

# BENCHMARKS

A black and white photograph of a snowy forest. The trees are covered in snow, and the ground is a smooth, white expanse. In the lower center of the image, there is a simple wooden bench with a metal frame, also covered in snow. The overall mood is quiet and serene.

C. C. Saint-Clair

# BENCHMARKS

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# C. C. Saint-Clair

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Lazy Moon Productions  
Australia

## Prologue

O h, to lose myself inside the tender turmoil of your chestnut-brown eyes, to melt with the deliciously painful constriction of my inner core.

You gave me green; the colour and its essence. You made them yours. “*Verde, que te quiero verde.*” Federico Garcia Lorca himself must have dreamed about you. Your green coat, walking away from me, left me alone to wait on this cold little park bench of another green. A green, yet another, comes towards me from behind the solid, green, cast iron kiosk.

It is not yours, though it resembles it. Yours, I can now almost see, hanging limply on the brass coat rack hidden deeply behind one of these grey, impenetrable Parisian facades. It is the arrival of this green, your green, that keeps me waiting, in the parc Monceau, on this little bench of another green.

It is far too early still for the fortified walls of your office chambers to release you. I know mine is an unreasoned impatience, although the little ducks on the frozen pond are already looking for their night’s shelter. Some search among the partially-immersed ornamental rocks; others among the green mossy folds of the Muses’ marble robes. A sotto voce sing song: ‘*Viens, viens, c’est une prière, viens, viens ...*’

Electric green, thunderbolt through my heart. That green! You have returned. My heart flutters at the sight of your coat. Green. Across the street, one impatient foot already on the black tar, you wait. You smile at me who had not yet dared to actually wait for you. The desire for you uncoils itself like the sleeping child who stirs and stretches.

## BENCHMARKS

Freeze-frame. The green hem of your coat brushes against the scaly bottle green of my little park bench.

You are here, right in front of me, silent, and unaware of the shy smile in your chestnut eyes. The passers-by, muted by the cold and their own rush towards warmth and home, glide past, silent shadows in tones of grey and brown.

The branches, glazed by the incoming evening frost, bend their icy tips to eavesdrop on the *jeux interdits* we whisper without word or movement.

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## *Baie des Anges*

**E**ven the sea reflects my unease. Her crinkled skin folds and unfolds itself in frightening coils of deep emerald. With all her might, she hits against the dark rocks that stand between the violence of her assaults and the beach. Each wave shatters itself against the unyielding surface, surrendering its water in an upward release, multiple offerings to the deceptively-empty blue sky, multiple gestures of penance.

The wind sweeps the sand with erratic strokes that leave it surprisingly smooth under the million mist-like plumes of sand spray that run and dance a mad dance on its flattened back. Invisible grains of silica whip the legs, graze the skin, search for my eyes, even behind the protective screen of my glasses. They crack between my teeth.

Further ahead, diminutive dunes try to give themselves a shape but the wind, master of their destiny, slashes and whips and blows their efforts away. Forever in a state of perpetual search for our definite mould, I, like them, bow my head as the capricious wrath of the wind god plays havoc on the beachfront.

I would like to know that I irk him, that maddening wind. Like a child intent on leaving gummy footsteps on the glistening kitchen tiles on which his mother has just rearranged the patterns left by her mop, I, too, take pleasure at the sight of my prints as they trail behind me. Streaks of translucent clouds emerge from behind the Alpes Maritimes

range, beautiful, even from afar in its cloak of glistening ermine, shiny snow cover under the frail winter sun.

I breathe in the sea wind. I trap it inside my lungs to purify them. I am airing myself from the inside, all the while knowing it will take more than this force nine Mistral wind, the great tormentor of the Mediterranean Sea, to dislodge the knot of anxiety that has curled itself inside me. Will I ever hear from you?

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### Paris, 10 January

Alex,

Last night, *ta première lettre*. It was all 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

C. C. Saint-Clair

melancholy. The thing is that even my neighbourhood feels different now.

You're ready for a new chunk of life in France, in Nice. Maybe I'm already a ghost in your memory. I imagine you, still walking by my side with those long strides of yours, used as you are to less busy sidewalks and open space, face to the sky. From what you say, too, the people of your town in Australia don't walk their dogs much through downtown streets. I imagine that not being wary of what one might step on would be liberating to anyone's stride. I remember how you looked up at the eighteenth-century facades and their slate roofs as they line the avenue to the place I only know now as our parc Monceau.

They're very beautiful, but I had stopped seeing these facades a great many years ago. Had I ever seen them the way you did?

Alex, if you still wish for us to stop writing know that, at the very least, I won't forget any one of our moments. I was ecstatic, energised, electrified during those unexpected ten days. You thought I was adorable; I adored you. Never forget any of this. At least, hold on to it a little longer. Will this letter disappoint you? I've learned yours by heart. I learn you a lot faster than I ever did English, and with so much more pleasure!

As it is, I had heard a few little things about you, as told by some who had known you, in different times, in different places. Sometimes Sophie, my Sophie, would show me a letter she'd just received. When she brought Elisabethette into our little group of friends, quite a few years ago now, it was clear that Eli still held fond memories of you and her in Spain. But of course, she could still give a mean rendition of how you'd dropped her for a younger one. I guess she was



young and vulnerable at the time. Nineteen, was she? *Si jeune*. Either that or we're getting old. Well, I am getting old. No, I can say that better; I was getting old until I came across you. Now, as I said, I'm energised.

Anyway, during that first evening with you, I discovered another Alex, first-hand: an Alex whom I haven't yet been able to absorb at leisure. And might never.

My past, such as it is, my roots and my experiences, have always been my *soutien*, 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

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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

C. C. Saint-Clair

my eyes lost sight of you around the bend of that dreadful satellite corridor, you have remained by my side.

Ironically, as the plane inched towards my almost forgotten relatives, already on their way to welcome me, one of the two major reasons for the twenty-thousand-kilometre journey, reunion with them no longer filled my heart and mind. The mixture of apprehension and joy that had been with me since I had made up my mind to break from my life in Australia was no longer focused on them, during that one-hour flight from Paris to Nice.

I was already full of you, my heart constricted by dread and guilt at the thought of you. You, the lover and partner of my long-time friend, Sophie, a friend with whom, good year, bad year, I had maintained a friendship, though mostly through the peaks and troughs of an enduring, intercontinental correspondence. Yes, you, Adrienne, the love of her life I had read about on numerous occasions during the past ten years! You, still unknown to me until a few days ago.

“Let me introduce you to Adrienne. *Addy, pour les copines!*” With these innocuous little words, Sophie brought you into my life in a way none of us could have foreseen.

She was so happy to finally have us acquainted with each other, to introduce me to the woman who had made her happy and secure for the past decade. She had not changed much; she still carried on in that larrikin way of hers and had not lost any of her strongly-accented Parisian intonation.

I knew she could still keep her audience of friends spellbound when she sang Piaf. And as Piaf, she was still as thin as the tiny resilient birds that carry the same name. I had

been happy to read in her letters that she had finally found a comfortable niche within a trusting relationship; she, to whom life had not often been kind. Not until it had brought the two of you together.

With a twinge of guilt as I hugged her, I remembered that more recently I had stopped reading her letters thoroughly. I was happy enough, by quickly skimming her lines, to know she was well. What I had retained was that she was happy with you, a woman of sound character called Adrienne, a lawyer specialising in international law, and that Sophie, herself, enjoyed a relative harmony within her own professional framework.

I would merely glance at the pictures of the two of you she would send at the end of each of your summer holidays. I had not consciously focused on any of your traits and would have found it impossible to recognise you, had you not been by Sophie's side.

And so we met. You, a Parisian *femme d'affaires*; the cut and style of your clothes gave that away at first glance. Friendly, warm; your eyes gave that away as we shook hands.

I had no other thoughts except the wish to sit down and fight off the encroaching jetlag with a tumbler of whisky on the rocks, and immerse myself in the syncopated start and stop conversations of friends excited to be reunited and eager to reconnect.

Elisabette, Eli as she now wants to be called, was there, too, with Isabelle, her new lover. In fact, the poor things had had to leave the warmth of their bed and each other at dawn to greet me at the Charles de Gaulle airport *en provenance*

C. C. Saint-Clair

*de* Tokyo. And Eli had arranged to let me have her little flat all to myself for the length of my stay.

“I spend most of the week nights at Isa’s anyway. She’s got a movie channel. We just love watching films in bed, all cuddled up. So, no big deal,” she had written at the time my trip to Paris was still at the planning stages.

Women connecting, sharing memories and anecdotes, cocooned by the wood panels of the little alcove where Sophie had sat us, cocooned by the lace of drifting smoke and the din of Parisians socialising in the brasserie Chez Lipp.

Now that all possible grudges lay buried under the gossamer layer of time, Sophie, Eli and I were exhilarated by the proximity of each other. We were reunited like the survivors of a shipwreck: happy and relieved the count was right, that everyone had survived the passage of years with only minor emotional wounds, either already healed or well on their way.

You all pressed me for more details of events that I had penned, possibly absent-mindedly, in my letters to Sophie. Humdrum day-to-day stuff: a little on school life and its inherent ‘modern’ problems; usually very little on my private life except the occasional admission to loneliness, on a particularly low day. Sometimes a couple of pages would not have been enough, as I tried to be convincing, or rather was convinced that I had finally found love.

So, now, months or years later, through the smoky gauze of Chez Lipp, cobwebs and memories were lifted on request, from the pages of my heart, and revived.

And then: “... to chase the monotonous grey of our little Parisian lives,” as you put it, you asked about Australia. So I explained how, some three days earlier, I lay floating on

my Lilo, liquefied by the thirty-three-degree post-New Year heat, comfortably living in the Western suburbs of Brisbane. So comfortable, in fact, that one day I had had the sudden urge to break that stifling comfort and had applied for an undetermined leave of absence from work to come back here, back to France. My aim at the time had been simple: I had had a sudden craving to rediscover the little but beautiful country that France is and, at the same time, discover the handful of relatives I had once known, on my father's side. Him included.

And the moment came when the ticket booked on QANTAS months earlier needed only the final good wishes of one last celebration with my good friends. I was toasted, hugged, farewelled and waved at, till only the deserted corridor tugged at my heels.

The final boarding call had forced a hasty conclusion to the last-minute advice and recommendations friends always seem to have for the one who strays away from the safety of the flock on the wings of a big white bird.

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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:

C. C. Saint-Clair

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, among 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.

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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

C. C. Saint-Clair

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-alright 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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C. C. Saint-Clair

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 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 head start, 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

C. C. Saint-Clair

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

C. C. Saint-Clair

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 nanosecond 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.

C. C. Saint-Clair

The only other thing I remember of that evening were 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 wellbeing of men in gaols 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 millennia and still going strong."

"What's new, really?" said Eli, cutting in on Sophie. "The world's been turning a blind eye to the ongoing 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 law makers and our hospital staff and

our neighbours might start paying attention.” You spoke, looking carefully at Sophie first and then at Eli across the table from you.

“A new set of victims but the same old story,” I replied, intent on the embossed pattern of the tablecloth. “You know, it’s never really been much of a ‘Stranger Danger’ thing. That’s the ‘bumper sticker’ leitmotif used in the Australian media,” I explained. “It’s probably the universal Anglo expression used to warn children away from strangers who might hurt them. I am sure you have the equivalent here. Like warning kids against getting in a car or being led away by someone they don’t know, even if that person tells them, ‘your mummy sent me’ and so on.”

“*Ah, c’est facile!*” Sophie snapped, with the classic Gallic throw of hands. “Don’t look too close to home; you might not like what’s there! ‘Beware the Males you Trust,’ is what the bumper sticker should be about. They, the trusted males, they’re still the aggressors of girls. Of women.”

I saw the way you looked at her but she had already turned to Isa who was pursuing her point. “Quite true. Any kind of violence. Not just physical,” Isa added, “If it weren’t for them ...” suggesting that the world would be a better place if men, on the whole, had evolved differently. “Maybe that could work, too, as bumper sticker philosophy now that it’s no longer cool to wish they should all be sent to the moon.” “Yeah, it’s a sad world all right but all the same, I don’t think these incidents involving either boys or young men need to be called rape.”

Silence.

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

C. C. Saint-Clair

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?”

“*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.

C. C. Saint-Clair

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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## *Tunnel of Darkness*

**H**eadlines swam before my eyes, mingled with memory of pain, violence, humiliation and the fear of dying.

*Law Student Not Guilty Of Rape* had been the headline in the *Austin Gazette*. Austin, Texas that is, as in the University of Texas from which I was about to graduate.

‘In the 147th District Court, after more than eight hours of deliberation, a seven-man five-woman jury found a third-year law student not guilty of the alleged rape, last fall, of a twenty-year-old co-ed.

Final arguments were made Friday afternoon, in the seventh day of the trial before a packed courtroom of some three hundred lawyers, most of the Law student body and as many spectators. Although folding chairs were set up in the aisle, some would-be spectators, unable to find a seat, crowded outside in the corridor and followed the proceedings through a crack in the door.

I grappled with the tremor in my hands symptomatic of the kaleidoscope of fragmented pain that had already flooded back to my mind. But this time I did not close my eyes, not even to flush them out. I knew from experience that it would not work. Instead, I allowed the events of that fateful night to settle, as uncomfortably as so many unwanted guests. This time I would monitor them so carefully they would not be allowed to flesh out, to come back to life.

As a little child at the movies, I had many a time peeked through my fingers when confronted by scary pictures. But

C. C. Saint-Clair

now I had to look at these visions from the past. I had to grab them by their edges, one at the time, like so many thin and cold photographs devoid of life. And one by one, I had to grab them and release them, shrunken-thin and empty.

I would give myself another chance to deal with what fears remained, sleeper-like, lurking just below the surface of my consciousness, still gripping tightly at my solar plexus. Here, now, tonight, I have absolute control over them! I regulated my breathing and found the outer edge of the coil of fear.

