the family album. The last picture in which her daughter can still pass for a daughter.

A couple of days after the birthday party, Morgan had stumbled into the kitchen, smeared rivulets of blood oozing from her head and staining her flannelette shirt. Mary had run to clutch her, unconcerned by what blood transferred to her cheek and blouse, before she pulled away to better peer into her daughter’s frightened eyes.

As Morgan likes to say whenever he recounts that particular mother-to-daughter moment, “She did that just to make sure it was really me under all that blood, and not some white zombie impostor.”

Only after being reassured that her daughter was fine in spite of the blood, did a thunderous, "For god's sake, Morgan, what've you done to yourself!" burst through Mary's lips.

Morgan had been riding her BMX bike full bore through the orchard when a branch zipped open the top of her head, as simply as it could have blinded her had she been riding only a couple of inches straighter on the saddle. Quite frightened herself, at the sight of so much blood and worried that Morgan might faint, Mary had driven her to the doctor's surgery where the medico's pronouncement had been that 'Young Morgan's wound' required some serious stitching up. To allow for the procedure, and avoid infection, a strip of hair as wide and long as the doctor's hand would have to be shaved off.

"But, Doctor!" Mary had cried, "How's that going to make her look, the poor thing?" The deed had to be done and Morgan ended up looking like a poodle with the mange.

"Not to worry," said the doctor. "Easily fixed. What say we shave the whole thing off and even it all out, huh? It'll only grow back thicker. Young Morgan? What do you say?"

"Mangy or bald?" Morgan shrugged. "Go for bald. Works for Sinead."

Sinead O'Connor, the Irish singer, had been on TV a week earlier, shaved neat and burning a picture of the Pope, and by the time the doctor had done the only thing that could be done, Morgan sported a shiny dome of her own.

In an attempt to bolster her mother, on their way home Morgan said, "That's OK, Mum. We can always say that this is a Shave for Leukaemia thing. Lots of women do it, you know. It's for a good cause, mama. No one will mind."

"Morgan, there's no such fund-raising happening at the moment. Nobody'd believe that! Besides ... it doesn't matter that some women shave their head for one cause or another. A good one or a bad one. No matter what *they* do, Morgan, *they* still look like girls. Like women! But look at you!" Out of sheer frustration, Mary hit the brakes to twist the rear-view mirror towards her daughter so as to give Morgan a glimpse of herself. "You look even more like a boy than before. Morgan, really!" Mary glared, knuckles white on the steering wheel, "This is all getting to be too much. And what with you starting at the new school! What will your teachers think? Have you thought of that?" Morgan hadn't had enough time to think about that, but when

she did, she decided that, fronting up to her first Monday morning class at Hobart S.H.S. as a boy would be easier than having to explain the scar and the shaved head to people who didn't even know her. Girls don't look like me, Mum says so herself. Boys do, and it won't make a bit of difference to the teachers if Morgan Maddock is a girl or a boy.

For months afterwards, whenever Morgan resisted her brother's attempts at bullying her into doing some of the chores that usually befell him, he'd say, "Hey, Mor! What d'you reckon Mum will say, huh, when I tell her you did it on purpose, the branch accident thing? Just so that you'd start at the new school with a shaved head and con everyone."

The first time Jarryd had challenged her, too flummoxed even to try to wrestle him to the ground, she shouted back, "But that's not true! Jar!"

"Don't matter none. Mum won't need much convincing. That, and what with Dad telling her how you'd use that old bit of rubber hose to pee like me ... that's really got her congested about you. So ... Morry baby, you're gonna wash the car or what?"

"Jar ... go eat yourself!" Morgan loped away, but an hour later she was making sud-swirls on the bonnet of the family car. She also mowed the grass that was too patchy to be called a lawn but that meandered up and down, skirting the edge of the house and going as far back as the orchard. She also wheeled, to the curb and back, more than her fair share of rubbish bins.

"Taking it like a man," Jarryd teased, but if Morgan played compliant in the face of such brotherly injustice, it was more to spare her mother another turn than to avoid her wrath.

Ironically, though her father indulged her in many ways, it was her mother whom Morgan loved most. It did seem, however, that every time Morgan began to feel Mary on the cusp of a thaw towards her, something or other, almost always 'something' linked to Morgan's penchant for all that was boy-like, would occur, and Morgan would see Mary bounce away from her as clearly as if she'd been rappelling down a slab. And yes, the day her husband jokingly told Mary how Jarryd had come upon his sister, shorts dropped around her ankles, feet apart, holding a bit of green hose protruding from her undies, Mary had reached saturation point. Dan tried to reassure her that it was all part of a phase that Morgan would grow out of when she dis-

covered boys. “But, either way,” he had shrugged, “peeing standing up, that hasn’t killed anyone yet. Not as far as I know.”

Morgan had begun by cutting off some eight inches of hose and slicing open one end. Once she had worked out the best angle at which to hold the pipe, she had carefully melted the jagged edges of the half pipe end so that they didn’t abrade her skin. Once applied neatly against the labia majora, careful to release her flow slowly, Morgan could pee standing up and not mess herself. One problem with the device was that Morgan sensed she had to wash it after each use and that was a bit of a bummer. Boys don’t have to wash anything, she thought, not even their hands, not if they don’t want to.

Mary closes the photo album. At least there’s always Jarryd—a lovely boy, a good son. No surprises with Jarryd and we can be proud of him. Isn’t that what it’s all about, having kids? she wonders on the way to the kitchen. Keeping the lineage going? Being proud of how they turn out? Is that asking too much? After all, it’s the parents who make the kids, so her giving back a little—Mary chokes on the thought. Oh, no! No, no! Dan and I, we didn’t make *her* the way she is. She’s made herself that way all on her own. From Day One she was difficult, a difficult baby. Didn’t want to eat. While all the other babies in the ward put on little ounces of weight daily, *she* just slept and cried. Didn’t want to swallow the formula. Breastfeeding is what she wanted. Me, breastfeeding! Ah, Mary sighs, the sacrifices you end up making for your children! Twenty-three already ... What sort of a daughter is she really? What sort of a *woman*? An engineer! She won’t even get to marry. What man will ever be interested in someone like her? No grandchildren. Not a single reason to be proud of her. And stubborn too.

The last time Morgan had visited her parents in Hobart, she had tried to explain to her mother that just because she had been born a girl, she didn’t have to act like one and she certainly didn’t want to live her life as one. She had flown home for the weekend just to announce that she had booked herself in for a chest reconstruction. It would be performed in Melbourne, at the end of the month.

“A mastectomy? You’re not even sick! That’s for people dying of cancer. Morgan, have you gone totally mad?”

“Mum, look, it’s not like that, like a mastectomy. It’s much better than that. It’s ... well ... it’s not the same thing at all.”

To Morgan, mastectomy, like lobotomy, suggested a mutilation, a gruesome hollowing, a concave appearance and a permanent harness of graphic scarring, while a chest reconstruction implied exactly what the words spelt out. Yes, the fatty tissue in her breasts would be removed but once rid of it, the muscles underneath would create not just a flat area of skin stretched over bone, but a male chest, with muscles, real ones, that she would develop and strengthen at the gym like any other male. So Morgan, downplaying her mother's outrage, had tried to explain something of her gender dysphoria, something that might finally make some sense in the light of the many symptoms of her daughter's malaise *she* had witnessed over the years.

"Breasts?" Morgan had patted hers, pancake flat, totally mashed by the sport Frog bra she had taken to wearing as a most welcome alternative to binding. "They're useless mounds of fat just there to be groped. And I won't need them to breast-feed either because there's no way I'm ever gonna get pregnant. Even you, Mum, you didn't really want kids. So ... how come you don't see where I'm coming from? Mum?" Back turned to her daughter, Mary had begun walking out. When she did turn around, Morgan saw the repulsion in her eyes but, hoping that something in what she was saying might eventually trigger a spark of understanding, however tiny, she kept ploughing deeper into her argument. "Mum, you got to admit that you've spent an awful lot of time resenting your 'needy' husband and your 'needy' kids," she blurted, following a hunch she had toyed with ever since she was old enough to infer certain things about life in the adult sphere. Shoulders hunched, hands shoved inside her jeans' pockets, Morgan leaned against the windowsill. "Look at me, Mum. I'm not going to let any limitations stick to me like flies to a pot of jam, not on me, they're not. Why aren't you looking at me, Mum? Look at me!"

Morgan took a step towards her mother to turn her around. Then, as if testing the depth of her mother's anger, she cupped Mary's chin. "If you looked at me, Mum, like, really looked at me, you'd see that I'm just as good as Jarryd. In every way. Actually, that's a lie." She straightened up and moved away. "What *is* true is that, in some ways, in some things, I'm way better than him. That's the bottom line, Mum. Whatever in life he can have, I can have too. Whatever he can do, I can do too. And that should really make you proud of me, Mum,

because I'm not gonna go under like you. I'm not going to cave in. Me, I'm going to be as free as Jarryd." Morgan walked behind her mother who was too flummoxed to move.

Morgan, lion tamer, bent her knees to better wrap her mother inside her long arms. "Mum, I love you. And I know you love me. But the thing is ... I need you to love me differently. I need you to love me for me. For who I really am." Mary moved out of the hug but stayed rigidly close by. "Mum ... I need you to love *me*, even if you don't understand what I'm on about. Even if I haven't given you any reasons to be proud of me. So ... " Her voice broke. "So ... *Mum*, here's the deal: next time I visit ... either you *hug* me like you hug my *brother*, like you hug your *other* son, or ... I won't come back."

Mary tilted her chin to meet her daughter's eyes. "Morgan, you're asking too much of me," she said flatly. "I can't do it." She patted her daughter's shirt front. "Don't come back." She left the kitchen without another word.

Morgan watched her mother go, screaming silently for her to turn around, for her to say something like, 'Look, darling. Do whatever it is you need to do and, your father and I ... we'll do what we can to understand. Just give us time.' But Mary didn't turn around. She simply disappeared through the hallway and Morgan, one hand clasped hard on the nape of her neck, chest heaving, jaws clenched, let drop the tears that had been lining her throat, making it all too watery, even as she had struggled to remain steadfast in front of her mother's cold obstinacy. Silently, she relinquished all control over them and let them spill over.

Hard against Christen but soft in her mouth, Morgan has never ever wanted to have sex as badly as he does at this very moment. His tongue—he doesn't feel his tongue anymore, he doesn't even feel the pain in his ribs anymore. All he feels is the blinding ache in his clit that's so strong that no matter how tightly he holds Christen, he can hardly open his eyes. It's from her kiss, from her lips that ripples of desire race through. It's also from his hands in her hair, from his hands over her breasts, from his hand pressing her harder against him, from his other hand cupped beneath the knobby fly of her jeans, that waves of desire spread and crash in his lower belly.

Christen pushes away from him. "Morgan, no. No, wait." One hand against his chest, a finger against the thin rectangular goatee that splits his chin, she holds him at bay, away from her lips, just for a moment. "Mor ... look. I didn't come prepared ... for that."

Christen had driven to Morgan's flat because he had asked her to. He said he wanted to apologise for having been such a prick that afternoon after the doctor had left, and he wanted to thank her for having sent him over in the first place.

When she asked him how well his ribs were mending, he had answered something funny about not being able to either laugh or cough much and her answer to that made him want to laugh, so he choked the laughter to block the sharp edge of pain, but he coughed anyway. He said that he'd like to buy her a pizza from a hole-in-the-wall pizza joint near his place and there was something he wanted to talk to her about. When she had rapped her knuckles on the door, he had been quick to open it and let her in.

All arms and legs, he had stood in the middle of the hallway and Christen smiled in spite of herself. She didn't want to be angry with him, so when he held out his hand, she took it, and they both stood still as if waiting for music to start. A waltz, Christen thought. A mad, wall-to-wall, ricocheting waltz across the floor of his small living room. She grinned at the thought. When Morgan moved closer to her, she let him.

He had reached for her, she snuggled against him. When he bent his head towards her, she lifted hers. His lips were soft. Warm. Her tongue recognised them and discovered his mouth again, slowly at first. When he cupped her buttocks with one hand and undid the buttons of her shirt with the other, they both forgot why she had come over in the first place.

He says, "I want you."

She chuckles against his ear. "I know." She nuzzles him. "But, hey ... Mor ... gan ... Tell me you have ... condoms. I ... I mean, I can't—"

"Christen," he says, lips buried in her hair. "Chris ... we need to talk." He only whispers because he knows he doesn't dare speak any louder.

"Oh no, we don't." Her lips play in the soft hollow of his neck. "Talking's for later. So ... where d'you keep them, huh? Condoms ... Morgan?" She urges him, her hand pressing over his groin.

Morgan wriggles out of the embrace and the wedge of pain between his ribs makes him flinch.

“Oh, I forgot. Your ribs. Oh, Morgan, you need to—”

He shakes his head but moves her hand away from him. “Chris.”

Aware of a shift of energy in his body, she opens her eyes wider. “Hey ... what’s up?” Her brow is furrowed.

His fingers smooth her hair back as he leads her to the sofa. “Sit,” he says gruffly. “Please.”

She sits but, tugging at his belt buckle, she reaches for him again.

“I don’t have any condoms,” he says. “I never do.” Her lips twitch in amusement. “I don’t need any,” he adds.

“You cocky little bastard,” she laughs. “Come and sit right next to me. It’s Sex Ed time for you, young stud.” She tugs at him again. “You’re going to tell me like, straight in the eyes, that you’re a real pro when it comes to withdrawing at the last minute? That you’ll take care of everything?” She pats the sofa next to her. “Then I get to explain to you that, even before you blow, dear boy, there’s the great likelihood of leakage—”

“Chris. No. It’s not that.” He detaches her fingers from his belt buckle. “I do know about ... Yeah, about what you’re saying, but that’s not it.” He lets go of her hand, steps back, briefly crosses his arms before taking two steps towards the hallway and stops, as if in two minds, before reaching in his back pocket. He flips his wallet open, rifles through it to pull out a snapshot. He walks back to the sofa and holds the picture level with Christen’s eyes.

“Oh. Great. So why show me this now?” she frowns. “Your girlfriend? Hobart? Melbourne? Brisbane?”

He shakes his head and drops his weight in the armchair behind him.

Christen peers at the fresh-faced woman. “So, who’s the chick, then?” Tall and thin in a white T, the camera has caught the girl leaning out of a window. Her hair, in short but loose curls, looks mussed by a breeze as she smiles squarely into the camera, seemingly amused by something the photographer might have said.

“That chick ... it’s me.”

Christen’s eyes snap to Morgan’s face. “What d’you mean?” Her lips hold on to the smile as she peers more carefully at the picture. “That’d be your sister, right? Jerry? There’s a bit of a resem-

blance, you know. Real cute. Come,” she urges again, “tell me about Jerry and then, *please*, Morgan, tell me where you hide the Trojans or whatever brand you—”

“Chris ... *ten*.” His voice cracks. “It’s me, *Jarryd’s* sister. It was ... me,” he corrects himself clumsily. He pushes his hands deeper inside his pockets. “Look, there’s no Jerry. *Jarryd’s* my brother’s name. Get it? There’s no girl in the family, not anymore. Get it?”

“Truth?” she asks, retarding the moment she will have to grapple with whatever it is Morgan is trying to tell her. “Can’t say that I do. No, I don’t understand what you’re getting at.” Fingers tap the picture. “You’ve lost me. What’re you on about? Morgan?” Because she senses her brow is knotted, she makes her body relax on the sofa. “OK, no rush. Just come over here and—”

“*Christen*, please. *Pay* attention. *Look* ... ” His smile breaks along with his voice. “I’m a transman.” These words, spoken for the first time, not willing to dissolve into the air just yet, make a sudden U-turn and careen against his eardrums. *I’m a transman*.

“A transman? Right. Uh, what’s a trans—” Christen’s eyes widen on the dawning understanding that she *does* know what a transman is. She squints at the picture. “*You?*”

He cocks his head to one side. “Yeah. Jar took it. Melbourne, like a year and a half ago. Just before I started on the T.”

“You’re on—”

“Testosterone. Hormone ther—”

“Don’t you patronise me, Morgan!” she snaps. “I do know about androgen hormone therapy. Fuck! *Morgan?*” She stands up. “Am I s’posed to believe you’re a ... *girl?*”

“No.” Shoulders hunched, Morgan shakes his head vigorously. “I’m not a girl,” he retorts, jaw tight. “Well ... I was,” he concedes, “but only on the surface. Something misfired. Like something happened to one of my chromosomes and it got all kinked up. No one really knows what really, *really* happens in utero to make a baby ... No, not a baby ... a foetus ... male as opposed to female. *Not really*, they don’t.”

“Oh, please!” Christen almost implores. “I don’t think I wanna hear that!” She glares at him, bites her lip and uses her question as one drowning at sea flounders towards a buoy. “Are you telling me you’re a female to male trans ... *sexual?*”

Morgan shuffles his feet. “You know about FTMs?”

“Do I know about transsexuals?” Jawline set, hands waving vehemently in front of her, Christen is pale. “I’m a policewoman, for fuck’s sake. In the police force, we know about these things.” She slaps a hand across her forehead. Palomino blond hair glints between her fingers. “But ... do I really *know* about it? You’re asking me if I know what it’s about, as in *really* know about? Like, do I understand any of it?” Lips tight, she inhales a shallow breath. “No, Morgan, can’t say that I do.” She wheels on the balls of her feet. “What’re the odds of me coming across one, huh? Across a transsexual anything? Not in the streets, mind you, no. In my private life? One in a million? On a bad luck day?” She throws the picture at him but it only flutters out of her hand.

“Actually, all in all ... it’s about one in twenty-something thousand. In the streets.”

She pushes past him and grabs her bag. “Why Morgan? Why tell me this now? Why not ... why not ... before?”

He steps in behind her, unwilling to let her add any more distance between them. “That’s what I’m about, Christen. Not *having* to tell.” He reaches for her arm but she shakes it free. “I pass. Hey ... ” He stops following her and she stops by the door. “Stealth ... Just like those reconnaissance planes that fly just below radar zone or something and they can’t be detected.” Hands shoved deep inside his pockets. “I didn’t have any reason to tell you.” He swallows hard. “Not ... before, I didn’t.” He opens his arms wide. “I pass, Christen. I pass! That’s my fucking reward. No, not a reward! It’s my right, my ... my compensation for having been born wrapped up inside the wrong envelope! Hey! Look at me. I’ve always been a man in here and in there!” He raps his knuckles against his head and hits fist against heart before grabbing at his crotch. “The only place I haven’t been a male ... ever, not for real ... is here!” His tone is bitter. “Only fucken *there!* So the good news, Christen, is ... I don’t need any fucken condoms and neither do you!”

“You let me think you were a guy and there I was thinking you and me, we might actually have something going—”

“Christen, I’ve never *lied* to you. I never told you I was a man. Didn’t need to. You took one look at me and you *knew* I was a male. Just as clear as I knew you’re a woman, and you and me, we do have someth—”

“Oh sure!” Christen pushes him back with the palm of her hand. “Look ... I can’t do this. Not anymore. I need to ... I need to go. No! Don’t you come nea— I ... I’ll see myself out.”

“Oh right!” Morgan sneers. “So the mighty DS Jensen doesn’t have the balls to sit and talk this through, huh? Or is it that you’re afraid the freak’s gonna smear himself all over yo—”

“Listen, you!” Christen bites back. “You’re fucking right I don’t have balls. I’m a woman, Morgan! Said so yourself. Me, I don’t need balls!”

“I know.”

“You fuckin’ know what?”

“I know you’re a woman.”

“Oh yeah? You know for sure, huh? Like I knew for sure about you?”

“Yes, I know for sure.” Shoulders tight, Morgan wills his voice to be gentle and not crack. “That’s why I’ve just outed myself. To you. You’re a woman and I’m a—”

Hands splayed in front of her, Christen is maxed out. “Morgan, please, don’t.” Fingers around the doorknob, she hesitates. “What about Jo?”

“What about her?”

“Does she know?”

He shakes his head. Her question is exasperating. She really doesn’t get that there’s nothing *to tell* Jo. “What’s there for her to know that she doesn’t already know about me? She and I go back a long way, remember? I’m her buddy from Fairfield!” He taps his chest. “I’m Morgan. I’m twenty-three. Engineering’s my thing. I’m the quiet dude, the rock-climbing dude. She knows about my music, she knows about my work. She likes me, I like her.” He places middle finger over index. “We’re tight. That’s it. *That’s all.*”

“That’s not all and you know it. She thinks she *knows* you.”

“She does.”

“Does *not!* You ... You’re the opposite of this thing people say, you know; the What-you-see-is-what-you-get thing?” Palomino-mane swishing around her cheeks and brushing her collarbone, Christen is struggling to contain the sudden shock-news that the man she’s been burning to feel on her, in her, for the past weeks, is not only *not* a man, but a freak—a freak, not for her, not yet, not quite, but she hasn’t lived the best part of thirty-six years to not be aware of societal labels applied to people like him. “You’re the total opposite of that. Get real!”

She could have fallen in love with Morgan, Jarryd's sister. Morgan, female, would have been OK. In fact, for Christen, whose first same-sex love entanglement with Maddy had left her tender but seriously hungry for more, Morgan as a lesbian lover, would have been very fine.

Loving Morgan as a woman would have been a totally logical and well-timed progression on the continuum of self-discovery in a sensual context, exactly what Christen needed. But, though she had felt prepared to love Morgan deeply as a male, she is too unprepared to embrace the business of exploring the third gender, not only with her mind, but with her heart, with her senses—with her body.

The reality of Morgan being neither-nor is glaringly harsh, glaringly ... mutilated in her mind. Raw, as if on a slab, trapped under a white light. So weird, so unknown that words fly past too fast, not heeding her.

"Jo ... she only knows a passer, a fake. You've conned her like you've conned me. Like you've conned everyone in between. I'd say, she, at least, deserves better. Because she thinks you're a friend she can trust. For Jo, there's only two people that matter in her life, Maddy and you."

The phone snaps Morgan out of the dream that had him stretched thin, opaque and high on adrenalin. He thrashes against the mattress to reach the receiver, to stop its screeching.

"Morry! Hey, dude! Wake up. It's me."

"Jar?" Morgan runs a hand through his hair and rubs his eyes. "It's fucken' ... like what ... the middle of the night!"

"Mor. This is serious."

Eyes still closed in a bid to hold on to sleep but ditch the nightmare, Morgan rubs his chest, warm and smooth under the sheet.

"Morgan! Sit up and listen. It's about Dad."

"Why you calling me, like in the middle of the fucken' night to talk to me about—"

"Dad ... He's ... he's ... "

Morgan sits up. He grips the phone against his ear. "Jar? You there? Dad ... he's what? What's happened to Dad? Jar?" His heart thuds hard in his throat.

“Look, Morry, I don’t know how to say this ... ” Morgan hears his brother’s whimper. “Dad’s dead. Mor? Buddy? You’re still with me?”

Morgan swings his legs over the side of the bed. “Dad? ... *Dead?*” He rubs his neck.

“Mum called. It happened an hour ago in the hospi—”

“Dad’s ... *Dead?* From what? Jarryd?”

Jarryd sniffs. “Morgan, breathe!” he urges.

Morgan turns on the light but keeps his eyes tightly screwed shut against it. “I am fucking breathing but like, Dad ... he’s dead? You sure?” Maybe it’s not Jarryd’s real voice telling him these things. Maybe he’s still dreaming.

“Morgan, please! Don’t go goofy on me. It’s like I said. Mum called a while ago—”

Morgan opens his eyes. Phone tucked under his cheek, he steps into his shorts. “I heard you the first time. You’re saying Dad’s ... dead, and Mum, she won’t call me?”

“Hey ... Mor, you gotta help me here,” Jarryd insists. “She’s not gonna call you. You know how she feel—”

“Oh yeah, I know how she feels about me. So ... what happened? To Dad.”

“It’s like, his heart just gave up. Not enough muscle left after, you know, after the two MIs he’s already had.”

Dan Maddock had been stacking crates of milk in the cold room of the corner shop which the family had bought when they had moved to Hobart from the hills of Tullah, in the Cradle Mountain, when a tremor erupting from the centre of his chest had gripped him, trapping his breath.

As the blood clot began restricting the blood supply to his heart, the muscles of his heart began a slow death of their own. He no longer felt the dull pain in his right arm, but he heard the chime attached to the shop door. Air hungry, Dan dropped down on one of the crates he had yet to shift inside the cold room and squeezed his eyes tight. Someone’s in the store, he thought. Shouldn’t be left there on their own. He had to watch the till. He had to be of assistance to ... He had to—

Dan didn’t have time to act on whatever sense of duty had made him push himself up. He collapsed two steps clear of the stock

room. The person who had entered the shop was not a customer but Reg-the-bread-man who had stopped by to deliver Dan's order of muffins, bagels, Lavash and Turkish bread. He was not on familiar terms with the man who ran the Harrington Street corner store, but one look at him had Reg punching 000 on his phone pad.

Morgan's brain buzzes but doesn't grip. Jarryd persists in his ear. "... hospital and ... funeral ... autopsy ... Mor? You still there?"

"So ... *Mum*," Morgan croaks. "How's she taking it?"

"She's taking it like she takes everything that's contrary."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning ... " Jarryd's voice hesitates on the edge of yet another chasm. "Oh, look ... " he says, lamely, "I don't know."

What Jarryd did know was that Mary had announced their father's passing in the same tone—cold and unyielding—with which she had announced to *him*, a few months earlier, that his sister would no longer be welcome in the family home. 'And nothing that your father cares to say about this will make a skerrick of difference! Enough is enough!'

"So, how you gonna play it, Mor? With Mum, I mean ... "

Before Mary had made it clear that she would be leaving it to Jarryd to inform his sister of their father's passing, he had suggested that maybe she should really make the effort and call him herself. '*Him?*' she had repeated, piling more ice on those three letters than had sealed the winter pond back in Tullah.

Jarryd knew this was clearly not the moment to expound on the issue of Morgan's gender malaise, but he reminded his mother that his chest operation had clinched the deal not just for Morgan, himself, but for all of them.

"She's imagined herself as a boy since she was ... since as far back as I can remember, Mum. And ... well ... It's like, now that Dad's not here anymore ... It's up to you and me to give him what support—"

"Your father was always too weak with her, Jarryd." Mary's tone had been brittle in his ear. "And I maintain that if he hadn't indulged her in her nonsense, she would've straightened herself out a long time ago. That goes for you, too, Jarryd Maddock." Too strung-out to argue further, Jarryd had been about to reply conciliatorily when his mother spoke again. "And while we're on that topic, Jarryd, I'm

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asking you to be very clear with your sister when you have her on the phone. Do tell her that *unless* she plans to attend the funeral as the young woman that she is, as her father's only *daughter*, tell her ... You tell her that I shan't have her by our side, not when we honour your father's passing. Not in front of all the people who will come to pay him their final respects."

Morgan

Morgan had hung up without knowing how to answer his brother's question about how he was going to 'play it' with their mother on the day of their father's funeral. How could he possibly think, let alone rationally, while his father's gentle eyes, his understanding pats on the back when Morgan had to head back to the house to 'help mother prepare dinner' ... How could he think about how to 'play it' when memories and emotions swam behind his eyes in an oozy kaleidoscope of grief?

When Morgan heard his mother's words passed on through his brother's voice he almost laughed one of his rare belly laughs. He would have laughed if tears hadn't picked that particular moment to tackle his throat, brim and overflow. "She's got to *be* a bitter and *twisted* bitch, Jar. There's no way Dad, of all people, would lay *that* on me. Not *alive*. Not fucken dead *either*." His voice broke and cracked until his throat became too watery to produce more than strangled whimpers. "*You ... know that. How ... can she ...*"

"I'm not!" The answer, that hadn't come to Morgan in time to reply to Jarryd, manifested itself shortly after. "I'm not going to play 'it' out with her. I'm not going. Full stop," he muttered.

Once crystallized, the decision flipped and flopped in his mind like the trout his father used to catch. Like the trout Jarryd would remove from his father's hook and toss in a bucket of water.

Morgan was not going to 'play it' at all. He was not going to shave his pen-thin goatee. He was not going to attempt shaping what curls he still had into a feminine sweep of any sort, not even a dyke one. He was not going to wear a padded bra, any more than he was going to wear either skirt or dress, not any more than he was going to squeeze his feet into any sort of feminine footwear, not that he had ever worn any. Already in Year 3, in Miss Stiple's class, her sneakers were unisex. More importantly, Morgan knew that he wasn't about to pretend that his father's love and tacit understanding had been mere dandelions in the breeze — sweet whenever they sprout, innocuously absent whenever they don't.

And see how well our Morgan scrubs up? Like a real young lady when she puts her mind to it. If Dan had tried to shake her out of

her foolish nonsense ... all that self-mutilation business would've been avoided.

Inasmuch as going as himself, as a transman, would be the only way he'd ever go, Morgan reluctantly understood that he didn't have in him what it'd take to impose his issues on his mother. Not on the day she farewelled her husband. Not in front of her relatives. Not in front of her friends. Not even if she were alone. Not anymore. Not now.

Squatting in front of a double row of parts aligned close to, but not touching, wires and coils. Close to, but not touching a selection of epoxy tubes. Close to, but not touching instruments that seem extracted out of a dentist's kit, Morgan peers again at the second plan sheet.

Sustained concentration is difficult and the headache makes it worse. "Two struts per wing," he mumbles to keep his mind focused. "The shorter ones nearer the leading edge. The longer struts further down the camber, closer to the trailing edge. That's not fucken rocket science."

Lately it seems, on the day that precedes the next T injection, nothing is simple, nothing falls into place except a slow irritation that simmers like water under boil.

The phone rings. It resonates against his eardrums but it doesn't disturb his thoughts, so it stops ringing. It has stopped ringing a few times already, but like a child in need of attention, it keeps trying, hoping to get a rise out of Morgan, but not too loudly, not relentlessly.

In the years that had ushered in her transition, Morgan had fixated on the removal of her female reproductive organs though, unlike the reconstruction of her chest, a hysterectomy, at his age, would be mostly symbolic since the testosterone had already made menstruation a pain of the past. Beyond its raw symbolism, though, that operation would rid her of the primeval fear that, for years, has sat at her heels like a golem. Years after the event, Morgan had come to reconsider her 'rape potential by Kurt'—the delayed spark of that fear—and doubt total impregnability while he still had ovaries.

Back in those days, Morgan had wanted to be absolutely sure that, no matter where sexual exploration might take her on the con-

tinuum, she would never find herself in the position of Pope John VIII, the surprise character in a video she had come across quite accidentally.

Imagine the real story of a female scholar who, after years of passing as a man—the only way back in 850 A.D. for her to gain access to the deeper node of theology—finds herself propelled upward, faster than a helium balloon, to fill the still warm slippers of the recently defunct pope. Cool! Morgan had thought. A fair reward for years of scholarly devotion. Not like all the religious women of our time who can, at best, only aspire to a second-class sort of ersatz priesthood. Except that some months later, Pope Joan/John had to admit, if only to herself, that she was pregnant—not, unfortunately, as the result of another Immaculate Conception, but from a common variety sex romp with a knight in the Papal escort, her escort.

