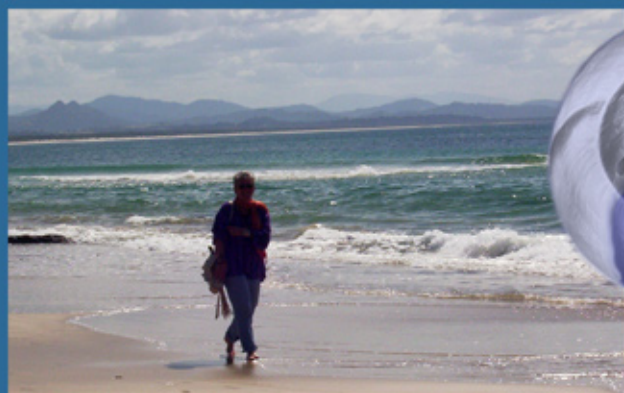




# **AWAKENING**

**C. C. Saint-Clair**





**AWAKENING**

Saint-Clair, C.C.  
Awakening  
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# **AWAKENING**

**C. C. Saint-Clair**

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*Benchmarks* [currently in ebook format]

*Silent Goodbyes* [currently in ebook format]

*Jagged Dreams*

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*The Fish Whisperer and the Crab Catcher*  
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*The Whip Hand* [free on C.C. Saint-Clair's website]

## AWAKENING

She picks up the empty shell of a sea snail and rolls it inside the palm of her open hand. Grains of sand from her index finger disturb those clinging to the shell. Color splits the shell in half, and she ponders why solid indigo should be the color that curls up the spiral, from the opening of the shell to halfway up, while the top half is a perfect, tiny, cyclonic whirl painted the colour of whitewash.

An ancient Greek village encrusted on a seaside cliff comes to her mind – just like the one already glued inside the pages of her photo albums - pages where she keeps her memories for fear of forgetting who she is and where she has been.

She smiles and rolls the shell one more time. Her hand closes over it. She can already see it – a quaint memento from another world transported back to the city, to her study, to the edge of her keyboard – The conical shell would remind her of soft white sand and of the smooth ripples tooled into it by the breeze – It's a new reminder of where she has been and what she has seen, a tiny cosmic trophy, as frail and delicate as the tenuous connection she has with her inner self.

“Don't touch!” says the voice inside her head. The voice had been with her ever since she began the solitary walk away from the campsite. “Don't touch!” it said every time she bent down to pick up a feather, a pebble, a shell.

“You're no fun,” she replies. Her words scatter about her. “You don't know me. I'm a hoarder. I accumulate photos, and I collect things, even bits of things which stand for bits of life. *My life*. I take them home so I can remember where I've been and how I felt at the time. They are my anchors.” Anchors into the past. The irony is not lost on her and she arches an eyebrow.

“Don’t touch!” the tone is as patient as it is firm. She smiles at the indigo-white shell, but drops it gently on to the sand.

Loud and full of rambunctious energy, the sea comes in adorned with frothy white caps. It comes in from afar, dancing, rolling on chords of cobalt blue and menthol-green, bejewelled and sparkling, but it is very gently that it stretches itself thin over the sand, leaving it untroubled and smoothed, untriting in the soothing of all that lies beneath.

“Be like the sea,” says the voice.

“Oh, OK. I’ll be dramatic and erratic. I’ll quit my job, say goodbye to my lover and become a drifter, a beach bum.” She grins into the sun though her eyes find the moon, a diaphanous presence overseeing all.

“You’re being childish,” says the voice.

Talcum powder soft, the white sand squeaks under her feet. She turns to look back at her footprints to see who she is and where she has been, but her gaze is pulled again by the moving edge of the sea, to the spot where it comes in to cover again and again the tawny wet sand with a wide apron of transparent, watery light.

“Be like the sea?” She samples the sound of the words.

She sighs for it does not come easily to her, this budding understanding that collecting and hoarding memories in a physical form do not, in fact, sustain her - not anymore than smudging her present with resentment from the past and fears of the future, however near or far - not anymore than the fear of the bogey-man under her bed helps the little girl get on with the business of growing up. Futile mementos, she agrees, thinking of the treasures she has accumulated over the years, each garnered as an antidote against any one of many spiky, barbed-wire moments that have left her bruised and clinging to what she fears the most.

“See the breeze,” says the voice.



She lifts her face again. “Can’t see the breeze. It’s invisible.”

“*See* the breeze!”

High above her head, bright-white clouds rim the huge void of blue calm. A small brahminy kite, a russet little eagle, is banking low above the tasselled fringe of casuarina trees. She watches the flutter on the tip of its wing feathers.

“I see the bird,” she says.

“*See* the breeze,” persists the voice.

She resumes her walk, thoughts tuned to the squeaking sounds of the rutile-soft sand underfoot. Behind her, her footprints are already losing their shape but, ahead, a sand bird, high on stick-thin red legs that match its beak is picking at the sand. And, around its legs, cloaked in grains of sand, she sees the breeze. She sees it drift over the sand. She sees it part around the bird and, undisturbed, follow its own path.