One day, more than three years into my relationship with Ann, the roommate-cum-lover of my undergraduate years, she – who had begun a slide towards the exit door of our closeted affair – had declared that the time had come for the two of us to begin planning our future in earnest.

‘After all, we’ll be university graduates in a few months’ time. We need to be ready to get on with our lives!’ she had said.

‘Yeah, sure,’ I had replied, more intrigued by her face, uncharacteristically void of expression, than by her opening sentence. ‘But what’s up?’

‘Well, things to do with our lives.’ Ann was decidedly uncomfortable.

‘Hmmm, what about our lives, then? Where do we start? That is a large topic, isn’t it?’

‘Oh, Alex, don’t play dumb with me. You know damn well what I’m getting at!’

I had looked at her blandly. ‘You mean, what we will do as post graduates?’ I was toying with her. ‘About getting on with our CVs? That kind of thing?’ I was sure I already knew the topic that she had for discussion on her agenda but I was not going to make it easy for her.



‘Well ... yes. No! Alex, I mean our relationship, you know ... making love,’ she had explained in flustered but hushed tones, as if the walls of our living room might be eavesdropping on us.

By then, Ann had worked herself into a little head of steam and following the straight trail her thoughts had locked in. ‘Well, we need to stop doing it ... making ... oh, you know ... making love.’ All of a sudden, these simple words seemed to have become prickly pears around which she couldn’t quite close her lips. ‘We need to get ready for when we graduate. Real plans, Alex, like in the real world.’ I kept a stubborn silence. And so, she pushed on, ‘We need to get on with our lives.’

‘Haven’t we been getting on with our lives all this time?’ I finally exploded. ‘Haven’t we been making real plans during the past thousand and two hundred odd days we’ve been together, together and making love?’ I had asked, hurt by the suggestion that what we had been sharing might no longer count as real. ‘What the hell do you think we’ve been doing, then?’

‘Oh, sweetheart, please, tell me you know what I’m on about.’

I shook my head, ‘No can do, because I don’t. And don’t call me sweetheart. You know I hate all these little patronising diminutives.’

‘You’re being stubborn. Of course, you know what I mean. We need to make real plans,’ she persisted.

I dug in my heels. ‘What is not real about the plans we have made so far?’

Ann had tried to explain that as wonderful as the past years had been, what we had shared could not count, not really. Not in the future. She had been working hard at convincing herself that the relationship we had taken to, like

C. C. Saint-Clair

ducks to water, in our late teens could, now, only be remembered as merely an interlude. One that did not count as real in the real world.

After all, she had just turned twenty-one. She was an adult now. Had to think like one. Like a straight one. She would soon get her Bachelor of Science. Real things could only be done with men. With men and for men.

As it was, we still lived together in the same off-campus apartment near the lake where we had retreated, in cowardly preference to a more sensational outing at the hands of other girls in our dorm. We had thought ourselves not invincible but simply invisible. And when one of them had pointed an accusatory finger at us, we fled, naked under the cold glass eye of our peers.

So, two and a half years later, Ann was still my best friend. We still made love. But, as the time of our graduation had crept closer, she had become more restless. I had watched as her guilt pangs invaded our space after lovemaking. And I had watched when, one day, she went back to church and came back reading the Bible.

Previously, on the numerous occasions when she had taken me back to her parents' place for a long weekend or a school holiday, ironically enough, she had always managed to find some pretext or other to not accompany her parents to their local church. Instead, we would make love in her double bed, surrounded by a colourful multitude of her childhood and early-teen mementos.

Then, a few days after that first conversation on the topic of planning our futures, our real futures, Ann, bible in hand, had questioned me, 'Where does it say in here that it's okay to make love to your best girlfriend?'

‘On the same page where it says that it’s okay to screw some guy in the back seat of a car,’ I had answered curtly. I was digging in my heels. ‘I tell you what,’ I added, ‘if that is not in the Bible, it’s got to be sinful too.’

And I will wager that it is doubly sinful if fornication is not committed with the intent to procreate.’ I was angry. ‘Abortions, Ann, as you well know, are not only illegal in the state of Texas, but also considered sinful.’ I was playing on her fear of getting pregnant. I was playing, too, on her deep-seated fear of having to forego career and freedom to raise an unplanned, unwanted child. I threw one last sarcastic jibe at her, ‘You might not be as close to heaven as you think.’

But try as I may, I was not able to manoeuvre her into any type of postponement of her ‘real’ future. And so, one day, as a result of a clear lack of options, I had agreed that we would not make love any more, that we would not kiss, either. That we would get rid of the mildly erotic literature we had been collecting, looking for female fantasies.

I promised, too, that I would even refrain from any reference to any, of the many, sexually-tainted memories we had shared. However, I had given her a resounding, unbudgeable ‘no’ when she pushed on, asking me to be civil to Dan, her new boyfriend. She, on the other hand, conceded to hugs, provided we only hugged in the way straight women hugged their best friend, the one they hadn’t already taken to bed, that is. That meant scrupulously avoiding breast and pelvic contact. She had me where she felt comfortable: at arm’s length.

‘Look, as it is, we’ll probably both go to hell for what we’ve done, anyway,’ Ann had said, trying to cheer me up.

C. C. Saint-Clair

‘Yeah, well, if you say so. In any case it’s too late for you to backtrack ... all the way ... into an absurd purity, no matter how much you look set to try.’

‘But surely, making love with Dan has to be less sinful, don’t you see?’

‘Who gives a damn, Ann?’ The apparent ease with which she had turned her back on our relationship, and her blatant efforts to rationalise that ease, angered me even more than the decision itself.

‘No, Ann, I don’t see how it is less sinful than making love with me,’ I had retorted, belligerently. I didn’t want to be objective. ‘And I bet sin is not the only ingredient lacking between you and what’s-his-name. I bet you don’t feel any of our magic when you rub his scrawny, hairy chest.’ I didn’t want to be fair. And I knew Ann was not in love with Dan, not that she would ever admit it. But he had, for women like Ann, just like Tom to whom she had been engaged before we had become lovers, something of a Mr Right quality about him.

Breaking a promise made earlier, I had asked, ‘Ann, don’t you miss us?’ She looked up at me. ‘The way it was? Don’t you miss the way it was?’

She had only shrugged and absorbed herself in the pages of notes that cluttered her lap. I could have pressed her for more than a shrug, for words, for a real sentence worth of explanation, but I didn’t. Words, battle of words, battle of minds, were not going to make me feel better. Not in the long term.

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Josh Bell, who had forced himself upon us at a recent party, had rung to re-introduce himself and mutter something

about a common acquaintance who had given him my phone number.

“Who’s this friend you’ve been talking to?” Who would be this friend of a friend who, knowing me, would give this guy my phone number? I wondered.

“Ah, look, don’t remember. Was last week some time but hey, that don’t matter none,” he said in that stereotypical Texan drawl that later, much later, was as natural to him as Texan boots for George Bush. He was ringing to invite me, at very late notice, to the biggest football game on any American university calendar, the Homecoming game. Anyone who was anyone, and the alumni in and out of the state of Texas, would already have tickets for that main, drawcard game. After an initial refusal that had met with an unexpected obstinacy on his behalf, I had grudgingly accepted the invitation instead of hanging up.

“Yeah, well, okay, I guess. Why not?” While I had listened to his argument with only one ear, I had been thinking that going out to that game, tonight of all nights would, after all, be preferable to staying home, counting down the hours, then the minutes, to Ann’s return from her date with Dan. And that reluctant acquiescence had been my first mistake.

Josh had arrived at the appointed time sporting an old T-shirt, sleeves rolled up close to the top of his powerful shoulders, and a pair of dusty, ripped Levi’s 501s. His straw like hair was dishevelled and as dull with dust as his jeans, as dusty as the body of his black Pontiac Charger.

“I reckon I’m a little dusty here,” Josh had said, patting his stomach. “Been hunting all day. Came back too late. Just stopped at my place for cash, then out again. Don’t wanna be late for kick off, huh?” What the hell, I had thought, as

C. C. Saint-Clair

long as he doesn't loosen that dust around me, it does not matter much either way. We're only going to a ball game, after all.

On the way to the stadium, Josh had pulled up at a bottle shop and had carried out a bottle of Jim Beam. He had rolled it gently onto my lap before turning on the ignition. I had looked at him, both eyebrows raised in a question.

"It's an okay brand for you?" he had asked. The engine roared and we pulled out of the drive-in lane.

"I wouldn't know. I don't drink whisky." For some reason I refrained from adding that I didn't drink any alcohol, at all.

"Oh, man! Jeez, why didn't you say so on the phone?" he exclaimed in an accusatory tone.

"You didn't ask."

"Oh, well, makes no big diff," he replied gruffly, eyes locked past the windscreen. "It'll still fit inside that big bag o' yours."

It became clear that Josh had intended for me to smuggle his bottle into the stadium, inside my large shoulder bag. Though I had initially refused, I had ended up going through the stadium turnstile with the bottle weighing down on my shoulder strap. At the time, getting that bottle in had seemed less of a hassle than fending off the guy's recriminations. Mistake number two.

According to the Defence lawyer, Mr Bartley of Odessa, the act of smuggling the bottle of whisky inside the stadium was surely proof that I had planned to embark on an underage drinking spree with Mr. Joshua D. Bell, the defendant.

My admission of the fact must have tarnished my credibility in the eyes of the twelve men and women who would decide the outcome of the trial I had initiated against Josh when I pressed charges.

These citizens, in their new-found role of sworn-in jurors, knew they would have to tread carefully. Any twenty-year-old willing to drink up during a football game would already be of questionable repute, already walking on the 'wild side'. At this point of the trial they would have decided that henceforth, in all their wisdom, they should not act rashly by taking my story at face value. An alien, a French gal at that.

I had told the court that, as a non-drinker, I had pretended to accept the first, as well as the next five plastic cups of Coca-Cola laced with great lashings of whisky, only to put an end to Josh's taunts about my 'childish' prudishness and my unwillingness to have fun.

He had totally ridiculed my polite refusal of the first drink. Wanting to avoid confrontation, I had decided that, after all, the immediate best course of action would be for me to appear to have finally caved in to his pressure. And so I had accepted the first cup, having already planned to discreetly tip it, and all subsequent spiked drinks, through the gap under the wooden bleachers and onto the grass some fifteen metres below.

The Defence lawyer had primed his client in such a way as to have Josh testify under oath that I was 'not a stranger to the accused'. In fact, these two had agreed to portray me as Mr Bell's 'casual girlfriend'. Casual in that context meant, according to Josh's recorded testimony, that we had already been out together a couple of times. He was further encouraged to perjure himself by alleging we had made love

C. C. Saint-Clair

on these episodic occasions, and that a few days before the Homecoming game, I had allegedly told him that I might be pregnant.

If that were to be confirmed, he had added, still under oath, “She wanted me to pay up and take on board all her abortion expenses.”

“And what did you reply to that?” Mr Bartley slyly asked, leading the jury by his tone of voice.

“Well, Sir, I told her the truth. I told her I didn’t think it’d be mine and that I didn’t -”

“How did the young woman take your refusal?”

“Well ... we had a major ... argument about it.”

“Mr Bell, think carefully before you answer my next question. Would you say that, on that occasion, you had an argument or a fight. We would all understand if you called it a fight considering ... the unusual circumstances.”

“Yeah, well ... hate to admit it but, yeah.”

“Mr Bell, an argument or a domestic fight?”

“A fight. Yes, sir. A real doozy.”

“A real doozy’? Do you mean by that, that there had been a lot of shouting?”

“Well ... yeah ... I mean, yes, Sir. Yeah, we shouted at each other. You know I told her it wasn’t mine. How could she say it was when— “

“Would it be fair to say the two of you came to blows?”

“Uh, I ... well yes.”

“Did you hit the plaintiff?”

“I ... I’m not proud of it but ... Yes. I’d have to say yes, as I’ve sworn to tell the truth. So, yes I hit her but not much.”

“Did the witness for the prosecution, the plaintiff, hit you?”



“Oh, yes sir, she sure did.” The accused stopped to reconsider. “Well, she sure tried to.”

“Did she mark you in any way?”

“She did. She did mark me. She scratched my ... she scratched my back,” he said, swivelling on the chair to point at his broad back as if the scratches showed through the jacket. “And my neck.”

“This young woman scratched your ... your back?” Bartley asked subtly, leading the jury towards where he wanted them to be, a little further down the track of this interrogation, to better corner them during his main argument, mindful that the double entendre would not be lost on everyone.

“And so we have it, Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury. We now have the young woman’s real motive for having cried rape, out of the blue. It was her bid to blackmail the accused into playing an important financial role in her plan to abort the fetus she thought she might be carrying.”

My ordeal had been obliterated, and my accusation had thus been explained away as a cheap feminine ploy, in only a couple of sentences. No rape. Only female vindictiveness. And in terms of the Pro-Life supporters in the courtroom, I had become blameworthy of ‘thoughts with murderous intent’. Elementary, my dear Watson. Would the guilty party, please, rise!

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After the game, which our Longhorns had won hands down, as was usually the case in front of the home crowd, Josh had indicated that, before driving me back, we were

C. C. Saint-Clair

going to 'make a pit stop' at one of his friend's pad for a post-game victory party.

"No thanks, Josh. I'd rather go home ... if you don't mind." But mind he did.

"Hey, what kinda date are ya? Huh? I mean, you don't wanna do anything. It's fun time woman! Loosen up, will ya?" he had shouted, flapping and loosening his arms for emphasis.

"Look, Josh, the date was to attend the game. We've done that. I'll get a cab—"

"Tell ya what," he had begun more softly this time, "we go to that party. I show my face. One drink. My buddies, ya know, they're expectin' me. And then, we hightail outta there. Save ya a cab fare, whatta ya say?" He had smiled boyishly, revealing surprisingly white teeth. He had pointed to a space beyond the skyline. "It's not far. It's out there somewhere." In a childlike pantomime, he had pranced in front of me. "So? Whatta ya say? Whatta ya say?"