Totally mesmerised by the horror of the ordeal, Morgan had watched on as the stealthy Pope, burdened by the weight of his multi-layered, richly brocaded vestments, miscarried during a laborious and lengthy procession under the midday sun. Blood soaking between the legs, exposed right there and then, in full view of a freaked-out mob of worshippers, she was trampled to death—the devil's pawn.

Night after night, haunted by the possibility of an undesired pregnancy growing inside her male body, Morgan would wake up drenched in sweat, trapped in a shroud of bed sheets. Imagine her relief when the Melbourne endocrinologist explained that within a few weeks of the testosterone therapy, along with subtle voice changes, some body hair sprouting where none had ever sprouted before, her clitoris growing, perhaps, by a couple of centimetres, the menstrual flow would diminish to stop altogether—thus repairing at least one of the major mistakes Nature had made with the template of her body while still in utero.

“Yeegah! Bring it on, Baby, bring it on!” she had exclaimed, fist pumping.

Toothpick-thin strut between clumsy fingers, head whirring away, heart full of memories stirred by grief symptomatic of broken attachments, all of Morgan is immersed in a raw resentment that's making him dizzy. Almost boxed in by the various elements needed to complete a large model aeroplane from scratch, he peers again at the plan sheet.

Before Robert, the slab polisher, had exposed him to the rest of the crew, and no doubt to everyone on the site, Morgan had been banking on fast cash rolling in from his work as driver of a concrete mixing truck. That cash was already earmarked to buy him, not only the last term that would see him awarded a Bachelor of Engineering, but also a much awaited hysterectomy—one that could only be prescribed by one of the doctors affiliated to the minuscule Melbourne Transgender Support group. No others would book him in for a hysterectomy as, in their eyes, as self-appointed custodians of the human race when it comes to female reproductive organs, Morgan is, above all, a healthy female in the prime of her child bearing years. A female they have to protect even against herself.

Fingers hesitant, Morgan struggles to keep in place the last of the double wing struts.

“Oh, for sure,” his father’s voice says from inside his head, “there’s plenty decent kits around that don’t require much building if all you want is to fly a bird.” Tall frame bent over the small parts he handles as nimbly as an elf on Santa’s squad, Dan is at the kitchen table of their Hobart house. “If you’re just itchin’ to fly something, pre-made’s the way to go. Easy to make, no pain when it crashes. But ... that’s too simple, isn’t it?” Eyebrows knitted, work-strong hands gentle and precise, Dan is carefully aligning the two halves of a cowl. “On the other hand, if you’re so worried about crashing your bird that you only take it on short go-arounds, you’d just better stick to balsa toys and keep them under glass, like in a display cabinet.”

Morgan grips again the tiny strut, wipes it free of the first pin-head of glue to apply a fresh one with the tip of a dental pick.

“What you love the most is what you take the most pains to shape,” Dan continues as young Morgan, attentive assistant, hands him the roll of masking tape. “Don’t you ever forget that notion, Mor, ‘cause it’s a life thing, that.” Dan’s warm brown eyes briefly search his daughter’s before returning to the strip of tape stuck to his index finger. “You love it ‘cause you’ve put so much of yourself in the forming of it. And the reward is ... I guess it’d be knowing it’s you what’s put shape and life into it. So ... you want it to soar and it does.” Two drops of CA gel on the inside seam. “You want to be proud of it and you are. And each time it glides and hovers, it’s the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen. A speck off the sun. A free spirit, graceful and purposeful.” A drop of epoxy. Morgan holds out the wipe-rag her father needs to

keep his fingertips from sticking. Dan applies a pre-cut strip of one and a half inch fibreglass tape over the joint. "But you can't keep it there, high up against the deep blue sky. Not forever. No one can. So there comes a time when your beautiful bird comes crashing down. Sometimes you can fix it, sometimes it gets pulverised." Dan puts the callipers down. "When that happens, the pain is real, Mor. It is. I won't tell you otherwise. And you feel sick, a bit, 'cause it's almost like you've waited all along for it to come down. As if, it's because you didn't trust hard enough in it that it crashed ... Something like that."

Squatting above the second plan, Morgan swipes wrist under nose and swallows hard. He doesn't want to cry anymore. He just wants this one to be the best fucking aeroplane he's ever built, not that he's ever built any without his father's guidance. Dan *is* the plane builder.

While Jarryd was experimenting with girls, and with computer games of full-breasted-narrow-waisted cybergirls, Morgan was helping her father build perfectly crafted model aeroplanes spanning a couple of metres from wingtip to wingtip, some even greater.

Then, out in the paddock, side by side, fingers light on the yoke, father and daughter would decide the best level of attack and make their joint creation bank, soar and glide on airstreams. Watching each plane's majestic sweep against the clean sky of Hobart used to fill Morgan's heart with joy and hope for something still obscure and, though she didn't know what it was, a sense of purpose. Dan had been her flight instructor since she had turned fourteen.

Well after his daughter had unwrapped the last of her fourteenth birthday gifts, well after the last pictures had been taken and the party was over, Dan had announced in the grandiose, self-important booming tone of a ringmaster, "And here it is, ladies and gentlemen—Oh, dear me, my apologies; Ladies and Jarryd, let me introduce to you the Spirit of St Loo."

From behind his back, red bow tied through the rudder, Dan had brought forward a resplendent model of the Spirit of St Louis.

"Happy birthday from Dad," he said, as he bent down to kiss his daughter on her forehead.

Morgan holds the strut in place with the ball of his thumb and forces himself to count to thirty, breathing in and out, gently connecting the breaths. After his pre-dawn conversation with Jarryd, he had thrown

on some clothes and walked into the dying night. By the time the sky had faded, he found himself in an unfamiliar part of town, but kept walking.

He stopped in front of a store that advertised a wide range of model aeroplanes. Though he wasn't cold, he was shivering. He was hungry but the thought of food made him gag. His watch told him the shop wouldn't open for quite a long while yet, so he sat on the sidewalk, back braced by the shop façade and, like the dog left to wait for its master, Morgan waited.

Actually, Morgan didn't really wait, as waiting implies a purpose, an action, however passive. It's more like he just sat, propped against the façade, until the pale streak of dawn became blue in morning light. And he sat some more, thoughts miles away from his body—a puppet discarded on the sidewalk—knees tucked under chin, forearms linked tightly just below his kneecaps, a faded 4 Skin T-shirt loose over his torso, denim on his legs, big Getta Grips boots on his feet—a curly-haired ventriloquist's puppet left there as an offering for something unspecified, until sight returned to the brown eyes, until blood resumed pumping through veins, arteries, capillaries and through a heart healthy, yet bruised and broken; the heart of a young man, aching like that of a child, disoriented and alone.

Wishing Morgan were by his side, just for him, for support, for comfort, in spite of their mother, Jarryd shifted on the hard pew. In spite of? He frowned. Or to spite her? He glanced at Mary's profile, bent towards the hymn book. How relieved is she now that she knows that Morgan's not around? he wondered. Elbow against elbow, thigh against thigh with his mother, elbow against elbow, thigh against thigh with Uncle James on the other side, Jarryd couldn't tell what, if anything, his mother was feeling. He simply couldn't. Has she even *looked* for Morry? Heat had been slowly building up inside his chest, a heat easily attributed to the irrevocable absence of a father he still needed, but there was another sadness, one that he could feel swirling around nodes of anger and resentment, one that stoked the thumping of his heart and the tightness in his throat.

Only two, but deep-thrashing, wings have ever disturbed his mother's usual mill-pond-calm temperament—her life as a dependent

female and Morgan's indisputable penchant for all that is male except, in a sexual context, for the males themselves. While the oppressive organ strains of Mozart's Requiem soared in the silence of the church, the more Jarryd ached for his father, the more he resented his mother. *She* did absolutely nothing about finding any sort of freedom for herself, he remembered, and she totally broke away from Morry. And here she is, he scoffed privately, the calm widow, the pan-faced mother of a daughter who's as good as dead. That's as far as she's concerned. As good as, isn't it, if she doesn't ever want to see Morgan or talk to her, not even on a day like today. Oh, Dad, Jarryd almost moaned, the pressure building up inside his chest. You'd put a stop to that, I know you would. You'd never have let her do that to Morry.

Mary Maddock, ramrod straight, acknowledged the gentle pats Uncle James left on the hands kept flat over her hymn book. She acknowledged the words whispered close to her ear by whoever it was in the row in front, someone who, like many assembled at St Andrews to farewell his father, Jarryd didn't recognise anymore. Next stop the cemetery. What? he wished he had the courage to ask his mother, you're gonna bury her alongside Dad and feel, like, all righteous about it?

Heads low, relatives and friends took the Requiem as their cue to file out through the central aisle. While some stopped long enough to hug, first the mother, then the son, and others simply nodded as they walked past, Jarryd thought about standing on the pew and shouting, "Hel-low, dear friends and relatives of the Maddock family!" He projected an image of himself standing high above the congregation, the picture of the bereft son of Dan Maddock, blond hair dishevelled though his navy-blue suit was immaculate. "As Father Jones stated," his voice would have soared under the vaulted ceilings of the church, "Dan Maddock is survived by his two children, Jarryd and Morgan. I am Jarryd. Is anyone here even *ah-ware* of Morgan's absence?"

Instead, eyes closed, he sat back on the pew and let the organ's voluminous sound fill his chest cavity. He breathed it in, inviting it to fill up his brain, willing it to amplify under his skull and push out his thoughts. No differently from Morgan, Jarryd didn't have it in him to confront his mother, at least not today.

Only the night before, the last time he had spoken to him over the phone, Morgan had been clear about not attending their father's funeral.

“Jar, little bro ... I’ll be there in thoughts but Dad, he’ll just know it’s me, Morgan, talking to him. Me, no matter where I am, no matter what I wear. He’s my father, Jar, he’ll recognise me, no matter how I look.” Morgan had paused that afternoon as Jarryd was preparing to catch the 5.10 Blue to Hobart, Tasmania. “In fact,” he had added, “I don’t look much different now than when him and me, we used to fly those stupid model planes, right? Like side by side, like Bib and Bub. Remember?” Jarryd hears the chuckle. “No boobs then. No boobs now.” Both had kept silent for a brief moment until Morgan asked, “Jar, question time.”

“Question away.”

“If I say, Spirit of St Loo, does that mean anything to you?”

“Depends. What’s in it for me?” he teased.

“What’s in it is knowing that you’ll be confirming something really important. You on the buzzer?”

“I’m on the buzzer. BUZZZZ! The Spirit of St Loo is that yellow plane Dad gave you.” His tone is that of an eager contestant on a quiz show. “The replica of the Spirit of St Louis. The first plane he’d ever made. That was for one of your birthdays.”

“Too easy! Little bro, you’ve just convinced me of something massive.”

“Cool it, dude! I’m not your *little* brother at all,” Jarryd admonished playfully. “Not only were you born my *little* sister ... That’s what Dad said when you came home from the hospital. ‘Jarryd, my boy,’ he said real formal, ‘let me introduce you to Morgan, your little sister.’ And then,” Jarryd grumbled, “he had to go and make it really painful by adding how me, being older and all that, like three years older, and being a boy, I’d always have to look after you. Hah! As if it’d be that simple!” Jarryd smiled as he continued his conversation through the mouthpiece. “So, Morry, no matter what, you’re still three years younger than me and there’s nothing you can do about *that*. So, don’t you go getting too big for your Rangers, right?”

Jarryd was the only one Morgan had absolved, very early on, from *systematically* referring to him in his preferred gender. After all, he had been there, by her side, pre- and post-op at the time of her chest reconstruction and it was he who, while she was still in her teens, had coached her in the science he called ‘Dude Ethics’; everything she needed to know to be safe while in stealth inside the ‘other’ camp. She owed him big time.

The greatest testimony to Jarryd's success as a coach in blurring had been the day Morgan had been recruited by Kurt of the S.H.A.R.P.s. She was fifteen, and Kurt, taking her for a lad, had invited her to join his crew. That tacit acceptance, that his sister was a boy, had been a turning point for Jarryd.

"And so ... Mor? You're going to tell me what that massive thing is? The one I've just convinced you of?"

"Jar, I'm not going to Hobart. You'll have to front up and deal on your own."

"I know." Jarryd let a moment go by. "I'd guessed that much. You're not coming for the service."

"Nah."

"So ... how are you going to play it ... I mean for Dad?"

"What I'll do, Jar, is say ... I'll just say goodbye my way. On my own. I'll do it my way and I'll do it right."

Toothpick jammed between his teeth, torso vertical, weight loosely balanced over feet, Morgan is once again studying the bluish-grey skin of the volcanic rock wall.

Moments earlier and a few metres up from the easy holds that pockmarked the first section of the slab, the strain on his arms had begun an insidious flow backwards to his chest and to his ribs. Morgan realised too late that he should have 'cured' his post-op chest muscles through some bench work, long before he embarked on this climb. However, the turn-around time between the news of his father's passing and Morgan's impulse to spend his father's body's last night on this earth, alone on a summit way above ground, symbolically closer to the heavens, had been less than a week. In any case, he had become so involved with the making of the model aeroplane and time-warped memories that Morgan had plumb forgotten this would be his first climb with a man's chest. He patted his shorts and had sighed in relief. The two painkillers, tucked in as an afterthought, to ward off what shards of pain still lurked between his ribs, were still there.

As it was, the combined pains that had ripped through him like an overripe pod exploding had unleashed thoughts scratched raw by the acrid smoke of fires he had failed to stamp down—the way Robert had exposed him like a slab of freakish meat—the fact that he

had yet to return to the site to put on hold, if he could, his contract as a casual labourer, resume work if he couldn't, or totally bail out on it if he wasn't ready to face the crew—the way Christen's eyes had travelled from the snapshot of him looking like a female, back to him, the male in front of her, whose maleness she had never thought to question but who had suddenly become a 'fake'—his mother's back turned to him, his mother's love turned off him.

Totally undermining his self-confidence, a creepy medley of What am I about—Who am I—Will anyone ever love me—More than for a fuck—What can I really give anyone—And now Dad's gone—had spun itself into such a thick rope of anxiety that it had threatened to wipe out the entire plan formed inside his head.

If he couldn't settle, focus, and relax into the climb, there was no way he'd be able to read the rock accurately. If he couldn't read the rock in the right sequence, *unless* he already had subconsciously decided to peel off the side of this puny five-pitch slab then, instead of a solo climb, he'd better head back to town and indulge in a solo piss-up.

"Oh right, like that'd really do the trick," he had muttered, molars clamped harder on the toothpick. "And what? When do I get to farewell Dad, huh? Before passing out or after?" He had looked at the back of his hands, all taped up against the bite of abrasive jams and nowhere to go. "Fucken sad case, that."

So, while he was not yet so high that he couldn't downclimb, Morgan found a sequence of moves that brought him back to the dirt-dry ground. The weeks of grace had expired. He needed his male chest to be functional. He needed it to be functional as the seat of male power on this climb, the christening one, the ceremonial one. Not next week. Not even tomorrow. Today. Now. Right now. And right now, too, he needed his ribs, the pain in them to just not be there.

"I've got to come good on this, right now ... or be a loser forever!" he had grumbled before sitting down at the base of the cliff. Spine straight, eyes closed, all alone in the silence, yellow Tiger Moth across his lap, struggling to control the flow of breath to his lungs, he popped one of the two pills down his throat and closed his eyes.

"Second attempt," he mutters. "Haul up that ass. Up and away!"

One rubber toe tucks into the crack. A twist of the ankle locks it in. Thumb clamped over fingertips, Morgan cranks the tiny hold, the

only one within his reach and, knees splayed wide on either side of the vertical fissure, he lifts his weight up from his feet, with only a narrow fingerhold to grip.

He looks up.

“Piece of cake,” he chirps, though the ten-metre crack ends right under a bulge that buttons it up as good as a rivet at the end of a zipper. Traverse ahead!

Squinting at the rock, toothpick swishing from side to side, Morgan plots another prelim sequence of the moves that will have him bypass the protrusion ahead. It’s not that the bulge is one he’d normally choose to sidestep, but he is uncomfortably aware of the pack on his back, however light. He’s like a brumby thrown by the unfamiliar feel of a riding blanket. The bubblewrap pouch strapped to his bare back, clinging-hot to his skin, makes him uncertain about his centre of gravity. Totally psychological. Has to be, he reminds himself.

Only the day before, he had tested the climbability of his makeshift pouch. He had tested it on some of the less travelled urban climbs of the Kangaroo Point cliffs, and the roughly sewn but carefully rigged cotton straps he had put together for the occasion of this six-hundred-metre climb had not hampered his movements in the least.

“Should’ve worn a T-shirt,” he mumbles again. Feels weird, stuck to me like Glad-wrap.

Morgan has never climbed unroped and, up to the moment the idea had crystallized while on the phone with Jarryd, he would have said that it’d be something only a very lame brain, a *tourist*, would ever attempt. “Take a fool somewhere, and where there’s a potential for danger, he’ll be sure to find it,” he often said about gumbies and non-climbers attempting moves way beyond their *inexperience*, and then suing governments for compensation the moment they peel off and find themselves in a wheelchair.

Morgan is a trad climber who, like all trad climbers, uses only ropes and belays to enhance the rock protection Mother Nature, herself, has hammered into the cliff face, the theory being that once the rope is anchored and bombproof, peeling off only means freefalling as far as the previous anchor. A stomach-lurching buzz, hard on knees and elbows, not fatal.

Having just cleared the line of spindly treetops, he continues up the crack, half a metre at a time. Kept cool by the breeze that breathes

softly on his neck and shoulders but cannot reach to refresh the broader area of his back, right toe jammed, left arm stretched, hand feeling blind the cool inside of the fissure before camming it with a fist jam, he doesn't look down. Only halfway up the volcanic plug, but already several hundred metres up, a second of inattention would prove hazardous to his health.

Left toe wedged in, ankle twisted for torque, right hand reaching for the next protection, chin, chest and knees grazing the grainy wall, he has to reach the flare to the left of the bulge in a sequence relative to what available protection he can see. It looks thin but he has to go for it.

Loose stuff crumbles under his fingers. Slow. Methodical. Deliberate, he reminds himself. The usual, but real important now.

Why?

Why? So short a word, a word of such insignificance that without the anchor of the question mark, as light as candy wrapper, it would have blown away!

Why is falling a bad idea? his mind demands to know.

Heart already beating a different rhythm, Morgan presses his forehead against the blue-grey trachyte face. His chest muscles are screaming. The pain in his ribs is like a sunburst. No, the stitches won't rip open, that much he knows. No, the ribs won't actually break. It's pain, only pain, he chants inside his head. Pain is only pain.

Sweaty palms are as much use to a climber as flippers, but Morgan hadn't planned on needing chalk, just like he hadn't planned on pondering why free falling might not necessarily be a bad idea. "No. Not now," he mutters, clamping harder on his toothpick.

Why not? The question is weightier now that it's in the company of a second word.

"Why not?" he repeats out loud, fingers stacked inside a shallow pocket. "What's at the end of it all, huh, whether I go up or down? Who gives a fuck?" he mutters, bolstering the first question with two others. "Why the effort?" Silence rings in his ears and he doesn't hear the answer, so he wants to think about his father because it's for him that he's climbing this cliff in the first place. Instead, he thinks of Christen.

He wants to focus on the reason behind the climb, the homage he wants to pay his father, but between his forehead and the sharp spine of the crack, shiny blond hair flutters around Christen's

face. He doesn't hear her words. He hasn't had time to read them on her lips. Instead, he remembers the ones she shouted at him. "You've conned Jo like you've conned me!" He doesn't hear the tone, but he remembers the turn of her mouth, the crimping of her eyes that clearly implied that, to her, he was so low, lower than a rat in the sewer. Morgan struggles to remember why the yellow toy plane is bubblewrapped against his back, but he can't.

He tries to remember why keeping his torso vertical and his weight over his feet is vitally important as he hangs, the inside edge of one sole smeared against the volcanic slab, the other toe edging a tiny foothold. It's only because the late afternoon breeze is cooling the back of his neck that he remembers something else he wouldn't have summoned on his own—the other breeze, the one he had felt on his exposed hips, on his thighs, that day, the day of Jim's birthday.

"Gotta commit." The voice comes from inside him.

A climber of some experience, Morgan is aware that he's already been static for too long. Lactic acid and muscles kept taut don't mix well with anxious introspection. It will probably start in his right foot and travel upwards to his thigh. The onset of the shakes, the dreaded Elvis leg, will override any protracted attempt at coming to grips with the question Why ... Why anything. Loss of control in a limb will decide for him.

Tentatively, he shifts his face away from the rock. Its imprint is etched in his forehead like a tribal seal. Hips still, he slowly flexes his shoulders to re-establish a connection back to his hands. Before expanding his jam to make it fit more tightly inside the hold, he rubs what finger pads he can feel against the roughness before gingerly checking the weight distribution over his feet.

"It's a walk up."

The frayed toothpick pitches downward before settling between Morgan's lips while he squeezes his eyes shut and keeps them screwed shut for the space of a second. The sudden darkness, the pressure against his eyeballs, creates a gap in his thoughts through which the bile and adrenaline-laced loop floats away like the payload out of a space shuttle.

"No way but up, dude!"

Feeling somewhat lighter, he carefully inflates his lungs. Slowly, he focuses on the centre of power inside his chest and imagines his breath filling every fibre, every muscle around his ribcage.

Body balanced, arms pumped and calves burning, he moves beyond the bulge with the gait of a sun-dazed gekko.

It is cool inside the flare. It smells musty. The two-sided tube is narrow but Morgan just fits inside the hollow formation. Back braced against one wall, knees flexed, most of his weight taken by the soles of his boots, sticking flat against the opposite wall, he's very glad he didn't have to go at it off-width.

Before entering the eroded space, he remembered to check both walls for the one that offered better traction. Once in, turning around would be just about impossible. Then he executes the transfer of the bubble wrapped pouch from his back to his chest, re-tying the knot against his lower back and, like a mother monkey with her young clinging to her front, Morgan is ready to resume his ascension to the top.

One foot on each wall, he pushes himself up, hands pressed flat behind him while the space allows him. Later, when the flare becomes narrower, he will switch to the ankle-crossed, ballerina-style toe-jam and his hands will feel blind for what protection the cliff might be secreting above his head.

Six hundred metres above the surrounding scrubland, the night breeze is much cooler on Morgan's skin. When in doubt, just leave it, is the one rule of thumb that most climbers try to follow in a bid to travel lightly. He doesn't have a backpack. He doesn't have anything with him, not a sleeping mat, not even a shirt. Nothing but five candles, a square of orange cheesecloth and a packet of jerky. His night on the cliff is not intended to be comfortable.

He reaches inside the pouch to retrieve the five tubular packets and the lighter he had packed at the bottom, before unfolding the lengths of padded plastic that have kept the yellow Tiger Moth well protected during the climb. With the few branches he's been able to find among the rocks, he erects a makeshift screen against the breeze.

Then, carefully, he rolls each candle out of its silk paper wrapping to place it next to the other. Five candles—one for each decade his father had spent on this earth. Five candles, as on his last birthday cake. As he prepares to light each one, Morgan summons a memory of his father linked to each ten-year slice of life.

Dan in his mid-thirties in his shorts and singlet, a utility belt slung low over his hips, saw in hand, he's building a tree house 'for the children'. That's how he had explained it to Mary, but only Jarryd had enough strength and overall coordination to climb the tree to get to the cubby house, much to Morgan's frustration. She was only five and by the time she had grown just that bit more to make it up the tree, Jarryd had already claimed sovereignty over the space and would not allow her in when he was there.

Dan in his forties. Just come home from work, his name tag is still pinned to his shirt. Dan Maddock, red letters. That's only in case some tourist, or outsider to The Range, should walk into the shop because everyone around and beyond knew, by name, the man who ran the only convenience store in the area. So here is Dan Maddock, barely home from work, applying a piece of red meat over his daughter's first black eye. Some kids at school had called her a dyke. She'd be graduating from junior high with a decent sized shiner.

Dan, the last time Morgan had seen him, some six months earlier.

"Dad," Morgan had said, "there's things, real serious things, I need to do to get my life in some sort of sync." She had wanted her father to be the first to know about her upcoming breast surgery.

"Oh? Is that right, Morry?" One eyebrow cocked in his familiar 'surprise me' mimic.

"Don't you 'Oh' me, Dad," Morgan had chided. "Just sit pretty and polite and listen."

"Isn't that the very thing your mother's been wanting you to do? For years? And she's still waiting."

"I know, but that's only 'cause I can do polite and silent but *not* pretty."

Coming from somewhere deep inside him, as did most of Dan Maddock's smiles, the smile he had for his daughter illuminated his face. "Don't you go on telling lies about *my* daughter," he had joked back, index finger in warning mode. "My Morgan, I'll have you know, she's as pretty as they come."

Morgan chuckled good-humouredly. "Only if you add, 'In her own way,' Dad. And Dad, actually, it's about the 'own way' thing that I need to talk to you."

"Mmmm?"

"Dad, look, you know I'm not like the other ... girls, right?"

"I know."

"So, you know how most everyone who doesn't know me thinks I'm a boy, right?"

"Hu-huh."

Morgan had rehearsed the exact words she was going to tell her father. She had chosen each one as carefully as the old Italian mamma chooses each of the tomatoes that will go in the pomodoro.

"Right. So ... Dad, what's going to happen is that on the 23rd of next month, I'm going to ... Uh, next time you see me ... " Morgan got bogged. She couldn't bring herself to tell her father that she couldn't stand having breasts anymore and that on the 23rd of the following month, she'd get rid of them forever.

"Hey, kiddo, I'm listening. You're not gonna drop out of engineering, now are you?"

Morgan looked at her father fuzzily. "Engineering? Uh ... no, Dad. That stays. In fact, I'm almost done with that. Only one term to go."

Dan Maddock had looked at his daughter thoughtfully. "Mor, tell me something," he broke in. "You don't like boys much do you?"

"Oh, I do, Dad. Boys are OK to hang with. Why you ask?"

"When's the last time you were out on a date?"

"A date ... as in ... "

"As in kissing, Morry. A date where you go out with a lad and what he wants to do most of all is find a way to kiss you and what *you* want to do most of all is let him kiss you. That's once he finally works out how to do it without looking like he's doing it. So ... Mor, when was the last time you kinda played the game with a lad?"

"I haven't."

"Not recently?"

"I haven't." She sprang off the starting blocks. "Look, Dad ... That's what I need to talk to you about—"

"So ... what's stopping you? Mor, look up a minute." Heart sinking, Morgan looked up. Her father's interruption, however brief, had killed her momentum. "I think I know what you want to tell me."

"You do?" she quipped.

"I'm pretty sure I do. You want to go first just in case I got it wrong?"

"No ... Dad ... it's OK. You first."

"Well, Mor, what I think is that boys don't matter much to you. And I think that you think that girls are more important than boys." Dan

had tapped one of her hands to make her look at him. "Morry ... have you ... Have you been ... Oh, the hell with it!" he had blurted, frustrated with his own coyness, "Mor, have you been intimate with a ... with someone who's not a boy?" His eyes were clear and earnest, but he leaned heavily back into the armchair.

Morgan nodded. She had been intimate with a girl, quite a few girls actually, but when it became obvious that Dan thought that her big news was that she was 'a homosexual,' Morgan had to bite the bullet.

"Yes I have but, no, Dad. I'm not a homosexual. I'm more like a ... " It was her turn to touch her father. "Dad, look ... you've seen it, I know you have. Like, I'm as much a boy as Jarryd?" She waited for a confirmation. When her father nodded, Morgan continued, "So ... that's because I think like a guy." Harnessed to the moment as to a gondola hurtling down the Tower of Terror, she had to close her eyes and surrender to greater forces. "I act like a guy but that's because ... Well, that's the thing, isn't it? When I'm with a woman, Dad, it's like ... I'm with her as a man." Silence inside Morgan's ears. No, not silence, not really, more like the sound of one's muffled breathing underwater.

First to return is the distant thrumming of a lawn mower. Then the clear chinking of plates in the kitchen. Rosella parrots chattering on a nearby tree.

Dan had opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again, before finally retorting, "But you can't. Morgan, you can't be with a woman like ... you said ... like a man." His eyebrows were knotted at an off angle. "That's not ... that's just not ... You're a girl, whether you like it or not." He had stood up. "Your brother, he's a boy. You're a girl. And both of you have different bits. Like Mum and me and—"

"Dad ... that's the thing. I'm not a lesbian, that's for sure. And the other thing I'm not is ... It's that I'm not a girl." She saw the look in his eyes, the look that said that for the first time in twenty-three years, Dan Maddock had finally thought his daughter mad, totally mad. "Dad, I've never been a girl." Unable to control her skid, Morgan continued. "Never been one. But ... you've known all along, you have, haven't you? Dad?"

By then, any one of the statues on Easter Island had more expression on their face than Dan had on his. His eyebrows no longer made weird accents on his forehead. His face was blank, totally void of any comprehension. If his daughter was not a homosexual, then

Dan Maddock had no idea what she was on about. Straw hat and shears in hand, he had walked out into the garden.

High on the rocky ledge, Morgan lights the third candle. Like three short clips, each moment plays back inside each candle's halo.

"I'm a transman, Dad." His eyes mist over. "That's what I wanted to tell you. I wanted to tell you before I told Mum. I'm a transman. I just thought you'd guessed." His throat is watery, but Morgan holds back the tears. "I'm sorry, Dad. I'm sorry I didn't make it back home, to see you ... after you found out from Jarryd. I should've ... Oh, Dad, I love you."

Matt or glossy, plucked from someone else's moments, pictures remembered from a photo album fill the two-decade gap that preceded Morgan's first memory of his father—Dan, a mere lad, strapping under the slouch hat of his Anzac uniform. Dan, a curly-haired toddler on a red tricycle. Dan, in the garden of the Tullah days, holding his brand new baby daughter close against his bare chest.

Five candles make a circle on the bright cloth rectangle and each cone-shaped flame bounces, eager and valiant, against the darkness.

High, very high above Morgan, the sky is dark. It is huge, too. Absolutely huge and absolutely flat. Morgan chuckles. He's just worked out why Columbus, in some old books, was said to have thought the world flat. Why would anyone think that a round earth would make sense under such a flat sky, huh?

Beaming at him from 2.5 million light-years away, Andromeda is only a small cloud but the Milky Way has such a bulge on it tonight that, watching it, Morgan thinks of a great boa constrictor made of lights and sparks and star dust, but he's not a navigator. He's not a star-gazer either. In fact, he doesn't often look up at all though, tonight, he does. Tonight is the overture, a very special movement, a unique moment in his life. He had had no choice but to make it all the way to the top of the cliff. Just so that he could be ready for dawn, the sole witness to his final farewell to Dan Maddock, aged fifty-two.

As far back as Morgan can remember, he's always had a fascination for the idyllic aspects of the Native American way of life—the turquoise, their weavings, their myths and the river villages, a fascination for all aspects of their lives, peaceful and romanticised. The

hostility of The People of the Panther towards the Algonquian people and even towards other Iroquois, acts of cruelty, promises not kept, the events at Little Big Horn, too, had her dismayed for days on end.

The legends that she had read, many, many years earlier, sometimes flat on the floorboards under her bed, when her mother had thought her asleep, the same ones that had shaped his intention to say goodbye to his father from a mountain top, each one, loose and disconnected from the other, connect once again with Morgan, this time high on a mountain top, exactly where he had to be at this particular hour of his life.