“I see the breeze,” she says. “It creates ripples and transforms the dunes and erodes the landscape.”

“The breeze doesn’t transform,” says the voice. “Its touch is a caress. It neither dwells nor lingers. It neither tumbles nor troubles. It has already passed you by the time you notice its presence. Don’t cling. Be like the breeze.”

She bends and puts her hand flat against the unbroken sand ahead of her feet. It is warm against her palm. Firm. Crusty. The breeze drifts around her wrist.

“The only moment that is real is the moment under your feet,” says the voice.

The past is no more real than the future. Neither exists. As you are, feet planted into this sand, the only moment that IS is the one that links a heartbeat to your blood and a gulp of air to your lungs. There’s only this – an eternal present. No moment to run away from or fantasize about. Be here, now. Be the sea at the edge of the sand. Just be.”

She lifts her face to better feel the breeze. “Who are you?”

Even before she opens her mind to hear an answer, her words are no longer hers. Lifted by the breeze that never stands still, deaf and mute, they have already slipped into the past, the all engulfing void that sucks in all that is used and spent to let it ferment like yeast.

She walks to the place where the sea meets the sand and stands, arms wide open, her face up to the empty sky. Warm water swirls around her ankles, sucking at her heels, surreptitiously pulling her closer to the earth's core.

Eye wide open, she looks unblinkingly at the solid blue sky. She stares at it through the onset of sun-glare tears. She stares at it until the familiar myriad of diamond-headed streaks appears. Erratic little comets, the silent crystal swirls of prana sparkles flit about. *Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds*. She opens her eyes wider. Finally she blinks, squeezing her eyelids shut tight.

The silent darkness of the cosmos expands inside her head. She no longer hears the movements of the ocean. She is only aware of its downward pull under her heels. It wants to keep her there, a thing of the earth - grounded. She opens her eyes and, through them, returns sound to the waves pushing each other out of the way.

She turns her back to the sea to get her land bearings. Lighthouse to the right. Campsite to the right, too. Some five hundred metres up the beach, she thinks to herself.

Her thoughts return to Myarh, her partner, her anchor. Myarh is a sailor. She loves the wilderness and camping, too, but she loves the sea a lot more than the sand and the sand flies. Myarh's self-inflicted mission is to keep the sand at bay from everywhere possible – a Sisyphian task when camping wild in the sand dunes of Moreton, the world's second largest sand island. She smiles at the image of Myarh, brush and dustpan in hand, pushing back obtuse grains of stubborn sand past the edge of the floor matting, the theoretical No

Trespass zone under the large tarpolin that protects the shared area between tents.

Dana is probably checking her fishing gear and getting herself organised for a post-breakfast fishing expedition. The lie of the sea in the shallows will guide her to the troughs where whithing, bream and flat-head feed, but it is the night's fishing foray, under the large moon, hip flask in her back-pocket that, for Dana, is the focus of this trip.

"Sure," Dana had already explained, "we can catch whithing during the day, but in this area it's at night that the largest suckers come out to feed."

Kim, she assumed, would probably be doing what she could to be of help to Dana, her new lover. Why, she might even be on the moist apron of the beach, sucking up ghost shrimps with Dana's pump or digging out pippies by twisting a bare heel on top of each little mound of sand, the locals' way of plucking them out of their burrow. Later, Dana will pierce their flesh with her fishing hooks and use them as bait.

She glances at her watch, but her wrist is bare. She grins, remembering how she had deliberately left her watch at home, on the bedside table.

To Myahr, she had explained that there was no justifiable need to know precisely which minute- the fifth, the twentieth, the ninety-seventh - has just ticked by when communing with nature. The dashboard clock, she had added, would do the trick just fine.

"After all, our only time constraints will be about the ferry to and from the island. So, technically, we'll only need to check the time once in five days once we're there." With a grin, she added, "Darling, ain't that great?"

Along with her eye make-up and her hair-gel, she had also left behind her many bangles and rings. Not for fear of losing them, but to yield to the intuitive need she had to free herself from anything that clasped hard around her - of anything connecting her to the mechanical tightness of her

real world; the life of a teacher in an inner city school: the life of an only child to a mother whose emotional life was as deflated as last year's birthday balloon; the life of a fifty year old lesbian, lover and partner of Myahr; the life of a woman who simply could not *just be*.

Still looking at the pale skin on her bare wrist, like one who suffers from memory loss, she tries to remember why so much in her life feels like cold lava, hard and solid, but amorphous and dull, permanently weighty somewhere in the area of her solar plexus. She makes herself straighten up to breathe better.

The call of a sea eagle makes her look up. She shields her eyes from the glare. She follows the bird's path until it banks beyond the line of sand-dune casuarinas.