"One drink and we're away?"

"Yeah, one drink. That's the deal."

Even if the party turned out a total flop, I had thought at the time, it wouldn't be any worse than waiting all night for the turn of Ann's key in the front door.

I had rationalised that, in the absence of anything better to do, I might as well stay out and socialise. And who knows, the party might actually turn out to be fun. I might run into a couple of people I know. And it's not as if I'd have to stay with him all the time.

And I had smiled back. "What the hell ... why not?" I had surrendered, yet again. The fact was that it was still very early in the night. I knew that Ann would not be back before 1 or 2 a.m. "But only a short visit, okay? Josh? One drink."

The sudden strident horn of a car startled me. I looked into the street just as four young people came out of the building and piled inside a little Citroën. Doors slammed. Music blasted through the half-open windows and the driver sped off into the night. I was in Paris, a lifetime away from Austin, Texas.

Wearily, I prepared for bed. Warily, too, I urged myself to not go back further into that tunnel. Not so late at night. Not before attempting to go to sleep.

It was only once I let the hot jets of my shower stream over my body and into my ears that I was able to block it all out, to flood him out, to go back to you, for the moment at least. I was able to go back to you as you had looked at Le Prince Noir restaurant. I recreated the expression I had seen in your eyes when you had felt my own upon you. When you knew I had come upon your secret. When you knew that I knew.

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Yes, I remember, as fate extended a tiny gesture of goodwill in our direction, but we should not have indulged in her game. We should have gathered emotional strength and resolution in the simple knowledge that, once separated by the mountains, the lakes, the vales, the hills, the forests and the gorges that lie between Paris and Nice, our desire would shrivel into nothingness. Theoretically the bud, broken from its branch, does not bloom.

In any case, when Sophie joined us at Le Prince Noir, looking tired and drawn, she made her way around the table giving each one of us the customary *bise* on the cheek.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Then, she announced, as she held her coat out to the waiter, that we should not count on her the following night either.

An international conference within the framework of the EEC that would involve her boss, and therefore her, was looming, too close in time, and during the early evening session with him, she had become aware that they had not yet reached a comfortable stage of preparedness.

Earlier, back at Le Chicago, Isa and Eli had already begged out of the next evening's plans, having talked each other into dutifully attending a family get-together they anticipated as being tediously uneventful.

"*C'est pas grave*. I can take care of myself for one evening," I had said after Sophie's announcement but she had insisted, entrusting me to your care and so, five became two, in a single shake of a magic wand.

Fate! We should have refused her meddling, while we still could.

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The ensuing day stretched into an endless procession of minutes, and seconds. The exhibit I had planned on viewing at the Quai d'Orsay was well conceived, but much smaller in scope than I anticipated. Thus, I had toured the museum and finished my visit there unexpectedly early.

By lunchtime, I had begun a mindless roam in the streets of Paris past where Camille Claudel used to live on the Quai d'Anjou before she began her long and painful descent into an unrelenting torment. And I walked until I found the relatively quiet streets behind the parc du Luxembourg and the quaint charm of Place Dauphine, a short walk away from the Seine.

This provided the backdrop on which my mind busily sketched and erased variations, possible and improbable, on the coming evening's dinner conversation, dreaded yet longed for. Then my steps, more than my will, guided me back to the Louvre, and into its bookshop I went, casting a cursory glance at the book display, and a doubtful frown at the souvenir counter featuring Renaissance masterpieces reproduced on umbrellas, scarves and shopping bags.

Then suddenly, at eye level, one of Botticelli's Graces appeared trapped under the sheen of a large black and white reproduction.

There she was, staring at me with unseeing eyes while holding up *Le Fruit Défendu* close to her throat, the Forbidden Fruit. I smiled at the appropriateness of such a timely reminder. So, by the time I had *Le Fruit Défendu* rolled under one arm and was looking forward, I thought, to a long, warm bubble bath, I resolved that later on that night, though you might be gently attentive, witty, adorable, sensual and aroused to the point of suggesting dalliance,

I would be strong and impervious to it all, in the name of the three Graces. But the time it took to win that argument against myself and seemingly resign myself to a quiet and private sublimation of my desire, was short-lived. Suddenly, like one who is subject to frequent changes of mind, I had retraced my steps back to the parc Monceau. Back to Avenue Velasquez.

I had walked into a little restaurant three doors down from your office, and I dialled your work number. Sophie had given it to me when I had first arrived.

"*N'hésites pas,*" Sophie had said. "Call her if you need anything. Talk to Helene, her secretary, if Addy's not in. I'll

C. C. Saint-Clair

tell her you might call.” Because you were the only one who actually worked within the Paris city limits, it was agreed you would be my first contact, in the event of an emergency. So, as it happened that afternoon, I did have an emergency. I did need something, something urgently, only I had not realised that urgency had been creeping up on me, inside me during the day.

Was it the knowledge that we were going to dine alone later in the evening that had given wings to that urgent need of you? Or was it the desire of you that had reared up its little head, electrified, as I toyed with the thought of reducing it to a dry, shrivelled up little peel before our dinner even began? Was that brazen need to see you the omen that any further effort to subjugate that desire would fail as surely as droplets of holy water, on their own, are no match against the mighty power of lust?

Once Helene had put you through, I knew my call had surprised you. “Alex? *Ça va?*” There had been a brief pause. “Is everything alright?”

“Oh, yes, everything’s fine. Been walking all day and ended up near the park, so-”

“So?” Were you truly nonplussed, possibly even annoyed by my intrusion into your other life for no particular reason?

Were you being cagey and toying with me, secretly pleased by the interlude my call would provide you in an otherwise routine day at the office? I couldn’t tell but you did agree to meet me within the half-hour and take that late lunch break that you hadn’t managed to fit in any earlier.

When you brought your chair closer to the table and you leaned forward, forearms on the little restaurant table, I watched you watch me. I watched your eyes, the asymmetry

of the smile that curled up higher on the right side, the odd strands of your short auburn hair that perked up, a truly endearing contrast to the classic line of your tailored suit jacket.

I anticipated the moment you would be speaking. I saw the precise moment when you were going to break our silence first take shape in your eyes, and then in an imperceptible twitch of your lips.

“Alex, I have a question for you.” I waited for your question. “It’s a bit of a trust question. *Confiance*, you know?” My heartbeats picked up. You were going to ask something that, ultimately, if I answered sincerely, would leave me exposed and vulnerable.

You were going to ask something personal, something that would put me on the spot. Maybe you were going to ask me something risky, like what I thought it was that Eli had caught in mid-air over the rim of her glass the previous night at the restaurant.

Having only just become aware of each other, but given my imminent departure for Nice, I guess we both felt that it was prudent to let our feelings go unexpressed. So, with some apprehension, I waited for your question.

“Alex, d’you remember our dinner conversation last night, at Le Prince Noir?” I nodded, holding on to my breath. “Isa told us about an article-”

“About little boys,” I broke in, relieved, “having recently become measurable statistics?”

“*Oui, c’est ça*. So, you remember?”

“Of course, I remember. I remember everything that has happened since I connected with you. With you guys,” I added, already aching to touch you. You smiled faintly, “It’s been great fun.”

As you nodded, I saw a thin veil of light crimson blush

your pale cheeks. You didn't keep your eyes averted long, only a couple of seconds, not more.

"*Bon alors*, after the conversation had moved on to the next topic, I felt that you hadn't followed us there. To the next topic. I mean, you had but a part of you hadn't." You stopped and organised your words differently. "I felt a part of you had stayed behind." I didn't say anything. I just frowned.

"Oh, you were fine. I didn't mean that anything was obvious at all. It wasn't. In fact, it was very subtle."

"So subtle that you noticed?"

There was no point in denying what you had correctly interpreted.

The slight blush crept upwards again but your eyes stayed on my face.

Then you looked into my eyes and said, "I guess I might have been ... looking at you ... *attentivement*. Maybe I caught your non-verbals, the tension in your voice." You sighed, "I'm a good observer. Part of my job." Your voice was calm, almost matter-of-fact.

I swallowed hard. "So, what is your question?"

You reached across the table and softly tapped your index finger across my wrist. You moved your hand back a little but you left it very close to mine on the tabletop.

Tantalisingly close. I dragged my eyes off your hand to settle back on your face.

"Alex, are you a victim?" I know I averted my eyes at the question that I had not expected after all. I could have asked, 'a victim of what? Of consumerism? Of technology? Of caffeine addiction?' But I didn't.

"Alex?"

"Yes and no. I was a victim." I paused, unsure about where to go from there. "But I think the politically-



correct term is ‘survivor’,” I added, a tad dryly.  
“Yes, I know. But I’m not a great fan of faddish T-shirt messages. *I Survived Niagara Falls* or *I survived my ... my mother-in-law*. Why not? And then we can have: *I’ve Survived my Rape*. Or *Empowered by ...* You know what I mean, don’t you?” I nodded but you explained anyway. “The idea of having survived is accurate but the empowerment, the closure it implies, is a myth. Maybe I should simply have asked if you’d been a victim of rape. Then you could have answered, ‘Yes, but I’ve since become a survivor.’ Alex, bear with me. I save my best semantics for the courtroom.” Your finger on my wrist had become a hand, a gentle hand resting, just resting on my wrist. “Will you tell me your story?”

Light fingers. A feather-light warm touch that did not linger, maybe because we were only a few doors down from your place of work.

You were known by the management and by the staff as ‘one of the legal crowds who sometimes come here for lunch’.

Or maybe because, I remember thinking, daylight and cups of strong coffee had successfully cleared your head of any irrational thoughts.

However soft your touch had been, it left a tingling imprint where it had touched my skin and a quickened pulse in my throat.

“I can tell you that story but,” I said looking down, “the truth is that I have already, partially revisited that story on my own, after that restaurant conversation. After you and Sophie dropped me off at Eli’s flat.” You shook your head

C. C. Saint-Clair

slightly, reaching into my eyes. The backrest of your chair creaked as you leaned into it.

“And I’ll suggest that such a story might, after all, better be left alone and buried.”

“I’m sure you’ve buried it, Alex. *Mais pas assez profondément*. Not deep enough. That’s why you weren’t able to move on to whatever else we ended up talking about last night. It’s not buried the right way.”

And talk we did, till two a.m.

You looked at me and once again you settled back. “Besides, traumatic stories have a way of ‘unburying’ themselves,” you said. “It’s a bit like the zombies in *La Nuits des Morts Vivants* or the evil creature that’s been burned and slashed and buried in many little pieces.” You stopped again, your eyes on my face looking for whatever signs you needed to go on. “Just when everyone believes it’s finally dead, it creeps up behind the good guy, slowly, stealthily, slimy and putrid, and ‘boo!’ we jump out of our skin.”

You twirled the heavy silver ring you wore on your middle finger, your only piece of jewellery, a present from Sophie. “What I’m saying, Alex, is that your story’s still creeping up on you and now that it’s done that again, I ... I’d like you to share it with me. *J’aimerais ...*”

If I tell you all about it and cry a little, will you hold me tightly in your arms and kiss me ... to make it better?

“The first thing I want to tell you is that I pressed charges and that some four months later I found myself in the witness box.” You nodded silently. “And now,” I said with pretended seriousness, “it’s my turn to ask you a

question.” You nodded again, though I saw a flicker of uncertainty register in your eyes.

It was my turn to lean forward and rest my forearms on the tabletop. “Tell me, Ms d’Anville, where were you back in seventy-nine,” I began in mock gravity, “when I needed a lawyer, a good one?”

“Back in nineteen seventy-nine, I was ... right here. Where I’ve always been,” you answered, running your finger against the bulging side of the white cup in front of you. “I’d gotten *mon Barreau*, my law degree, four years earlier. But in seventy-nine, I wasn’t anyone’s partner. I wasn’t even anyone’s associate. I hadn’t yet specialised in international law, far from it. I was only beginning to learn the ropes. I guess I was only a glorified ... gofer.”

You smiled, possibly at the memory of those long-gone days, “I was dreaming of, you know, what’s the word, not fame but something like it. Maybe limelight, yes, limelight in the courtroom.” You paused and looked thoughtfully into space. And then you turned back to face me squarely, adding gently, “Back then, I would’ve been of no use to you at all.”

And now? I ached to ask, thinking of indirect ways to postpone the moment where I would summarise for you my first three mistakes before leaping much closer to the molten core, before touching again the icky-yucky memory Joshua D. Bell has imprinted on my psyche. And again, your hand settled briefly but firmly across my wrist.

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C. C. Saint-Clair

**Paris, 28 January**

Alex,

My arms ache to hold you. I ache to look into your eyes, to kiss your smile and to give in to my delirium. I am stuck in time.

I go about things as if I were behind a glass wall. What's worse is that this mood not only affects my performance at work but also interferes with the quiet moments I spend with Sophie. I force myself to remember how I used to enjoy moments like that, but it's like convincing the amnesiac that the life inside the photo album was truly his.

On the one hand I feel numb, on the other I feel helplessly pulled towards you. *C'est ironique, tu sais.* I, who, in another life, would have offered you the emotional security you seem to need so badly, I am the one who, now, brings you to a pain you had successfully avoided, until now.

You said that your usual thing is to avoid love beyond the 'in love' stages of your relationships because you think that, one way or the other, the deep kind of love always means pain and sorrow. I admit finding this notion a little immature. And yet, here I am, initiating you to that similar pain, one that will never give you anything but pain.

One day, at best, this pain will change into a single, once-red tulip, pressed thin and forgotten inside the pages of a book; a dried-up and colourless memory.