Indians, his memory whispers, have come from beneath the ground. They have come from the sunrise in the east. They have climbed to the light from the innards of the mountain. Me, too, I've climbed to the top, through the innards of the earth. To the top of this plug from the inside of the flare.

Some Indians, he remembers, were afraid of the dead but some hung up the dead in a place of honour to better watch over them. If I were an Indian, that's exactly what I'd want to do with you, Dad. Either that or spend my lifetime apologising to you for not having done it.

Thoughts swerve and split as he slips into the realm of dreams. Yes, if I'd been born a Zuni, if I lived in a tepee village in the River Valley, I would've had my time. My time of pain. My time of fearing the wolf's howling. My time of listening for the wolf's howl and seeking him out under the full moon. My time to release every one of my demons and shed all thoughts that had become obsolete encumbrances. Time to purify myself. Time to mourn. Time to grieve. I would've had a moment in which to be reborn and another in which to be celebrated. My time to shine and join the men. My rite of passage into manhood and beyond.

High, very high above Morgan, the sky is huge, absolutely huge. Naked, curled up like a giant foetus, he lies beneath it. Not spread-eagled waiting to be sacrificed to the mountain god. Neither prone nor supine in penance. Body pale in the moonlight, awaiting the defining touch of the Master Carver, he sleeps curled up in the shape of a C. The five candles lit for his sunset prayer flicker towards him but they are too weak to warm his skin, too feeble to smooth away the goose-bumps the night breeze keeps brushing over him.

Ghost images of his father swirl around images of his mother, bisecting images of his brother, framing ephemeral images of himself—little at times, not so little at others. Not little at all, not anymore. And around those images that are distended, discoloured and dislocated, other things, feeling things, pain things, sexual things and dark things spin and churn while Morgan sleeps, cheek resting on the inside of his forearm. Way up there, way up near the sky, Orion, the hunter, watches over him, curved seal of ivory over the bare ground.

Charisse was her name. She had been Morgan's lover, his lover during the one and only year Morgan thought he had to be a dyke. Charisse was soft and pale and slight. She wore gypsy skirts and doused herself in patchouli. She had just stepped out of a tattoo parlour when she connected with Morgan for the first time. She thought he was a boy and she had kept on walking. Morgan knew the girl with the shaved head was a girl so he followed her to the curb because he knew that the girl thought he was a boy and for once, Morgan didn't want to be a boy, because he knew that Charisse, a girl who graduated from his high school a couple of years earlier, didn't like boys much at all.

In fact, the rumour had it that Charisse was a dyke and Charisse didn't seem to mind the rumour. She'd occasionally humour the taunts with the flash of a middle finger, but a firm one, straight, hard and full of conviction. At that particular moment in her life, Morgan thought she wanted to be the girl that she was because what she wanted most of all was to touch Charisse's breasts and to slip a hand under the cherry-red, ankle-length skirt. Having a look at the girl's new tattoo would be a plus, later.

Charisse fell in love with Morgan because Morgan was strong, much stronger than she could ever be, though Morgan, too, was a girl. Morgan was tall, quite tall for a girl, but a girl nonetheless. When Charisse looked at Morgan, she loved the way that made her feel.

What she loved above all was how she felt when Morgan made love to her. Charisse was convinced that, in terms of lovemaking, she had the best of both worlds—the deep penetrating thrust that she'd already figured she needed but of the sort, she thought, only a male could deliver properly, and there had been that sort of gentle-

ness that Charisse had assumed only girls had in them to give. And there had been the fun.

It was only in terms of what she had always thought a given—mutual discovery through a reciprocal exchange—that Charisse ended up feeling short-changed and Morgan aggrieved.

Charisse could make love to Morgan, but she was not allowed to touch her breasts. Morgan didn't like her breasts touched. The warmth of Morgan's hands on hers felt so good, and her lips too, that Charisse couldn't understand why not and Morgan couldn't explain why it was so.

Charisse would say, "Morg, look, you like to feel me, yeah?" Morgan would nod. "You like my breasts, yeah? Nice and soft?" Morgan would nod again. "So, me touching your breasts, kissing them and ... well, it's OK, isn't it? They're a part of you—"

"They're not a part of me. Never've been!"

Charisse would frown again. "Of course they are. I can see them. They're right there—" Charisse would move her hand to touch and Morgan would jump backwards as if threatened with an electric prod. "Don't! Just don't! Just forget I have any ... any of them ... any breasts." Morgan would cross her arms over her chest, stubborn and defiant. "It's not even like they're so ... big or anything. I keep my shirt on, Char, and you don't know they're there. OK?"

"No, not OK. This is real silly, Morg. It feels so good—"

"Feels good to you, don't feel good to me." It wasn't anything Morgan could explain any differently. After all, she was only seventeen and Charisse was the first woman, the first person ever, Morgan had had sex with.

Months later, it was her genitals Morgan could no longer bear having touched. The monthly blood that leaked from there disgusted her. Her slash, that opening with its soft folds and slippery lips, disgusted her. Her clit disgusted her. In the place of this shrunken, little nob of nothing, Morgan knew there should've been a proper penis, one that got hard, one that fucked like a ram. One that commanded respect.

Because she didn't have that glorious dick to thrust into Charisse, to Morgan, making love meant that she *felt* she had to cover all options. It meant that she made love to Charisse as one might play a piano, deftly, bringing a satisfying sound out of every key. Morgan licked and nibbled, sucked and humped, fingered and rammed until

Charisse climaxed, panting under her, one hand, her left hand, always her left hand, clasped tight over Morgan's narrow hip, face buried against her lover's shoulder. Fine for Charisse, but for Morgan, when the visualisation of her cock rigid and pumping inside Charisse wasn't enough to bring her to orgasm, she'd have to masturbate, but not in front of her lover, never. Just as she knew, already back then, that she'd never let anyone touch her breasts, she also knew that no one would ever look at her ... *there*. Not *there*, not her deformed genitals, the perfectly formed genitalia of a genetic female.

"Look at my tattoo," Charisse said one day. "What do you see?"

Morgan had frowned suspiciously. "I've already seen it. I know what you're getting at."

"I know that you do, but tell me anyway. What do you see?"

"It's a flower, Char. It's an orchid."

"It's pink, it's a fucken orchid, and it has those amazing soft folds and that awesome little bit that's just like a clit. So what I see ... what I used to see when you let me lick you was something just like this tatt—"

"Fuck this, Char. This conversation's over."

The more Charisse pursued the matter, the more Morgan retreated into a sort of lone-wolf isolation until the day Charisse said, "You know what, babe? I reckon you're just like a guy now." Morgan had just brought her to a double orgasm. "Oh, yeah, sure, you can make me come," she sighed. "But you used to do it with a lot less ramming and humping." She moved from under Morgan. "Look, it's all pretty straightforward, Morg. If all I want is a cock jammed into me, I can always find one, you know? A real one. A purpose-built one." She sat up on the edge of the bed. "But, helloow! I'm a dyke." She pointed again at the tattoo, clean and luscious on her biceps. "And what that means is that I don't do males. What I want most of all, Morg, when I make love, is a chick who'll let me lick her and hold her and smell her. I want your cunt, Morg."

Charisse had finally decided not to yield to the usual post-coital meltdown though her body was craving it. That afternoon, she had her own agenda and not even the lingering heat that warmed the inside of her belly would dissuade her. Not this time.

Morgan peeled herself off her lover's body and was already pulling on the boxer shorts.

“What’s the point of me being with a girl, huh,” Charisse asked again, matter-of-factly, “if all you’re going to do is pin me against the mattress and hump away? Maybe you need a guy and be his butt plug.”

“I’m not a chick, so ... fuck you if all you want is to see my ... my ... cunt. I’m not a fucken girl. And I’m not into queers!”

Charisse had pushed off the bed. “Whatever!”

By the time she reached the bathroom, she had called off the relationship. No matter how good the rest of it felt, she couldn’t cope, not anymore, with Morgan’s stone-coldness even as he made her climax. It had begun to frighten her.

Morgan hadn’t been overly distraught by the breaking news. It’s OK, she thought. I’m not a lesbian anyway. That girly shit’s not for me. Too intense.

The three stars of Orion’s belt, three fishermen in a canoe, as an Aboriginal myth has cast them, are still there, holding their vigil high above Morgan’s sleeping body. If he opened his eyes, he’d see them blinking from way, way out there, but Morgan’s not stirring. She can’t stir because T-Rex’s hand is hard on her arm, his breath is hot on her ear made cold, very cold, by the night wind that’s been blowing around Hobart for the past couple of days. It’s always cold in Hobart, in winter. Very, very cold, because there’s nothing that stands between it, in Tasmania, and the Antarctic. Nothing at all, except for snow-blown penguins atop icebergs and slow-melting glaciers.

Morgan had been standing watch with the crew, waiting to jump the lame-dick racist who needed to be taught a lesson in social conscience. She hardly ever put the boot in herself, she’d only be a lookout and that was all right. Kurt and T-Rex, these guys understood the theory that said you could be a S.H.A.R.P. and still be a *total* pacifist.

“I’ll be in on everything as long as you’re cool about me not joining in the boot-party thing, ‘cause for me, it’s all simple, violence only breeds violence. There’s not a thing that’s *good* violence.”

“Cool,” they had said, “there’s plenty other jobs you can do with us and for the cause. So, dude, if you want to hang with us, we can all be bros, you know, like family only better.”

Months later, that night in the park, Morgan had intentionally spooked the mark because there was a girl with him who hadn’t been

spotted earlier and there was no way Morgan was going to stand by while Kurt and the others roughened her up, even a bit, as they worked over the boyfriend.

She had loped towards the couple, big in her big bomber jacket, feeling big in her big boots, looking mean with her shaved head. "Off you go, fuckwads!" she had called out. "Off our fucken turf, you mongers!"

The young male had taken off like a ball out of a cannon. Or, more to the point, he would have if he hadn't been hindered by the baggies he had to hike up with the one hand as he dragged his girlfriend with the other.

T-Rex had caught up with her. "Morg? You cunt!" he had snarled, "What's with the confusion, huh?"

Morgan had shrugged his hand off. "We've never done girls, T. That's all. No confusion."

T-Rex had slapped the palm of his hand hard against Morgan's chest bone but it was OK because her breasts were all bound up. Her chest was nice and hard under the braces, not soft like a girl's, it's just that she didn't want him to feel the binding. That's why she always wore more than one layer on top, even in summer. So, because she was family, T-Rex didn't punch her where the chest bone meets up with the collarbone, as he would have an outsider, and maybe Morgan should've been happy to leave it at that. Maybe she should've taken that as her cue to just back away. But she didn't. A young male doesn't back away from another, Jarryd had taught her that much.

"Not if he's got any balls at all, he doesn't."

The fact that *she* didn't have any balls, none at all, never had, never would, didn't phase her a bit. She had had to take a step backwards to balance against the shove, but she stood her ground.

"So whatta you gonna do about it, huh?" she had asked cockily. "You can always head them off at the pass. Before the gates. If you're that hot about it."

By then, Kurt had joined them. "What the fuck was *that* about?" He, too, wanted to know, but unlike T-Rex, Kurt didn't want to talk about it.

"A breach is a breach."

Once an action was decided, the gang knew that everyone who'd been in on the decision were relied on to play their part.

"We only abort," Kurt often reminded, "if the situation's looking greasy or if the cops have popped out of their hole."

Neither had been the case that night and though Morgan is asleep on a ledge high above the ground, as lightning fast as Jimmy Warhead, his Rock 'n' Roll wrestling hero, Kurt wheels her around, pulling her arms behind her back with the same move and, his body pressed hard against her back, he forces her forward until he's got her totally smeared against a tree trunk, and Morgan is afraid.

She knows all about males forcing themselves on girls, but rape is not her worst nightmare. Well, it is one of her worst nightmares, it's just that it's not the only one that, at times, has her waking up in a cold sweat. Having her stealth blown, being exposed as a girl, *that* is just as frightening to Morgan as having a guy split her open. Getting pregnant from that, that's real scary, too.

She doesn't call for help, guys don't do that, but she twists her neck against the tree trunk in the hope of catching T-Rex. If anyone's likely to come between Kurt and her, it'll only be T, the others won't dare interfere, she's been hanging around the crew long enough to know that. She can't see him. She can't see anything except the open space to the right of her shoulder and there isn't anyone in that space.

She can't move her neck to check to the left because her torso is in a vice between the scaly trunk and the side of Kurt's chest. No room to even snap her head back against his nose. His mouth near her ear, he begins rubbing himself against her buttocks.

"That," he growls, "will teach you the fucken lesson you need to learn, dude. That's if you're figuring on keeping that Trojan patch, our patch, on your fucken back."

She feels him bend his knees behind her. With a quick movement of the hand and nimble fingers, Kurt releases his penis from his combat trousers. Morgan's free arm strikes out but he's quick to force it back against her side. His fists manacle both her wrists.

Unguided, his rod slithers down, then hesitates, up and across the small of her back, over her buttocks. Morgan stiffens, flattening herself harder against the tree. So hard that her hips already feel bruised under her belt. She can't reach backwards, not with both arms pinned. Kicking with her heels, trying to find one of his feet, just so she can stomp on it seems like a really lame idea. He wouldn't feel a thing, not through his steel capped Docs, he wouldn't. What she figures is that, as long as she can stay pressed against that tree, Kurt

won't get at her belt buckle and if he can't get at her buckle, he'll never find out she's a girl.

What Kurt had in mind was, in fact, a different kind of game altogether. Much older than Morgan, much older than T-Rex, he'd already had his years in the Army, and there he'd observed firsthand how a bit of bastardising always made a man as compliant as a first grader with his favourite teacher. But, better than shoving anyone's head inside a toilet bowl, better than tying them up before pissing on them, much, much more efficient than anything else was The Splat.

Now, of course, he had seen some of the rougher dudes in the platoon do it for real, like getting real carried away and do the barebacking shit, but he'd be damned if he was going to be anyone's butt plug. Besides, just to know that a guy's rubbed himself all over your butt and that you've been splat with his cum, and that you did zilch to protect yourself, and that everyone knows you've been done, even the ones who didn't witness anything, all that's enough to break much better men than this skinny-assed punk.

Kurt presses his belly harder against Morgan's back as he tightens and releases his buttocks just enough to bounce himself against her. Slowly, lazily at first, letting the tension build up some more but real slow. Faster, but still all sweet and subtle. Nothing much to see at all, not even when he thrusts, once, much harder against her buttocks. Nothing to hear, not until he groans, chin hard against the back of her head.

He lets go of her arms and steps back to adjust himself and close his fly. Only then does Morgan know that he's done with her. What Kurt thinks is that this young dude will think twice before over-riding solo any crew decision.

"Not anywhere, not anyhow," as he warns the recruits.

What fifteen-year-old Morgan thinks is that she'll have to walk all the way home with a guy's white splat drying on the back of her jeans. Nothing more.

High above the rocky ledge, high above Morgan, the new dawn has already begun bleaching the sky. Like a shawl made of lesser grade diamanté, sparkle dulled by the night's excessive display, it is no match for the morning light. Tired, most of the stars have already put themselves on standby until the next performance.

"Nothing more!" Christen shouts. "A fake, Morgan! Nothing more than a fake." Morgan stirs. He rolls on to his back and winces.

“Shit! That’s fucken *not* comfortable,” he mumbles thickly, eyes still closed.

He’s cold. He’s very cold. He rubs his chest. Body as stiff as a rusty spike, he sits up and rubs his eyes. Not a good idea that, sleeping out here, butt naked. He scrambles on all fours to the shelter of a nearby boulder. Before sitting down, back against the rock, he clears away with the toes of his boots all that is loose.

He yawns. He frowns. The paleness of the sky is disappointing. Where are the colours? I need colours. This is the one morning when dawn, Dad’s dawn, needs to have colours. Loud ones. Vibrant ones.

“Violet, magenta and purple,” he says out loud, like a little boy asking for a triple-scoop ice-cream cone.

Maybe it’s not dawn yet. Too early. Maybe that’s only the vanguard. He peers at his watch. 4.17. Maybe dawns don’t come in vibrant colours after all. He’d like to remember whether they do or not, but he can’t. He’d like to remember, too, the time the woman on TV said was the exact time of dawn for the next couple of days, but he can’t. When’s the last time I watched TV? he wonders, scratching his chest. He winces again, this time from the tender feeling that’s all his skin. Head tilted against the rock, he massages the edges of his chest, gingerly at first, but progressively with firmer strokes, moving towards the centre and outwards again.

He doesn’t remember much of anything he did during the days preceding the climb. He remembers making the yellow plane and the pouch, but he doesn’t remember watching TV, eating anything like a meal or even sleeping. He knows he didn’t talk to anyone, not even on the phone. The palms of his hands move down to rub his belly. He is hungry, and now that he remembers that he hasn’t had anything at all to eat in the last thirty-six hours, bar a packet of jerky, he is ravenous. Ravenous and terribly thirsty. His belly rumbles.

“Good,” he grumbles. “That’s the intention. Purification before the ceremony. It has to be hard, it has to cost me some. It has to, if it’s to count for anything.” His slides a hand over his belly and finds the only patch of warmth, the only patch of skin protected from the cold air, the patch where his thighs are resting one against the other.

His fingers, drawn to the warmth, slide further to nestle under the rubber penis-shape that sprouts from his pubic bone. Christen is fully formed inside his mind. “Oh, Baby,” he whispers. “What am I gonna do ‘bout you, huh?” His fingers brush the pubic hair that is

dense at the base of the prosthetic. "Zat it?" he asks Christen, who's standing still inside his head. "Zat it? Don't want to know nothing more 'bout me? Don't want to do nothing more with me?" His Adam's Apple bobs up and down. His jaws are clenched. "Lady," he whispers, "we gotta talk." I come down from this slab, I go straight to her place.

Morgan squints at the sky and briefly wonders again whether there's a proper dawn getting ready somewhere beyond the horizon or what. I make her listen to me, that's what I do, the minute I get back. I make her see me. Me as me. And me as the dude she's got the hots for. I make her see that.

He closes his eyes, fingertips warm against Christen's lips. They are warm under his rubber shaft. He cups it with his other hand before tenderly, as tenderly as Christen would, running the tips of his fingers down to the glans and back up again. It almost tickles, but again it doesn't. It feels nice. It feels real nice in his mind.

Behind his eyes, his penis is quick to respond to the vision of Christen laying naked on ... where? On a bed? Morgan scrunches up his eyebrows. No, not a bed. Too ... boring. Where, then? Bathtub? Uh ... no! Not practical if I'm there, too, like ready and randy. So ... where? He nibbles the inside of his lip. "Ah, yes," he grins. On the beach. By the water-line. At night. Lots of palm trees. No one around. Stars, sand, sea. Yes. He sees her. Christen is there, golden on the moonlit sand. Hair wet. That's because we've just dragged ourselves out of the water to make it on the sand. Mouth hot and hungry. She's been kissing me and laughing in my ear, in my mouth. And she reaches for me and yes!

The minute he imagined her hand on him, it was perfect, so he put his hand over hers to keep her there and he pressed all of him against all of her. He wanted her to feel his maleness and he also wanted to bury his face between her breasts and he wanted to grab her butt and he wanted to feel her cunt.

One hand stroking his rubber penis, the other stroking his clit, Morgan kneels next to Christen who loves him, next to Christen who wants him. It's all coming good for Morgan. Tongue hard inside Christen's—

"It's a fucking *freak!* Jee-sus!"

Morgan's head snaps back, hard against the rock. Eyes open too wide on the memory that had broken through, he chokes on his breath.

Mouth twisted in absolute disgust, Jim, the man he had liked well enough, spat out the words again. "It's a fucking *freak!* Jee-sus!" And, like a hyena intent on bringing back bits of rotting carcass to its young, Morgan's memory keeps bringing back the words, the tone.

Splintered and barbed, they shatter the sensual fantasy he has been fabricating about Christen. His heart pounds against his ribs. There's too much light all around him. He looks at his thighs. Pale. White. Hairless. Soft skin wrapped over slender muscles. Rubber dick in hand, he feels sick.

It's like the mirror in the bathroom except there is no mirror. The mirror in the bathroom doesn't show him how he is, deep, deep inside. All the mirror in the bathroom does is show him as he looks, a neither-nor.

"Too much white light," he moans. It's harsh, too harsh. He blinks and looks again. Why should *she* find me less of a freak than the guys at the site, huh?

Again, he closes his eyes, this time to remind himself why he's decided to leave a phalloplasty well enough alone. Why is it again, that a genital reconstruction is out of the question?

Eighty-thousand dollars average. The surgery's mutilating. Morgan counts on his fingers. Scars on forearms, scars on torso and more scars on thighs. Grafts, grafts and more grafts that may or may not take. His jaw muscles tighten up. Corrective surgery, at least twice, infections, and possibly more infection. Morgan is adding more fingers to the count. Five reasons already, and even Dr Rhinehart, the master-surgeon, can't say how long it could take before the merry-go-round finally comes to a standstill. Ah yes, Morgan remembers, flipping up yet another finger, there's the usual thing of the body rejecting grafts. How *do* they deal with all that, all these other dudes, who've gone under the knife? How do they live with the pain, the cost, the strain of it all, day after day, year after year for some of them. Morgan is, once again, awed by the financial and physical costs that must still be faced by all transmen on a quest for a penis made of skin. He shakes his head. I just don't have that kind of courage. Even if I did, he continues, one last finger flipping up, the damn thing might not even shoot straight.

"And all that ... for what, for god's sake?" he shouts, jumping to his feet. "For another fake dick that don't do what a dick's supposed to do any better than the one I already have. Ah ... yes, flesh," he

sniggers. "Flesh has got to be sexier than flesh *tones*." But again ... His thoughts meander as he nibbles his bottom lip. What decent chicken neck needs a fucken piece of Teflon insert just to get hard, huh? "Oh, I forgot the pump." His giggle is pitched too high. "How could I forget the pump? Oh yeah, real nice. New sex toy for Christen. She'll fall right in love with it, I just know it." He swallows hard but his throat feels watery. Even a pump can be rejected by the body recognising it as *not* a part of the original configuration. New hardware found and rejected.

Morgan looks at his prosthetic. In the strong morning light, it is a pasty sort of bubblegum pink with the vague suggestion of a network of veins etched in bluish purple. "And so what?" he whispers, throat tight. "The best dick money can buy me will still look like it's been ripped off a god-damned midget."

Teeth clenched, eyes screwed shut, because he believes that the odds are rather slim that any woman he'll fall in love with, like he has with Christen, will ever see him as anything more than a bitser. A neither-nor. "That's why I couldn't tell her anything about what the guys did."

Oh, sure, he churns inside his head, she would've made the right noises and all, because ... because she'd have seen I was hurt and all and ... Thing is, secretly ... she would've thought it all kind of makes normal sense, doesn't it, that real blokes would find a guy with a false dick a bit ... freakish, to say the least. Nasty, like a golem or something. Wouldn't be natural if they didn't, would it? Like in the old days, I mean, who could bear to look at the freak with the two heads, or the woman with three breasts, or ... or ... Morgan's brain is struggling to conjure up images that, to him, would be particularly horrible to see. Oh yeah, like the Siamese twins joined at the head. Total gross-out.

Chest tight, head heavy, Morgan looks across the valley. A translucent band of pale pink is all that separates the horizon from the already bluing sky.

"A fucken freak, world! That's what I am!" he shouts, some five hundred metres above the treetops. He shuffles closer to the edge of the cliff. Neck muscles straining, he shouts some more. "My *name* is *Morgan*." His voice breaks up. "I'm twenty-*three* and I am a *freak*." He moves right up to the ledge but hesitates. He needs to unlace his boots. He needs to be totally naked.

Toes lined up with the edge, he breathes in more clean, cold, fresh air and holds it deep inside his lungs. So deep inside his lungs that he feels it heavy in his belly before letting it out in short, controlled bursts. Ramrod straight, buttocks and shoulders tight, arms opened wide, he is the cross planted deep into the rock.

The morning breeze reaches up to ruffle his hair. Tenderly. If only it had hands, he thinks. He peers down past his toes. Seen from that height, the trees are flat, trunkless like shrubs. All he sees is a canopy of thin shrubs, anaemic broccoli. He closes his eyes again to feel the caress of the breeze. The pressure inside his chest is not yet relenting. That's because the taste of Christen is still in his mouth. That's because his nostrils have flared at the acrid smell of dusty sweat. John's shirt. John straddling his belly. The breeze, that other breeze played with him, too, that afternoon. It blew softly on his exposed thighs. It blew softly on his pasty pink penis, too.

Jim's voice. "Sick ... *cunt!*"

It is very dark behind Morgan's eyes. Densely dark and shimmering dark at the same time. Big toes a couple of millimetres off the ledge, arms open wide to better embrace the panorama, his mind finally still, Morgan waits. Having decided that he won't think about *it*, he waits. Having decided that he won't decide, his only decision is to stand ramrod stiff at the edge of the ledge and wait.

He's lost track of his breathing and the moment stands still. It stands still long enough to signal to Morgan that he's been heard, then it passes. His mind kicks in again. What *is* a man? his mind asks.

He has waited so long at the edge of the rock, eyes closed over a dark shimmer that his mind has begun pumping back thoughts and images. "Being a man," he replies softly, "is a belief." Dark silence inside his mind. "Like belonging to a religion," he tries to explain. Silence inside his mind. "Like belonging to a group." The image of Jarryd floats over the dark silence. "Like being totally fanatical about a team!" Morgan shouts, eyes wide open, big toes at the edge of the cliff.

Yeah, being a man ... it's like Jarryd and his beloved Magpies. Even when he's not wearing the black and white gear of the Collingwood team, he's still Collingwood through and through. In the metro, at work, at play, it's always the same with these Melburnians—spend half an hour with any of them and before you know it, out comes their AFL preference. The Saints, the Magpies. Like the Bloods

and the Crips whipping out their bandannas in a defiant declaration of their allegiance.

Right. So? Morgan's mind needs a wrap up. So what *is* a man? Someone with facial hair? Cool, he thinks, got some of that, a bit. Someone with a dick? Pained silence. Hairy legs? A lot of muscles? Someone who's at least six foot tall? "What, for god's sake, is a man?" Morgan drops his arms to his side.

"A man is ... A man is!" His mind shouts, Yes! And Morgan repeats, "That's it. A man *is*. He simply is." His chest heaves again, but differently because something awesome has just clicked into place. "Take a war veteran," his mind whispers. Like one who's got his bits blown up. Still a man! Take an impotent dude who can't get it up. Still a man! Take a quad who can only move his little fing—

"Yeah, like the old Superman dude who can't even breathe on his own ... Still a man!" Morgan moves away from the edge. "A jellybelly that's only five foot tall," he begins chanting, "is still a man. A scrawny dude that can't grow a beard is still a man." Fists hard against his chest. "And so it should be. It all makes sense. Being a man is a state of being. There! Like the old Descartes thing: I think therefore I am. No, it's much more than that. I don't *think* I am. I just am." Head down, knees pumping, fists in the air, Morgan moonstomps to the beat of imaginary drums.

The scene would make a lot more sense if he were actually circling a roaring fire and a chorus intoned after him, but the candles lit the previous night have long dissolved into the atmosphere and even in the valley below, there wouldn't be a soul for miles around. The sky is as empty as it is blue. Not even a bird flaps past.

"A man is ... A man is! A war vet who's got his bits blown away. Still a man! A dude who can't get it up. Still a man. Superman in a wheelchair. Still a man! A jellybelly that's only five foot tall. Still a man. A scrawny one that can't even grow fuzz. Still a man." Fists pound his thighs. "And so it should be, 'cause being a man's a state of being. Yes!"

Out of breath, he flops to the ground. Painted blue veins, pasty pink penis between his thighs. Morgan peers at it and lifts the heavy gland between two fingers. He lets it drop.

"OK, little dude," he says to the pretend penis he's been packing, gluing and ungluing, cleaning and regluing on his pubic bone for the past three and a half years.

No, to be exact ... He makes a series of quick calculations. I've been packing for exactly one thousand three hundred and two days today. OK, he concedes, one thousand, three hundred and one days and six hours.

Morgan runs a hand over the shaft as he has done so many times, and further down where his scrotum should be, the scrotum he's never seen in the mirror, but the scrotum he imagines there, like a ghost limb, heavy and full. Slowly with the tip of his index finger, he picks at the edge of the prosthetic. The surgical glue that holds it in place has a firm hold but is pliable; besides, five days in place already, it's due for a scrape and a new application of glue.

Nimbly, he inserts another finger under the rubber base and yanks it off. In one fluid movement, his arm, long and sinewy, works as a catapult. The pasty pink penis with the blue veins tattooed on its shaft arcs briefly against the blue sky, clears the ledge and disappears into the canopy of trees that lines the base of the cliff.

Briskly, Morgan rubs his fingertips deep against the pubic bone, as if to bring life back to it. It's looking decidedly odd now with its monk's tonsure right in the middle. It's flat and empty, unfinished, but all Morgan says is, "Wow."

Just Wow. But as it turns out, the Wow precedes a chuckle and the chuckle clears his throat for a laugh, a full laugh, a full belly laugh, and Morgan laughs until tears can no longer brim in his eyes because they're too heavy. So he laughs and big tears roll down his cheek and his sides hurt and he needs to find a way to stop because it's getting difficult to breathe, laughing so hard. And he needs to stop, too, because he doesn't know why he's laughing in the first place.

The release over, Morgan is aware of the tightness in his thighs, so he stretches his thigh muscles, heel against buttocks, one at a time, before rotating his hips and shoulders, freeing them from the night's kinks. Then, back turned away from the rising sun, he shuffles his feet nice and wide, relaxes his shoulders some more and slowly, in a controlled, well-practised manner, he releases the content of his bladder.

"Right, Dad. It's time for your ceremony to begin."

Facing to the west, yellow Tiger Moth firmly in hand, Morgan feels the breeze, thinking about the angle of attack, the best angle at which the air will hit the wings. He knows his plane will fly because, by the nature of its design, fly is what a plane does best. Having said

that, the pitch, the angle of climb and the angle of incidence—the angle at which the wings are attached to the fuselage—do make a difference.

When Morgan had originally decided to build a plane, a yellow Tiger Moth, just like the one her father had given her on her fourteenth birthday, and make flying it the main part of the farewell ceremony to his dad, he had bought a proper remote-controlled plane, one he could take on full-throttle power dives, soars and hovers, and with the help of three plan sheets, he had built one over a tarp, on the living-room floor.

At the time, though, he hadn't yet thought about flying it off a cliff. Once he did, it became immediately evident that the plane he had just built, its sheer weight combined with that of the yoke and a two-metre wing span, would not allow him to climb the volcanic plug unroped.

He had to compromise either on the symbolism of a climb unroped or on the type of aeroplane he'd fly from up there. And so he had made a second plane, a light balsa wood model that he could just hand-throw, a Tiger Moth all the same, another yellow one, but one with only a sixty-centimetre wing span, one that he could haul up inside a bubblewrap pouch strapped to his back.

Light as the plane is, Morgan reckons, it'll cruise at a low angle. It'll take its time gliding down and ... the longer the glide, the longer I can see it, the longer I know Dad's enjoying this. Feet planted firmly and wide apart, Morgan lifts his arm. Bright like a bunch of daffodils, the yellow aeroplane sprouts from his fist.