The footsteps she had left before entering the sea are still there, comfortably deep, waiting to guide her return to camp. The passing breeze has only softened their crumbly edges. She looks at them, as if surprised to still find them there. As if, perhaps, they should have kept walking on ahead – without her.

The silver tarp, held up firmly by the ridge-pole, stretches under the line of wispy conifers. She treads cautiously over the pebbles, twigs and sharp-edged pine nuts that litter the ground. Thock-thock! Thock-thock! Mallet on pegs. Someone is tightening their tents' guide ropes in anticipation of the afternoon sea wind.

Dana's voice cuts through. "Kim? Myahr? 'Nuther round of toasts while we await the return of the Lonely Walker? How about a cup of some hot brew while I'm at it?"

She weaves her way around Dana's tent pegs, barely avoiding crushing a tiny, purple sand crocus.

"I'll say yes to coffee, but no to toast." Myahr's voice. "But, if you're all set to go, don't feel you have to wait for Alex. Once she disappears on one of her walks, there's no telling when she'll be back."

## AWAKENING

She emerges from behind one of the tents, just as Dana turns around, kettle in hand.

“Well, well, speak of the devil!” she grins. “Spot on timing, Alex. “Name your poison. Coffee, chai, tea?” she asks jingling the kettle in her direction.

*“The only moment that is real is the moment under your feet,”* says the voice.

Alex grins. “Oh yes, please. Coffee, but, first, water as an antidote.” And then, wryly she adds, “There is not moment like the present.”

C. C. Saint-Clair

**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 fantasising 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.

C. C. Saint-Clair

**Benchmarks**  
**C.C. Saint-Clair**

Set in the Montmartre district of Paris, the French snow-fields, 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

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*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 Elisabette into our little group of friends, quite a few years ago now, it

C. C. Saint-Clair

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

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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

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strays away from the safety of the flock on the wings of a big white bird.

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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

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The thick ledger-like notebook is cool under the palm of my hand, inseparable companion of the last few days. Waking hours, sleepwalking 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

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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.

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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 complexion 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.

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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.”

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*“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 penetratee.

“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?”

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“*C’est vrai. Depuis les hommes des cavernes ...* since cavemen 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.

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**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.

C. C. Saint-Clair

*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

C. C. Saint-Clair

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'*

C. C. Saint-Clair

*(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.

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### *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**

*Far from Maddy and yet so close to love*  
(Reviewed by F.T. Johnson)

*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.

C. C. Saint-Clair

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 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.

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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.

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## About the Author



It began quite some time ago when I came home feeling particularly fragile after a night on the scene. Though I had never kept a diary, I picked up a notepad and jotted down remembered flashes of discomfort related to the alienating nature of the night's experience. The following day, I found myself fleshing out these snippets of raw emotion into full sentences and paragraphs, which later became the opening chapter of **North and Left from Here** – C.C. Saint-Clair.

By day, a teacher of Senior English and, by night, a writer of lesbian romance with a definite penchant for social realism, C.C. Saint-Clair went on to write another six novels.

Like Alex Delaforêt, the main character of her debut novel, Saint-Clair lives in Brisbane, Australia. However, unlike Alex who feels loss, regret, anger and loneliness since separating from her most recent lover, Saint-Clair is happily settled with her partner of many years.

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 [Austin], majoring in English Literature.

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 on our many (un)resolved personal issues rise to the surface.

After returning from a challenging trek inside the jungles of Sarawak, Saint-Clair wrote the screenplay adaptation of **Far From Maddy**, which came second at the Rhodes island Film Festival [GLBT Barren Branches] screenplay competition in 2005, and made it to the quarter finals of the international but strictly *mainstream* Scriptapaloosa comp in 2006.

She has also written the screenplay of her seventh novel, **Morgan in the Mirror**. Although it is centered on a female-to-male transgender, the script has made it to the finals of international mainstream Canadian Wildsound screenplay competition in 2007.

She has also published various short stories whose themes range from adult fairy tales and erotic tales to strong spiritual writings such as that of **Awakening**.

“It is a tentative first-step exploration of the spiritual concept of \*no-self\*, a topic of personal significance to me at this stage of my life,” she says.

Though Saint-Clair shrugs amiably at the tag that has cast her as a romance writer for the ‘thinking woman’, she prefers the body of her work to be described as urban realism embedded in lesbian romance.

Neither airbrushed nor high-profile 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.

“There are no ‘prestige’ targets, no sinister political plots to evade, no serial killers to contain,” she says. “My characters’ quest is emotional fulfilment within their ordinary lives, not only as teachers, police women, veterinary surgeons and mechanics, but also as disengaged Gen - Xers. And the irony

C. C. Saint-Clair

is that, within this simplicity, lies the complexity of life and love's role in defining it.”

Saint-Clair is passionate about her writing. Her readers journey through an emotionally complex landscape that she believes is the real life backdrop against which many women have to struggle, before they come into their own.