And because of me, too, you went back in time inside that dark well, back in Texas. I say 'because of me', because I'm the one who pressed you to re-explore that moment of

your life. But I'm being punished for it because I can't make the pain that you've put around your words go away.

*Chérie*, why does your voice make me feel ... the way it does? Your phone call ... I wasn't ready for it, I wasn't expecting it. At this very moment, I'm unable to tell you how I am, how I feel. I need to finish this letter now as I am due at the Ministère des Finances in a couple of hours and later I'll have to stop by Le Palais de Justice.

Each minute of my time is measured; one grain of sand for this, a small handful for that. And for the first time I find the pressure, the demands and expectations placed upon me totally irritating. Everyone, it seems, wants some of my time, some of me.

All I want is to rush home, leaving my briefcase, my work, here at the office. I just want to wait for the postman to deliver the letter you talked about over the phone. I know. I know. I need to grip the situation. No, that's not right. How does it go? To get a grip on the situation, maybe? Never mind.

I know, too, that the specifics of my work don't allow anyone to let go for very long. A day off is impossible. Besides, how would I explain that to Sophie? Can't have her think that I'm sick, I mean, not just sick in my heart. Even Eli leaves messages. She's complaining that I'm not trying to organise the weekend away that we'd started to plan before you came. A new benchmark of lustful and irrational desire is superseding all previous understanding I had of myself.

All this is just ... too complicated.

I kiss you *trés doucement*.

Adrienne

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The Defence had summoned to the stand a few of the partygoers, all males, who had testified that they had, indeed, seen the defendant at the post-game party they had attended the night of the alleged rape.

According to the transcript of the proceedings, one of the young men had said, “Yeah, sure. Josh was there with his date. Very long hair, dark. Thin. Quite a doll, really. Didn’t talk much, though. So, yeah ... when I saw her, I thought, ‘Hey, lucky dude,’ you know.”

Another male witness had also testified having seen me ‘sitting on the armrest of his armchair.’ Another had been called to the witness stand simply to state he had ‘briefly’ seen me ‘seated on the defendant’s lap’. The word ‘briefly’ became redundant.

The defence attorney had presented these morsels of information to the women and men of the jury as the moist titbits that they were, all fitting together to create a particular picture of me: that of a young woman, out and about on a Saturday night, drinking and partying with a healthy young male with whom she was comfortable enough to sit on his lap. Ann and I, discussing what little tactics we could, had decided to keep our past relationship the secret it had always been.

The courtroom just didn’t seem to be the right place to come out and talk about my defunct lesbian relationship. The many silences Ann and I chose not to fill allowed the Defence unbridled licence to chew further at my credibility. And so, he was free to interpret my presence in that strange house, in an unfamiliar suburb, a good hour’s drive from my apartment, as proof that I had implicitly trusted my date.

Sometime around midnight, I had managed to wrench Josh from his party buddies and from an umpteenth glass of whisky. By then, I was truly fed up and decidedly tired. Tired of fending off Josh's sloppy groping.

"Gawd, woman," he had snarled at some point, "my fuckin' luck. Got myself a frigid Homecoming date. My very own frigid Homecoming Queen." He was, I had assumed, making a pun around the traditional election of the University's Homecoming Queen that precedes by a week every yearly Homecoming game.

I was fed up, too, with his rudeness, his callowness, the amount of space he took up, the amount of noise he made. I was stressed, too, by the passing traffic of joints that I was given by one to hand to another, back and forth along the couch. In a way, Josh was right – I wasn't much of a party girl. I didn't do pot and I didn't smoke and I didn't drink.

The self-imposed pressure to be polite was beginning to irk me. I grew intolerant of questions that had always bored me since my arrival in Texas: Why had I chosen this particular campus? How did I like it, here, in America? Where had I learned to speak English, and so on. Though most everyone was clearly intoxicated, I had felt compelled to humour them and be gracious.

After all, it wasn't their fault if I had let Josh drag me to that house. It wasn't their fault that I was still there, surrounded by fetid breaths and smoke that was too thick and heavy to lift itself to the ceiling. I was irritated, too, by languid girlfriends draped across their boyfriends, like thin little branches that no longer question the presence, the shape, of the stake that props them up.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Why hadn't I left once Josh had made it clear that the 'one drink' promise was not going to be honoured? Indeed, why not? With hindsight, of course ... but the problem inherent to hindsight, is that it only ever comes after the event. As it was, I didn't know the name of the suburb we were in. All I had noticed, as the Pontiac had thundered through the streets after the sun had set over the city, were rows of ramshackle houses in a socially-disadvantaged part of town. I knew I didn't want to walk off alone into the night. I didn't want to hitch a ride either. It all had seemed a little unnecessary at the time.

I certainly had thought about ditching Josh, but not before calling a cab from the house. I would have had to ask one of the hosts for the exact address and I had felt that would have led to Josh's involvement and another round of public irascibility. Besides, I was afraid that the fifteen dollars I had on me would not be enough to cover the cab fare across town and beyond. And once again I had thought, too, of what little comfort I would get from sitting at home while my mind tried not to be a fly on the back seat of Dan's kombi van, picturing him and her somewhere in the local Lovers' Lane, rocking the van off its suspension, while she wrestled with the notion that, somehow, that was less sinful than making love with me.

And so finally, I was settled in the passenger side and had rolled down the window to gulp the fresh air while waiting for Josh to return from a visit behind the nearest bush. Couldn't he have done that up there, I had asked myself, totally disgusted with the guy's general maleness.



Though he had already told me he was a third-year law student, I could only imagine him totally at home in a road gang, digging ditches, thick muscles glistening under a layer of dusty sweat, under the harsh Texan sun. Something out of the ‘Cool Hand Luke’ chain gang, for example. He was finally driving me back to my place. But what a long night it had been, waiting for the right moment to wean Josh from his glass and have him bear hug his male friends and twirl the girls in a mock dance as he made his farewells. As he started the engine, I let out a sigh of relief. In a matter of minutes, I’d be under the shower, letting the hot steamy water dislodge the last particle of smoke from my hair, from every pore, from my nostrils even.

Josh had steered the car onto the highway ramp and I became aware of the tug of the night air on my hair. I leaned to the right to glance at the speedometer. Sixty-six miles per hour.

“Hey Josh, what say you slow down a little?” I shouted over the blaring radio.

“Don’t ya worry, momma, I’m in total con ... trol.”

I had begun to worry about what reflexes he might still have, after the gallons of whisky consumed during the last few hours blended with the clouds of Mary Jane inhaled, as it all raced through his system. But a short while later I relaxed again. I had recognised the first of the fluorescent green panels indicating the exit to Lakeview, where Ann and I lived. I had eased back into the seat and unwound myself for the first time since Josh had knocked on our front door earlier that evening.

“Hey! You’ve missed the turn off! That was my exit back there!”

“Relax! Night’s young. Stop bein’ a party pooper. Ya’re no fun at all. God! That’s one lousy night,” he said through

C. C. Saint-Clair

lips pursed as if around a squirt of tobacco juice. As an afterthought he added, “Hey chick, remind me to lose your number, right?”

“Dude, you do just that,” I had replied, copying his gruffness, “and do us both a favour,” though I didn’t want to wind him up too much. The prospect of a cleansing shower had just slid around another corner.

“Hey, you, uptight lady, don’t go getting mad, will ya,” he had said, almost civilly. “One teeny-weeny night cap and I get ya home. Front door to front door, silver service with a smile.” He had briefly turned towards me, grinning. “It’ll only be fifteen minutes once we get goin’. But there I was thinkin’, homecoming date with a Frenchie. Heehea! Fun ‘n’ loose!”

“Josh, I’m not interested in fun and loose!” I began reaching across to turn the volume down. “I agreed to go to the game with you as a last-minute thing. It’s not as if I had been sitting by the phone waiting for your call. I don’t even know you.” And now that I do, I certainly don’t like you one little bit.

“So why did you say, ‘Yeah, why not’ then?”

“I did say, ‘Why not?’ I didn’t say, ‘Yeah, great. Can’t wait,’ did I?” The night wind momentarily filled the cabin.

“Never mind that. Why did you say okay, if you didn’t want a good time?”

“Josh, read my lips. I just wanted to see the game. Okay? The game of the year! Just didn’t want to stay home. So, okay, I said ‘yes’,” I had explained as to a moronic child.

I brushed the hair away from my face and to keep it from flying out of the window, I gathered it inside one hand. “I thought you’d probably be okay enough ... to go catch a game. If you’d said that you wanted to make a night out of it, I wouldn’t have said ‘Why not’. I would have said, ‘Sorry

dude. Thanks, but no thanks. And you would've had to find yourself another last-minute date.”

Josh turned the volume back up. I looked at him sideways. His jaw muscles were knotted, his profile was angry. And I was angry at myself for having been silly enough to think that all he might have wanted was somebody to sit next to on the bleachers. For having truly thought I'd be home by ten. For still being dragged around by him. For being forced to participate in a three-legged race for which I had not volunteered. What sort of date with a male is ever hassle-free? And then I had thought of Ann, probably still wrapped around Dan. She's quickly relearned to like them. Must be like getting back on a horse. I closed my eyes against a punishing image of them.

I shifted uncomfortably against the car seat. For the first time of the night, I was truly focusing on the taut thickness of Josh's neck, on the muscles wrapped snake-like under the skin of his steering arm. A pang of alarm rose inside me. I was, no longer, merely annoyed, tired, aggravated or simply fed up. I had just become scared, scared of the man driving through the night the vehicle in which I was as much a prisoner as anything else. I had become afraid of what he might do, of what he could do, simply because ... he could.

I stuck my head out of the cabin and into the wind in an attempt to dispel that fear before it crystallised. You're being silly 'lady', I thought, letting the wind play to its heart's content with my hair. And I thought of Isadora Duncan at the wheel of her swish speedster.

C. C. Saint-Clair

“*Ah, merde!*” I had mumbled under my breath, realising the long tendrils were getting terribly tangled. Won’t have the patience for that when I get home tonight. That’ll be Ann’s penance, I thought wryly. One tangled knot at a time. I craned my neck to look at the dark sky that sat low down and blind to the stars.

A thought crossed my mind: maybe I should open the car door and roll out. I glanced at the speedometer and looked at the lampposts racing past with only the briefest blur of houses and sky between them. I opted against any rash decisions. And unpredictably, I found myself thinking that maybe, just maybe, muscle-bound-grunt-man-Josh might be a little bit right. Maybe because, from the moment he had knocked on our door and I looked upon him as if he belonged to an alien race, I had become a little too uptight. He was an alien all right, totally foreign to me. But instead of awakening my curiosity, the type of alien he was automatically raised my hackles. Possibly, *une question de peau*, meaning that there exists a type of physical ‘antipathy’ that is not always rational. Maybe that was because I, as a lesbian, was not used to such boorish, call it cave-mannish, behaviour.

Regardless of how much he had drunk or smoked, he was not showing any signs of weariness. He was not yawning. He was not rubbing his eyes. He didn’t slur his words. He kept the car in the middle of its lane and he still signalled correctly. *Une force de la nature*, is the other expression we use to refer to someone whose physical prowess is almost unbelievable. Humour him, Alex. What the hell, I thought, although I was very much aware that I had done nothing else but humour him for the past five

hours. The fifteen bucks I have should see me through, now that I am on my side of town. Less painful than a broken back if I jumped out now. Shit woman, that was one crazy thing to think about ... jumping out of that damn car. Hulk here's not worth all this hassle! Re-lax Alex! Okay, you're definitely not in control here, so just hang loose and re-lax." Mistake number four.

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I hit the pause button and stopped my recall. You were still. You had listened all the while without interrupting. Though you were watching me intently, the sudden manner in which I stopped seemed to have jarred you somehow. You wore that particular expression that people have when they feel disoriented or jerked out of a daydream. Or the same expression they have when they step down without looking, sure their feet will find the step on their own. But there is no step to be found. They stand there, body jarred and confused.

"Adrienne," I said leaning forward, wishing I could casually reach across the table and brush my hand against your cheek. Your face was set in a mask of grim concentration. "Adrienne, you've been sitting here, listening to my story for too long. You only came down for a quick lunch. Shouldn't you be on your way back to your active case load?"

You straightened in your seat. And stretched your back a little. I saw, more than heard, your slow intake of breath. But you did not gather your belongings to go. You just sat there silently. Grim and silent, your jaw tense. Your eyebrows were tight, too, and yet you were not

C. C. Saint-Clair

frowning. And then you turned slightly, visibly looking to catch a waiter on the hop. You raised your eyebrows at me instead of asking the question.

And I understood you. I nodded yes, to your silent offer of another double strength café.

A waiter looked up and caught the quick telegraphic signs you made in his direction. I was still amazed at the efficiency of Parisian café staff everywhere. No need for them to take time to register your signal and amble over to ask what they could do for you. These waiters and waitresses simply didn't have time. French patrons, it seemed, had only two expectations, a courteous and efficient service. And so the waiter brought us our cups of coffee. You still had not formulated a single word but I could sense you were thinking. You were calculating something, I could almost see the cogs of thought turning behind your eyes.

Once the waiter had left our table, you seemed to snap back to your exterior environment. You smiled at me. And slowly shook your head. You reached for the very classy ostrich-skin briefcase Sophie had proudly told me she had offered you as a tenth anniversary present.

You pulled out your leather-bound diary and a slimline Montblanc pen. Your eyes coursed from entry to entry. Some you crossed out to re-enter on another page. Two entries seemed to cause you problems. You tapped the tip of the pen against your lips. Then you looked up, your face once again clear and open.

You raised a finger in the French gesture that signifies 'one moment.' You retrieved the smallest of cell phones from your jacket pocket and punched in the keys very quickly.

From what you said, I understood you were talking to your secretary. You were asking her to clear your timetable

for the next two hours. You dictated a set of concise instructions for her to activate in the meantime. And you asked her to tell someone not to lock the safe as you'd be working late to make up for lost time. My heart missed a beat. There it was. The price to pay for this mid-afternoon unscheduled incursion into your professional rhythm meant that you had to cancel our dinner date and stay back at your office.