"Look, Dad!" Morgan lifts the plane above his head. "Look! I made it for you." His throat tightens. "I love you, Dad. And ... and I just know you love me ... a lot, no matter what." Tears gather under his eyelids. "So ... here it *is*, Dad. From me *Morgan*. Me, your daughter, but also from me as *I* am." Morgan moves his forearm past his ear. "All my love ... forever." He fills his lungs with the crisp fresh breeze. "Dad!" he sniffs sharply, needing to keep his vision clear just a moment longer. "I'll never forget you! You know I won't."

Morgan's arm whips past, straight and strong, and the little aeroplane glides on the breeze, trusting it, bright yellow under the morning sun, bright yellow against the bright blue sky.

Part II

Christen's Journey

Spread long and wide over the sand, the big kite looked like a huge but flailing sea-bat about to give up the ghost. Held down only by the weight of the front tube, the foil fluttered between the peaked struts in vain attempts to lift itself, while its stirring lines could do no more than tremble.

Christen pulled on the dangling strap. Shrugging out of the wet suit, turning it on itself to better peel it away, she pushed it all the way down to her ankles. A couple more pulls, a final tug and she was free of the rubbery cling. Sodden, her hair was the colour of wet sand. She ran both hands over the water-swollen strands before dropping on to the sand.

Dull-metal grey, the morning sea had not been easy to kite surf on. Too many white caps. Too much tension. Too much angry air under the fourteen-metre kite. Made tired, more by the struggle with keeping the rail engaged and slicing evenly through the hard corrugation of the water surface than by the exhilaration of a high speed ride, she'd decided to call it a day.

A battle, that's what that was about. A battle between three opposing forces, was her assessment of her time kiting. Overpower, oh yeah, for sure, but it also comes down to the wind, the sea and me. Totally not in harmony.

She closed her eyes but a frown puckered her brow because, illuminated by a smile that had its source deep, deep out of sight, gentle brown eyes were peering at her.

"Morgan," she whimpered, "what the fuck are you doing still inside my head? Buzz off and let me be."

Morgan didn't hear her but he moved closer. So close that her shoulders, her belly and her breasts screamed for the feel of his hands, for the seal of his hips against her.

"Oh, right!" she muttered, teeth clenched. The feel of *her* hands, more like it. But again, it's not that simple anymore, is it?

Flint-hard anger rose inside her chest as it did each time her thoughts had returned to Morgan. Not now that she's chopped off her breasts! No, nothing's simple anymore.

"And now what?" she barked at the wind. A dick that's like, made out of a sow's ear or something? Is that what she wanted ... so ... desperately between her legs? To feel like ... what? Whole? In harmony with ... with ... what?

Christen's resentment is aggressive. Actually ... what *do* they use to construct a penis out of ... out of nothing? she kept on, in an attempt to process mentally her Was-about-to-be-lover's gender position. Or more to the point, what does it look like?

The visuals she received in lieu of answers made her grimace. She didn't *really* want to know how a reconstructed penis might look. Hell no! She'd already imagined one—totally gross: Morgan, strapped in a harness of red welts, a furry misshapen dick dangling between his legs, leaned towards her. Christen gasped, heart already thudding from the garish vision. Angry, resentful and overwhelmed by the intrusion, she rolled on to her stomach, turning the sand into a hard protective shield.

For days now she's been trying to reconcile Morgan, the one she doesn't know, with the other one, the one who had been so cute and so vulnerable, the one whose skin was as soft as Maddy's but whose anxious lips, hard-edged hands and urgent need had been all his.

What the fuck does that really mean this, this ... shit? Being a transsexual? She had turned the question around and around and around some more during the past few days, enough times already, to thread each time into a worry-bead bracelet. It was, however, still only at the intellectual level that Christen thought she wanted to know more about the 'condition'.

Short of a better word, 'condition' as opposed to 'illness' or 'madness' was the euphemism she had adopted as a label for Morgan's gender dysphoria. It's not that she was even curious about it, no, not then she wasn't. It was more a lazy sort of question, like that of one whimsically pondering the failure of the 'mechanism' that produced Siamese twins.

Sealed craniums. Deformed genitals. Misshapen fingers. Fused hips. Not knowing anyone who was deformed, not even handicapped, an erratic assemblage of basic body parts was not some-

thing Christen had ever had to ponder. The only differently-shaped individual she'd ever come across had been a boy in a wheelchair and that was while she was still in high school.

That boy only had stumpy little arms and legs and, from the neck down, a barrel-shaped short trunk. Christen had never wondered what the boy's 'condition' might have been. In fact, whenever their paths crossed in and out of the library or along the commonly frequented areas of the school, she had avoided looking at him.

She could have been awed by this misshapen being's determination to keep going, to keep studying, to keep turning the wheels under his old-fashioned, cumbersome wheelchair but she was not. Instead, she made it her objective to not see him. Most days, she didn't, and the boy's revenge, if he had survived his body's shortcomings that long, which was doubtful, would be to know that some twenty years later, the golden girl who used to not see him, even when his wheelchair was unintentionally in her path, now saw him every night.

Though Christen had never known his name, she now saw him even during the day, any day, any time her thoughts deviated from what was immediately at hand.

Morgan—she knew *this* lad's name. She knew *him* and what she didn't know of him, she had been aching to discover, just as she had been aching to make love to him but Morgan, her Morgan, didn't exist anymore. Never had, she told herself. Morgan, the only Morgan there is, is misshapen, too. Just like that other boy in the wheelchair.

Thoughts run in a loop.

OK, Christen argued with herself. Shit happens. I'm a sucker. *She* fooled me. *It* fooled me. Is she a she? Or is she an it? Whatever! She shrugged, belly pressed into the sand, one thing for sure, it's not a he. Her fist slammed into the sand. "What a fucking waste!"

She remembered the picture Morgan had showed her of himself before he began transitioning. While *she* still had breasts. At a time when *she* had a gorgeous body—the body of a tall, young and healthy female. How could anyone want to be a male when she is blessed with so much? I mean, as opposed to simply enjoying male things like independence and strength and ... oh yeah, like screwing gorgeous women. I mean, even a *butch* dyke, I understand that. Christen shrugged. Even a stone dyke ... I can understand ... in theory. But, I mean ... how could Morgan even think ... Surely, she

must've attempted therapy or something ... Why would ... How can any one logical normal person go weird like that?

Words spun around thoughts and, as many lashes off a whip, they snapped around each one to choke it until, finally, Morgan-of-the-smiling-brown-eyes looked at her.

"I'm not a girl, Christen." He spoke softly inside her head.

That's fucken right, you're not a girl. You're a ... you're a ...

"Oh, Morgan," Christen whimpered again, forehead pressed hard against the grey sand, "What've you done to yourself?"

Immaculately dressed in a white shirt and navy blue slacks, hair pulled back in an eight-strand plait, Christen rapped her knuckles on the door and walked in.

The man looked up. The unexpected appearance in his office of an energetic, blond woman put a smile on his lips. Because of his immaculate work clothes and his position near a desk, Christen figured it a no-brainer that this man was the foreman.

"And what can I do you for, young lady?" he asked too pleasantly.

"Hi." Christen replied coolly. At almost thirty-six years of age, she hardly got a thrill at being called a young lady but then was not the time to alienate, with a pedantic remark, the man from whom she needed answers. "I'm Christen Jensen. And you are ..."

"Rigo Cambra. I'm the foreman here."

She extended a hand towards him to establish a contact between them. His hesitation, as his eyes darted from her hand to her face and back to her hand, suggested he wasn't used to shaking hands with women. Wrong, she corrected herself, he's not used to shaking hands full stop. In this line of work, it's the slap on the back and the punch on the shoulder that get these guys going.

Christen's hand firm against his, the foreman grinned. "So ... Christen, is it?" She nodded. "What is it exactly you're after?"

"Real simple stuff. I just need to locate a friend of mine who works here. Morgan Maddock. Concrete mix—"

Eyebrows beetling, the foreman peered at her. "You're the girlfriend?" he asked cautiously.

“Uh ... no, not the girlfriend. Just a friend. So ... where am I most likely to find Morgan at this time of the morning?”

The foreman opened his mouth to speak but the heavy chuckle rising from the far end of the demountable got in the way of his intention. Christen wheeled around. A fat man, visibly one of the workers, was seated at a small table. The handful of forms spread in front of him suggested he had been attending to some paperwork.

The man pushed himself up from the chair. “My advice is to ask the lads.” He smirked. “Want to know anything about anyone around here, you go straight to the crew. They’re the ones to ask. The foreman,” he winked, lowering his voice in a falsely conspiratorial tone, “he’s got the roster and all the formal stuff to keep tabs on us, but there’s no real dust on him. A desk job ... ”

Christen felt a familiar prickling at the base of her neck, the intuitive warning that there was something underfoot and that both men were in on it.

“By the way, Robert’s the name.” The smile, intended as engaging, didn’t work on his beefy face as he moved towards the door. “I guess I’d better show you the way. All these lads, they’re always a bit of a bother with visitors of the female kind, and a pretty lady like yourself ... That’s sure to get ‘em fired up.” His shrug rippled across the breadth of his back. “It’s all harmless fun—”

“If you’re going to show the lady around,” the foreman interrupted, “you make sure she gets a hard ... hat while you’re at it. Workplace Health and Safety regulations.”

The man waved back. A couple of steps behind him, Christen was appraising his bulk. Deceptive. Heavy not fat. Great beer gut but there’d be amazing strength in those arms and legs.

Char-grilled by years of working outdoors in the harsh sun, wearing only the customary shorts and singlet favoured by most Queensland labourers, the man’s legs were pillar-thick, bulging at the calves. She was about to ask him what work he did on the site when he called out to a group of men seated on an assortment of coils, blocks and stacked layers of reinforced steel.

“Hey!” The workers looked up. “There’s a lady here for Peedee. Seen ‘im around anywhere?”

Christen noted how the men, five of them, looked at each other, then back at the large man before one answered, hard hat balanced atop his head.

“A lady? Of the female persuasion?” he asked with mock suspicion. “For Peedee? You sure ‘bout that?” He scratched the side of his neck. “Uh ... nah. Can’t say that I’ve seen ‘im. You?” he asked the group. They all shook their heads vigorously, coming across as a bunch of oversized boys covertly sharing a private joke. “Right, well ... ” smiled the man with the hard hat, “Who’d know where the lad might be dickin’ around, hey?”

The men laughed. One stood up, palming his tackle over his shorts. Another one egged him on. “Go, Jim, my man!”

“Lost your boyfriend, ‘ave you?” A dark-haired fellow called out to Christen. He looked about Christen’s age.

“Oooh, pret-ty lady,” sang another, “You be my butterfly. I be your bumblebee.”

The men whooped and the level of testosterone rose as each tried to outdo the other at the level of boys’ toilet humour.

Turning her back to their schoolboy din, Christen made her way back to the demountable. “What’s with the nickname? Peedee, was it?”

Half a step ahead of Robert to keep him aiming for the foreman’s demountable, Christen saw him teeter like a circus elephant on a log. She guessed his better judgement was telling him to keep his mouth shut. It was, but the titillating prospect of using the words ‘dick’ and ‘penis’ in conversation with this pretty, squeaky-clean lady *and* expose Maddock’s sick little secret was too sweet to resist.

She stepped inside the demountable for the second time. “Peedee? You were saying ... ”

Robert glanced at the foreman who shrugged indifference. “It’s not Peedee or any one name like that.” The big man was delaying the pleasure of disclosure for greater gratification. “It’s more like initials,” he added cryptically.

“Cool. Initials that stand for what?”

Robert cleared his throat. “Pink Dick.” Eyes shiny on Christen’s face, he waited expectantly, knowing she’d have to ask for more.

She smiled placidly. “Not real macho for a worker on a building site but ... cute. Morgan ... he’s OK with the nickname?”

Robert snorted. “Wouldn’t know.”

Christen retrieved her ID from the depth of a breast pocket. “Gentlemen? Let me introduce myself differently.” She held the card

in front of her. "Christen Jensen. Detective Sergeant. Burleigh Heads station, Gold Coast."

The foreman straightened up and moved closer to his desk. Robert looked like the guy at church who'd just let out a fart. The two of them exchanged a succession of quick glances but neither cut in with an attack argument.

"Now, gentlemen, I'm here on informal business. Just as I said, I'm looking for Morgan Maddock, a friend. What we do know for a fact, though, is that Morgan has been the victim of an assault." Robert, having resumed breathing, seemed ready to interrupt but he noted the foreman's subtle shake of the head. "Records show that the aggression took place right here on this site. More specifically ... " Christen flipped open a thin notepad though the entry she was referring to was recorded only in her head. "It states right here ... that the act of aggression perpetrated on the person of Morgan Maddock took place on the 16th of this month, a Thursday at the end of the shift, some time between 4 and 5 p.m. That'd make it exactly eight days ago today. So ... Gentlemen ... " Quietly, she closed the door to the demountable before returning her attention to the men. "Let's all have a sit down, shall we, and you tell me about the last time you saw the lad and ... since we're only chatting here, you might as well fill me in on how you reckon Pink Dick," she enunciated slowly, "works as a nickname."

When Robert got to the part where Jim had 'pulled down the lad's trousers, but it was all for a bit of fun,' he hesitated. Somehow, the words 'dick' and 'penis' and 'sick' and 'freak' no longer held the same anticipated pleasure. Not anymore, not now that he knew he was talking to an officer of the law.

"But ... honest ... It's only when I heard the way they were carrying on that I turned around. It's only then I realised it was his dick and ... even me ... I mean, I've been around a lot but ... it really looked ... sick."

"How so?"

Robert swallowed, hoping that a display of goodwill would save his ass in case Maddock had already pressed charges. "Well, that's what it looked like, didn't it, like a pink ... tackle."

"Pink as opposed to ... what?" Christen shrugged. "Isn't pink a reasonable colour for a white male's ... appendage?" Though she

maintained a tone that was casually detached, she was inwardly struggling with the unexpected turn of the conversation.

Hoping to distract her from the heat he could feel creeping over his face like a furry caterpillar, the big man cleared his throat.

"It was pink like ... like a crayon. Pink," he repeated. "*That* sort of pink, not like any chicken neck ... Uh ... sorry, Ma'am. I meant not like any male's ... appendage that I've ever seen."

Christen remained unruffled. "So ... you thought something was wrong with Morgan's manhood."

"Well ... it sure didn't look very healthy, that's all. More like it'd been boiled, you know, like the ham the wife puts in my lunchbox."

"Right. So that explains the nickname," she said matter-of-factly before asking Robert how he thought Morgan's 7th and 8th ribs had come to be broken at the midline.

The foreman, who had been keeping himself at the edge of the conversation, scooted further away. Clearly the man was not going to involve himself with the incident of the 24th.

"Just a knee-jerk reaction, I reckon ... or something," Robert answered tentatively.

"Yours?"

"Ah ... can't say for sure," the big man hedged. Christen let him get away with it. She was there on informal business, said so herself. "So what's wrong with him, then?" Robert asked, perhaps out of male solidarity. "So ... did he have his ... manhood like, burnt or something? Like a workplace accident?"

"No idea. That'd be a question for his girlfriend," Christen replied lightly. "But tell me, Robert, has Morgan been back since that incident? To collect his things?"

The man shook his head. "On a job, we don't keep anything worth coming back for. At best a hard hat ... a change of clothes. Tools and machinery are provided." He paused. "I'd for sure stay away too, if it'd been me. Look," he sighed, large hands spread in earnest. "Truth is, a young lad like Morgan, with that weird ... with like, this deformity ... *there* ... and what with all the guys on site ... The word's out ... he's toast. He'd know that for a fact. For sure!" he finished categorically.

"Rigo?" Christen stood up to reconnect with the initial purpose of her visit to the foreman, "Did Morgan call to say anything at all ... to *you*, in your capacity as foreman?"

“Can’t say that he did but I did what I could for the lad. He was a good’un so I kept his truck for him for one full shift, thinking for sure we’d hear from him some time during the day. Had to borrow a driver from another crew and all.” Rigo shuffled some of the papers that covered the top of his desk. “I called the number that came with his paperwork. I thought he should explain himself. Failure to report for work, that sort of thing. Phone didn’t answer.” He turned down the corners of his mouth and shrugged. “Next day, I put another driver in his seat. Last fortnight’s pay’s been paid to his account, same as everyone, minus the penalty rate for the Friday he didn’t show. That’s all I know.”

Maddy had called Christen the night before. Jo was worried, she said. Morgan was not answering his phone. He was not answering his door either and Maddy was wondering whether Christen had had any news of him during the past few days.

“Me?” she had asked too quickly. “Why should I?”

“Oooh,” Maddy joked. “Who’s the twitchy lady then?”

“I’m not twitchy, Maddy.” Christen lied. “I’m just surprised that you’d think I’d know more about Morgan than Jo.”

“Look, it was just a thought ... seeing as, you know, you were interested in him and all ... ” Maddy let her words drift, hoping that Christen would pick up on the thread. “Right ... so ... maybe he’s just gone walkabout again.” Again Maddy had waited for a reaction that didn’t manifest. “The thing is ... he always tells Jo every time, I mean, before he takes off, so ... we’re just wondering what’s changed, that’s all.”

Jo and Maddy’s confusion about Morgan’s silence was the confirmation that he had yet to break his news to them, the big daddy of all news.

“Maybe Jo could, like ... wait for him after work or something. Too far to ride on that bike of hers, but maybe she could get there by public transport? Could be a bit of a trek though, not knowing exactly where in Sandgate the site’s located. Could be a fair way from the nearest bus—”

“She almost went there, but at the last minute she chose to dial the construction site instead and they said that Morgan has gone AWOL.”

Christen nodded to herself on the understanding that Morgan had actually gone underground and, keen to forestall more of Maddy's hesitant probing, she suggested an element of truth—that Morgan was probably following the doctor's orders and taking some time off to nurse his ribs.

Maddy had countered by saying that whatever had happened to him that afternoon was already some seven days old. Besides, what had spooked Jo the most was that the foreman, or whoever it was she spoke to, went on blasting about how lame and shabby it was of Morgan to just walk away from the job without even the courtesy of a phone call and ... ” Maddy paused on another thought. “Look, Chris, you know how important that job is to Morgan, huh? How he's counting on that money for a lot of things, right? And what, with another four or six weeks to go ... he wouldn't just chuck it in and walk away, would he? Chris? Waddayasay, huh?” she insisted, still trying to interest Christen in the matter of Morgan's silence. “Like it's not as if you don't know him or anything.”

Christen had reluctantly agreed that it all seemed a bit odd, going by what little she knew of him, but she couldn't bring herself to suggest a reason for Morgan's vanishing from their orbit. She couldn't bring herself to suggest that, for once, Jo might be the last person he'd want to see and she couldn't bring herself to say, ‘Look, Mad, there's this thing I think you should know about Morgan.’

Her hunch was that Morgan was too freaked out to show his face. So, just to move the conversation away from that oil-slick of a topic, Christen asked about Maddy's day at the garage, so Maddy detoured to talk about the '77 Range Rover she had just about nursed back to life, and for a moment her talk was all about cylinders, retarding or advancing glitches between the timing light, the distributor and fly wheel. Or something to that effect. Then she groaned about being undecided about the lining of the cabin roof that drooped more miserably than a mosquito net because, over the years, it had become unglued from the cardboard backing that was standard to all the vintage models.

“It's only a cosmetic job, that. Not really my priority,” she had concluded on the fly. Christen had then asked about the concert she thought they had attended a couple of nights earlier. “OtherCrowd, was it?” and she stretched out that conversation until it had become rice-paper thin.

“Hey ... Chris ... you alright?” Maddy had finally asked. “You sound like ... totally maxed out. Work?”

A moment later, Christen had hung up, hoping that she had not given Maddy further cause to think about *her* state of mind, though while listening to her friend, something had clicked into place—she had realised that she needed to see Morgan, that she needed to talk to him. No, she corrected herself, she didn’t need to talk to him, no, not really. What she needed was to listen to him. She wanted him to tell her what the transman thing meant to him.

Only the night before, with the trepidation of a child looking for something she shouldn’t, Christen had begun a timid search on the net.

Transsexualism, the only word that had come to her, had yielded a plethora of information that seemed mainly related to cross-dressing, a behaviour she considered tangential to whatever Morgan was into.

Transgender had brought up a myriad of links as well but, as many were the same as for the previous search, she had given up only to return to it the following day, after Maddy’s phone call.

This time, seated squarely in front of the monitor, she had used her keyboard much more efficiently. An advanced search combining phrases and must-have words like **hormone therapy, transitioning, female to male, surgery** had opened a floodgate of FTM-specific information: chest reconstruction, phalloplasty, prosthetics, hormone therapy, masturbation, how to pack, how to tell your boss, the lot—from the medical to the anecdotal, it was all there for her to read. Momentarily overwhelmed by the amount of information as well as by the number of sites dedicated to the chronicling of personal crusades with various aspects of gender dysphoria, she had clicked in and out, as some zap from channel to channel, before scanning more carefully another dozen. It was then that the notion hit her that she wasn’t, after all, interested in reading about these strangers’ stories.

How do I know that what *they’re* on about is the same thing as what Morgan’s on about? she checked with herself. Everyone’s different, right?

Totally deflated, she had logged off. Moments later she dialled Morgan’s number, assuming he’d still be up, but the phone rings ran their course and the line went dead.

Christen drove back from the Sandgate site feeling totally sick. It was clear that, except for a kick to the ribs delivered viciously, what had happened there had been only intended as boys' horseplay.

She had two brothers, she knew all about that. Besides, just watching how the men, recruits and officers alike, 'play' to bond with each other and the locker-room pranks they inflict on each other, at the gym or even at the station, she could easily reconstruct the climate that had generated the attack on Morgan. What had resulted, none of the lads could have foreseen. An accident, she told herself. Nothing premeditated. Be that as it may, she shook her head, there had clearly been one victim left in need of medical assistance.

Christen imagined Morgan's pain—the emotional one linked to his humiliation, to the helplessness he would have felt pinned under another man, and she understood his anger and silence following the doctor's departure. Throat tight, she had had to pull over just before the approach lane to the Gateway Bridge.

Morgan, that evening back at Maddy's: the quiet grace that had reminded her of Maddy, her first woman lover—head tilted to the side, body flopped in the typical male slouch, taking up far too much space on the sofa, work boots covered with engrained dust.

That's why I sensed that graceful vulnerability, she thought, returning to what in Morgan had initially intrigued her, seduced her even. It's that *thing* that males just don't have ... except perhaps younger ones. *Some* younger ones.

She thought back to the teenagers she'd come across lately and shook her head. Pimpily and gawky. OK ... she conceded, some young males must've had that grace. Like the shepherd boys of Ancient Greece. Yeah, like Michelangelo's boys, the Adonis sort of ones. So, yeah, she continued spiralling deeper into a stubborn monologue, males just don't have this thing about them. That's what makes them male. That, and a dick. That, a dick, body hair and body smells. That, and a brain that's like, so weird.

"Boys will be boys," she snorted. But not happy to let it go at that, she went back to teasing her thoughts further.

OK, so ... she reasoned, from inside the cabin of her car, the grace-thing, that's because ... It's clear, he was born a girl. No matter what he says and no matter what he thinks, genetically, he's a girl. A woman, she corrected herself, a young woman. So what happened? Puberty hits and Morgan doesn't feel she wants to be a girl anymore? So she makes herself look like a guy?

Christen looked out of the car window. The slanted sun was pale against the late afternoon sky. Off to the left, the dinosaur-spined bridge stretched over the river.

No, there's got to be more to it than that, she thought, otherwise she would've been a dyke, like ... any normal, everyday sort of dyke. Like Maddy, like Jo. Wanting to be *like* a man is very different from wanting to *be* one. Take me for example, she continued, having just thought of her own lesbian tendencies and her work as a senior police officer. I want the adrenalin rush that comes with action, the quick reflexes, the freedom of movement. I do envy their strength. Oh yeah! I'd trade in my womb for more of that strength and another four inches in height. What woman wouldn't? she grinned. Yeah, right, but I've *never* ever wanted to have the body of a male. Oh, fuck! She slammed her hand hard against the steering wheel. "What do I know about any of this?"

Christen's attempts to intellectualise Morgan's circumstances were part of a process that was proving as unrewarding as it was unproductive. So, OK ... she persisted anyway. With Morgan, it got a lot more complicated. So ... what'd she do? Got rid of her boobs and ...

Suddenly remembering the information that had popped up the previous night on a surgeon's site, her heart lurched.

Did she go and get this phalloplasty thing done to her? Did she?

Nasty and clear, one of the visuals Christen had had to squeeze away in the days that had followed Morgan's disclosure flooded behind her eyes—Morgan, strapped in a harness of red welts, a furry misshapen dick dangling between his legs, leaning towards her.

"Oh, Morgan!" she moaned, heavy against the car seat. "OK, I give up," she conceded defeat, too exhausted to sink more emotion into the bottomless pit that had opened under her feet.

Back on the road, vision a lot clearer than her thoughts, Christen had driven straight to Morgan's flat, hoping to find him there, hoping he'd open the door, hoping he'd invite her in.

They needed to talk. She wanted to tell him about her visit to the site and about Jo's concern, but she also needed to apologise for the way she had reacted to his news about himself. Actually, Christen had worked out that what she really wanted was for him to tell her about *his* battle with gender dysphoria.

Morgan-the-transman, she had realised, is also Morgan-of-the-brown-eyes and of the gentle smile. Those traits are still his. *Surely*, she added, turning hope into truth. Just because his dick's not right and because it's all ... like extreme, kinky and scary ... It's still him, the same human being. "*He's* still him," she corrected herself glumly.

Parked across the street, Christen saw that the living room lights were on inside Morgan's flat. However, she didn't insist when, after three raps on the door, no one came to open it. Instead, she scribbled a quick note, folded it in half, printed his name in neat, evenly spaced block letters and dropped it through the slot in his mail box.

He opens the door. "Hey."

Stiffly, she stands on the doormat. "Hi."

"You want to come in?"

She nods.

He takes a step back to allow her in. She walks directly to the armchair facing the sofa and, back straight, feet flat on the floor, she sits at the edge of the cushion.

In ageless white T and jeans, Morgan, head cocked to one side, hands jammed inside his pockets, looks at her a moment too long.

"Coffee? Beer? OJ? Wine?" he finally asks, voice deeper than Christen remembered.

She turns to meet it. He is smiling, she can see that, but she shakes her head imperceptibly—the smile is only epidermic.

"Coffee, that'd be nice, thanks. Need a hand?"

"Nah. Kitchen's only big enough for one."

From the other side of the dividing hutch she hears the chinking of cups, the sound of water filling up a kettle.

How long's it been?

She tries to add up the days since she has last seen him, but she can't quite do it. Too many to remember each day separately from the other. That other time, though, she had chosen to sit on the sofa. That other time, her fingers had tugged at his belt.

Christen's throat is parched. She clearly remembers how flushed she had been, that other time. How ready she had been for

him, for love, for sex—for his sex. She looks away from the sofa where she had sat, aching for him, and crosses her ankles.

The silence between the kitchen and the living room of the little flat is heavy. As heavy as a drapery. Just as heavy but not as ornate. Not ornate at all. Just grey. A dingy shade of grey. She thinks of the silence as grey because she remembers how silent they had been, too, that other time, with the both of them in the kitchenette.

She remembers how rich and vibrant that other silence had been. How full it had been. Full of emotions. Full of need. Full of desire. Full of promises.

Silent. Stillborn. She shakes her head again and stands up. Arms crossed over her breasts, she walks to the sliding doors.

Three pots on the narrow balcony. Two geraniums and one something else. She's not into plants. She likes them well enough, she likes their little leaves and she likes their flowers when they flower, but she doesn't like them enough to remember to water them, at least not as often as they'd need, feet bound in clay, in the semi-tropical heat of Brisbane.

They do make a place lived in, she muses. Like a pet but less demanding. She turns her back to the three pots on the little balcony. The large plant she had noticed that other time is still there, sitting placidly in the corner of the dining room.

Homey and clean, she had thought the first moment she had walked into Morgan's flat, that other time. She thinks *that* should have alerted her that it couldn't have been a guy living here. No bachelor grunge anywhere. Not then, not now. She sighs in spite of herself and, once more aware of the grey silence, moves self-consciously towards the kitchenette.

Morgan's back is to the doorway. Both hands flat on the kitchen counter, immobile, he seems lost in thought.

"Hey," she says.

He wheels around. "Oh ... uh ... it's taking its time but it's coming." The tone of a doctor observing a breach, "It's like they say ... about a watched pot not boiling as fast ... or something like that."

"Yeah. Or like waiting for a site to load up not realising the computer's hanging."

"Yeah. Well, the kettle's not stuck or anything but ... " He crosses his arms. "Look ... Christen ... You said in your note, you know, in the letter box ... You said that we needed to talk."

“What the note said is that I’d like *you* to talk to me.”

Shoulder slightly hunched, he considers her with a frown. “Right.”

“Oh what?” she chuckles in spite of herself. “You don’t want to talk to me anymore?”

“Oh ... sure I want to talk to you.” Fingertips tease the little goatee. “It’s just ... It’s like ... I was wondering if you’re going to help me out on this or do I have to launch into the thing like ... You know ...” He grins hesitantly. “At the confessional. Like in films when the dude says to the priest, ‘Father ... I have sinned.’ And the priest says, ‘Go ahead, my son. Tell me all.’ And then, me, I’d say something like, ‘Father, I’ve rejected the way the good lord had me looking in the mirror ... every time I looked. It was all a big mistake of his, so Father, I’ve redressed that personal wrong.’” With a smile that comes from behind his eyes, but hands joined comically, like a supplicant in the throes of feared rejection, he adds, “Father, please, don’t tell me two wrongs don’t make a right.”

Feeling suddenly lighter, Christen leans back against the hutch. “My son,” she replies, voice half an octave deeper, “haven’t they taught you at school that two minuses have been known ... at times ... to make a plus?”

The kettle gurgles softly. “Hah! Cool,” he grins boyishly.

She looks at him closely for the first time since she’s walked in. Thin, thinner than she remembered, thin and long-limbed. All arms and legs. If only he was that ... *only* a boy, she thinks wistfully.

One mug in each hand, he offers her one. “How d’you have it?”

“Just like that. Thanks.”

“No milk? No sugar?”

“No, thanks.”

Too close to her, he hesitates. He opens his mouth to speak just as she steps back. The seconds shrivel up in silence. He slurps a sip of the steamy liquid and grimaces against the bite at the back of his throat.

Surprised by her own awkwardness, Christen sits heavily on the armchair, mug balanced on her lap.

“Morgan, listen ... Yes ... I do want us to talk,” she begins laboriously, “I mean ... I’d really like you to tell me how ... I’d like you to tell me about your life, like when you first realised you wanted to become a transman—”

About to sit across from Christen, Morgan changes his mind and places the mug on the corner of the coffee-table. As if in two minds about something, he briefly toys with his goatee before suddenly grabbing the back of his T-shirt and, hand over hand, pulling it above his head.

Christen's breath catches in her throat. "What are you doin—"

Bare-chested, arms away from his body as if braced for a body search, Morgan stands proudly. "There!"

"Morgan!" She hears her outcry. She hears the shocked cry of alarm of a teen girl startled by a friend's unexpected nudity.