As your own words reached your ears, you seemed to stop dead in mid-sentence. The same slow blush slowly infused your cheeks. You gave me a quick apologetic smile and shook your head slightly. I breathed again.

You were telling Helene, "*Non ... pas ce soir.* Not this evening. I have an important engagement that cannot be rescheduled." You flipped the little phone on itself, dropping it back in your pocket. And only then did you settle against the wooden backrest of your bistro chair, your features as perky and open as usual.

"Alex, *je suis toute à toi.* I'm all yours," you said, visibly quite pleased with yourself, "for the next couple of hours, until, say 5.30." It would have been pointless for me to falsely suggest that you 'really shouldn't have'. A businesswoman you are. One who clearly knows her own mind.

"Then, I'll have to go back to the office for a while. Can we push back our dinner date by an hour? Say we meet again at 8 p.m.?" I gave you a big grin and you gave me one of your broad little-girl smiles. "So, where were we?"

"I was telling you about the next crucial mistake I had made simply to go along, simply to kill a little more time before Ann came home from her date with lover-boy, Dan."

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C. C. Saint-Clair

Matthew Bartley from Odessa had all he needed for the Defence, for him, to further damage my credibility in the eyes of the jury. He knew these twelve civic-minded citizens would not agree on a guilty verdict as long as there existed 'a shadow of doubt'. How could these twelve citizens (seven males, five of them white, five women, only two of whom were coloured) argue that 'beyond any shadow of doubt', the pretty lil' French gal on the stand was telling the truth.

How could twelve people off the electoral roll know 'beyond any shadow of doubt' that my pressing charges four months ago hadn't been a mere female ploy? What if 'I' had really meant to force young man Bell in-the-pin-stripe-suit to fork out a fistful of dollars because I had got 'knocked-up' somewhere else along the party circuit merry-go-around?

After all, the women in the jury probably agreed with the defence that the accused did look like any mother's wish for a son-in-law.

Strong and quiet, handsome even, in a nice Texan rugged sort of a way, and on his way to becoming a lawyer. Give us a break, they might have thought. This girl is trying to come out whiter than Snow White. What did she say? She didn't drink? What? She threw all her drinks beneath the stadium seats? As if no one would notice! Didn't smoke dope, not even cigarettes.

What twenty-year-old, healthy coed doesn't dabble in a bit of college fun? She did go to the defendant's apartment, after all. She didn't have to get into his car if she was afraid of him, did she? And she called rape early one morning after a night in his bed? The police found the poor guy still sound asleep at 10 a.m.? Hardly the MO of a perpetrator, really!



“After a night of drinking, this very pretty young lady,” the defence lawyer had explained in a sticky-sweet patronising tone, “agreed to come back to this young man’s apartment for a nightcap.” Matthew Bartley was pointing towards Josh, who sat pale and ramrod straight in his smart lawyer-to-be-suit, his wiry blond hair neatly patted down.

This Defence lawyer knew that, at the same moment, each of the fourteen women who had been made to wait in separate cubicles at the end of the corridor were ready to testify against the defendant.

The irony of the game being played out here in the tribunal was not lost on him. He knew that as long as he was able to cast a shadow, even a teeny-weeny shadow, over either my character or my testimony, the court, the jury, the hundreds of people packed inside the courtroom would never ever hear these women’s tales of rape and abduction at the hands of the accused, Joshua Bell.

Apparently, each woman, at the time, had felt too humiliated, too battered, too afraid of reprisals to press charges. It was only upon reading in the local newspaper, that one named Joshua Bell, 28, of 1604B Valley Ridge Drive, had been arrested and charged with the rape of a twenty-year-old UT co-ed that each woman, unaware of the existence of the other thirteen, had decided to bring her own tale of fear and violence to Sergeant Sam Dean, in charge of the case. In an ironic case of reversed order, it was my story first, theirs later.

Though Bartley had heard and read each of these depositions, he had clearly banked on ‘stitching this thing up’ for his client long before it ever came to a public hearing

C. C. Saint-Clair

of these fourteen testimonies. After all, hadn't he taken up the 'UT rape case' free of charge, as a publicity gamble, he felt he could not lose, not in Texas, not back in those pre 'date rape' days.

Upon having heard that piece of law locker-room gossip from Sergeant Sam Dean who, by then, had taken a paternal interest in my case, I said through clenched teeth, "A man of high moral principles, through and through." I would have spat in Bartley's face, too, if only I had been given the opportunity to confront him after the jury had announced their verdict.

Instead, my lawyer, anticipating defeat in spite of the eight hours of jury deliberation, had advised me against being present at the reading of the verdict. "To avoid further pain and humiliation in the face of their likely victory," he had said, patting the back of my hand.

And months later, Ann felt she could show me the magazine excerpt that Sergeant Sam Dean had sent us. Bartley's reputation had indeed been boosted by the trial. His profile had been featured in a law magazine of national distribution.

Among other aspects of my court case being aired out, the journalist had asked him why he had been so sure of getting a 'not guilty' verdict, "... not unless the victim is a contemplative nun in habit and wimple, or someone's grandmother over sixty, providing she's not the frilly type who coos around younger men.

Very difficult unless the female has been carved up from the inside out. And from the early preliminary reports, before I even approached Mr Bell who could never have afforded my services otherwise, I already knew that the

plaintiff was young and slight, attractive and French. And that she had not reported any internal injuries.”

“We find the accused not guilty.” The words of my defeat, of my own sentence.

That evening, I realised that Justice, like any truly blind person, is entirely dependent on the hand that leads her most firmly. And that had certainly been the hand of the Defence. I had rubbed my scalp trying to understand. And in doing so I, once again, saw the long strands of my hair that had come out by the handful, just as they had fallen earlier on the cream linoleum of the Emergency Room off at the side of Brackenridge Hospital.

I remembered once more the vaginal examination, performed by a young male intern in those dark days of pre-victim awareness, and how I had been made to wait for over two very long hours alone in a white-sheeted cubicle. The hospital staff had not considered me ‘an emergency’ – and in fact, I wasn’t one.

I was not dying, at least not in the manner they had been trained to recognise. I had been asked to strip out of my clothes. And the mismatched clothes I had found groping in the darkness of a room somewhere in Joshua Bell’s apartment dropped to the floor. A nurse had shoved a brown paper bag at me, in which to place my clothing, whisked it away and brought back the standard issue paper dress.

“That should take care of it,” she said curtly, while handing me a little pink pill and a tiny thimble of a paper cup.

I had blinked at her, “It will ... take care ... of what?”

“Morning-after pill. You know.” I shook my head, feeling tears well up from deep inside.

C. C. Saint-Clair

“In case, you know. You don’t want to get pregnant, do you?” And just as quickly she had gone back through the white curtains as if my condition was contagious.

And there I had sat and sat, head down, hands squeezed between my clamped thighs, waiting. Waiting and remembering what I most desperately needed to forget.

Occasionally, I would raise a tentative finger to my burning cheek, checking the hard core of the lump that was already forming below the scraped skin of my cheekbone. On my neck I had already found the raised imprint left by Josh’s steel grip as he had all but crushed my larynx before half choking me with his weight-bearing forearm, enabling him to brutally ram his penis into my vagina. I was trapped, pinned against the floor by the weight of his body, by his knee pressing into my stomach.

It was in the sterile cubicle at Brackenridge Hospital where I had been left isolated that I first relived the ordeal I had escaped from, by jumping naked from a second-floor window, shoes wrapped inside a bundle of clothes under one arm. Shivering and totally alone, I had no defence against the events of the night as they returned, blurred by pain.

The nurse had refused Ann the right to sit with me.

“Family only,” she had said.

So, Ann had been kept apart and hurting, too, at the other end of the corridor.

She had come home a little after midnight, unable to relax with Dan. She had found my note on her side of the bed.

In case you come home early, which is not likely to happen, you might wonder where I am. But, hey, don’t

worry. I've gone to the game with Josh Bell. You know, the one who came and talked to us at that awful party we went to a couple weeks ago. He kept on pestering you for a dance. Well, lucky me! I'll be home around ten, straight after the game. If you're in, we'll make some popcorn. Aly.

What's this about? Puzzled, Ann had frowned, but had gone around the living room, pulling the curtains against the night. She had shrugged, had a shower and had flopped in front of the TV set with her favourite late-night snack. It was past midnight, way past my scheduled return but she had thought that I must have been having a better time than anticipated.

She had not worried. In fact, she had been happy for me, for herself, relieved to think that I was not going to be as obstreperous as she had apprehended. Alex is moving on too, she had thought. I knew she would, sooner or later. She had gone to bed but had found herself unable to sleep.

At approximately 2 a.m. Ann had actually gotten dressed again in the same clothes she had removed earlier. Again, she had sat in front of the TV set though she said she had turned the volume off.

While she had stared at the moving images on the screen, she had tried to make some sense of the disturbing thoughts, of the fear that had insidiously crept upon her, almost as soon as she had lain down.

So, Alex went *on a date*, really!

No, not on a date. Just to the game.

Ann, too, had been there with Dan. All of Austin would have been there.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Who's this Josh fellow? She pondered.  
Think, think.

Ann had re-read my note.

Met the guy when we were at a party a couple of weeks ago? We didn't talk to any guy- Oh, that numb brain with the big shoulders!

She had finally remembered Josh.

Vietnam vet strutting around in his '*Born to raise hell*' fatigue jacket.

"I remember him all right," Ann spoke out loud.

Hard looking muscles under his black cotton T-shirt.

Coarse reddish blond hair. A real lush. Loud. Must be him.

And though she didn't know more about him, it was enough for Ann to know that under normal circumstances, I would never have given this guy the time of day.

'What on earth has made her go ... anywhere with this guy?' She slammed her fist into the padded armrest.

Where the hell is she?

*Home after the game*, she said. That would have been four hours ago. Why isn't she back yet?

And the answer to that question had ripped through her brain with the accuracy of a Navajo arrow. Something's happened to her! She had felt a sudden heat rise from her chest and burn its way to her cheeks like the hot breath of a furnace.

'Oh ... shit. If anything's happened to her, it's totally on me!'

She had decided that whatever was keeping me could not be good, and that whatever it was would never have happened if she hadn't gone out with Dan. And now, there was nothing she could do but wait for the phone to ring. She had already called the Brackenridge Emergency room. She had called the police station, too. But it had been too early.

At the time of Ann's phone calls, I was still crushed against the floor at Josh's, unable to breathe, being torn apart by each of his thrusts.

At approximately 5 a.m. the phone had rung in our living room, waking Ann from an uneasy doze on the sofa.

"Alex! Alex! Where are you?" she had shouted into the receiver. Silence had crackled inside Ann's ear. "Alex! Aly! Talk to me. Where are you?" The absence of sound had sent waves of dread rippling through her heart. "Aly, Sweetheart! Talk to me!" she had urged, her fingers gripping the receiver tighter, fast against her ear. She thought she had heard a sob. Not a sob, a choked whimper.

"Alex, where are you? Hey ... I'm dressed. I'm coming. I'm on my way to get you. Darling ... you have to tell me where you are!"

And Ann had heard an answer. "I ... Ann ... don't know... where I am. Please ... oh, please, come!" Ann said my voice had been only a croak. And then, over the phone she had been able to coax me into breathing deeply, and unclenching my jaws.

"He ... Oh, Ann. He ... I ... I've been ..."

"Alex, listen to me now. Breathe. Breathe some more. With me. Now! Inhale. Deep. Hold. Hold it. Slowly, between your lips. Come on, Alex. Let me hear you." And she had listened to my breathing. And she had said, "Again." And she had said, "Alex, now tell me where you are. Street, suburb, shop, anything. Just tell me something. I'll find you." And then she had asked a different question, "Alex, are you hurt?"

"I've ... jumped ... from ... I don't know."

"Alex, tell me. Are you hurt?" There had been a pause, a silence on the line. Then I had expressed my most pressing need. "I ... want to hide." A gurgle against Ann's ear had

C. C. Saint-Clair

punctuated my words. And my whisper slid and spun down her ear canal, “Ann ... he ... raped me.”

Ann had held on to her breath, her worst fear confirmed. She let the icy finger of guilt probe at her chest. “Yes, sweetheart, I know,” she had said softly. “And that’s why I need to come and get you. Now, where are you?”

I did, eventually, find a way to tell Ann where she could find me. And what seemed an eternity later, her pick-up truck had pulled up in the service alley of a U-Totem store and there she had found me, ‘... slumped against the wall, between the dumpster and some empty boxes.’

According to the transcript of the trial I got to read much later, Ann on the witness stand had added, ‘Like a doll, that’d been ... thrown away, you know, her head between her knees, hidden under a mass of tangled, matted hair, arms hanging limply at her side.’

She had walked me back to the car, supporting my aching body with her own. It was then that she had noticed my hand holding up a pair of old jeans, far too large for my hips. She saw my bare feet and the way I curled up my toes to minimise road contact with my soles. Squashed drops of blood began drying on the bitumen.

“Oh ... I’ve walked ... Ann. Ouch! Ah! I don’t know ... how far... and I ran. Please ... take me home.”

Ann had found it strange that the only pain I should mention had been in regards to the cuts on my feet.

‘As I was helping Aly ... Alex into the car,’ she had said on the witness stand, ‘I brushed the hair off her face and looked into her eyes and ... and then, I saw the pain in her eyes. I realised that the pain, the pain on the outside, the pain in her feet was all Alex could bring herself to mention.’



And Ann had testified having winced at the sight of the angry red welts across my cheeks and the budding swelling under my left eye.

‘And when I stroked her hair ... to soothe her and wipe some grime from her face, strands of hair stayed caught in between my fingers. I just stood there ... looking at Alex’s hair, there in between my fingers, in clumps.’