He shifts his weight to the other foot. "There!" he repeats. "That might save us a lot of unnecessary talking, Christen."

"Morgan ..." she begins, eyes averted.

He remains still. "Look, Christen ... you know me. You do ... You know the inside of me. So what I say is that we cut to the chase. It's time for you to see what else there is of me. I won't touch you." T-shirt clutched inside a fist, he lowers his hands back to his sides. "Me, talking to you, ... it'll only amount to a great waste of time as long as, inside your head, all you see is a freak. True?" She nods hesitantly. "So ... first things first ... I don't want to tell you my life's story. What I want is for you to see me. Me as I am. Not me as you imagine me. Look at me!" More gently, he calls her name. "Christen?"

Coyly, or is it reluctantly, she brings her eyes level with his shoulders. She makes them brush the base of his neck and the span of his collarbone. She's not yet ready to admit to herself that her eyes have *already* glimpsed Morgan's flat chest. They saw it the moment he pulled the white T over his head. *They* saw. Her eyes *have seen*, and her eyes don't understand why it's so difficult for her to look squarely at the middle of his chest. And Christen knows that she needs to drag her eyes down by a few centimetres. Deliberately. Now. She knows that she has to do that before she does anything else but breathe.

"So ... what d'you see, huh?" he asks flatly. "A butchered female? Christen? What d'you see?"

"I see you, Morgan. I see you, bare-chested, in the middle of the living room."

"Good. Keep looking," he grins quickly as his fingers work the rivets of his jeans. "And for the lady in the room ..." he announces, "the *pièce de resistance*."

Christen forces air down to the bottom of her lungs. She knows she has to do this. She has to follow his lead. She has to watch. He's right. She knows he's right.

Why, indeed, put himself through the effort and possibly the pain of recapping a life journey just for her, if all she feels is pity, or worse.

Morgan pulls down his jeans, hops on one foot while tugging at the hem of the other. Feet on the carpet, shoulders straight, belly taut, hips narrow, he is once again still. Naked and still.

A sigh of relief, escaped from Christen's lips, signals to her that she has resumed breathing. Thank god, she almost blurts out thinking, Thank god, he's still a woman.

Morgan will tell her, later, that the absence of a penis does not make him less of a man. Later, he will also tell her that, actually, his left nipple is 1.3 millimetres lower than the other. He will go on to say that it is insensate which, by now, probably indicates that it will never respond to touch. But, he will add, in the greater scheme of things, a nipple is only a nipple. After that, he will say, "By the way, Christen, one doesn't choose to become a transman. One is. From birth."

From her position near the armchair, Christen walks up to him. She stops close enough to him to touch his chest but not see it. Eyes closed, too close to him, she inhales deeply. Unsuspecting of the myriad tendrils, shimmery thin tongues of white ache that it will unleash inside her lower belly, she allows her nostrils to pick up his scent.

Christen and Morgan made love that afternoon but it was a manic, erratic sort of lovemaking, a lovemaking that was encumbered by far too much to be only about the release of pent-up desire.

She had not, but not at all, planned to be in any sort of intimate moment with Morgan, not that afternoon and, if anyone had asked, not ever. Not anymore, no. And yet, when she saw him, body pale and vulnerable, vulnerable yet strong—a fallen angel, neither man nor woman—she had looked into his eyes. They were brown. Brown, smiling at her, and the source of this smile was beyond, far beyond his eyes. Imperceptibly, he had moved towards her as, in mirrored imperceptibility, she had moved towards him.

Their bodies had touched and the repressed need they had for each other rippled out of its bond to overtake the silence, the distance and the awkwardness that had been laying thickly between them, as thickly as insulation padding. In spite of it, they had touched, they had met.

He kissed her and she melted from the inside out. It was only when her hips had pressed against his that she became aware of the absence, of the flatness, and for a brief moment, her thoughts returned her to the living room where they were. To the living room and to the reason why Morgan was naked while she was dressed. The flatness of his sex didn't quite feel right to Christen not if, at the same time, she didn't have the soft warmth of a breast to rub, nuzzle and nibble.

She had had to close her eyes on that visual confusion because his lips, his tongue, his hands were establishing sensory connections that sparked and danced inside her. His hands, gentle but hard-edged, kneading her breasts, sliding over her stomach, cupping her buttocks, pressing her against him—all of it felt too hot, too liquefying to stop.

Like soft sand ridges at the thin edge of the lapping sea, though his belly was smooth, she felt the tension under the palm of her hand. The thin goatee was a blur that made her smile. Her lips discovered his Adam's Apple and nibbled the hollow at the base of his throat. Christen wanted him. She wanted to take him and she wanted him to dissolve inside her.

One hand clasped hard over his butt, she reached for his penis with the other. Her eyes snapped open as Morgan's hand clamped her wrist.

Disoriented and too close to a sensory overload, she looked at him fuzzily. Morgan, Jo's friend, had a sweet little mound tucked inside the crotch of his jeans. She had seen its outline many times. She had even imagined it, lovely and perfect inside her.

He kissed her eyes, pressing her closer against him while at the same time running his thumb against the thick seam of her jeans, firmly over her clitoris. He wanted her to forget what she was thinking. He wanted to make love to her and he did.

He made love to Christen like she had never been made love to, not even by Maddy, and when he felt her ready to orgasm, he positioned himself more comfortably between her legs. She held him tight-

ly against her, calves locked against the back of his thighs, and he danced against her belly, big and strong, smooth and hard, hot inside her.

It is only later, some time later, on the other side of the post-coital daze that, reaching lazily for Morgan, her hand, blind, had come to rest on his mons. At that moment, Christen knew that the conversation they had yet to have could no longer be postponed.

Christen and Morgan

Christen keeps her eyes squeezed shut as she attempts untangling herself from the sheet that holds her wrapped as tightly as a mummy, post-embalment. The crook of her elbow is a shield against the afternoon light that's been pushing its way further and further into her bedroom. Exasperated by her inability to drift back to sleep, she thrashes around some more, winces some more and groans some more. Her mouth is dry, her guts queasy and her head aches from too much champagne. From too much whiskey before the champagne, and from one too many Kahlua chasers after the bubbly had run out.

The night before, in Morgan's flat, the whiskey had been the bracer the two of them had needed to launch, however awkwardly, into their first, post-lovemaking debriefing, and though the champagne had provided them with a sparkling succession of Thank-god-that's-over-and-done celebratory drinks, the nips of Kahlua had brought on an artificial glow, a match for the colours of dawn that had begun painting Morgan's little balcony a lovely hue of transparent pink. By the time the taxi had dropped Christen near the steps to her front door, by the time she collapsed fully dressed on her own bed some time around 5 a.m., the sun was wide awake, already gathering heat, already too bright for her eyes.

Thoughts blurry, Christen rolls off the side of her bed and the movement ripples inside her head.

"No! We can't fucking be friends," she whimpers, pressing a hand hard against her throbbing temple. Her brain, like risen dough, is pushing hard against the inside of her skull. "We can't be lovers either. Too hard."

The night before, hearts warmed by their lovemaking, tongues further loosened by a bottle of Great Western Cuvée Brut, Morgan had asked about Christen's previous lovers.

"But only the meaningful ones, right? A full roll-call might be too much to handle."

"Young man," she quipped, "even at the ripe age of almost thirty-six, the full roll-call would fit on the fingers of one hand and one."

“Zat it?” he had asked, incredulous. “A tasty chick like you? Only six?”

“Thanks for the compliment, but ... yeah. Six is all. Look at it this way, only six beings on this side of the world have managed to get under my skin so bad that I just had to get a bit more ... personal with them.”

“And ... Ladies and Gentlemen,” Morgan boomed like a bombastic game show host, “tonight, on this very night, the head count has just jumped to seven. Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen—”

“Morgan, shush,” she giggled. “The neighbours don’t have to know, do they?”

“Forget the neighbours, Chris. What I’m gonna do is take you rock-climbing and then, from an altitude of six hundred metres above ground,” he grinned, “I’ll shout that *me*, I’m only your number seven. How cool!”

“You’re mad and besides, the news is that I don’t climb anything higher than a tree and I don’t sit on anything higher than a rooftop, so you’re not likely to get me up anything that’s metres hi—”

“I will.”

“You won’t!”

The matter had been resolved by Morgan talking Christen into having a go at bouldering with him.

“No altitude. No risk. Just to get a feel for the movements and grips.” He raised his tumbler towards her. “Next weekend, at the Kangaroo Point cliffs. We’ll do the 5m Fantastic. Piece of cake. I’ll be your spotter,” he grinned. “I get to catch you every time you peel off.”

His youthful enthusiasm was refreshing, but she said, “No, not next weekend. But the one after that, we could. That’d be the weekend of the 9th ... if you’re free.”

“I’m free.”

“How d’you know?”

“I know.”

They both grinned at each other as their tumblers chinked in agreement. Triggered by his smile, the warmth of arousal in the pit of her belly was ready to be fanned, but the moment was too soon. They needed to talk. *She* needed to know more, a lot more, about him as a lover before she tumbled back on to his bed. So, she embarked on her account of three head-over-heels moments. At his request, she followed through with a quick synopsis of what had gotten screwed up between her and those three men.

She talked about Seith with whom she had broken up, right smack in the middle of her senior formal, after six months of sexual intimacy because, by then, it had become unquestionably clear that Seith, though only twenty-two, was a married man.

A couple of years later, Jeffrey, a fitness fanatic with a penchant for Slash porn broke off with her the day she showed him the letter of acceptance into the Police Academy she had been hoping for.

“What Jeffrey said that night was that we had to break up because of the worry factor.” Christen rolled her eyes. “You know, his partner in a potentially dangerous job? That sort of thing. He said he’d never be able to get used to it.” Elbow raised, she drained what remained of the champagne in the tumbler. “Personally, I thought it all a bit weird, but it was only months later that I found out that the breakup had been on his father’s orders. Jeffrey’s family didn’t want a cop as a daughter-in-law.”

That second recall had led, as directly as a trail from dune to sea, to Michael who was still at the Burleigh Heads police station in a capacity equalling hers, that of Detective Sergeant.

Though these three vignettes represented meaningful moments in Christen’s life they, in isolation, were not necessarily the most memorable. It was just that they curled up neatly inside Morgan’s questions and, unprepared for a ‘past life’ sharing, she had opted to leave her sexual history uncluttered. She would tell him about Maddy, but another time.

“Morgan, look, I need to know something, like right now.” She took a big breath. “Will you ever let me touch you?”

Hands spread wide. “Hey, foxy lady, *you* can touch me any time. Any time you like.”

“Oh right! Like, I can touch your arms and your face and your chest and your back. Probably your feet, too. That’s clear. But ...” she hesitated, “Morgan ... all the time we were making love ... it was quite clear that you didn’t want me touching you. I mean, me touching your sex ... your vagina.”

Morgan only moved a fraction but that had been enough to signal annoyance. “Christen.” His tone was flat. “My slash is not a vagina. You really need to understand that. You need to understand that I’m not a girl.” She looked into his eyes but kept silent. “I’m a man. A transman. See this thing on my chin? Only males have hairy chins.” He took her hand to move it across his chest. “Any boobs anywhere?” He didn’t wait for her answer. “I’m a guy. Guys don’t have boobs. End

of story.” He reached under the shirt she had left unbuttoned. “*You* have breasts and they make me stiff on impact.” He swallowed. “Actually, I used to get hard just thinking about ... well, you know ... how they’d really feel when ... like, totally bare ... ” He cleared his throat to distract her from the blush on his face.

Christen could well imagine his young male fantasies about her breasts and, if the overarching topic had been any less serious, she would have smiled in reply.

“But Morgan ... guys have dicks.” Braced for another flurry of delusional gender congruity, she bit her lower lip.

“I’ve always had one.”

The simplicity of his answer took her aback. “You’ve always had a penis?”

He nodded. “I was packing when we met. I’m sure you noticed.”

“Packing?” she hesitated. “Packing as in ... Oh right!” She felt hot all over. She *had* noticed and, the night she had driven him home, the thought of his manhood so close to her hand every time she shifted into second gear had made her incredibly randy. It had been quite discernible even under the chunky fly of his jeans. *Pink like a crayon*, the big man at the construction site had said. *Pink*.

“But Morgan,” she shook her head. “A dildo’s not a penis, you’ve got to admit—”

He stood up. “Look, Chris ... you might never understand thi—”

First she considered him above the rim of her empty tumbler, then she looked at him squarely. Their eyes met. “Try me.”

Morgan grinned undecidedly. Bypassing one-night stands, most of whom he didn’t remember clearly, and to whom he allowed neither time nor reason to question anything, his thoughts dredged up Charisse. She, alone, stood out from all the other girlfriends he had since had. She, too, had been interested at first. She, too, thought she had what it took to ‘understand’, but she didn’t, though she had loved him. So, as others light up to buy themselves some thinking time, he fingered his goatee. He didn’t really want to piss off Christen. He didn’t need to hurt her feelings or be crude or gross. If the conversation went pear-shaped, he knew she’d leave. She’d slam the door behind her and he wouldn’t have to think of a way to explain the obvious.

It did feel, to him, as if he was talking to an intellectually challenged child. One who had yet to grasp the concept of gendered

beings. Daddy is a man because he has a beard, and he's tall. Mummy is a woman because she's all soft and not as tall as Daddy. If Christen left, he wouldn't have to explain anything to anyone. Not tonight and not to anyone who mattered. No more trying to explain himself to anyone. Ever.

He moved back towards her. Where to start? How to make her understand? Hesitant words were slow to form behind his lips. "Look, Chris, it goes like this. When I feel the weight of a dick dangling from here," he palmed his crotch, "I feel ... as a guy. Complete. Whole."

"But it's not a real dic—"

One hand slapped tight against the back of his neck, he hissed. "Listen. Just *listen, will you!* You don't fucken ... you don't *have* to ... to understand this." The grip he thought he had on his tone, on his vocal chords, wasn't holding. He shouted, "You don't have to *understand* this. Actually, you don't *understand* a fucken thing about *me*." Chest tight, fingers tense, he paced from the sofa to the balcony. "Look, the thing is that you *can't* understand this. Only Jarryd can. Even *Dad*, he couldn't." He turned to face her. "He couldn't, I know that. But what he did, was accept *me*, just as I was. He didn't try to twist me like a pipe-cleaner, like mum did. So ... yeah," he continued, reining in his irritation, "it's like, the best you can do is listen. If you want to hang with me, you need to ... to just listen." He wanted to shove his hands in his pockets, but the shorts he had thrown on didn't have pockets deep enough. Instead, he rubbed the knuckles of one hand with the palm of the other. "Look, I'll get us another bottle, huh?" He didn't wait for an answer. None came.

Christen had flopped back against the sofa, eyes squeezed tightly, top lip drawn in. I can't do this, she thought. Too weird. He's cute. Real cute and really screwed-up. *She* doesn't have a dick, for godsake! What she is, is a man-chested *chick* with weird delusions!

A cork popped. Morgan padded back from the kitchen.

"You want to?" he asked. She opened her eyes. He was squatting in front of her, holding another bottle of chilled champagne by the neck, as he might a dead hen. His free hand on her knee, he tried a smile. "You wanna listen?" His eyes were dark and shiny. Her hand over his, she nodded. "This ... this thing ... you see ... it's not about you, Christen. It's about me." She took the bottle from his hand to pour the sparkling wine in both tumblers. "Look ... all that happens when I pack is that I feel how it should've been for me all along. I feel

like Jarryd feels. When I ... when I jerk off, I *feel* it harden.” Christen sat up and closer to the edge of the cushion, nostrils flared, but he continued. “I *do* feel it and that’s all you have to know. I see it and I feel it. And when I go in ...” he shuffled awkwardly, “when I make love, I feel that, too. It’s like I feel the heat on that dick, and I feel it slide and then when I pump and thrust, it all comes together and I blow my load.”

“Sweet!” She had reached for his hand and held it. He sat at the edge of the coffee-table facing her. “Morgan, if it works for you, I don’t have a problem with that.” His fingertips were rough. Almost like a cat’s tongue. She told herself that she’d go climbing with him, rock-climbing, even if they couldn’t find a way to move onward as lovers. She held him by the fingers. “Hey ... all I’m saying is, why not *also* do with what you *do* have. I mean ... if you let me touch you—”

“Oh fuck this, Christen!” He snatched his hand away from hers as if an open flame had just burned his palm. “I’m not a *dyke!*”

She continued, undeterred by his outburst. “If you let me touch you, I could give you an orgasm at least just as good as—”

“Hah! That’s it, isn’t it?” He slapped his thigh exuberantly. “You’ve hit it on the head.”

“What?” She squinted. “What’ve I said?”

“*Give*. That’s the ... the buzz word here. *Give*. You want to *give* me an orgasm.”

“Yeah, I do. So?”

“All that means is that you want to have *that* control over me.”

“Wait, wait, wait! What control?”

The crease of concentration between his eyes brought them closer together. “Look, I think I’ve just slam-dunked this thing.” He held on to his breath briefly. “Goes like this: if I come because of some clever finger-thing that you might do ...” Nodding to himself, he plucks at the thin goatee. “Yeah ... I bet that what shits you is that you don’t feel ... empowered.” Christen stirred as if to speak but he didn’t pause for her. “What I think is that I don’t let you go down on me and you feel you’re not essential to my orgasms. OK! But if you thought that my orgasms were the direct result of you groping my grotto or having a go at my clit, then you’d feel the power.” He locked eyes with her but followed on the trajectory of his argument. “You know, that top-stud feeling of having *made* me come? Of having *given* me that huge blast? Mad! Dude, I’ve cracked it.” His grin was large and easy. “All

this shit I get from all of you, it all boils down to this control that you feel you don't have if you can't do a hands-on—”

“Morgan, stop it.” She had leaned forward, bringing her face closer to his. “It's not about control. Giving is not controlling. And ... orgasms come naturally when the screwing's good. It's a shared thing. It's a ... it's what two lovers do together for each other. They give each other—”

“Chris, I come! I can totally come hard on my own. I know how to make it happen. I come and you come, everyone's happy. Where're you stuck?” He stood up again.

“Oh great. Congratulations!” Christen retorted snidely. “You do me and you do yourself. Busy boy.” She, too, stood up. “Then ... what's a lover for, huh?” She poked his chest. “If it's only company you want while you jerk off ... there's sex workers out there, in Brunswick Street, who'll have you. You get them to lie there and you fuck away. They'd rather not touch if they can avoid it anyway. And they're not big on questions.” She crossed her arms, unaware that, in the movement, the open sides of her shirt had bared more than covered her breasts.

“But I made love to you, Christen.” Morgan looked stricken. “It wasn't like that for you, was it? Like a fuck?”

Lips pinched, she breathed out through her nostrils. “All that's happened is that you *made* me orgasm.”

“So?” he had shrugged diffidently. “Isn't it what you want anyway, like all women? A shaft in their snatch that goes drilling and ... Dynamite! A heart-stopping, thigh-shaking explosion!” She looked at him blankly. “Says so on the covers of all those mags, like Cosmo and all the other ones.” He spread his hands wide enough to bracket his words. “How To Make *Him* Give You The Best Orgasm Ever!”

Christen sat down heavily and grabbed her tumbler. “Morgan, what those articles are about ... it's about being sensual ... it's about energy, about arousal. They're about triggering the imagination and being relaxed and about a positive self-image, that sort of thing.” Her voice trailed off. She took a long cooling sip and licked her lips. “Forget those mags, Morgan. What you're on about is totally one-sided—”

“What I'm on about is, me, being allowed to make love how I like and to get off as I like.”

“As a result of an over-developed imagination and 3-D fantasies?” Her voice rang too high. “Where do I come in, then? Will I just

be a juicy cunt to you?” she demanded, rearranging brusquely the sides of the shirt over her breasts. “Are your lovers only a place, warm and tight, where you park that *phantom* penis of yours and imagine it getting real hard?” She looked about to stretch her legs but instead, she jumped to her feet and strode towards the balcony. Her intention had been to stand there alone in the darkness of the street and shut down the discussion, but she changed her mind. Glowering, she turned back to face him.

“I don’t get it.” Morgan struggled to keep his tone neutrally conversational. “Where’s the kink?” No matter what Christen would say from there on, he would play it down. “You’re a mature chick, yeah? A cop. Been around. Read stuff. Seen films. So you’d know how there’s some lovely folks out there that get their rocks off with beads and ... and gold fish up their asses, right? And what about those righteous citizens who get rock hard just thinking about a golden shower, huh? Just thinking about someone pissing on their face. Would it make you feel better if you had to pee on me to get me to pop?”

He slumped against the sofa. He knew he had to do better than that. He had to be through being angry because she deserved more from him. What he’d been doing and feeling all his life was not aligned with the norm, he knew that. He was not totally delusional about everything. He knew Christen needed time with this, they all did. Still in fight-mode, she glared at him, needing to remain clenched-jawed a while longer, but Morgan grinned and his grin disarmed her. She shook her head in incomprehension.

“Christen, look, I don’t want an argument. And it’s only because of the way ... you make me feel, that I need *you* and not a sex worker. When I was inside you like, you know, earlier, it was so ... so great. You made me—”

“Well! Well!” Her tumbler came down hard against the coffee-table. “I rest my case! See, that’s exactly what I’ve been trying to get through to you! I want to be *inside* you, too. I need to touch you, too. And kiss you, too. And lick you, too. And taste you, too, Morgan. Now ... if you had a real dick, I’d do all that with it, to it and around it. Yeah ... not a problem. But you don’t have a real dick. What you do have is a real cunt. So there’s no problem here either. I can do all of the above *even better* than if you had a *real* dick. So here’s the deal. You can go inside me and I can go inside you. I can’t go inside you, then you can’t go inside me, either. No trespassing!” Morgan looked at her, mouth

open. “You can kiss me, you can do what you want to my shoulders, my back, my feet, you can do anything you want with your tongue and your fingers, but the deal is, if I can’t touch your cunt, you don’t get anywhere near mine. Non-negotiable. This conversation’s over.”

It was then that Morgan finally broke through with words that painted more graphically how much he despised the gash area between his legs. How he hated the smell it left on his fingers. Those slippery bits almost turned him off hands-on masturbation. In fact, what worked best for him was humping against something, anything, even if only a cushion. Morgan was sure that, very early on, she had grown to prefer the bump and grind method, just to avoid touching herself.

“Just to avoid getting close to that hole where there should’ve been a scrotum! Mine!”

To him, the whole genital region was a garish mutilation. One of those horrible mistakes Nature makes occasionally.

“What’s happened to me is the same sad mistake as whatever is wrong when baby twins come out with their brains, or their hips stuck together. It’s a birth defect, that’s what it is. My foetus clit should’ve been longer. The lips should’ve fused together to make the sacks but they didn’t. I was castrated in utero. That’s what’s happened to me. Nothing more, nothing less.”

Sunshine is flooding Christen’s bedroom. Too wrecked to go on squinting against it, she pushes herself up but ever so cautiously, so as to keep her brain from bumping against the sides of her skull. She needs the tube of Berocca that Maddy’s left behind and she finds it ensconced in a catch-all kitchen drawer. Four chocks into a tall glass. Fuzzily, she watches as the orange circles erupt, like pustules, on what little bed of water had remained in the bottom of the glass.

Glass in hand, she wearily makes her way to the bathroom and turns the shower on full blast. Hot water splatters over the orange pustules, freeing them to fizz their little hearts out. Glass against her ear, she listens to their chatter. A small smile turns up the corners of her lips. Two Nurofen pills go down with the orange liquid.

Inside the cubicle she holds her breath, just for a brief moment, in anticipation of the assault of the jets on the top of her head.

She groans as her body softens under the soothing warmth. Very carefully she lifts her face to let the outpour hammer at the flesh

beneath the skin, over her forehead, massage her swollen eyelids and her cheekbones. Slowly she stretches and sighs, hands flat against her skull, to lift it away from the pain but all she does is smooth the hair away from her face. She almost shakes her head in disbelief over the events of the previous night, but she dares not. Instead, she chuckles, head very still.

Morgan's hands on her neck, on her shoulders, his fingertips against her ribs, his sex against hers, his fingers inside her, his body hard but supple over hers, his mouth hungry but yielding and delicious, his lips, his tongue nuzzling her breasts, nuzzling all of her, until a massive orgasmic wave had surged from somewhere deep, very deep below her navel. It had surged and surged some more until she felt it high, high up above her. High behind her eyes shut tight under its power, the fiery blue wave had hovered, gathering, magnet like, more and more sparks of iridescent energy, until it had burst open, wide open. She heard herself cry in surprise, in surrender, as the wave released to the very last, all the tongues of white desire it had hoarded, Gargantua-like, until it could hoard no more.

"Wow," she splutters under the cascading water. "I've been kissed and licked, and sucked and caressed and rubbed to death."

La Petite Mort. The expression she had found so odd the first time she came across it had, like a tadpole at the bottom of the pond, squiggled its way back to her consciousness. The Little Death, she had read somewhere, was a euphemism for the cathartic state induced by an orgasm. At the time, she had thought the whole idea of death within the context of sexual release somewhat repelling, quaint to say the least, but under the driving jets of the shower, she grins at its appropriateness. I could've died from a sensorial overload, there, right there, in his bed.

It was not a thought she had entertained, that of making love with Morgan a second time that night. In fact, quite pleased with the way she had turned the table on him with the old tried and true Tit-for-Tat in the form of If I can't touch you, then you can't touch me either, she would've been happy just hanging with him and talking about everything else but sex. Or at least not about her and Morgan having sex together. She did want to know him better, much better, and not only in terms of his unusual sexuality. Morgan, she had decided, was not a one-dimensional character.

As it turned out, she had had her second orgasm just as the fresh pink-tipped light of dawn had begun peeping through the cur-

tains of his living room. She didn't see it, though, that fresh morning light, because her eyes were closed. At that specific moment, one hand over her chest, she was reeling under the still erratic beats of her heart. Morgan saw the dawn lick its way towards her naked body and, later, as Christen crept back inside her crumpled clothes, he told her about it. He even admitted that the new dawn breaking at that particular moment had been a huge omen for him.

He told her about the previous dawn he had seen break far beyond the rocky pinnacle he had climbed. That dawn hadn't been pink, in fact, he had expected a lot more colour in that morning sky, a lot more than a band of pale light as a backdrop to farewell his father.

Just before that other dawn had cracked above the horizon, he told Christen, he had had a massive hard-on, just fantasising about her, naked on the sand, somewhere under the moonlight. But that sexy moment had been shattered by another crack, that of a work boot against his ribs.

As Christen was buttoning her very crumpled shirt, straightening it the best she could with the flat of a hand, Morgan had told her that when he had first become aware of dawn breaking over the balcony and inching towards her, he had gazed at her, just for a minute, just to watch the play of pale pink light shy on her body, barely brushing the side of a breast, the curve of a hip, her big toe. Even the tips of her hair, sweat-darkened nearer the temples, were touched by the ephemeral hue.

Morgan explained all that to Christen as she crept inside her crumpled clothes. What he didn't tell her was that, as he had looked in silence at her breasts full and firm, at her luscious thighs, at her golden mons, he had whooped joyously inside his head. My chick! he had shouted, though not a sound had passed his lips. Morgan—the young stud, proud of his sexual prowess, proud of his conquest, proud to have made love, searing love to her, not once but twice.

Moments later, Christen had felt him lie against her, gently, carefully. She felt his hand light over her breasts before she felt it, warm and comforting, over her stomach. She rolled towards him and away from the light that she had just noticed spilling over from the balcony and hovering at the edge of her body. Lips quiet and still against her forehead, Morgan had held her tightly.

“God,” Christen groans, back turned to the watery pummelling. I'm so weak when I'm with him. I can't believe this. Couldn't even keep him

away from my cunt for more than five minutes. So much for that test of wills! And the No Trespassing thing! Absolutely disgusting! she grins, unable to deny how good he had made her feel. OK, she reasons, I'll get it right next time.

Moving inside the cubicle as gingerly as a woman in the advanced stages of osteoporosis, Christen soaps up slowly, skin soothed by the sudsy softness. All that drinking! *That* was really, really, dumb. Like a schoolgirl on binge night!

The white foam sits over her head like a thick swimming cap. She rubs it in, but very slowly so as not to give her head cause for movement, and while the shampoo soaks through each strand of hair, her mind, too numb for any other thinking, travels back to an indefinite moment in Morgan's living room, some time after their first love-making, some time after she had cockily told him that if she couldn't touch him, neither could he touch her, sometime around champagne tumbler number five.

The cake of soap slides away from her fingers. Body reflexes faster than her thoughts, she bends down after it.

"Awh! Fuck, that hurts."

At last free to rock, her brain ripples and whirs like dough under a beater.

The moral of the story, she snorts, mindful to resist another shake of the head, is Don't talk and drink with a guy who doesn't own a set of champagne flutes.

Bodies angled one off the other in a classic sofa sprawl, him—in a faded 4 Skins T thrown over a pair of shorts, her—head pillowed by his thigh, clad only in a little pair of underwear, shirt still unbuttoned over her breasts—they had finally settled into a less emotionally charged conversation and took turns peeling back various layers of their lives in a bid to expose to the other the adult each had become.

What *she*, first, wanted to hear from Morgan was a series of flashbacks linking him to his childhood. She wanted to know all about him: him as a toddler—him as a teenager—him with his father—him with his mother—him with his brother, Jarryd, and he obliged her by remembering his childhood in the hills of Tullah as a long string of carefree moments. A father who never stopped loving her just as she was and a mother who loved her, but was not demonstrative.

Although Mary never drank anything but tea during the day, she was extremely attached to the two, sometimes three glasses of

sherry she'd have in the evenings and, tucked away in one corner of the living room, Morgan would watch on, as the fortified wine loosened the rigid efficiency of her mother's gestures, softened the creases on either side of her mouth and smoothed away the tightness that made her eyes appear much narrower than they really were.

Christen felt his shrug, his thigh moved under her head. She tilted her head back to see his eyes.

"I don't think I've ever seen her happy," he confirmed, mouth pulled downwards. "I mean, happy on her own. Not just *looking* happier because of the booze. I don't remember her ever being ... joyous. Or light and bubbly." The tumbler, once again empty of champagne, lay cradled against the outside of his hip. "Talking about bubbly ... "

Around the time of their new round of champagne, Christen asked Morgan about his early life in stealth. Easily, he answered that he had always done it. Newcomers to the area, Morgan explained, strangers to the area, would often pat her on the head while she was 'helping her daddy' at the store. 'What a nice little lad,' they'd say. 'A real little tiger, isn't he?' They'd smile at the man whose nametag stated he was the owner-manager of The Range, the only general store for miles and miles and miles. Dan would beam back at them, not in the least compelled to correct their assumption that Morgan was a little boy but, one hand protectively over his little daughter's sternum, he would hold her more tightly against his thigh. She had blurred, even before she was old enough to know what she was doing.

Morgan's hand resumed stroking backwards Christen's shiny blond hair. He liked watching it fall back into place of its own accord.

"So ... basically ..." he concluded, "in spite of the pink bunny rugs and that slash between my legs ... I was well on my way to living in permanent stealth ... naturally."

Head again upturned towards him, her eyes first connected with the thin goatee on his chin, then with the corners of his lips, tiny horn-shaped creases. His eyes were dark by candlelight, and deep inside them she found the source of *that* smile. She shifted against him.