A nurse, concerned by preceding snippets printed in the local newspaper and in the campus rag, had been one of the many people moved to write to the Editor:

‘Mr Bell’s lawyer, the noted gentleman from Odessa, cleverly used the Brackenridge intern’s testimony for the State to discredit the victim’s claims. Her blood pressure, respiration rate and pulse were cited as normal.

This has no bearing whatsoever on the crime committed, since one’s vital signs usually stabilise within thirty minutes of a traumatic experience.

It has been reported that the young woman had been kept waiting at least two hours once at Brackenridge Hospital, and that she had escaped from the scene of the crime, at least one hour prior.

The vagina is a flexible organ that stretches. It is unlikely that any internal damage would be found except in a case in which the victim is tortured and penetrated with an object over twelve inches long ...’

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C. C. Saint-Clair

That afternoon at the Oh Poivrier restaurant we had, once more, run out of time. And though we had our first and only dinner alone that night, I had categorically refused to grunge up our special intimate moment, the only one we could ever get, with more of my murky account.

I had said, “Stay tuned for the next episode, I’ll mail it to you.”

I was joking of course but you said, “Yes, please do.”

And my careless comment ended up being turned into a promise. And so, I had embarked into a scriptwriting of sorts, a sad comedy of errors. And so, a few weeks after I had left you and Sophie at the turn of a long corridor at Orly airport, I had mailed you from the South of France, the first ‘in role’ instalment, a script of sorts that began with:

“An object over twelve inches long!” I still shudder at the thought of the long Bowie hunting knife I had glimpsed upon my arrival at Josh’s apartment. Its blade had glinted coldly under the dull kitchen lamp.

It was lying on the drain board in a little pool of water. Its grooved horn handle had the soft waxy sheen I have always enjoyed in natural wax and ivory carvings. Its curved tip seemed to point at a box of rifle ammunition nearby on the kitchen counter and at a very dusty bong that bared mused palm prints.

At the time, however, only three thoughts had come to my mind: the first was that he did hunt, just as he had said he did. The second was that by the well-used looks of the dusty bong, he probably hunted high.

The third thought that had crossed my mind then was, actually, more of a question. Where’s his rifle? It was not,

however, a question that had begged an immediate answer. It had been a thought that had simply flitted across my wary mind.

Josh had momentarily excused himself to ‘hit the john’, as he had said, and I had been working up to telling him I needed to use the phone to call a cab. That would be signalling to him that I was through with him and through, too, with his idea of fun on the town.

By then, I truly had had enough and Ann would be home soon. I no longer had any reason to delay my return home.

Mr Smith, the assistant DA, repeated his question, “Alexandra, tell us what the accused shouted at you after you screamed for help?”

I had heard him the first time and I was trying to bring myself to say his words in front of all these people, in this courtroom filled to the rafters with lawyers, law students, onlookers, my family and my friends.

“Alexandra, please.” Mr Smith looked kindly at me over the metal rim of his glasses.

Through clenched teeth, I repeated what Josh had shouted, ““You scream again ... I kill you!”” I hesitated and Mr Smith nodded for me to go on. I inhaled slowly to calm my racing heartbeat, ““You motha fuckin’ slut. You ain’t going nowhere, bitch!”” Looking down at my trembling hands, I added softly, “That’s what he said.”

“And why did he feel the need to threaten you in such a vicious manner?”

“He had tripped me and I had fallen backwards on the floor. Against something very hard, a hard edge. I was winded and ... disoriented. I tried to sit up, to stand, but I couldn’t.”

C. C. Saint-Clair

“Okay. I understand. You were winded by your fall backwards. But why did he say these very harsh words to you, Alexandra?”

“I had screamed. I thought I had heard ... footsteps somewhere below. I had cried for help. I was hoping—” My voice broke.

“And what were you hoping for?”

“I ... I was hoping ... I thought. I thought someone might hear me ... and ... I was hoping they’d call the police.”

“Now, Alexandra, why did you want strangers walking back to their own home around 2 a.m. to call the police? Why did you want them to call the police on your behalf, Alexandra?”

“I ... knew Josh was going to—”

“Objection, Your Honour!” Mr Bartley interjected.

“Sustained.”

Startled, I looked at my lawyer, startled by the defence lawyer’s objection.

“Alexandra, without naming anyone,” enjoined my lawyer, “please, tell us why you wanted passers-by to call the police on your behalf.”

“Without naming ... anyone?”

How can I not name anyone? He was not an abstract concept. He was right here, right in front of me. Boring right through me, smirking when he thought no one was watching. Why can’t I refer to him by his name, Josh Bell, the man who

raped me? “I ... I mean the thing is I was afraid of ... of ... “

“The man you knew was going to rape you—”

“Objection. Your Honour!”

“Sustained!”

“Alexandra, can we refer to him as the accused?” I willed myself to be mesmerised by the hem of the navy-

blue skirt I was wearing and how it lay pressed slightly above my knees, demurely close together. “Alexandra?”

“Yes, sir.” I answered, fighting the pull of Josh’s presence, as he leaned comfortably back into his chair, slightly out of focus but very real all the same, as he sat permanently to the left of my field of vision each time I leaned forward to speak into the microphone. “Well ... Jo – the accused ... Well, I knew ... I just knew he was going to ... to rape me.” One hand clasped tight inside the other I fought to contain my emotions. “And I was afraid to ... to die, too.”

Mr Smith let my words ripple across the silent courtroom before pretending an innocent question, “You mean that you thought the act of rape might kill you?”

“No. No, sir. I don’t mean that. I was ... I was a virgin, sir.” More to the point, sir, I wanted to add, no woman ever wants to be penetrated in a climate of fear. Not even if they have made love a zillion time before. But no, I didn’t think his dick was going to kill me. “... I was ... terribly frightened of being raped. But on top of that, I thought he ... my ... aggressor might ... he might kill me ... instead of ... or ... afterwards.”

“Instead of what?”

“Instead of raping me. Because he couldn’t ... penetrate.”

“This sounds somewhat confusing, Alexandra. You need to tell us, you need to tell the jury here why such horrible thoughts had crossed your mind and why your aggressor could not penetrate.”

“Well, he ... he had finally managed to ... get on top of me. But he hadn’t ... yet. I mean I knew he was not yet able ... to rape me. I had thrown him off. I sensed he was furious. Mad! I mean ... crazy.”

C. C. Saint-Clair

“So, he was crazed because he had not yet been able to penetrate you and-”

“And I remembered the big hunting knife, a Bowie, I had seen in the kitchen near the sink. And the cartridges. I knew there would be a rifle ... somewhere in his apartment.”

“And why were you worried about a rifle being in the apartment or by the hunting knife in the kitchen?”

“I felt he ... he might become enraged or so frustrated with me, with ... the fact that he couldn’t, that he might ... get a weapon. The violence in him ... I just knew ... “

“Alexandra, I am going to ask you a very important question. Listen carefully. You had two fears going on simultaneously at the moment at which you screamed for someone to help you. One was that you were about to be raped. The other was the intuitive feeling that you might be stabbed or shot dead by a deranged-”

“Your Honour! Objection! Cheap trickery to-”

“Sustained!” declared Judge Grimes. “Mr Smith, the Court is asking you to refrain from using any sort of derogatory epithet that might lead the jury to a premature character judgement of the defendant during this particular line of questioning.”

“Yes, Your Honour. Alexandra, rape or death? Which did you fear the most at the time?”

Like LCD displays on the highway that urge motorists to negotiate the road carefully, little thoughts flashed behind my eyes: Take your time. Breathe in. Be clear. “I thought I would first be raped if he could and then killed ...afterwards. Or killed if he couldn’t.”

“That’s a fair enough answer under the circumstances. Now Alexandra, you need to explain to the Court and to the

ladies and gentlemen of the Jury how it is that your aggressor was able to position himself ... on top of you.”

“I’m not sure. As soon as I fell backwards ... it felt ... I couldn’t raise my head.”

“And why not?”

“I think he must have grabbed ... my head was pulled back by my hair.”

“Yes, you do have very long hair indeed, but please explain to all of us here why you have just said ‘I think.’ Surely, Alexandra, surely you would know whether or not the defendant had a hold of your hair or not.”

I shook my head. “I know he did but the room was ... dark. Pitch dark. I could not see anything. Not even my hands in front of my face. I couldn’t see anything. I was totally disoriented.”

“Well, now. Okay. The room was pitch-black. So, how did you know your aggressor was even anywhere near you?”

“My head was pulled back. I could feel his breath. I could ... smell him.”

I had clawed the absolute darkness searching for his eyes. A fist had smashed against my face. Sparks of yellow pain had screamed behind my eyes.

“So, the man who has trapped you inside a pitch-black room, has thrown you on the ground, has punched you in the face, is yanking your head back and— “

“Objection, Your Honour!”

“Overruled.”

I had pleaded with Josh not to hurt me, but the sudden understanding that I, Alexandra Delaforêt, had come face to face with raw, gratuitous violence had stunned me even more than the blows themselves. I had lifted my bottom off the floor to bring my legs back against my stomach, coiled to kick, desperately wanting to connect with his body,

C. C. Saint-Clair

anywhere on his body but a mighty kick that would crush his genitals was foremost on my mind.

“Alexandra, did you, at any time attempt to strike ... your attacker? Did you try to weaken him somehow?”

“I did.” A totally useless thought had crossed my mind at the time, how can he still be so strong? After the gallons of whisky, after the marijuana smoked at the party. How can he still be standing?

“And did you manage?”

“No. Not really. Only glancing blows. I didn’t manage to really hurt him.” I hadn’t managed to disable him.

His eyes! Go for the eyes! I had not been able to gouge his eyes out. I had not even been able to crush his balls with my knee. “At the beginning, he was careful to stay either behind me or to the side of me. To stranglehold me from behind.”

“The strangleholds you’ve just mentioned, were they before the blows to your face? Or after?”

“Uh, after. When I had managed to get up. And he brought me down again. And somehow, he dropped himself on top of me. I tried to kick but I couldn’t turn enough to face him. To position my legs to ... to kick him properly.”

“Why were you unable to face your aggressor?”

“By then he had a hand gripped around my throat and ... a knee on my stomach.” I heard him grunt. Though the grip around my neck was still tight, I felt his weight shift sideways.

His belt. He’s undoing it.

He grunted again. As the pressure against my throat shifted once more, I strained under his fingers.



He's tearing his fly open.

And I pleaded with him.

And I thrashed and kicked the empty space directly in front of me, the only space I could kick.

He's going to rape me! I had screamed silently, sensing that penetration was imminent.

The thought of the impending rape electrified me beyond fear. He moved off me. For a split second, I did not feel him anywhere on me.

"And his full weight crushed me a second time. Sideways across my chest and stomach. Slamming the wind out of me. One knee prizing my thighs apart. He was ... cursing and shouting obscenities at me."

He's rearing to thrust and impale me.

"Now, Alexandra, I know this is harrowing for you but, please tell us what he did next."

"He had finally managed— "I can't do this. Too ... hard. Too ... I leaned back against the high back of the chair, squeezing my eyes shut against the welling tears that had suddenly pooled under my eyelids, against the repulsive memory of his body slamming against mine.

"Alexandra, here, have a little water."

I knew my mother was seated somewhere near the front of the courtroom. I could almost hear her urge me through the moment. Come Alex, you can do it. Don't you break now.

No, I wouldn't break in front of him. She had flown in from Peru to be by my side during this ordeal. Ann is the one who, by phone, had broken the news of my 'accident' to her, back in Lima.

"Darling, Ann, your roommate," Mayanne had said, "she's told me everything." But Ann had not told my mother everything, certainly not the part of my life that had spanned

C. C. Saint-Clair

close to four years. After all, as Ann had reminded me, “It’s not like we’re still together ... now, is it?”

“No, Ann, it’s not.”

“Well, you know how much I love you, don’t you?”

“I know.’ But not that way.”

“Alexandra, would you like a little water?”

Straining against the onslaught of jumbled recalls, I struggled to open my eyes. Mr Smith, one hand on the witness box, was holding a glass of water in the other. “Take your time. I’ll get you a box of Kleenex,” he said in a fatherly way.

Be a good girl and blow your nose, I thought wryly, reaching for the white peak that poked out of the box he was holding almost under my nose. And I gulped and I gulped the water to dislodge the hard ball that was constricting my larynx. I choked on it and I coughed some more. I wiped my lips with the back of my hand. And I took in a deep breath, knowing I had to go all the way. Knowing that I *wanted* to go all the way. Just like Josh Bell had.

The courtroom was utterly silent except for the odd, restrained coughing sounds one often hears from audiences at the theatre. Though I didn’t look at the rows of faces, I knew that many hundred pairs of eyes were trained on me, watching, searching for the expression that would convince them, if not the jury, of my innocence, ‘beyond any shadow of doubt.’

“His elbow ... first, I think,” I started slowly, not yet trusting my throat muscles, “then his ... forearm crushed my windpipe.”

Breathe, Alex. Take your time.

“He was bracing himself, his whole-body weight against my ... windpipe, he ... to ... position himself to ... to...”  
I can’t say it.

“We all know this is very, very difficult for you, Alexandra.” Mr Smith had positioned himself between me and the courtroom spectators. “You are a very, very brave young woman.” He talked gently and softly. “But you do want to tell the court ...” Yes, I do. Very much, “... everything that has happened to you in that pitch-dark room, to the very best of your recollection? Every movement you made, every movement he made. Everything he said to you.”

“Yes, yes, I need to say it.”

“So, in the room where the accused had lured you to better– “

“Your Honour! I object forcefully!”

“Sustained. Mr Smith, please!” Judge Grimes banged his gavel. The buzzing of low chatter that had erupted in the courtroom stopped. Everyone was quiet once again.