"I remember how I used to look at her ... at my mother," he continued, seemingly unaware of the delicious swirls of desire his hand sparked deep inside Christen as it meandered lazily over her breast and down across her ribs. "Back then, I know I loved her a lot

more than I did my dad. And I'd watch her ... you know ... when she went about the housework."

It delighted Christen that the hand and fingertips she knew to be hardened by rock asperities and manual work already felt familiar, warm, and surprisingly light over her, and the sight of her nipple, pink and erect, cradled by his thumb and forefinger, made her grin quietly. Lips sucking deeply the rim of the tumbler, she slurped more of the champagne.

"Bor-ring!" she interjected, smacking her lips. "You ... you're gonna tell me that you were a ... just a little girl at heart ... only wanting to play with a big broom and—"

Morgan let his hand glide along the length of Christen's arm. "Nah!"

He liked the feel of her skin. He liked the feel of her under the linen of her shirt. He liked the firmness of the deltoids that she didn't like. 'I don't like my shoulders,' she had once told him. 'Way too developed. Not enough definition. Not like Maddy's. Maddy ... she's one chick with absolutely great shoulders, don't you think?' Morgan had shrugged the standard male indifference for 'girl talk'—women's sensitivities.

Leaning further into the sofa, he added flatly. "I never ever wanted to play with a broom and not with dolls either." Momentarily forgetting that he no longer packed, by force of habit he tugged at his fly to adjust himself. Feeling no more under the cloth than an amputee under pant leg or shirt sleeve, his fingers fluttered to his chin, seeking reassurance of his maleness in what facial hair he did have. He cleared his throat and, careful to keep Christen lying against him, shifted his hips to a different position. "I really hated those tiny little plates and that midget little teapot Mum would buy me. She wanted me to pretend, like I was at a tea party or something. She used to carry on about a white rabbit that disappeared." His long arm reached to caress Christen's buttocks. An ache of desire shimmered in the pit of her stomach and she felt the familiar wetness of arousal. She brought her knees tighter together. Not *still* wet from our lovemaking, she thought, almost blushing. More like, *again* wet. Ready for more.

"Alice in Wonderland?" she asked, very much aware that what she wanted, most of all, as she listened to him unpack more of his memories, was to roll on to her back and offer her face, her breasts, her stomach, her sex to the rub of his hand, to the teasing of

his fingertips. "There's a white rabbit and he disappears through a ..." She frowned. "Can't remember whether he disappears through a small door or a keyhole."

"Whatever!" Morgan replied, dismissively. "What I remember is that I was watching her, but only because I didn't want to miss out on a smile." He added, "Like keeping your eyes riveted on a bird nest so as not to miss the moment a little one will poke its head out." He rolled his eyes and shrugged, "I mean ... just in case she'd actually do it ... I mean ... smile."

Christen wanted to look at him while he continued with his story. She wanted to try, to try as hard as she could, to stay focussed on his words while her body, her skin, all her nerve endings would try as hard as they could to stay focussed on his touch, on the path of his fingertips. But if she turned around to allow his hand to roam freely over her, she knew she'd quickly need something else, because if she let him play her body with his hands, she'd soon have to sit up. She'd have to sit up before his fingers breached her last line of defence, the electrified outer fringe of her pubic hair. If she didn't sit up then, he'd take her, she knew he would. He'd reach for her right where they were, on the sofa, in that position, with her flat on her back, head still resting on his thigh.

Pinned by her own craving for his touch, pinned in the position she was in, she wouldn't be able to reach for him. She wouldn't be able to touch him but he'd bring her to another crashing orgasm. Christen kept her thoughts focussed on little dinette plates and fluffy bunny rabbits in red jackets.

She opened her eyes. "I bet she knew you were hovering and if she paid you any attention, she'd never get her work done ..." If she kept her eyes closed, the darkness behind them would heighten the sensations trailing behind his fingertips. Multicoloured traces of desire, they meandered dreamily downward.

If she kept her eyes closed, she'd want to kiss him well before he got a chance to trigger the point of no return. She'd have to sit up. She'd have to kiss him. She'd want to kiss him to further stoke her desire right around the dial. Then, she'd straddle his hips, lips against lips, tongues blending in a now familiar ache that caresses deep inside her, she'd let herself melt. She'd melt right inside his mouth. She'd melt into his smiling eyes. Then she'd make love to him as she had made love to Maddy.

“Yeah, maybe. And I remember how I was only given dolls to play with but Jarryd ... he had the entire collection of Riatons; inflatable ones, decal ones, miniature ones and spinning ones and ... oh, yeah and those big dude GI dolls with bulging muscles, crew cuts and their fists, they were as big as ... ”

Christen imagined herself settled between his knees. She imagined nibbling at his clit. Morgan had told her earlier that evening, before they made love for the first time, that since he had started on the testosterone, his clit had grown by a couple of centimetres. “I may not have a dick,” he had said lamely, “but, baby, I’ve got one hell of a dicklet.”

“Cool!” she had replied too quickly, imagination fanned by the prospect of *more* clit.

Little did she know that one love-round and many hours later, fuller of alcohol than she had been since the night of that dreadful senior formal, she’d be none-the-wiser about the true state of her lover’s genitals.

That *other* night, when she had cancelled Seith in front of her friends, she had remained, allowing Nathan, a boy with big, sad puppy eyes, to console her, because Nathan had snuck out of the house one of his father’s bottles of Black Douglas. The whiskey had burnt her throat, its vapours had made her eyes water but it had kept her loose and giggly until the morning-after hangover, her first one, had hit her like a massive sledgehammer.

Years later, in Morgan’s living room, on her way to but not yet trapped in the maw of another ripper hangover, she was still none-the-wiser but seriously fantasising about his scent. About the taste of him. About the feel of him hardening against her tongue. Hardening between her lips.

Christen had made herself lie very still under the movement of his hand. Up along the inside of her arm it went, curving outwards towards her wrist and back to her shoulder. She closed her eyes while she still could. The whiskey, the champagne, hadn’t yet made her dizzy so she let her mind play with the flat tip of her tongue and folds that she imagined musky and mysterious, silken and wet, just beneath her lover’s mons. Just beneath that odd patch of shaved pubic hair. Her eyes snapped open.

She had been so relieved by the absence of any appendage, crayon pink or otherwise, that she hadn’t given the shaved patch another thought. No penis at all! had been her only thought. As she

lay, head on Morgan's lap, Christen's attention had begun splitting further away from his words. He said he used to pack a dildo. Can't be a dildo, it'd look like a permanent erection. Then, what is it really? Why isn't he wearing it today? What does he do with it? She had sat up to stop her thoughts from running haywire anymore, to stop herself from fixating on it. She would ask him about his false dick, but later.

"So ... why was your mother so ... stressed out, then ... during pregnancy?"

Backs against the sofa, seated thigh against thigh, Morgan lifted Christen's hand off her lap.

"She didn't want children," he said. "She didn't want the first one and there she was having another one." He slurped the dregs at the bottom of his tumbler and reached for the bottle. Christen followed the movement. She wasn't thirsty but she held out her tumbler for a refill. "Another one bites the dust," Morgan grinned, as he rolled the empty bottle under the coffee-table.

"Two down and that's my stop, Mor. Don't open another one on my account."

"Oh right," he grinned. "The voice of reason has spoken."

"Free speech for all. I like free speech."

"Uh ... yeah ... free speech is cool ..." he hesitated. "Problem I see is that it's a right everyone has ... even real life Dumb and Dumber. Been known to get messy, this free speech ideology."

She had listened to him, to the subtle manly timbre, having no difficulty imagining his renewed refusal to be touched. "You're kidding, aren't you? About your mother?" Morgan shook his head. "You're saying that she got so worked up about having another child that she ... It's because of that that you ... that you're—"

"That I'm a transman?" His eyes briefly bore into hers. "Nah! Too easy." He shrugged. "I *want* to think that, me, being a transman is the combination of much greater things than whether Mum breastfed me, or not. Smiled at me, or not. It's just that ... when I think back and nothing I did made me more lovable ... like, in her eyes ... I'm sure she would've been happier if I'd been stillborn. Even more so now—"

"Oh, Morgan! Don't say that. It's not funny." Stubborn as a child refusing to be washed, she thought, remembering his hand, not hard but firm against hers, to keep her away from his genital area. What she also knew was that the second time, if there was to be one, she wouldn't be content just being made love to. She wouldn't be

happy just caressing her lover from neck to toe. She wouldn't be happy just nuzzling his belly and stroking his thighs and she wouldn't be happy just rubbing the small of his back, cupping his butt and licking the back of his knees. His mouth was not enough. His tongue was not enough. His hands were not enough. She wanted to feel him harden under her fingers, under her tongue, between her lips. She wanted to touch his desire, not just feel it in the breath that caught in his throat.

She wanted to give Morgan an orgasm. She wanted to bring him to that point where desire spikes to explode in a million shimmering tongues of electric ripples. She wanted to take him there. Yes, damn it! I want to be the one to actively bring him right to the edge and beyond. She didn't want him to have to do it for himself, bumping against his wrist while *he* was inside her.

"And here you are." Morgan's voice had brought her back to the moment. He grinned tentatively. "Some fifteen years of crap and doubts ... to get exactly where I'm sitting now. Right here."

Wow, was all Christen thought and Wow was all she could trust herself to say. "Wow."

The surreal aspect of the conversation had finally hit her—this guy she had made love with once, only hours ago, was pouring out his life's story—from childhood exploration to sexual discovery, from a sexual confusion branching out into a full-blown gender dysphoria—all centred around one set of genitalia or the other, all revealed by one body or another—little Morgan's body and the discovery of her girl's genitalia, the lad's explorations with masturbation enhanced by Slash Porn and her brother's underwear, to the imagining a phantom dick as real as an amputee's nerve-ending memory of the lost limb. And all Morgan had to say to tie all that up in one manageable bundle was, "And here you are."

Surreal, too, was the realisation that she had made love, passionately vibrant love, to someone who had neither breasts nor cock, and though her lover had a cunt, she hadn't been able to touch it. She needed another drink.

Palms against the tiled wall, rivulets of water circling and splitting around her feet, hair parted by the unrelenting stream hammering at her skull while thoughts hammer at every preconceived idea she had ever held about good sex, Christen is floundering. Morgan: fallen

angel—half man, half woman. Verboten! For some reason, the word pops up from the past.

“Forbidden,” she mutters, plucking the word from a long list of words—homework for a Year 8 language class. That’s *exactly* what his hand clamped over my wrist meant ... Every time I got near him. “Verboten!”

She splutters. “Fuck!” What am I supposed to do with him, huh? Drop him before I get sucked in too far? It’s all screwed-up. It’s like it’s *me* and my need to feel *him*, to better love him, that are all wrong.

She reaches up to wrap her fingers around the shower head. The movement loosens some of the tightness in her lower back. What *is* wrong with me needing to touch and to feel him, his desire? What’s wrong with wanting to feel it physically, to ... She moves altogether from under the cascading water. “Why? Why does it matter so much?” she asks out loud. “Why do I need to focus on his genitals?” *Because* that’s what people do, that’s why.

Back pressed flat against the white tiles, eyebrows arched, she nods to herself. *Because* that’s what all the sex hype is about. So ... what? Unless I have a firm grip on his ... on his clit ... nothing else *I do* counts towards getting him there? “Fuck!” she spits through gritted teeth. Too weird. Too hard. Can’t even move my head, for godssake!

No vigorous rubbing of the scalp. No towelling wrap. This afternoon, Christen’s hair is let to drip-dry. The doorbell. She groans. Probably the neighbour looking for his cat, again. Not that she’s ever seen the cat in question. Wrapped inside a moss-coloured sarong, she opens the door just enough to appear sociable, not wide enough to invite entry.

Rust-red hair on end, round blue eyes. “Hey, gorgeous!” Maddy is in high spirits. “Still alive. Good to know.” Her enthusiasm rings and rattles inside Christen’s head. “I come in or what?” Silver lip loop grin.

“Oh ... Mad? I’m sorry. Sure, come in. Hey ... Good to see you.” She leads Maddy by the hand.

“OK. OK. I’m in. Now, Chris ... let me look at you.” Maddy steps around her. “Uh-uh! Just as I thought,” she quips. “The grandma shuffle. Puffy eyelids. Christen Jensen, you’re one burnt baby.” Christen wants to nod because nodding would be much easier than

talking but she checks her impulse. Maddy pats her hand. "Maybe / should make us that coffee, huh?"

"That'd be nice, yes." She pads along behind Maddy.

"So ... whatssup, then? Who you been celebrating with?"

"Morgan."

Blue eyes grin. "Correct!"

"What d'you mean, 'Correct'?"

"I mean 'Correct answer'. As in, you're not trying to get around me, that's nice. As in Morgan's been over at our place all afternoon. As in—"

"Morgan?"

"Yes, Morgan. Your toyboy lover."

"My toyb ... Oh ... Maddy." Christen crinkles the ridge of her nose. "I really wish it were as easy as that."

The spoon hits the side of the percolator. Coffee grounds spill on the counter. "Well, who would've thought, huh?" Maddy says softly. "I mean, Jo thought he was winding her up. It took him a good twenty minutes to convince her that he wasn't having her on." Freckly knuckles wrap over the tap. "To be honest, even me, I was ... like, totally shocked."

"That we'd made love? What's so weird about that?"

Maddy giggles. "Duh, girl, you're in one bad way." She nibbles her lip loop. "That you had sex with him ... we were quick to grip, seeing that huge beeline you made in his direction whenever that was, that Sunday, at my place." Christen smiles weakly as she follows, blankly, the play of muscles under the skin of Maddy's arm. Screwing the top of a percolator back on its base can provide a rather sexy visual when one like Maddy, with the chiselled muscle definition of a male gymnast, is wearing a loose T-shirt that covers only a couple of centimetres of her clavicle and is cut open all the way to her waist. Jo likes to take scissors to just about every T she gets her hands on, even Maddy's, and alter its appearance, 'to personalise.' "In fact, Jo thought the whole idea totally ... " Bright blue flames lick the base of the percolator. Maddy glances at Christen, now toying with the tangled fringes of her sarong. "Never mind. Yeah, what did throw her in a spin was the *really big* news. Like, her best male buddy ever is a girl. You should've seen her face. Mind you, in a way, this explains that, doesn't it?"

"A transman. Not a girl."

“Oh right. Sure.” Maddy runs her fingers through red tufts. “Might take a while, you know. It’s not like we’ve suspected all along, is it? As for you ... well, you’ve had a bit of a head start on us. Anyway ... if you don’t mind me asking ... what’s it like?”

“What’s it like what?”

“Uh ... you know.” Maddy kneads her biceps. “Rolling around in the sack with a ... with Morgan.” She squints at the percolator.

“Yeah ... well ... ”

“Oh c’mon, Chris! You got to disclose. At least a bit.” Eyes pulled up in a tiny grin, Maddy turns to face Christen. “So ... the two of you are an item, like in love and all? Where you go, he goes?”

“Nah. He can’t. He doesn’t have a badge.”

“Oh funny.”

“Maddy, come here. I need a hug.”

“Sweet!” Maddy grins. “I thought you’d never ask.”

Forehead against Christen’s shoulder, Maddy tightens her hug. Christen dips her knees to kiss her on the temple. “It’s OK, Mad. Yeah?” She pulls back a little to look into Maddy’s eyes. “Sooner or later ... I had to relocate, right? Couldn’t keep on moping after you. Bad form. Said so yourself.”

“True. Real bad form.” Head cocked, Maddy considers her. “But you didn’t answer. You’re going to commit and all, like try to do long-term with him?”

Christen breathes in deeply and shuffles out of the hug. “He’s lovely, Maddy. He’s really lovely but that gender hang-up he’s got ... That’s so ... ” She stops to consider where that thought is taking her and redirects. “Well, actually it’s not as freaky as I thought ... like, you know, when he first told me. At first I thought, Oh my god!” She wants to do better, much better by Morgan. “Actually, it’s not freaky at all. He’s gorgeous. And yeah ... he ... All I’ll say is that, the little jerk ... it didn’t take him long to chart all my E. zones, that’s for sure!”

Maddy blinks, opens her mouth on a question that she doesn’t speak. Christen reaches for her again and tousles her hair.

“Yeah, whatever. Moving right along!” Maddy mumbles, somewhat miffed at the thought that Morgan’s sexual vibrancy could well be superseding hers in Christen’s memory. “Hey, I have a message for you from him.”

“You do?”

"I do."

"So ... what is it?"

"We're all invited to his place next Friday night. Beer and pizzas on him. We get to choose the vid for the night. That's what he said."

"Been there before?" A quick blush ignites Christen's face at the thought of the sofa, site of their fiery lovemaking, "At his place?"

"Nah ... he never offered before. What he said this afternoon was kinda sweet. He went like, now that he won't be jetting about anymore between here and Melbourne or wherever ... he said that he'd like to have us around to reciprocate for all the times he's been at our place and consolidate ... if we wanted to. Like real friends do."

"So ... you wanna stay friends with him, you and Jo? Even now?"

Fingers rake quickly through Maddy's hair. "Sure." She shrugs to punctuate a brief hesitation. "Jo ... she's a bit aggro but mostly because of the trust factor. It's like she feels betrayed. Like, if they were as close as she thought they were, the two of them, then why didn't he disclose? She really let him have it about having done the blurring thing with us for so long, but ... she's really fond of him, no matter what. She'll get over it." The aroma of percolating coffee fills the kitchen. "See ... we thought he was a guy and he thinks he's a guy. So ... in regards to the daily grind ... nothing's changed." Maddy shrugs again as a deep bubbling sound rises through the percolator. "His condition and his battle with it ... nothing to do with us. What I think is, once the shock value of his revelation wears off, and Jo works out the trust angle with Bernice-the-Shrink ... she'll understand how he, holding on to his privacy ... Look, I know it had nothing to do with how he feels about her as his buddy. So basically, it won't matter to us what he's got *or not* under his belt. *That* will be your nut to crack." She reaches again for Christen's face and, on tiptoes, plants a kiss on her cheekbone. "Tell you what," she adds, "Why don't you spread yourself out somewhere, huh? Sofa? Bed? I'll bring that coffee over in a tick."

Epilogue

Jo, Christen, Maddy and Morgan

Seated cross-legged on the rug, Morgan has been entertaining his guests with a series of light-hearted tidbits loosely linked to rock-climbing etiquette.

“See, the worry for us rock rats is that we don’t want the same thing to happen to ledges and summits that’s happened to just about every picnic site everywhere. Even the sand dunes on Fraser, they used to be in a totally virgin condition not that long ago.” He takes a swig of beer but instead of swallowing it, he lets it seep between cheek and jaw. Christen watches Jo watching him.

“Bud, has anyone ever said you look like a chipmunk when you do that?” Jo chides.

“Do what?”

“Store liquid inside your cheeks instead of swallowing it?” She folds her legs under her. “Why is it that guys do that all the time? That, and take a swig on a mouthful of food. How gross is that?” she asks in mock outrage. “Checking the cubic capacity of your mouth? Like how big it is?”

Maddy looks at Christen who, across from her, is wondering whether Jo’s playful remarks might finally pop the bubble that’s been hovering ever since she got here. It’s not a big bubble, certainly not as big as a balloon. It’s more like a soap bubble, a largish soap bubble. One that, irrespective of its translucence, contains the leaden vibrations that shadow ‘things’ that have come to pass but have not been laid to rest.

Christen had been held up at the police station and by the time she walked into Morgan’s living room, Jo and Maddy were already comfortable on the sofa. Morgan had jumped to his feet to open the door on the first knock.

“Oh, what? Not a woman in uniform?” Maddy had called out, taking the mickey out of Christen. “How terribly disappointing!” The TV set that no one was watching was chattering to the big pot plant that sat in the corner. A couple of beer bottles lay like drunkards, spent and empty, near the coffee-table. “Wait till you see DS Jensen all decked out for work, Morgan. Like, a big black Glock at the hip. Hair all tied up in one of those fancy braids. Ironed and starched like nobody’s business. Awesome.”

“Sounds real tasty,” Morgan had replied sombrely.

One foot inside the door, Christen had paused only long enough to realise her heart was beating far too fast and all she did was smile at Morgan, say hi, pat him on the arm. All in one fluid movement, she had made her way into the living room, to the sofa, behind the sofa, where she floated a kiss on Maddy’s hair and squeezed Jo’s shoulder in lieu of greetings, very much aware that she had yet to connect with Morgan properly.

In the grip of a girlish awkwardness, not unlike that of a teen who had yet to figure how to greet her *mother’s* brand new boyfriend, Christen had opted against giving Morgan an enthusiastic full body hug. She had tossed up whether to give him a quick hug or a kiss on the cheek, and she had yet to do either.

Eventually, she had had to look up and her eyes framed him, closer to the kitchen than to the sofa, leggy and thin, hands shoved inside his jeans pockets. Head cocked to one side, he looked at her as Maddy and Jo looked at him. It was at that precise moment that Christen had become aware of the bubble of self-consciousness that floated over the party.

“Hey ... whaddayasay, guys? Time to order?” Jo had asked, to help things along. “I’m starved. Still into the Hot Balls pizza, Morgan? Hot Balls or whatever it is that’s got jalopeños all over?”

“Sure thing. I stick to the tried and true. So ... yes to the Fire Ball.” His timbre sounded rusty. “That’s what it’s called, Fire Ball. Singular. One ball.”

“Too easy.”

Though Christen had spent each of the week’s nights, late into the night, arguing with herself, dissecting and weakening and analysing and strengthening her resolve to cut him loose, before reproaching herself for it, each time, none-the-wiser as to what she truly wanted from Morgan and expected from herself, she had given

up, to get some sleep before dawn and focus on police matters after dawn.

The moment snap-froze. When Christen and Morgan had finally stood face to face, something had shifted inside her chest. Brown eyes soft. Sad, brown eyes. Not smiling. *She* had put that sadness in those eyes. She had, she knew she had, when she sidelined him in front of Jo and Maddy, but it was not something she had meant to do. She touched his cheek.

Morgan didn't lean into her hand, but he didn't move away either, so she took his hand, led him back into the living room, closer to the sofa, closer to his friends. Dropping to her knees, she pulled him down next to her on the rug.

"So ... what were you all arguing about, just then as I came in?" she had asked, spinning the conversation back on its track. "Did I hear the words 'sick and depraved'?"

"Yeah," Morgan rejoined, "we were talking about the old dude in the vid Maddy's brought over, and he has this thing for a chick he's supposed to help exit from a cult and—"

"You've seen it already or is that all on the blurb?"

Fingers loose around the neck of a fresh bottle of beer, he nodded. "I saw it when it first came out. At the movies. So ... yeah, and it's all a bit mad how he just falls into abject submission and all."

"Hey, don't give it all away." Glancing at him sideways, she had pulled the bottle from under his fingers to take a sip.

Quick as termites chewing up a pole house, the four of them make short shrift of the pizzas. Smiling eyes between razor-edged strands of black hair, Jo plugs Morgan back into rock-climbing.

"Ah, look, it's like I was saying before." He uncrosses his ankles to stretch his legs under the coffee-table. "As soon as you're a couple of metres off the track, there's a goddam trail of toilet paper on the ground. There, or caught in the shrubs where the wind's rolled it. So ... when you're way up there, on an outcrop, and the urge takes you to dump, that's assuming you're not on a belay—"

"Oh, dude!" Jo cries out. "I just got a visual. Not nice."

"Yeah, well ... shit does happen but, what with being strapped inside a harness and dangling halfway up a pitch, no one's likely to remove their pants to make the drop, so ... yeah, I'd say the belayer's pretty safe." The corners of his mouth turn up in two little horns. "What

I'm saying is more, like you've made it to the top and you need to crap. So, the thing is to not leave it lying there, right? Like supposedly out of sight on the other side of a boulder where someone else is sure to spot it. And you can't bury it like on the beach inside a sand hole."

Maddy brings the last slice of pizza to her mouth but the thin crust dips at a dangerously steep angle.

"You're gonna lose it!" Jo warns, fingers inching forward.

"Just don't you go leering at my slice," Maddy warns, swiveling her shoulders away from Jo. "I bet you made it do that ... telepathically ... kinetically. Just so I drop some and you pounce on it."

"Oooh! So who's the only child that doesn't know how to share, huh?" Morgan quips.

Maddy swallows the morsel. "Me and proud to be." Lip loop glinting, she flexes her biceps. "Wanna wrestle me for what's left or what?"

"Nah, pass," Morgan replies in kind. "Not hungry anymore."

"So ... Morgan ... " Christen asks, interrupting the banter. "You didn't say. What's the eco-friendly way of getting on with the job, then?"

"Easy. You squat over a container. An old Nutella jar or—"

Maddy chokes on her mouthful. "Say again?"

"You can practise your aim at home, but the deal is you have to take your shit with you. Literally. Can't leave it there." Morgan spreads his hands wide. "No other way. And since you have to cart the container up and down, your poo pack's got to be small. And a tight seal is advisable."

"You sure about that? About the jar?"

"Sure I'm sure. How else do you keep that ledge clean for whoever's gonna be mantling up there after you?"

"Mmm ... on the strength of that, I think I'll just have to forego the adrenalin rush of a high altitude climb." Christen taps Morgan on the knee. "If I'm going to haul my butt anywhere, I'll stick to bouldering. It's still on for this weekend? Saturday a.m.?"

"You bet. All I need is to score a mattress." A quick blush rises to his cheeks. "Uh, a crash-mat ... to catch your falls. That's how it's done. It's thick like a mattress ... to absorb."

"What? You're not gonna be there, ready to catch her every time?" Maddy teases.

“Bring that mattress and you’re on. Jo? Maddy? Join us for a hug-a-boulder session at the Cliffs?”

“Yeah, if it’s after ten,” one answers.

“Why not?” chides the other. “Might as well make the most of that mattress of yours.”

Moments later, lights dimmed, the foursome settles in front of the TV set; Maddy and Jo, tucked one into the other while, shunning the lone armchair, Morgan and Christen stay on the rug, backs propped up by the sofa base.

Somewhere in the middle of the Australian desert, a mad, quirky family of the sort that is said to flourish in deserts. A young woman mesmerised by an allegedly libidinous Hindu guru. Too many young men. Christen can’t figure who each one is supposed to be; brother, neighbour, friend, boyfriend? An Exiter, a craggy has-been, hired to bring the young woman back to her senses.

Senses—Christen’s are disturbed, her attention totally scattered by Morgan’s proximity. Close enough to pick up the scent of his aftershave, the thoughts that have kept her awake at night, the same thoughts that argue that, if only she cared to think outside of the square, she could work at a relationship with him, these thoughts race back at dizzying speed. They make her heart pump faster, far too fast, triggering a pre-emptive swirl of adrenalin below her solar plexus though, clearly, she’s not in any physical danger.

Morgan shifts to allow her closer against him and shoulder against shoulder, together but separately, eyes locked on the TV screen, they create with growing urgency, and far behind their eyes, the details of their impending sex romp. Morgan shifts again and in the movement her hand slips against his groin.

“Oh sorry!” she whispers, annoyed at the thought that Morgan may think she is again forcing the issue of genital contact, albeit over his jeans.

He swivels to face her more squarely, “Wanna do that again?” he whispers back. “More slowly?”

Pushing back the hair from her eyes, she looks at him quizzically. His hand spreads over hers to lay it unequivocally over his fly.

Just as she frowns, unsure as to what he wants from her, her eyes widen in surprise. It’s the surprise of a softly resistant mound against the palm of her hand that’s startled her. His lips twitch into a

cat-grin. A pulse of desire flares up deep inside Christen as, hand cupped, she initiates a small circular motion. Morgan moans softly into her hair. She looks at him from under her eyelashes.

"Gotcha!" he grins quite pleased with himself. "Reality check: Even with *this* silicone cock ... arrived in the mail ... from the States," he says, lips touching the gleaming blond hair that borders her face, "it's the best money can buy ... but even with it on ... I really need a *bit* more ... uh ... more stimulation than that before I bliss out. It's not like it's battery powered or anything." His soft whispers hardly contain his boyish excitement. "So ... Sexy Lady ... what d'you think? Wanna help me road-test my new hot rod? Wanna meet the new *member* of my family?" He twitches his eyebrows. "Member? Get it? Huh? Huh?"

She removes her hand from his fly and considers him a moment before bringing her mouth to his earlobe. "Morgan," she whispers. "You're one mad dude."

"But?"

"But I think I could love you."

Hot breath inside the whorl of her ear. "You *think* you could?"

Gentle brown eyes smile at hers. For Christen, this smile comes from somewhere far, somewhere deep inside Morgan.

Another thought: other words, tiny words, already shaping her tongue, pushing against her teeth. "Morgan ... I ... " She hesitates on a slow, deep and deliberate breath. She breathes in to quieten the thought, to quieten the tiny words that have bubbled up on the tip of her tongue. Too soon. Too fast, she reasons.

She takes his face in her hands. "Yes, Morgan, I think I could love you."

Dear Reader,

You have enjoyed *Morgan In The Mirror* and so it is my pleasure to share with you excerpts from *Benchmarks* (available from www.ccsaintclair.com in its new format—a free and downloadable serialization), as well as excerpts taken from *North (Take II)* and *Silent Goodbyes*.

Warm regards

C.C.

North And Left From Here (Take II)
C.C. Saint-Clair

In between her sixth and seventh novels, Saint-Clair has released a second edition of her first book. *North and Left from Here (Take II)* is more streamlined than the original. 'Here' is Australia, and 'north and left' is the Europe of Alex's childhood, and the magnet for her current restlessness. Saint-Clair's introduction draws the reader into her story, which poetically describes one woman's journey and, in doing so, communicates the underlying universal issues.

Excerpt beginning on p. 80

Flamenco strains rippled energetically around the cabin. I opened my eyes and became aware of the changes in the terrain. The pine trees were more sparsely planted now. Roots and ruts were no longer hard and unyielding under the tyres. Villa Solidea wouldn't be far now.

Diana turned the volume down. "Alex," she called out softly, "Alex ... d'you realise that eight days from now I'll be handing my desk back to Mrs Butterworth?"

I would've liked to reply with something light and silly like, Hey, for some kids and teachers, that's bound to put a stop to a lot of wet dreams, you know, but more than the blush already hot on my cheeks at the thought of my own Diana-driven fantasies, it was the flat tone of her voice that kept me from a casual rejoinder.

The sea was there. My lantern-boat would have already dropped anchor somewhere amongst the flock of glowing lights that, like seagulls bobbing on a swell, had congregated at the furthest point of the sea. I watched Diana, though she kept her eyes fixed beyond the headlights, surprised that she would have been thinking about her departure at the same moment I had. "Yeah, I was just thinking about that too ... You know, about the end of your contract and all," I said honestly, but gingerly, too, as if walking on hot coal. "I mean, I thought about that ... earlier. So it's good, yes? Moving on and all that."

Though the radio whisper sounds were too low now that we were once again silent, neither of us moved to pump the volume back up. The speedometer needle oscillated between three and five kilometres an hour. The night sky peered through the trees.

"I ... I don't know," Diana replied after a while. She swept her hair back away from her forehead. "Uh, yes. Of course, it's cool. I was just thinking out loud."

"You keep on doin' just that, my lil' Honey-Bun," I drawled out, jokingly. "You're my chauffeur for the night. No fallin' asleep at the wheel. Not even with the excuse that we're only doing some six kilometres an hour."