I heaved a great sigh and began slowly, almost trancelike so as to better pace myself, “He positioned himself, hard against me, heavy like concrete. To rape me.”  
There, I said it.

Not a sound came from the hundreds of people in the audience. I exhaled a cloud of pent-up tension through half opened lips. “But I ... dislodged him with another sideways roll ... from the hips. A vigorous one. And he loosened his hold on me.” Whispers rippled again through the courtroom. “I had managed to scramble to my feet. He shouted at me, ‘You cunt!’” Explosive verbal violence is so hard to talk about, so alien. “Frantically I bolted, wanting desperately to find a door.”

C. C. Saint-Clair

The door. Where is the door?

“Pitch-darkness all around. Hands out in front of me, I was frantically feeling, blindly feeling, feeling for a door knob.” Feeling for an escape. Things fell off the wall as I felt my way, off something like a tabletop, too. “I felt a knoblike shape. I grasped it. Turned it. I pushed on it with all my strength thinking it was a ... I jerked it, it moved open but ... it was only a closet door.” I needed to pause to let the panic I had just re-actualised ease its way back to its own pit of darkness.

I was aware of the new timbre my voice had acquired. I could hear it. It was stronger. I was stronger. I was going to get to the end of this ordeal, this second ordeal of a different kind.

I’m going to nail the bastard.

“A couple of steps behind me, he laughed. ‘Told ya, stupid cunt!’ he said. ‘You ain’t gonna go nowhere.’ And he tackled me again mid-waist and he slammed me against the floor, my right arm twisted under my own body as I had tried to break my fall. I was pinned under him, again.”

I can’t move. Why can’t I ... just ... throw him ... off?

I remember having felt as helpless as a rag doll wedged under a bolster. I remember wondering, but very briefly, why my eyesight had still not gotten accustomed to the darkness in the room. His forearm slammed against my windpipe again, like a bar of concrete. My eyes watered, my vision blurred.

I can’t swallow!

Again, he levered himself against my neck. I thrashed around as best I could. Anything but stand still.

Move, Alex! Sharp orders barked at myself came from within.

Don't stand still.

Move your legs! Hips! Just don't stand still!

Tire him out. Buy yourself some time!

I kicked up. My legs were once again brutally spread apart, his lower body, pillar-like, was bolting me down. I remember having screamed in pain as something tore inside my right shoulder.

I remember not being able to move. An image of me had flitted through my mind. Me, as a blue butterfly pinned to a corkboard by a long upholstery tack that speared its middle.

I need to swallow.

“He snarled an animal snarl. Small jerky movements. I knew he was fumbling with ... with his crotch ... penis. It's then that ... I became aware that I still had my slacks on.” I took in a deep breath and released it slowly around each of my words. “Which is why ... he hadn't yet ... been able to ... rape me.”

“Alexandra, do you mean to tell us that that man, so intent on raping you, hadn't realised that he first had to ... make it possible for himself?” The low hum of whispers buzzed around the room and settled as quickly as it had erupted.

“I guess, well ... all this happened pretty fast, really. It takes a long time to explain but ... Well, I think that with the amount of alcohol he had drunk and the marijuana he had smoked ... and the crazed violent way in which he ... carried on ... I think he had lost track of ... of that. Of my trousers.”

“To the best of your recollection, how much time had, indeed, elapsed from the time your aggressor began till the moment you realised you were still protected by your clothing?”

C. C. Saint-Clair

“Oh, I ... I don’t know. It ... felt like a long, a very long time spent crushed, being hit and strangled and afraid to die ... that way.” I stopped suddenly, unable to say clearly how long my ordeal had lasted. I took a sip of water from the glass Mr Smith had left for me on the wooden rail on the witness stand, by the microphone. And then logic suggested that my struggle, the violence, couldn’t have lasted more than a few minutes.

How long does it take, in real time, for a strong man to pin a girl down, in a room in which she is totally disoriented, totally blind?

How long does it take him to grab her again, once she’s managed a temporary escape for herself?

How long could it possibly take him to come crashing down on her, his forearm at her throat as he braces himself into position, as his knee grinds away the resistance of her thighs?

“Not very long. Only a few minutes.” He had heaved once, and slammed hard against my sex, heavy on my stomach, his forearm still crushing my throat.

I need to breathe. Dislodge the bastard!

Block out the grunts! I need to buy me some time.

“Hey! Hey ... Josh,” I had rasped, painfully trying to work a tiny space for my saliva to move down. “Ease ... up, man.”

Can’t swallow. Can’t push my throat down.

Down.

Can’t breathe.

I needed to move my neck.

Sideways. A fraction.

He grunted again, shifting between my legs. ‘Shut it, bitch!’ His face was right above mine. I felt him. I smelt his thick, rancid breath. His hips pushed hard against mine, his trunk-

like legs keeping mine apart. Then, the pressure of his forearm eased against my throat. I filled my lungs. But only for a moment. I knew he was re-adjusting his position.

His final aim for the penetration.

The killing thrust of the Matador.

Talk to him.

Promise anything.

Beat the bastard at his game!

“Hey ... ease ... up!” I had begged, trying to calm my voice into a semblance of sensuality. “I’ll help. Relax. Hey ... Come on ... Josh.”

I tried to cajole, I tried to con him.

I had switched into a survival mode. ‘You ... you don’t have to do it alone. Let me move. Hey ... let me help you.’

I pleaded out loud, silently pleading for air. And silently, too, pleading for my life.

“Shut the fuck up!”

“Alexandra, will you please tell the Court what happened next,” asked Mr Smith, an encouraging smile on his lips. I knew that he knew that I knew that what he was asking of me was only what he knew I wanted to say, what I needed to do.

“He had become confused. He compensated by renewed vigour, more ... frenzy. He was even more ... feral.” I reached for the glass of water that was still on the railing in front of me near the microphone. “Can’t quite remember the sequence but ... I’m not sure ... how it happened but ... I was still pinned down by his weight. I could move my legs but ... didn’t make any difference any more. I felt him tear at my waist, at my pants and ...” I lowered my eyes and backed away from the microphone, once more aware of the tears that were welling in my eyes. “And he ... he ...”

C. C. Saint-Clair

“Slow down, Alexandra. Take your time. The Court understands how all this is terribly difficult for you. Do you need a break? The Court can adjourn– “

“No!” I interrupted. “No ... I’m fine. Please.”

No adjournment!

Won’t be any easier later, not tomorrow. Not ever.

Let’s get on with it. “I’d rather get on with it, now.”

“Fine. So, let me recap. The accused has lured you inside an unusually dark room. He made you think that he was tired. That he wasn’t feeling very well. He offered you to use the phone. He called out to you, from the bathroom you think, to say that the phone that works was in the first room to the right of the hallway. Is this correct?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Next thing you know, he tackles you. You struggle.

He kicks the door shut. He grabs you by the hair and yanks. You fall down. Caught unaware, shocked, and disoriented.

Is this correct?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Your aggressor restricts your movements, first by coming behind you in this pitch-black room and by yanking you by the hair. Then, by constricting your throat, your larynx first, with a very strong hand grip once he’s thrown you on the floor. Then by levering himself against his forearm, thus pressing his full weight against your windpipe as he tries to manoeuvre himself into a ... penetrating position.

And then by pinning you down, your own bodyweight, plus his, pressing down on a shoulder that had been twisted under when he pinned you down a second time. And he tears off your trousers in one violent movement. Alexandra, to the



best of your recollection, is that pretty much how the events unfolded at around one a.m. of the night in question?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Is it accurate to say that by restricting your breathing, the accused knew he was restricting the scope of your movements? Is this accurate?”

I nodded, “Yes, it is.”

“Good. Now, Alexandra, tell the Court how the def ... how your— “

“Objection! Your Honour!” I closed my eyes, suddenly extremely weary.

“Sustained.”

“My mistake, Your Honour, I apologise.”

“At this stage, I would like to present to the Court exhibit number four,” I heard Mr Smith say as he walked away from the witness stand. He picked up a plastic bag from the Prosecutor’s table and shook out an item of clothing. My heart jumped at the sight of the slacks I had been wearing.

I had not seen them since the night the accused had ripped them off me. Not since the night I had had to leave them behind, unable to find them in the dark room, after Josh had ordered me to strip and sleep by his side.

“A pair of beige cotton-blend, girl’s slacks. Size ten. Alexandra, do you recognise this item of clothing?” I nodded. “Alexandra, please speak up for the Court Reporter. Are these yours?”

“Yes, they are. They’re the slacks I wore on the night of ... the Homecoming game.”

“Your Honour, these slacks have been retrieved from the floor of the defendant’s bedroom by Sgt. Samuel Dean.”

Mr Smith came back to the witness box and held up the garment for all to see. I watched him as he turned to the jury, spreading it in a way that revealed loose threads no longer

C. C. Saint-Clair

connected to the set of five buttons that had closed the front of my slacks. It was then I saw for myself how he had done it, how he had, in one powerful motion, broken through my only rampart of protection. Cotton-thin protection.

As long as I have my pants on ... I had thought at the time, thinking the cloth would protect me. In one furious movement he had exposed all of me, from navel to small of the back.

A long tear reached clear to the back of the waistband and ran down both the inside leg seams. Mr Smith held up my slacks like a matador holds his sword, defiantly high in the air, readying for the kill. He wanted the jury to see the torn seams, to remove any 'shadow of doubt.' A low rumble rose from the rows of benches.

"Silence in the courtroom." The bang of a gavel on a wooden surface. Silence.

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But you see, Adrienne, by the time I sent you that first written account of the court case from Nice, you and I had dined together and we had been very aware of the pull of sensual attraction that drew us together. We do know that our story is, after all, rather banal, particularly in Paris, the City of Lovers. But, oh, I still remember that shimmering heat that constricted my loins every time I allowed my eyes to settle on you, any part of you. And we had talked. Together, differently, again the way only lovers or total strangers thrown together for a moment in time can do.

And of course, the evening gave way to the night. And when we came to our senses, we shared the anguish of knowing that Sophie would have rung your apartment, before going to bed, as she always did when not spending

the night with you; the anguish of knowing that your phone would have rung again and again, startling only the darkness of your empty bedroom; that anguish clung to our bellies like a wet shirt worn on the inside.

For the first time in ten years, she would have gone to bed unable to connect with you at the end of a working day. Her mind, reeling off a number of possibilities, would have found us there, in Eli's little flat, pressed against the closed door, ready neither for flight nor fight but made to face both.

The tearing, knowing that we would never again be alone to lull each other's desire into a manageable, innocuous, little secret! The tearing, knowing dawn had found us here

in our rumpled clothes, red-eyed from lack of sleep, from lack of peace! The tearing the deer feels when she stands still, flanks pulsating, knowing the hounds are closing in on her. After a final embrace of raw sexual frustration, you and I, for different reasons, tacitly surrendered to the loyalty we owed Sophie. Out of timidity, out of reasons, unknown to our loins, we separated in the early morning.

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### Paris, 8 February

Alex,

Tonight, I am in *total délire*, delirium, I think you call it. Only a couple of weeks have gone by since you left. My arms feel useless and stiff from not being able to close

C. C. Saint-Clair

around you. Here's the classic question: which is it easier to live with: regrets or remorse?

Tonight, I'm flooded with regrets: regrets of not having done; regrets of not having caressed you, all of you, shy attempts restricted by clothing and by self-imposed restrictions; regrets of not having kissed your face more slowly, more tenderly; regrets of not having dried your tears more lovingly; regrets of no longer seeing that little movement of your lips, the feigned protest for a kiss too passionately rough. I miss you terribly, living trapped in the old paradox of pain and pleasure.

*Ce soir j'ai le blues*, the real blues, blues that cling to the air around me. Delirium and blues. The more I try to settle myself back into my old routine, the clearer your memory becomes. Infernal! Hell!

On the radio, a woman's voice is begging, "*Explique-moi comment te dire adieu.*" But me, I'm not yet ready for you to show me how to say goodbye, though honestly, I wish I were. My contradictory wish is to have you, right next to me on the sofa, your shoulder against mine.

My imagination's always been pretty dull and my dreams anaemic and shapeless, but when I dream of you ... I wake up suddenly when, eventually, I sense a body pressed against mine, a body that, even through the half-awake dream, I know is Sophie's. Then, I'm afraid to go back to sleep. I'm afraid I might call out your name. *Ça aussi c'est infernal!* It's totally mad.

You need to know, Alex, that for the past two weeks, she's been like a battered bird. No, not battered ... bruised, yes, bruised because of the change she notices in me. She's not trying to make a scene. She's not even trying to get me to lie badly. In fact, she's not even asking anything, though she did clearly spell out something the other day. I'll tell you

about it later on. It frightened the hell out of me but ... I need to think about that, too, calmly.

Anyway, though she hasn't said it, she knows it's you I think of during dinner, while we listen to music, when I stop turning the pages of the book or file opened in front of me. She's strong. She's attentive and she's patient, but I can tell by looking at her pale face, and seeing the flat light in her eyes, that she, too, is losing sleep over all this. I think she's begun to lose weight and you know how thin she is already. She's waiting for all this to pass, as one waits for the end of a *bourrasque*, you know, a windstorm, all tucked in, as best as possible.

There's something I need you to understand. Alex, it's because it's you I'm so attracted to that the dialogue she and I would normally have is impossible. I feel it in her silence, and honestly, right now, I'm not up to dealing directly with such a conflict. I need to be a lot more grounded before I can try that type of conversation with her.

Her intuition must tell her that, because of the irrational state I'm in, it wouldn't take much for me to drop every-thing right here, right now. I'd book myself on the first plane leaving for the South of France. Though, as I write these lines, I know that she's my baseline. And that, as such, she is, how should I say ... she's *incontournable*.

What I mean is that I can't go around her and I can't step over her. No, don't call her a 'hurdle', Alex, please.