Our silence settled once again inside the cabin but the quality of that silence had been altered.

"Tell you what. Soon as you park this here machine, the race is on. To the sea. Better yet, I'll race you *into* the sea."

Diana kept on peering beyond the headlights, but I could tell she was grinning. "Girl, you're on! Ah ... and by the way, that's what I ... like, *one* of the things ... I like about you."

"What is? I mean, what's that one particular ... thing ... you like about me?"

"Well ... I don't know. It's not just the *one* thing, really. I've enjoyed our times together, you know. A lot." She shifted into third gear. "But there's this duality in you that I find ... interesting. Paradoxes, no doubt, from conflicting previous lives."

"Previous lives, huh? Well, I wouldn't know about that." Gently mocking her contrived choice of word, I ventured, "What I find ... *interesting* about you is that you do exactly what you need to do to be *inside* your life, right into the present. You don't just watch it go by." Ahead, the Villa Solidea was glistening under a mantle of fairy lights. "Hey, we're home," I said, pointing out the obvious.

Diana turned off the ignition. From the terrace came the sound of a guitar strummed by pensive fingers. She switched off the headlights. I looked towards the beach. The flock of lantern boats had drifted parallel to the coastline. I pushed off the chrome side-step, and before Diana was even out of the cabin, I was tearing towards the surf, propelled by the need to be physical, to thrash around. To breathe. To float on my back. To close my eyes. To focus on the sound of water whooshing against my eardrums, and *only* on that. I heard the muffled pounding of Diana's boots on the sand only a few metres back, a couple of strides behind me. She overtook me but the sea already wrapped around our calves brought us down in a great splash.

“Now ... Alex ...” Diana said, spitting salty water sideways. “As a teacher ... you should know that *cheating* to get a headstart is not a nice ... thing to do, right?” She slipped under the water, but immediately shot upwards, smoothing her hair away from her forehead.

“*Well?*” she asked pointedly. The deep open V of Diana’s khaki shirt focused my eyes on her glistening throat. The wet cloth clung to her breasts. The mermaid of my childhood dreams. No, better than that—the adventurer of my adult fantasies.

With her hair flattened by the immersion, my eyes found it easier to focus on the structure of her face, on her high cheekbones, on the wide space between her eyes, on her lips, wet and smiling. And then, I could not *not* notice her breasts, nipples erect under the cotton weave of her shirt.

Oblivious to my roving eye, Diana asked again, this time with the tone of an admonishing teacher, “So, young *lady*, what have you got to say for yourself, uh?”

Pitifully aware that I couldn’t just stand mid-waist in the water and gaze at her forever, I attempted a rejoinder. “Well it’s like the old saying ... The one that says, Do as I say, not ... well, you know.” Tiptoeing on the soft sandy bottom, I bobbed up and down with the swell. “So, what you gonna *do* about—”

Diana once again ducked under the surface, pulled me under by the ankles. Thrashing and spluttering, I went down. Our bodies briefly tangled together and I thought of Ann back in the wheat fields of Texas, I thought of how I had desired Ann, too, keeping my desire secret. I remembered how we used to play-wrestle out of sexual tension. In an instant, my secret desire for Diana rippled hot and strong, low in my belly. The moment passed, though, without either one of us having said anything louder than the whisper of the pebbles at the water’s edge. Feeling awkwardly inept, I turned my attention to the churned up sand that had crept inside my clothes, inside the crotch of my jeans, against my neck, inside the collar of my shirt.

I unbuttoned my shirt, slipped it off my shoulders and watched it pool between us like a carmine petal of seawater. When it became too waterlogged to float anymore, I wrung it free of water and slapped it over one shoulder.

“Hey,” Diana called out softly.

I stopped breathing. Caught in the moonlight, the roundness of her breasts had the sheen and smoothness of caramel. Her nipples were erect under the caress of the breeze. I swallowed to crank-start my breathing. She had unbuttoned her own shirt and it wanted to float away from her.

Toes dug into the shifting sand, I could've touched her from where I was. I could've moved closer, much closer, but I didn't. Instead, I flopped backwards into the sea and squeezed my eyes shut.

In the darkness behind my eyes, skin to skin, Diana was against me, naked, her back against my breasts, her hair draped over a shoulder in a heavy coil, the nape of her neck offered to my lips. Softly, as softly as the breeze, I caressed her breasts, a nipple. Supple and firm, it rubbed against the palm of my hand. I tasted the salty water trapped inside the whorl of her ear like inside a seashell and Diana made herself heavier inside my embrace.

I cupped her breasts. My hands glided over them. Over one, then the other. The palms of my hands, delighted by their weight, by their plump softness became bolder and moved against her ribs, over her stomach. I felt the soft, yielding hollow of her belly button under the ball of my thumb. My hands glided over more of her.

My heart pounding against her shoulder, her hip curved hard against my splayed fingers, her butt pressed against my thighs, I had to glide lower. My craving for the caress of her curls, for the silken— A deep-throated groan escaped from my lips.

Oh, fuck! Did she hear that? Alarmed, I thrashed into a spluttering upright position only to let myself sag and sink into the swell, clitoris seriously on fire, heart thumping too fast and disoriented by too jarring a break from the heat of my fantasy.

When I did come up for air, Diana was still standing only a couple of metres away from me. "You need to do that more often, you know," she said.

"Do what?" I grumbled, senses erratic with frustrated desire, senses irritated by my real-time inaction. "What? Float on my back and splutter?"

I was totally unimpressed with myself. Why didn't I just breach what little distance still separated us and grab her, huh? Why didn't I just topple her, right there and then, in the warm ebb and flow of the sea? Why couldn't I just make myself do that, huh, instead of fanta-

sising about touching her, wet and glistening, as she stood only an arm's reach away from me? What the fuck was wrong with me?

"Yeah, floating on your back, that's nice, therapeutic and all," she said wiping her face with two hands, "but I meant the whole thing. Play in the sea. Get dunked. Float half-naked in the moonlight. You should let yourself go more often. That little child inside you needs to feel free, to come out and play."

Groan. "Yeah, right." The fire of desire shifted, daring me to interpret her words as a dare, but what, at the time, I really wanted the most was for that desire to dissipate in the surf. I really needed that just as I needed to go to Diana, to lay my hand on her collarbone and rest my thumb in the hollow at the base of her throat. I needed to be closer to her so that she'd cover my lips with her own. Oh! Is that what it's about? I asked myself. I can't make myself take that first step? I just can't risk the humiliation of a rejection, not even that of a rebuke.

When Diana reached for my hand over the swell, it didn't dawn on me that she, too, may have been waiting for me to take charge. It didn't dawn on me because I knew, I just knew that someone like Diana, someone who is so into the moment, someone like her makes things happen. Someone like her doesn't wait for someone like me to decide whether it is safe for the little snail that I am to cross the highway.

So Diana held out her hand and I took it as she led me back to the sand. I willed my hand not to tighten around hers. It would've been so easy for my hand over hers, to tug a little, to bring her closer, to lie her down on the wet sand and make love to her. Stay cool, I admonished myself. It's just not worth it. She'll soon be on her way, out of here on a jet plane and you'll be stuck here, all on your own ... with a broken heart.

Diana let go of my hand. We wriggled back into dripping wet shirts. With hers simply tied in a knot above the navel, she was one of those gorgeous James Bond girls—statuesque, golden—stepping out of the sea.

Somewhat empty, somewhat pleased with myself, I thought of the little lantern boat. My wish for the sexual tension to remain but me to not yield to it, had just been granted.

After a quick shower, I made my way to the terrace. Ramón was still making love to his guitar, his long and sensitive fingers making the strings vibrate till they gave him all the languor they had to give.

A free-standing crystal candelabra cast gleeful sparks all around but most particularly on the marble-topped table that had been set for two, in a corner facing the sea. In the distance, the smattering of fishing boats was a handful of wicks alight in the depth of night.

“*Aquí estan! No les han comido los pescadotes?*” asked Ramón jovially, fingers flat across the strings of his guitar.

“Nah, all’s well. We’ve just made it back from the port,” Diana replied behind me. “Not too late for your music, Ramonitó? And Margarita’s tapas?”

“*Claró que no. A mi, la musica me tocá siempre.*” The music always played *him*, he said. “*Y la Margarita, ya viene.* She see you ... on the beach. She bring now the best tapas you ever eat,” he said to me. “You see after first bite.”

And so it came to pass—midnight at Villa Solidea.

The following morning I woke up early and opened the shutters for a view of the sea. First, my heart lurched, then I thought of our colleague, Dan, back at school, and how he had speculated about whether Diana’s tan was an all-body one, and how he had bragged about being the one most likely to find out firsthand. Well, I grinned, maybe I should put all of those horny dudes out of their misery. Maybe I should be the one to confirm that Diana’s tan was, as we say in French, undeniably and totally *integral*—flawless from head to toe. There she was, splendid in profile, lying on her stomach, face turned to the sea, hair in one gold braid twisted on itself, totally amber, totally golden. Only the soles of her feet, immune to tanning, remained pink.

I had intended to quietly soak in the vista without approaching her but she had become aware of my presence on the terrace. “Morning, young Alex. How was your night?”

“Slept like a baby. This place is so great, Diana. A parcel of paradise, really.”

“Ah yes, indeed.” Leaning on her forearms, she half-raised herself the better to look at me. Her breast, even in profile was full, firm and golden all over. “And you know what?” she continued,

“Because I’ve done absolutely nothing to deserve this parcel of paradise, every day I thank the cosmos for that special karma that’s allowing me to access this and all the rest, uh, you know ... through my father. But, between you and me,” she lowered her tone, “Alex, I bet it’s all thanks to the many incarnations that have preceded me to earth, you know, to their spiritual enlightenment and all that.”

I chuckled, recognising the topic of an earlier conversation on my terrace, back in Palma, during which I had, in vain, tried to make her guilty of the crime of enjoying the freedom allowed her by her father’s wealth.

Some time later that morning, I *did* ultimately get to run my hands along Diana’s finely-muscled back and feel the smoothness of her sun-warmed skin against the palms of my hands. But only because she had asked me to apply some sunscreen to her back.

“Alex! For chrissake, ease up! This is not meant to be a pummelling massage,” she mumbled, face hidden in the crook of her arm.

Benchmarks
C.C. Saint-Clair

Set in the Montmartre district of Paris, the French snowfields, and the Riviera, *Benchmarks* is a lyrical meditation on female desire focused on an ultimately unattainable release.

“Benchmarks: the wrong circumstances, the right person; how many of us know this situation? I do! I never want to experience these emotions again, but life isn’t something that anyone can ever totally control. C.C. Saint-Clair has the ability to evoke emotions and feelings—powerfully!”

J.M. Wright

“Sensual, evocative prose. The desire that draws Alex and Adrienne to each other is palpable but, so, too, is the brutality and raw injustice that Saint-Clair has fragmented around it.”

Madeleine G. Sorrento

Excerpt begins on p. 6

Paris, 10 January
Alex,

Last night, *ta première lettre*. It was alone in my mailbox. I can’t keep from answering. But only this once, if you don’t wish to get involved in a correspondence.

I felt you pull away, I understand why; I should do the same but I can’t. How could you move away, just before you left, from our whirlwind of conflicting emotions?

Your bouquet of tulips has exploded in its own fireworks similar to the one I’ve experienced during the last ten days.

I hope you won’t find me either over the top or too forward, but I’ll be honest and say that our incomplete physical contacts have left me totally unsatisfied and my imagination is, well, all over the place. You, you don’t write about things like that and yet you leave me in a strange state of sexual limbo. I don’t know if I should be ...

euphoric or melancholy. The thing is that even my neighbourhood feels different now.

You're ready for a new chunk of life in France, in Nice. Maybe I'm already a ghost in your memory. I imagine you, still walking by my side with those long strides of yours, used as you are to less busy sidewalks and open space, face to the sky. From what you say, too, the people of your town in Australia don't walk their dogs much through downtown streets. I imagine that not being wary of what one might step on would be liberating to anyone's stride. I remember how you looked up at the eighteenth century facades and their slate roofs as they line the avenue to the place I only know now as our parc Monceau.

They're very beautiful, but I had stopped seeing these facades a great many years ago. Had I ever seen them the way you did?

Alex, if you still wish for us to stop writing know that, at the very least, I won't forget any one of our moments. I was ecstatic, energised, electrified during those unexpected ten days. You thought I was adorable; I adored you. Never forget any of this. At least, hold on to it a little longer. Will this letter disappoint you? I've learned yours by heart. I learn you a lot faster than I ever did English, and with so much more pleasure!

As it is, I had heard a few little things about you, as told by some who had known you, in different times, in different places. Sometimes Sophie, my Sophie, would show me a letter she'd just received. When she brought Elisabethette into our little group of friends, quite a few years ago now, it was clear that Eli still held fond memories of you and her in Spain. But of course, she could still give a mean rendition of how you'd dropped her for a younger one. I guess she was young and vulnerable at the time. Nineteen was she? *Si jeune*. Either that or we're getting old. Well, I am getting old. No, I can say that better; I was getting old until I came across you. Now, as I said, I'm energised.

Anyway, during that first evening with you I discovered another Alex, first-hand: an Alex whom I haven't yet been able to absorb at leisure. And might never.

My past, such as it is, my roots and my experiences, have always been my sustenance, my level-headedness. They gave me inner strength when faced with chaos. So I hope that, as in the

months ahead, too, they'll come to my rescue. Anyway, the point is that this incomplete feeling in regard to the short time spent with you, already part of my past, only makes me long for more. I kiss you.

Alex, *je t'embrasse* with infinite tenderness.

N'oublies pas trop tôt.

Adrienne

In a flutter of wings, white with light; stick-red claws guiding their landing, seagulls fly in to pick at the crumbs abandoned on bleached roof tiles of the beach bungalow below. The air vibrates, tormented by their graceful, frenetic wings. Facing the sea of the much photographed and filmed Baie des Anges, in Nice, I now see it already alight with the sparkles that will later scatter upwards towards the night sky. I find you on this, the first page of a very thick notebook, wanting to share this moment of beauty with you, my pen as channeler.

Ever since Sophie, and you, Adrienne, accompanied me to the airport for the last leg of my homecoming journey and my eyes lost sight of you around the bend of that dreadful satellite corridor, you have remained by my side.

Ironically, as the plane inched towards my almost forgotten relatives, already on their way to welcome me, one of the two major reasons for the twenty thousand-kilometre journey, reunion with them no longer filled my heart and mind. The mixture of apprehension and joy that had been with me since I had made up my mind to break from my life in Australia was no longer focused on them, during that one hour flight from Paris to Nice.

I was already full of you, my heart constricted by dread and guilt at the thought of you. You, the lover and partner of my long-time friend, Sophie, a friend with whom, good year, bad year, I had maintained a friendship, though mostly through the peaks and troughs of an enduring, intercontinental correspondence. Yes, you, Adrienne, the love of her life I had read about on numerous occasions during the past ten years! You, still unknown to me until a few days ago.

"Let me introduce you to Adrienne. *Addy, pour les copines!*" With these innocuous little words, Sophie brought you into my life in a way none of us could have foreseen.

She was so happy to finally have us acquainted with each other, to introduce me to the woman who had made her happy and

secure for the past decade. She had not changed much; she still carried on in that larrikin way of hers and had not lost any of her strongly accented Parisian intonation. I knew she could still keep her audience of friends spellbound when she sang Piaf. And as Piaf, she was still as thin as the tiny resilient birds that carry the same name. I had been happy to read in her letters that she had finally found a comfortable niche within a trusting relationship, she, to whom life had not often been kind. Not until it had brought the two of you together.

With a twinge of guilt as I hugged her, I remembered that more recently I had stopped reading her letters thoroughly. I was happy enough, by quickly skimming her lines, to know she was well. What I had retained was that she was happy with you, a woman of sound character called Adrienne, a lawyer specialising in international law, and that Sophie, herself, enjoyed a relative harmony within her own professional framework.

I would merely glance at the pictures of the two of you she would send at the end of each of your summer holidays. I had not consciously focused on any of your traits and would have found it impossible to recognise you, had you not been by Sophie's side.

And so we met. You, a Parisian *femme d'affaires*; the cut and style of your clothes gave that away at first glance. Friendly, warm; your eyes gave that away as we shook hands. I had no other thoughts except the wish to sit down and fight off the encroaching jetlag with a tumbler of whisky on the rocks and immerse myself in the syncopated start and stop conversations of friends excited to be reunited and eager to reconnect.

Elisabette, Eli as she now wants to be called, was there, too, with Isabelle, her new lover. In fact, the poor things had had to leave the warmth of their bed and each other at dawn to greet me at the Charles de Gaulle airport en provenance de Tokyo. And Eli had arranged to let me have her little flat all to myself for the length of my stay.

"I spend most of the week nights at Isa's anyway. She's got a movie channel. We just love watching films in bed, all cuddled up. So no big deal," she had written at the time my trip to Paris was still at the planning stages.

Women connecting, sharing memories and anecdotes, cocooned by the wood panels of the little alcove where Sophie had

sat us, cocooned by the lace of drifting smoke and the din of Parisians socialising in the brasserie Chez Lipp.

Now that all possible grudges lay buried under the gossamer layer of time, Sophie, Eli and I were exhilarated by the proximity of each other. We were reunited like the survivors of a shipwreck: happy and relieved the count was right, that everyone had survived the passage of years with only minor emotional wounds, either already healed or well on their way.

You all pressed me for more details of events that I had penned, possibly absent-mindedly, in my letters to Sophie. Humdrum day-to-day stuff: a little on school life and its inherent 'modern' problems; usually very little on my private life except the occasional admission to loneliness, on a particularly low day. Sometimes a couple of pages would not have been enough, as I tried to be convincing, or rather was convinced that I had finally found love. So, now, months or years later, through the smoky gauze of Chez Lipp, cobwebs and memories were lifted on request, from the pages of my heart, and revived.

And then: " ... to chase the monotonous grey of our little Parisian lives," as you put it, you asked about Australia. So I explained how, some three days earlier, I lay floating on my Lilo, liquefied by the thirty-three-degree post-New Year heat, comfortably living in the Western suburbs of Brisbane. So comfortable, in fact, that one day I had had the sudden urge to break that stifling comfort and had applied for an undetermined leave of absence from work to come back here, back to France. My aim at the time had been simple; I had had a sudden craving to rediscover the little but beautiful country that France is and, at the same time, discover the handful of relatives I had once known, on my father's side. Him included.

And the moment came when the ticket booked on QANTAS months earlier needed only the final good wishes of one last celebration with my good friends. I was toasted, hugged, farewelled and waved at, till only the deserted corridor tugged at my heels. The final boarding call had forced a hasty conclusion to the last minute advice and recommendations friends always seem to have for the one who strays away from the safety of the flock on the wings of a big white bird.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Paris, 18 January

Alex,

Te voilà. Well, here you are ... closer to me when I place an empty white sheet of paper in front of me and superimpose on it an image of you. A one-way conversation is better than nothing. A good friend of mine used to say: little pants fit little behinds. I have my own understanding of that line and yes, it fits the occasion.

Yesterday, your letter was waiting for me, amongst many in my mailbox. I spotted your handwriting as I flipped through the bundle. The truth is I was looking for it. I had been waiting for it, you see. Though I desperately wanted to tear it open while waiting for the lift, I couldn't. Sophie was right next to me. She had picked me up from work and was going to spend the night, as she normally does two or three times a week. Many years ago, you see, we agreed that neither one of us really felt absolutely compelled to a life under the same roof ... with anyone. By then, I already had my apartment and she had hers. I loved mine and she loved hers and so we agreed that there was no need to sell or rent off either one of them. There was no real call for us to always be thrown together, all the time and forever. But we do spend at least half of the weeknights together, in one apartment or the other. And of course every minute of the weekends.

I always love having her pad around in my flat, but last night I resented her presence. That scared me. That had never happened before. The urge to tear that envelope open scared me. It was not reasonable. I didn't want to sneak it into the bathroom. I didn't want to read it in a hurry. My distress at knowing I wouldn't be able to read it, without betraying it, or you, or me, scared me too.

Imagine, if you can, the inexplicable exasperation in which I slapped our breakfast together the next morning. It was only once inside the over-crowded metro compartment that I reached inside my coat pocket. The inside one. Ah yes, you did like my green coat. How appropriate then, to have made it, as opposed to any of my other coats or jackets, the guardian of our secret.

Careful not to poke the old woman jammed against my arm, I tore the envelope with my teeth as discreetly as possible, one hand holding on to the overhead strap while the other extricated your folded letter, my heart lurching in rhythm with the carriage.

Mon dieu, the state I'm in today! Two grey eyes set on the rim of Sophie's large breakfast cup; she asked if you had remembered to leave us your father's phone number in Nice. I nodded that you had, trying hard to focus on the tiny trails of butter that were forming on either side of the blade, as I ran the knife across a piece of toasted baguette. When I did look up, I sensed a painful dawning behind her lowered eyelids. You had forgotten to give it to her, your friend, because your conscious or unconscious priority was that I should have it: I, who quite uncharacteristically, I'm sure she remembers the moment, had blurted out how beautiful you looked in her purple jacket; I, who by two a.m. the following morning, the time of her last phone call to my flat, had not yet returned from my dinner with you. That was on the night she had trusted me to entertain you while she was busy. That was the night that had turned into that 'horrible dawn'. Dawning desire already frustrated. Never able to be replayed. Never able to be played out better.

Alex, I'll never be able to hurt her. She notices my changes in mood though she doesn't prod me for information. Somehow, her silence changes into a burden, you know, *un poids*, what might otherwise only be an electrifying infatuation with someone that I simply can't have. You.

Sophie doesn't say anything anymore but after your plane had left, she joked, 'Is it because we've just seen our little Australian friend to her plane that you look that way?'

I should've asked, 'And what way is that?' I didn't because I knew. I should've managed a real smile. I should've peeled my eyes away from the rear bumper on the black Audi that seemed to be pulling us forward as we crawled back towards Paris, caught as we were in yet another traffic jam on the Périphérique. All I felt able to do was slide a side-glance in her direction and mumble something like maybe it was. But very quickly I added, 'It was fun having her here. We all enjoyed the change in routine. Now we'll get back to our normal work-a-day schedule, and it might seem a little tight ... for a while. A little like when we come back from holidays.' It's then that maybe I made another mistake. Though I smiled at her it was one of my everything-will-be-all-right smiles. What did I need to reassure her about?

You know her story, Alex, in the broad lines; you know I'm all she has. She's always been a loner since childhood, a lonely child with a great big burden to drag everywhere. As an adult she's never

been able to forgive her mother for not having protected her at the time. The old woman died a couple of years ago and still Sophie could not bring herself to go to the funeral. And of course her brother would have been there too, though well into his sixties by then.

She cried but not when she heard the news. She only cried on the day of the funeral. She didn't go to work on that day. She didn't want me to stay with her either.

Tu vois, Alex, I'll never be able to tell her anything at all about us. What worries me the most is the need for total secrecy, the impossibility of being transparent. The fear that maybe, one day, I might betray the trust she's invested in me, that's really what my panic is about. Because I know that it's only with me, finally that she's learnt to trust. What scares me, too, is knowing that you come and you go. You're a footloose spirit. And that I'd live each day in constant fear of the first look of indifference I'd see in your eyes, one day. But that's another story.

Time, more time is all we needed but couldn't have. *Le temps, normalement, il y en a de trop*, but in our case we just didn't have enough of it. How can we test the difference between a new love and an *attirance*, an infatuation I think it's called, if all we can do is write secretly about it? The only thing I know for sure is that I'd never be able to build another relationship over Sophie's pain and sorrow. That's the only certainty I have to hold on to at the moment.

I have your letter right here, on my desk. I've memorised every word. I try to remember your tone, too, from what I remember of your voice, of your eyes, of your smile.

I kiss you *avec une tendresse infinie*.

Adrienne

The thick ledger-like notebook is cool under the palm of my hand, inseparable companion of the last few days. Waking hours, sleep-walking nights filled and challenged only by thoughts of you, by the ghost of our prematurely amputated love. You, Adrienne, vulnerable and raw on the eve of my departure as some moral scruple plummeted behind the frail chestnut veil of your eyes. You, from whom I have had to wean myself the second I found the other you, the 'you' I had

not, until then, seen, not yet sensed. The 'you' not yet unveiled. And then, only seventy-two hours remained.

Seventy-two hours in which to try to deal with our awesome discovery; to let the tenderness of your face invade my heart, to allow the burst of euphoria to course through my belly. Squash it! Flatten it under its weight of guilt and lust! But how? Not a minute on our own to acknowledge and contain the wave of desire that washed over us with the violence of a flash-flood as it courses on a parched desert bed. Silent sparks of sexual arousal, painful in their intensity, crackled as my eyes locked with yours. And already then, at the second of our reckoning, our hearts began to shrink with guilty apprehension, strong in the knowledge of what could not be.

Back at Le Chicago bar in Paris. It had become our meeting place around 7.30 p.m., giving each of you time to leave work and fight your respective traffic jams. That allowed me to go back to Eli's little flat above Avenue de Turennes after I had scoured the streets of Paris for most of the day and enjoy a shower and a read before setting out for our evenings together.

But earlier on that particular day, a Sunday, the four of you had taken me on a day trip to Provins some eighty kilometres away, on the outskirts of the capital. Sophie had parked the car on a little esplanade and we were getting ready to begin our stroll. I remember fumbling with the buttons of the padded jacket she had lent me in anticipation of a crisper winter morning, once away from Paris. I remember its colour well: a deep shade of royal purple. My gloved fingers had become furry and clumsy with the buttons. Intent on my task as any pre-schooler learning to tie shoelaces, I heard your voice.

'Tu es belle dans cette couleur. That colour really suits you!'

I turned around, surprised to realise the compliment had been addressed to me. I smiled at you, quickly, shyly. Instinctively I knew that I could not maintain eye contact or should not linger by the car. Instead, on my own, I began the gentle climb to the heart of the village, while the four of you were still preparing to make the ascent.

I have rewound my memory to the only private dinner conversation we have ever had, back to the moment when you had

explained, leaning toward me, your small cashmere clad breasts almost brushing the foamy whiteness of your dessert, “You know, Alex, when I saw you in Provins, looking so healthy, still golden from the Australian sun with that deep purple of the jacket as a backdrop, I felt my legs go under. How can I say? I lost my breath, just like that. Totally unexpected. Never saw it coming. And when you turned to face the old trail, I simply had to ask though to no one in particular, ‘*Où elle va, comme ça*, in such a hurry?’”

I had heard your question so I replied, without turning back to you, that I was getting a headstart, that I was going to breathe in the musky smell of the old stones. And off I strode, leaving you below with Sophie, Eli and Isa.

And now you added with a little girl lost expression, ‘I just stood there, alone and *désorientée*.’ You looked down, embarrassed by this impromptu confession. Yet you added a detail that constricted my throat: ‘Then I realised Sophie was looking at me, vaguely puzzled, an odd kind of smile in her eyes. Now, I know I should’ve paid more attention to that smile of hers. *J’aurais dû faire plus attention*.’

Adrienne, I did not tell you then, or did I, that a short while later Eli had caught up with me?

‘Well, well, my friend. I see you haven’t lost your touch, she said, zipping her jacket all the way up to her pale chin. I looked at her quizzically. ‘You’ve obviously made quite an impression down there.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Oh, c’mon! Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed. On Addy, of course!’ She moved closer to me as if to peer into my eyes while mimicking you, ‘*Tu es belle dans cette couleur*. You heard her. This colour suits you beautifully. That’s what she said down there.’ She skipped ahead, then turned around, stopping dead in her tracks. ‘I’ve never heard Addy comment on what any of us might have been wearing. Ever.’ Then, half-joking, half-serious, she had poked me in the middle of the chest, in warning. ‘Alex, this one’s not for you. Remember, she’s Sophie’s partner. They love each other. And they’ve been at it for a long time.’

‘I know. It’s lovely to see. But why are you being silly. I know, you’re just jealous ...’ I had replied jokingly, though amazed she could perceive something I had only just realised myself. Unsure if I needed to be wary of her perceptiveness I simply added, ‘... because purple is one colour that does nothing for your pale, English rose com-

plexion and you know it. Purple and yellow.' Humour had often rescued me from tight corners. Eli grinned back at me. Without the confirmation she had sought, she shrugged a kind of truce and stopped to admire the tiny chapel, in silence, while waiting for the three of you to catch up with us.

Le Chicago Bar was in full swing: the air around us moved in smoky patterns but it was another well-chosen venue.

"What a day!" I said to Eli, as I sat back on the well-worn leather sofa.

"Damn right!" she smiled. "Must say, I've surprised myself during these last few days. Now, I know that when I lose my ranking at squash I can always reinvent myself and become a tour guide specialising in medieval villages for Australian tourists!" Eli playfully punched me in the arm.

"That's a thought. In the meantime, remind me not to forget your tip. Actually," I added as I got up, "the first round is on this 'Australian' visitor. Orders everyone. We'll get a head-start on Sophie."

When I came back from the bar, I came in on the tail-end of a conversation about Sophie.

"Well, not that long to go now that she's decided to retire. Next year, right? Good on her, really," Isa was talking to Eli. "Who wants to go on working, forever and ever, for a guy like that who needs constant propping up, huh?" We all turned to you for a reaction to the fact that Sophie had had to rush home, with only enough time for a quick shower and a change of clothes. But you remained silent, staring into the burgundy depth of your glass.

Earlier that afternoon, when the car phone had beeped on the way back from Provins, you all let out a synchronised groan and Sophie had looked at you with a silent warning to remain quiet. She picked up the receiver with one hand, keeping the other supple on the steering wheel.

I guessed you all knew who this obviously unwelcome caller might be. Eli moved her head in the direction of the phone, making her green eyes wider and round for emphasis, while her lips exaggerated the contour of her whispered words. 'It's him again ... her boss!' I

looked blank and she added, 'He always does that. Calling Sophie at home, after hours, on weekends. It's like he can't decide anything without her.' Eyebrows cocked in surprise, I nodded that I had understood the gist of what she had said and Isa joined in *sotto voce*.

'According to Sophie ... he's bored with his home life so ... he fancies himself as a workaholic. But the thing is he's not competent enough ... to make any real decisions on his own. He's a *foutu* director, you know, a regional director. I mean ... really!' She shook her head in mock disbelief. Strands of blond hair fanned and twisted on either side of her face, 'So, when something needs doing but he can't handle it ... because he doesn't know how, he calls Sophie to the rescue. And she bails him out ... every time. Because she's nice.'

'That and the fact she feels sorry for him.' At this point, you had turned towards me where I sat squashed in the back seat, and added in a tone of low exasperation, 'It's been going on like that for the past five years. He doesn't seem to have learnt much during all that time, though.' You looked pointedly at her profile but, though I think her eyes had crinkled in what might have been a smile, if seen front on, she had remained intent on her conversation, and focused on the curves and bends of the black and white ribbons of the road ahead.

So, you had come on your own to Le Chicago Bar and Sophie, as agreed, would meet us at Le Prince Noir restaurant, a little later. You and I would later pinpoint this as both a fated and a fatal absence on her part.

In Provins we had inhaled the musty smell of mist rising over ancient moss-stained stones. We had stood still as the old bell tower called vespers, for miles around, as it had over the centuries. We had followed the uneven, steep cobbled streets, wide enough only for donkey and cart. We had strolled on the restored battlements of the fortified village, a storybook village forgotten by the passing of time, that I had dreamed about while basking under the lavender shade of a jacaranda tree, back in Australia.

The Chicago waiter, decked out in a suit that could have been Al Capone's favourite, brought my round of drinks to the table and over the din that filled the bar on this Sunday night, we resumed our friendly banter.

Eli stretched out her long legs. "I can't tell, anymore, if they feel taut or jelly-like. All I know is that they're lead-heavy from so much

walking.” She rubbed a calf muscle and grinned, “I won’t have any problems falling asleep tonight.” Then, she added screwing up her eyebrows, “You’d think that considering the numbers of squash games I put in every week, I’d be immune to leg tiredness!”

“It must have been the steep walk up to the rampart that did it, you know, when you caught up with me?” I could not resist another little jab.

“It’s a different type of exercise, you know,” I added, tousling her shiny, dark curls. She snuggled a little closer to me, all aggression of earlier seemingly evaporated, as I added, one arm folded around her shoulders, “That’s all very well, but I know you will all be happy to return to your normal routine in a couple of days.” I was acknowledging that none of you had had more than a couple of waking hours to yourselves since my arrival a week earlier. You had taken turns suggesting interesting and varied activities to keep me entertained after your work hours.

Leaving me to my own initiative during the day, the four of you had planned to accompany me on evening and sightseeing activities for each night I would spend in Paris. And while I lazed around each morning, before tackling the Louvre, or the Musée Rodin in search of the Danaïde the master had carved in the shape of Camille Claudel, the four of you got ready for work, stale smoke still trapped under your eyelids.

And so, later on this particular night we had left the smoky *ambiance* of Le Chicago and had made our way to the restaurant where Sophie was due to catch up with us. And so we were seated at yet another table, tucked away in a side room of Le Prince Noir.

“In about seventy-two hours, I’ll already be back on the plane to Nice, on my way towards ... I’m not sure what.”

A little sigh had escaped from my lips and for some reason I looked in your direction. I could have made eye contact with Isa or with Eli who were seated opposite me, across the white expanse of cloth, but no, I turned slightly to the left as I made myself more comfortable on the hard Bentwood seat. And I saw you! I sensed, more than saw, a twinge of pain cross your face and instinctively I knew that that look was somehow related to my imminent departure for Nice. And through the unfortunate phenomenon of osmosis I met you right there, on the edge of the beckoning void that swirled upward as it

wrapped itself around our ankles, reaching for our bellies to better pull us into its clutches.

Momentarily disoriented, I was brought back to the conversation by the peripheral awareness of Eli. She looked away as she felt me about to pull away from you. I glanced back at you; your eyes trapped mine and held them tightly, for the space of a nano-second which stretched into infinity. If we had effectively arrested time, Eli, not affected by our time warp had caught up with us. Somehow, I had become aware of her silent encroachment and wrenched my eyes away from yours. In a mad attempt to protect you, I reached for my glass and tapped its rim against hers.

“To us and to yet another great day! *A nous et à Sophie!* To us.”

Sophie did join us shortly afterwards. She made her way around the table giving each one of us a hearty *bise* on one cheek before settling on the chair left vacant for her between Isa and you. I remember thinking then that the cold imprint left on her cheek by the winter wind blowing outside felt as cold against my lips as the knot of ice suddenly lodged under my solar plexus.

The only other thing I remember of that evening are my desperate efforts at avoiding Eli’s prodding looks, as she peered at me through her thick eyelashes, every time she lowered her head. I sensed she was trying to lock me in a silent confirmation that she had, indeed, interpreted correctly the essence of what she had caught in mid-air, just then, and earlier, with the purple jacket incident.

But the conversation resumed around the table. Isa told us about an article she had recently read in *Le Monde* newspaper about the rising number of rapes of young boys and how our Western laws and our societal attitude were both antiquated and blind in regards to these occurrences.

“Apparently,” she said, loosely paraphrasing the article, “It’s not just the well-being of men in jails and of young men living on the edge that is at stake here. What seems to be the latest concern for social welfare groups, here in Europe and in the States, is the rising incidence of boy rape. It seems that more and more little ones are raped either by a parent, by a trusted other for paedophilic sex, even by their male siblings. Boys from five to fifteen seem to have become a new ‘at risk’ group in regards to rape.”

“Welcome to what’s been a female reality for—”

“What’s new, really?” said Eli cutting in on Sophie. “The world’s been turning a blind eye to the on-going rape of women over the centuries,” she added, looking sideways at me.

“I assumed that it’s because rape, like menstruation, like birth, are undervalued or devalued like most other women-related issues.”

“Okay! So, okay, the good news for females is that maybe, just maybe, now that the issue of little boy rape has hit the headlines our lawmakers and our hospital staff and our neighbours might start paying attention.” You spoke looking carefully at Sophie first and then at Eli across the table from you.

“A new set of victims but the same old story,” I replied, intent on the embossed pattern of the tablecloth. “You know, it’s never really been much of a ‘Stranger Danger’ thing. That’s the ‘bumper sticker’ leitmotif used in the Australian media,” I explained. “It’s probably the universal Anglo expression used to warn children away from strangers who might hurt them. I am sure you have the equivalent here. Like warning kids against getting in a car or being led away by someone they don’t know, even if that person tells them, ‘your mummy sent me’ and so on.”

“*Ah, c’est facile!*” Sophie snapped with the classic Gallic throw of hands. “Don’t look too close to home; you might not like what’s there! ‘Beware the Males you Trust,’ is what the bumper sticker should be about. They, the trusted males, they’re still the aggressors of girls. Of women.”

I saw the way you looked at her but she had already turned to Isa who was pursuing her point.

“Quite true. Any kind of violence. Not just physical,” Isa added, “If it weren’t for them ... ” suggesting that the world would be a better place if men, on the whole, had evolved differently.

“Maybe that could work, too, as bumper sticker philosophy now that it’s no longer cool to wish they should all be sent to the moon.”

“Yeah, it’s a sad world all right but all the same, I don’t think these incidents involving either boys or young men need to be called rape.”

Silence, then a pause. You all looked at me but it was you who eventually asked, “Well, what should they be called then?”

“Hey, call me territorial,” I replied as light-heartedly as I could, “but I think the term ‘rape’ should be ... like saved for what it’s always been referring to: the forced penetration of a female by a male.”

“What does it matter who endures the ‘forced penetration’ as you say? A victim’s a victim,” Sophie said categorically, following the traditional line of thinking.

“Absolutely. I am not trying to belittle what is happening to boys or innocent men who have never dished out violence to anyone. But as far as I can see these sexual aggressions already have a name. Predating the writing of the Bible. These are called acts of sodomy. They can also be called anal rape. But not just rape.”

“What you mean is that rape is a woman’s ... *prerogative*.” You smiled on the last word. Did you actually see my point or were you simply diplomatically playful?

“Something like that.”

“*Mais enfin*, a rape is a rape, *non*? And it doesn’t matter what it’s done with either. A bottle, a broom or a finger ... anywhere.” Sophie was not disposed to differentiate between one type of sexual violation and another. Yes, both were against the will of the penitente.

“Is it a matter of anatomy, then?” Isa suggested as she filled up our five glasses, one by one.

“For me, yes. Absolutely. That article you read, Isa, is about what is happening to males, younger and older, and it clearly has to do with the forced penetration of someone’s anal ... anal ... duct. *L’anus*,” I explained, gently trying to modalise and remain neutrally distant from the topic. “While rape is the forced penetration of someone’s vaginal duct. *Le vagin*. Men, be they little or bigger or older, simply do not have ‘vaginal ducts’ or uteruses for anyone to penetrate.”

“Okay, maybe. It’s a matter of semantics,” I threw in, conciliatory.

“Semantics and anatomy,” I heard you confirm softly. I looked up as you accepted the basket of bread Sophie was passing you.

“But what does *viol* or rape really mean, etymologically speaking?” Eli asked us.

“Does it truly only refer to a vaginal penetration?” No one knew for sure. But we all thought we should look that up.

“Well, yeah, sure but besides that, I mean who knows what they call it in Russian or in Bambara? My point is, why should women, now, have to share this word with male victims, whatever word has

been used for centuries and across the world to refer to that very specific victimisation of the female kind?”

“*C’est vrai. Depuis les hommes des cavernes ...* since cave-men clubbed women on the head to drag them back to their cave,” Isa looked at you as she spoke, “since the billion maidens raped as war bounty from antiquity to now, even without mentioning what goes on—”

“In our civilised streets—”

“And in their homes and yeah, the act of rape has always been perpetrated by dominant males and inflicted on ‘weaker’ females.”

“Or weakened females,” I added dryly. “But anyway, what’s wrong with sodomy as an alternative noun?”

My thoughts lingered around the issue well after we had moved on to other topics, caught on the thorn of rape as surely as by a line of barbed wire. I couldn’t just move on as the rest of you did. Not with my own understanding of what the word ‘rape’ meant to me, perhaps even to most female rape victims, we who, despite our separate histories, were united by the common bond of survival.

Later that night, you and Sophie dropped me back to Eli’s flat. I was thankful she was sleeping over at Isa’s, glad to be alone with my thoughts. I stayed up by the window but not to rest my head against the cold pane as I had done the night before. Not to replay your smile, the chestnut warmth of your eyes. I did not try to imagine you asleep, Sophie’s head on your shoulder. I did not imagine you at all. Instead I listened to the sounds of Paris at night and I tumbled back in time through a dim tunnel of swirling dark violence.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Silent Goodbyes
C.C. Saint-Clair

Romance With Substance

“Erotic dreams have always been, in retrospect, the first symptoms that my heart was no longer in tune with my mind. They are the first moments of an often long string of silent goodbyes.”

Emilie

“Silent Goodbyes is an insightful, clever and descriptive work of our own relationships and our own ‘goodbyes.’”

Andrea Russell

“OK. Emilie is neither quirky nor zany. Won’t make you laugh. Won’t make you cry. That’s because she’s real. She could be me, on a bad day. Or is it me on a good day? She could be my next door neighbour. If my next door neighbour was a lesbian.”

Kate Madden

Set on board a yacht sailing the Whitsunday Islands in The Great Barrier Reef, and in the river city of Brisbane, Australia, *Silent Goodbyes* introduces forty-five year old Emilie Anderson as a new central character.

When a particular set of emotional triggers forces Emilie to grapple with her insecurities, what begins as a weeklong sailing trip becomes a journey into Emilie’s heart and soul.

Sexual tension, desire, infidelity, and personal shortcomings all highlight this powerful third novel.

Excerpt begins on p. 130

Skipper by day, dishwasher by night. Great dinner, though. Thick slices of Atlantic salmon *nappées* with lightly spiced cream and salmon roe. Delicately delicious. The tab for me lies in the washing up in our diminutive sink. In the process of splashing water over the comparatively gigantic cooking implements, I've drowned yet another box of matches in a tsunami of dirty water. Luckily the galley light is not strong enough to shame me into mopping the rubber linoleum. Not right now, please! Not just before bedtime.

Up the ladder I go, struck as always by the visual effect of a handful of mast-lights gathered together, seemingly suspended in mid air to form a frail gateway to the galaxy. I turn around. She's at the bow. Feet dangling under the safety lines, forearms resting on the steel railing of the pulpit, she seems lost in thought. Maybe she's simply absorbed by the mesmerising, endlessly changing colour patterns that dance on the moonlit ripples of Indian ink. She didn't jump off the boat today, she didn't even complain about the weather. She's been good and being good doesn't give her any feel-good feelings. Being good makes her droop and wilt.

After a light breakfast we had snorkelled in tandem, her hand on my back. She's a much stronger, more natural swimmer than I am but during our morning snorkels over the reef I propel myself a couple of flipper flips faster than she does. At one time, while we were hovering above the twenty-metre abyss, I thought that the great gloomy depth, sucked inside the eerie, slanted chasm of brown coral and particles trapped in filtered sunlight, might entice her.

We had been skirting the abyss side by side but while I made sure my belly remained somewhat protected by swimming a couple of metres above the coral reef-bed, Solange swam totally exposed to anything that might have been lurking deep within the dim waters below.

Her hand left its position on my back and through the foggy Perspex of my mask I saw her veer away from me, propelled by the yellow blur of her flippers. My breathing stopped inside the hollow plastic snorkel. I lost sight of her when the yellow of her flippers had totally dissolved in the water ahead. Coral cluttered the shallow depth ahead. The gloomy gorge of unfathomable depth hovered at my left. Exhaled air chugged through the snorkel. I remained where I was,

softly flicking my own flippers, determined to go on with my underwater promenade. Movement at ten to twelve on my left, right above the chasm. The emergence of a pale shape.

We looked at each other goggle-eyed. Her hair fanned and floated around a face a few shades paler than when dry. Eyes large and wide but all other expression lost behind the fluo plastic of the mask, lips stretched over the rubber mouthpiece. She swung into a wide circle and closed it with her hand once again on the small of my back. She let me lead her a little to the right and her body, too, was safer above the rising coral bed.

Schools of fish, soft and pink, fluorescent yellow, coated in velvet colours had passed below us. Fish with a purpose. Clams had clammed up as they detected the shadow of our presence, their thick lips of luscious iridescent purple, green, and mauve clenched tight between the two valves in foot-wide clownish grins. Large parrotfish had swum past foraging between coral stems with their parrot beak. Shafts of sunlight, floating plankton, blue-tipped antlers, pink bouquets of spiky stems, little oasis of colour atop decimated colonies of brown coral, big round balls that resembled bulging throbbing brains, all had been laid out for us. But the clownfish and the more exotic sea anemones had yet again eluded us.

I could go over to the bow now and sit beside her, interrupting her reverie but I'd rather stay back a while longer and simply look at her, as if I couldn't simply walk over and sit by her side. As if I didn't know her. As if I could only observe her from afar. Unseen. Unnoticed.

And I choose to stay at the stern, leaning against the wheel locked in place for the night. I breathe in the stillness. I inhale the quiet. The only sounds once again emanate from the dinghy's underside. Quiet peaceful soft-mouthed sounds like those of a gentle and contented suckling mammal, one that, though no longer hungry and about to drop off to sleep, still holds on to the nipple. Unconsciously wary of tomorrow. Involuntarily afraid of letting go.

Solange. My grey-eyed lover bundled into the bulky sweater that matched the colour of her eyes on a wintry morning, legs warm inside her old grey fleecy trousers, hasn't heard me come up the companionway. Maybe I should, after all, sidle up to her with two glasses of chilled Tatachilla as a peace offering though there hasn't been a war. Then I could say, 'a penny for your thoughts'. I could but

I won't. I prefer to stay back while allowing her more time in which to let herself be drawn into the golden patterns cast by the moon as they float on a sea the colour of Indian ink, on a sea as glossy and slick as silk. The Southern Aurora glints and shines above us.

Solange. The woman whose recklessness, exacerbated by the unstable environment that is a yacht at sea, in an area where wild water creatures are at home, stresses me beyond reason. The woman through whom, I know, I could learn something important about myself, if only she and I were wired a little differently. If only she and I were a little *less* the way we are.

I often feel I should somehow backtrack twelve months or so. Backtrack to the end of our period of grace, of our honeymoon. Backtrack to recapture the early liberating thrill of being with her. The thrill before the fear.

There was a time when I felt that if I could emulate a little of her trusting nature—trusting of the moment, trusting of people—I might be able to redirect my insecurities away from the basic belief that something could always go wrong *and would* if I ever became careless. If ever I relented in my caution.

But it hasn't worked out that way. I guess I haven't allowed it to happen that way. Instead, I've become passively resistant. And all I now think of her insouciance and intrepidity is simply that she might well be suffering from the James Dean Syndrome; youth and fitness, as in her case, are invincible. The thing is that she's some twenty years well past mature teenagehood. I'm hoping that tomorrow, our last full day on board Lazy Moon, will come and go by quickly. Uneventfully.

After Gisèle and her cool approach to love I had, for a long time, shied away from older women. That, in turn, had cast me in Gisèle's role, though not in her persona. At many levels, I just didn't have what it took to emulate her. Strangely enough though, as I healed my very first heart-splitting ache, I neither hated nor resented her. Already then, I had understood that she was too beautiful, too sensual, too sexual for just one lover. All the same: *chat échaudé craint l'eau chaude*, says my mother. Something about the fact that a cat, once scalded, is fearful of hot water.

That evening back in Paris, I had gone to Place des Vosges to catch the launch of Mikael's month-long exposition of oil paintings and large mixed-media assemblages. I had, intentionally, gotten there

late, more than fashionably late. I wanted to make sure Gisèle had already arrived by the time I got there. And she had. It's the shine of her silken black hair, alight under the ceiling spotlights that caught my eye as soon as I had pushed through the glass doors.

The room was full of people doing what people do at *vernissages*: they chat, drink, eat, and, in those days, they smoked. They whisper, too, in hushed tones as they move from one piece to another. Very few buy right there and then. Though some buy on impulse, most of us seem to need to be prompted by a lingering feeling, by a recurring memory brought upon by *that* particular piece. A heart tug that won't go away until we return to it, to that piece out of some stranger's psyche. To that piece that's triggered something deep inside us, a longing, an almost lustful urgency, a need to possess. Some of Mikael's frames already carried the round red dot that signified the piece had already been sold, I suspect well ahead of the *vernissage*.

Chatting with a group of five people, Gisèle was somewhat off-centre to the middle of the room, her back to the entrance. Her hair swayed gently from side to side as she turned her attention from one in her entourage to another. Dark and Daliesque Mikael towered nearby with his own retinue of admirers.

From where I was standing, near the buffet set near the left hand wall, I could see her, striking, in a simple, black, backless dress that ended just above the knees. Well-defined calves and thin ankles led the eye to black *escarpins*, flat-heel shoes, that matched perfectly the tone and feel of her dress. She turned slightly to her left to accept the thin champagne flute from a waiter's glistening tray. A quietly elegant gold brooch enhanced her *décolleté*. It glinted, caught in the light from above.

And out of nowhere came a woman. There was nothing particular to note about her except that she wrapped her arm around Gisèle's waist in a proprietorial gesture. Her lips touching Gisèle's ear, the woman whispered something that made my lover laugh. Though there was nothing particularly unusual about this woman's movements as such, my heart had lurched. Maybe because I didn't know who she was. Maybe because I was raw from Gisèle's early morning admission, I painted that woman, the one who still had her arm around my lover's waist, in the role of The Other Woman. I never found out whether she was the one or not.

What's the connection between Gisèle and Solange? Is it that both are attractive women and both are careless? Yes, Gisèle was careless too. Careless with people, intrepid too, but only in matters of love. In matters of sex.

The moon is reclining comfortably portside, lazy on her axis, looking very much like the supine blood-tipped, honey-coloured curved horns of Isis's headgear. Isis, often depicted with tears, is tonight too thin and frail to shine down on us.

Solange is still absorbed by the silky dark shimmers on the water's surface and I watch her watching them. And the longer I stand my back against the wheel, watching her pale shape draped over the pulpit, the more I feel the tug of love. That tug is the reminder I need that beyond her idiosyncratic behaviour that collides with my own search for equilibrium and equanimity, she is the woman I love; a woman attentive to my *other* needs. And they are many. She's also a woman who is hard working, self-driven and caring. A woman who takes pleasure in cooking gourmet meals. A sensual woman totally clear about her sexuality. None of that I should ever take for granted.

The moon is low. The other boats are anchored some two hundred metres away, closer to the strip of sand. I close my eyes as I breathe in very slowly, pushing the air deep inside to the deep tip of my lungs and slowly I let it out. I visualise the expelled breath in varying shades of soot. On the back of each exhalation ride accumulated tension-induced toxins and dingy remnants of curdling resentment that have been constricting my abdomen, backed up all the way to my collarbone. Again, and again I force deep breaths down below my ribcage. These deep breaths force me to straighten my spine. Again and again I exhale feathery volutes of smoky grey soot.

With my eyes closed, newly conscious of the gentle rocking of the hull under my bare feet, I know that if I went over to her and sat behind her, I know she would edge back a little to fit more snugly between my legs. I know we would just sit amicably, together enough, yet separate, for a little while. As her body warmth began radiating from her back to my chest, I would bring her back a little more into me, against me, so as to lean my back more comfortably against the slanted cabin hatch. Her hips wedged between my thighs, her back against my breasts, my hands folded over her stomach, my mouth near her ear, we would not need to talk.

Words haven't been good for us these last few days. No. No words. We must not speak. I would just brush the top of her head with my lips and inhale the furry warmth of her hair and rediscover the tattoo she has there, that of a tiny little bluebird caught gliding forever, never getting anywhere. She had had it done at a time when she wore her hair very short. The little bluebird sat high on her nape, just below the cut of her hair. Many a love session has begun in that position, with her wrapped snugly against my stomach and chest, my face buried in her hair breathing warm kisses on the little bluebird. The little bluebird was more of a free spirit back then, wings wide open, visible to all, getting its share of light and sunshine. Now that she wears her hair brushed back in longer strands, days go by without my catching a glimpse of the little tattoo. And so now, my back to the wheel, I imagine the little bluebird gliding, invisible, behind a curtain of dark tendrils.

I would part that curtain of salty hair and kiss the little forgotten blue bird. Ever so slowly, I would run my tongue over its shape and she would remember. She would bend her head exposing more of her nape to my lips. And so, I would kiss behind her ear. Slow measured, firm kisses to compensate for the warm wetness left within its fold knowing the crisp night air, finding it there, would pick it up. I would slip my cold hands under her thick sweater. Her nipples would harden and rise. But my hands would know to rest on top of her T-shirt until she reached for them. I would not allow them to roam freely. Not until they had been warmed by her warmth.

And so, in between the two layers of her clothing, I would slowly, dreamily, run my hands over her stomach, her chest, her breasts, her erect nipples and feel them tighten a little more as each of my fingers wandered inquisitively over them. Lips and breath near her ear, I would tighten my embrace around her. She would fit perfectly snugly inside my legs, inside my arms, against my heart, against my sex. Some time later, she would push her lower back against me and reach for my hands, lifting the thin layer of her T-shirt, welcoming them in against her skin, warm, smooth, responsive, vulnerable against my palms. My hands would take over heady with the permission she had given them to take her, to love her. Empowered by her need and spurred on by mine, they would glide under the top of the fleecy trousers she wore rolled down at the waist, ballerina-style, to keep them from sliding down her hips. And press against her

sex. And my hands would caress her thin hips and round they would go across her stomach and back over her breasts. And her nipples, hardened by desire uncoiled inside her loins, would catch ever so softly, ever so slightly, under each of my fingertips.

I know that she would take my hand and slide it downward to the edge of her nascent short curls. Her hand would cover mine for a brief instant, just long enough to convey a silent order to mine. And my hand would understand. And familiar with the shape of her sex, it would move and curl around the nexus of her desire. Her breath would stand still in her throat until it found its release in a soft moan.

There against her sex, my hand would linger to play, to decipher in Braille the contour of her need while my heart would pound against her shoulder blade. My own loins, electrified by her arousal, would press back against her hips. Lips swollen with desire. Her lips, her tongue velvety moist inside the palm of my other hand, tracing the length of my fingers, teasingly firm over my fingertips, nuzzling, nipping. Hot breath, hot lips close around the contour of her ear, insistent now, hungry for more. Wanting to close around the softness of her sex. Wanting to taste the satiny smoothness of her sex. Here. Now.

And because I know all that, because I know my own desire, I duck below deck to retrieve a pillow. And I will sit behind her at the bow. I will lay the pillow against the cabin hatch. I know she will edge back a little to fit more snugly between my legs.

Risking-me
C. C. Saint-Clair

The bleak backdrop of *Risking-me* is woman to woman violence but, as in all Saint-Clair's novels, her main focus is the delicate and sensual web that she weaves around her central female characters, whose main desire is to get on with life through love.

Risking-me is about taking risks. It is about facing, rather than hiding from one's insecurities. *Risking-me* is about triggers.

What prompts Emilie to involve herself with one woman as opposed to another? Forced to make more choices that are emotionally draining and risky, Emilie has no choice but to find herself and confront some of her hang-ups.

But above all, *Risking-me* is as sexy and sensual as it is relevant to the modern lesbian reader.

'Risking-me', looks at the everyday realities of women. C.C. Saint-Clair explores issues such as domestic violence, ageing and age difference between lovers, as well as the universal fears of rejection and impermanence. Within the context of these everyday realities, there are also fun times and moments of exquisite connection between women. Will Emilie's self-reflexive musings lead to insights which might gradually allow her to 'let go' and to risk becoming involved with Tamara, who is many years younger? Layer upon delicate layer of erotic sensation and desire between Emilie and Tamara is portrayed subtly and passionately through Saint-Clair's sensuous language and imagery. This subtle, sensuous, slow spiralling of stimulation and sensation reminds me of the French confection 'mille-feuilles' (literally, a thousand leaves)—multilayered, simultaneously rich and light, creamily textured and delicious.

J. Dougherty, PhD

Jagged Dreams **C. C. Saint-Clair**

Jagged Dreams, C.C. Saint-Clair's fifth novel, another BookMakers' Ink publication, begins when Emilie finds her lover, Tamara, unconscious near her Jeep. It soon becomes apparent that a violent blow to the head is the cause. Beyond the fear of possible complications not yet ruled out by Tamara's doctor, Emilie and the police need more clues than they have regarding the attacker's identity and motive.

This novel is about the disturbing reality that becomes Tamara's during the time she spends in the ward, inside her bed, inside her head, while her thoughts go on, sliding and slithering away from her.

Romance with Style and Substance (Reviewed by Veronica Clayton)

Jagged Dreams targets two social evils, homophobia and incest, and though it is also about love and commitment, its greatest contribution lies in the intelligent and sensitive handling of the issue of abuse. In spite of its serious exposition of such topics, *Jagged Dreams* is also a sexy tale of lesbian lust and love. It is a romance novel tightly wrapped inside a 'whodunnit', a novel that offers something to everyone without weakening any of its parts.

Sexual violence, emotional violence: for most of the thirty-odd hours since Tamara, a victim of random attack, collapsed in the grounds of a deserted parking lot somewhere in an Australian city, her thoughts are a shaken and stirred cocktail of memories, stretched and distorted by the warped reality of dreams and nightmares. Yet, despite the dark thread of violence woven through the novel, one of its most lyrical moments occurs only hours after Tamara becomes the unwitting witness to the ugliness of sexual abuse.

It is in the vineyards of Bordeaux—Marielle is eighteen and straight. Tamara, at twenty-four, is the older woman who, though she is terribly attracted to Marielle, understands that when the young woman eventually sneaks into her bed, snuggles against her and

begins a dreamy exploration of her body, it is more an emotional connection Marielle is seeking than sexual gratification. Tamara intuitively recognises that Marielle's fragile psyche might construe any overtly sexual response on her part as yet another act of physical domination. That nighttime visit is a very touching, very tender moment because Tamara's sensitivity is, ultimately, what brings Marielle not only to survive the ritual of incest her father has been subjecting her to but also to find the strength to finally break free of him.

Jagged Dreams is a novel that brings hard-hitting issues to the romance genre without compromising it. Make no mistake, though it foregrounds violence, *Jagged Dreams* is really about love. And while real time is suspended for Tamara who drifts in and out of consciousness inside a hospital bed, the reader still has to work out whose act of violence has put *her* there and why.

C.C. Saint-Clair writes with luminous language and creates remarkably visual scenes. The topic of violence perpetrated against women in general, but more particularly against a strong cast of endearing lesbian characters—that spans five novels—is visibly one that preoccupies this author. Thus her portrayal is always compassionate and moving, hard hitting yet dreamy. It is romance with bite and substance. And with a great deal of style, too.

A genuinely great escape on rainy days. A seriously engaging read on sunny days.

Far From Maddy
C. C. Saint-Clair

(Reviewed by F.T. Johnson)

Far from Maddy and yet so close to love

Far from Maddy explores the potential for dependence and loss inherent in any close relationship. On the eve of twenty-two year old Jo's intended move in with her lover, Maddy, in urban, working-class Australia, Jo simply vanishes. So begins the strange tale of her self-determined disappearance and Maddy's desperate search to find her.

As a child, Jo had tried to survive her mother's illness, alcoholism and suicide the best way she could. There was also her father's emotional distance, and the loss of a much older sister when that sibling left home. Years later, Jo's interactions with Maddy, within their loving relationship, trigger her unresolved childhood issues. Her fear of emotional dependence on her lover reflects her fear of abandonment as a child and, so, in a pre-emptive strike, she runs away from Maddy before Maddy might think to abandon her.

Far from Maddy is about the wounds of childhood which we know may be re-opened by subsequent relationships, particularly those with intimate others.

Saint-Clair's distinctive voice, unusually poetic for lesbian grunge, vividly describes this complex, emotional and psychological landscape. Yet there is no proselytising, no judgement, only a compassionate portrayal of each woman, be she the mother, the daughter or the lover, as she tries to live her life the best way she can.

Woven throughout this tale of emotional brutality, and a young woman's desperate bid to find herself, is the leitmotif of this 'thinking woman's lesbian romance' writer: Saint-Clair's erotic, subtle and sensuous language of desire, lust and love between women.

It is easy to fall in love with Saint-Clair's protagonists: 25 year old Maddy, achingly at a loss to understand why her young lover has

C. C. Saint-Clair

dropped out of sight, and Jo who needs to find self-love before she can ever be any good for herself, for Maddy, or for anyone.

Engrossing and insightful, tender and raw, *Far From Maddy* is a sheer delight: while your heart goes out to Maddy, you know it is Jo who needs to be made whole.

Review by Kathy F (for *Queensland Pride*, Australia. September 2003)

If romance novels that are emotionally raw and sensual without drifting into melodrama are rare, finding a romance writer who consistently lives up to their PR is even rarer.

So it's impressive that C. C. Saint-Clair, dubbed the writer of the "thinking woman's lesbian romance", achieves both with her latest novel.

Far from Maddy is an absorbing blend of thought provoking and intimate affairs, likely to please fans and new readers.

Set mostly in Brisbane, *Far From Maddy* introduces us to flame-haired mechanic, Maddy, and her enigmatic new girlfriend, Jo.

Just as the young lovers are celebrating their decision to move in together, Jo disappears. The shock leaves Maddy shattered, and immerses both women in unraveling a past trauma.

Maddy and Jo are possibly Saint-Clair's most endearing characters yet. Although atypically grungy for a romance, their relationship maintains the poetic eroticism that Saint-Clair novels are renowned for.

Maddy is appealingly self-assured even in a crisis, but it's Jo who's bound to win readers' hearts.

As a little girl lost putting on a brave face, Jo's so exquisitely tenderly written you'll be holding your breath waiting to find out her fate.

Tamara from the earlier novels *Risking Me* and *Jagged Dreams* also returns for a cameo.

The "thinking woman's lesbian romance" writer moniker probably stems from Saint-Clair's addition of social issues to the romance staples of personal transformation and seduction, and *Far from Maddy* is framed against the lives of New Farm Park's homeless.

If that sounds deceptively unromantic, think again. Saint-Clair utilizes compassionate insights about loss and the origins of homelessness to complement the lovers' own dilemmas perfectly, heightening the empathy and suspense.

Overall, *Far from Maddy* is an exceptionally well written treat of a romance.