A few days ago, while we were having breakfast, I felt her eyes on my hand. I kept on drinking my coffee, fighting the pull of her stare as long as I could, before looking up. And then, with that husky voice of hers, she said rather

C. C. Saint-Clair

slowly, ‘Addy ... for ten years ... over ten years now, you and I have been making plans ... happy plans together. We’ve made plans for now ... and for the next ... twenty years.’ She stopped, but by the tone of her voice, I knew she had more to get off her chest. She was looking straight into my eyes but she was calm. Calm and determined and that’s what scared me, when she said something like, ‘*Tu sais très bien c’ que j’ vais t’ dire.* You know that if you, too, were to betray me ... I’d just give up. You know I would.

You know I’d rather die ... than go through that pain ... the lies ... the loss and the betrayal ... again.’ She sighed and massaged the palm of one hand with the thumb of the other as she always does when she concentrates hard on her thoughts. ‘You know that I mean it when I say that I would never consider starting over, with anyone ... not now, not anymore. I’ve invested too much ... in you, Addy, in us ... always gladly ... but I’ll never start over ... with anyone else.’ Her voice broke as she added, ‘Never.’

I was so stricken by her monologue, by her tone, her words, and her face, that all I think I did was arch my eyebrows, as if this ridiculous movement would somehow reduce the strength of her words. I’m glad she didn’t seem to have noticed. And she added, ‘I’m not saying that *en l’air*. I’m not saying any of this lightly. We both know I just don’t have that strength. I don’t have that ... that fire in me anymore.’

She was right, I knew she wasn’t just saying that for effect. I knew she wouldn’t have the fire needed to pick up the pieces and plod onwards on her own. And I knew too, that if it came to that, she wouldn’t choose to go on living alone either.

Anyway, she got up quietly, stacked her cup on her plate along with her knife and scrunched up her paper napkin. She paused by the bin. The tip of her shoe on the pedal flipped the lid open, she tossed in the napkin, and the lid snapped shut. She set her breakfast things by the sink, and left me there, in a whirlwind of thoughts and fears, patting the chequered pattern on the tablecloth.

No, don't say it, Alex. I know her words can easily be construed as emotional blackmail. Maybe so. Let me just say I'm not ready to test her will to live. I'm not even ready to cause her such doubt, such pain. She's normally strong, I mean in good health, but emotionally she's terribly vulnerable.

You know her life will soon change in a major way. She's clearly looking forward to that early retirement of hers but it's a page that's difficult to turn for someone as driven as she is. And in the meantime, instead of making the most of that year that remains, she's exhausting herself playing mother to this useless boss of hers. She's clearly the one who should've been promoted Regional Director. Years ago!

Anyway, the other thing is that I still have another five good years before I can kick back and keep her company in *fare niente* land. Well, in partial *fare niente* land. I always thought I'd remain professionally active, if only as a consultant. The idea was to retire from the 24/7 8am to 8pm grind. In any case, *c'est ce qu'on avait prévu*, that's what we had planned.

So, there's a lot happening in her head at the moment. Doubts and fears and all that. Anyway, in terms of her retirement, she's obviously planned it all around the notion

C. C. Saint-Clair

that she and I would grow old together, and organise ourselves and enjoy a lot of life, and live a lot, while we're still relatively young. That's how I wanted it too. With her, for her and for me. Alex, I do want to grow old with her. But what about the here and now?

Now, if you would let me sleep better, without invading more of my dreams, I'm sure I'd be able to think more clearly. It's only ten forty-five, but I'm way too tired and *énervée*, unnerved to attend to the briefs I brought home. I'm really not in the mood for any more infringements of international law. My mind is all over the place. Oh, if it were at all feasible, I'd say goodbye and farewell to you in this letter. But that, for the moment, is not the way out. Which is the way out?

I've been re-reading the scenario-like account of your story. I wish we had had more time together. More time to deal logically with the fireworks that have exploded inside us. But also, much more time to let you unravel that whole nasty business of your trial with me by your side, as we were able to do for only a couple of hours in that little restaurant, so unfortunately close to my office.

Instead, I've asked you to write everything down for me, hoping that once you entrust your nightmare to me, it, like a feral hyena, will lose your scent and let you access a much-needed closure. And though you write about a grotesque and abhorrent turn of events that defies understanding, along with the basic concept of justice, the scenario you've recreated for me makes, dare I say it, for riveting reading. I'm just so terribly sorry, *Chérie*, that it was you, there ... feeling it in your flesh, in your heart.

I hope what I'm going to say won't sound too weird but, actually, the fact that you're writing all this down for me



makes the whole exchange even more powerful than if you had simply told me about it. What I mean is that, besides conveying facts and emotions, your writing and my reading of it give us a way to communicate at another level. So intimately, but not intimately about us. So please don't stop half way. I'll try to be clearer over the phone. I'll call you, tomorrow lunchtime, from our park bench in Monceau.

The night wind is hitting against the shutters. The metallic sound they make as they rattle against the rusty brackets is tapping on my nerves.

Anyway, the one positive note for the day is that I'm sleeping alone tonight, free to tuck you inside my dreams. You see? I'm contradicting myself again.

Adrienne

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I need to find something, not related to you, Adrienne, to occupy my mind. *'Fare niente'*, as you say, the Italian notion that true relaxation can only be achieved by not doing anything that is not pleasurable, is best enjoyed when the mind is free of any extraneous thoughts. And that freedom is out of reach at this point in time.

I worry about you. I worry about your health. I worry about your sleep, and lack of, and I worry about your general wellbeing or, more to the point again, the lack of. Sophie. Yes, she is vulnerable, particularly because there had been no sign there to prepare her for the possibility of an eventual 'betrayal' as she calls it. Mind you, that's what I would call it, too.

C. C. Saint-Clair

And yes, when one is on the verge of retirement, I imagine one can easily feel on the edge of old age. Though only a technical 'old' age, it still is the second landmark of aging for women. Aging, as opposed to getting older; menopause being the first, not that these two necessarily always come in that order.

In any case, a glimpsed possibility that she might find herself out of the nest and alone to face an older age is undoubtedly a heart-shrinking prospect. A double loss of love and emotional security. But realistically speaking, Adrienne, it is one prospect, you know and I know, Sophie is not truly faced with. To use another one of your terms, it is my 'baseline' conviction that you and I are too gutless to see our thing through to a happy end. Too gutless, or not ruthless enough?

The latter sounds better, but would you tell me a little more about her past, about that other betrayal, the first one? I can't quite remember what she told me about it at the time. It was so long ago. I remember that it had to do with her mother not having protected her from physical abuse. Was it from ... within the family? It was, wasn't it? But I can't remember who the perpetrator was and why circumstances were such that Sophie felt her mother had failed her.

From your bench in the parc Monceau, you asked about my family. Ah yes, my roots. And I replied that it was too long a topic to chat about on the phone, that I needed to hear about more immediate things from you, from your world. But I can write about it now.

It is all very simple really and maybe a little sad, but I know we don't live in a fairy tale world where unbridled joy necessarily overflows from everyone's heart simply because

one has decided to jump on a plane and reconnect. Actually, it would be a lie to say that I jumped on that plane to reconnect.

As romantic and exciting as it sounds, it is not quite right. I told you how I had grown bored with my life in Brisbane. I needed to jump on a plane, on any plane. I could have gone anywhere, really. For any length of time. You can do that when you are footloose and carefree. I will even go as far as saying that this kind of physical freedom is the only benefit I personally derive from being, to all intents and purposes, forever single.

So, as it happened, I thought of France. And as I thought of France, I thought of that little country that I had never really gotten to know as an adult. And as I did, I thought of my father and his side of the family; all relatives I hardly knew anymore. And some childhood memories had flooded back. And in my mind, back then, these memories led to that romantic notion of travelling to the other side of the world to ‘discover my roots’. Besides, that notion went a long way towards legitimising my decision to take leave from work for an indefinite period of time.

The thing is that there was really nothing to ‘discover’. My roots you see, these roots, had never been lost, not in the real sense of the word. Never lost to discover as in a first time ever discovery. Through the twists and turns of life and destiny, my father, my aunt Marie-France, her daughters Joceline and Emmanuelle, and my grandparents, we all stand on opposite sides of a thirty-year gap of circumstances not shared, of celebrations and sorrows not shared. We have

C. C. Saint-Clair

neither rejoiced nor commiserated together. We have not woven any length of cloth together. Not even a spool. We do not have any common memories.

Look, I don't wish to bore you with too much on that topic. Suffice it to say that everyone was truly happy to see me, that everyone is well, that everyone works and has a life of their own, except perhaps my grandparents who are quite elderly by now, and my little cousin Emmanuelle, who might be too young to have one.

She is only nine years old but a very together, 'modern' nine-year-old, and now that I think about it, she does carry on as if she does, indeed, have a life of her own. Marie France bought her a little diary of sorts in which the little one jots down all the after-school activities, and all the places where she needs to be driven over the weekends. She is a very busy little girl.

Grandfather seems now to prefer the company of endless successions of words to that of people, as he fills in one Master crossword puzzle after another. He has become one eating, sleeping and crossword-filling machine. Before that though, I remember him mostly as the 'Colonel' from the '*Bonjour, mon Colonel*' that the local shopkeepers used to throw his way in greetings. I remember him, too, as the grumpy one who begat my kind-hearted but equally grumpy father.

Yes, I think my father could easily pass as a grumpy one himself though he does have a sense of humour that I do not think my grandfather ever had. But then again, when I was very little, the Colonel used to take me fishing.

We would sit under a very wide weeping willow, *un saule pleureur*, and we would dangle our lines in the dark

green waters of the quiet river that bordered my grandparents' property. He would thread worms for me but I do not remember him having to unhook any of my fish.

I do not remember having ever caught any.

I do, however, remember feeling a little awed and privileged just being there by the river with him, my line dangling next to his, my little stool right close to his. In silence.

I don't remember him catching much of anything either.

As I look back to those childhood days, I would say that my grumpy grandfather used to watch the slow flow of the gentle river in meditative silence. That is obviously what he needed to do. And he let me share that with him.

As much as I would love to spend afternoons talking with my grandmother, listening to her memories of her own life in the thirties and forties, of my father's childhood, and my own during the years I was in their care, it is not possible, not really.

Only very few moments are still clear in her mind and, such as they are, they are disconnected. And my little grandma forgets that she has already covered those, the same ones, three or four times in the same number of days.

I feel sad every time I leave her because she is extremely frail. And though she is very huggable, her skin is so transparent and thin that I am afraid any hug I might give her would leave her bruised. Marie-France does not hug her, she pats her. When I look at grand-mere, I know I have waited too long before coming back.

Your father is dying, Adrienne, and my grandmother does not remember any of the happy moments of her life.

C. C. Saint-Clair

You asked about my initial contact with my father. Obviously, I am still at his place but only because I have his house to myself during the week. He is always away on business until Friday evenings. He still works, though he has finally retired from the army. An early retirement, an *anticipée*, as you call it, but not early enough in terms of, dare I say, his ‘arrested personality development’.

Anyway, he had, very thoughtfully indeed, taken a week off work to spend time with me upon my arrival.

How can I say it without sounding horribly self-centred? I have to admit having been glad, no, not glad, more like totally relieved to be alone on the morning of the eighth day. The thing is that, as I landed in Nice, I was so full of you, so heart-shocked, that I was almost literally gasping for air, unable to unplug you from my thoughts, not even for a moment.

And so, the business of catching up with my father, and filling up gaps spanning back to my last whirlwind visit some ten years prior, quickly became an ordeal. It was soon reduced to a mind-over-matter thing, to a test of self-control; the test of the claustrophobic trapped in a lift momentarily stuck between floors.

The whole thing was made a lot worse by my being unable to talk about you to anyone. And that was further compounded by my being unable to go anywhere on my own. Father would not have understood why I would choose to do that. And so, every minute of that week, and I mean that quite literally, every minute of my waking hours he organised to fit inside an army-style, precision-driven timetable.

Or were that precision and regularity only those of an old bachelor? It is probably worse, mind you, when the old bachelor in question happens to be a retired Colonel and a Knight of the *Légion d'Honneur*, like his father before him. Day in and day out.

Whether we went for a walk, a drink, to the restaurant, to visit my grandparents or Marie-France, everything was timed to the minute. The point is that I felt totally claustrophobic, totally inadequate in terms of how I could see and hear myself relating to him and, at the same time, totally put upon.

All I wanted, then, was to be alone, alone with you. Alone to process the sudden desire of you. Alone to surrender to all, excluding erotic fantasies.

You might be pleased to read that the overwhelming need to be alone with my desire of you has not relented much. If anything, our ongoing communication is exacerbating it, as I knew it would. But having lacked the initial willpower to leave your answer to my first note well enough alone, the steel teeth of a badly concealed trap are now truly gripped around my paw. I can no longer back away.

And so, I need to look for some sort of temporary, part-time work. Anything pleasant or interesting enough will do as long as it succeeds in pushing thoughts of you into a recess of sorts.

I need to achieve a balance of emotions. I need to enjoy what I came to do, here in Nice. I need to breathe, to open my lungs to this much-famed air of Provence, and appreciate the unique quality of the sunlight that has made the hinterlands so uniquely attractive to many a painter's eyes.

C. C. Saint-Clair

I need to get into my car. I need to roam the region, light-hearted and open to the charm of the quaint little villages I might find hanging down the cliff face on my way to Monte Carlo, or as I make my way up the mountains to catch the snow in Auron.

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Through half-closed eyelids, I want to watch the Méditerranée as she glistens under a sky in shades of washed-out blue but I have to close my eyes against the shards of penetrating light.

A muffled background voice enters the convoluted thought patterns I was secretly indulging: my father has broached yet another topic.

I recognise his intonations as his voice stirs me out of my reverie. It is, in fact, a simple chat that does not require the effort of concentration. Thank goodness, for in front of me, but slightly to the left, I glimpse the silhouette of a couple kissing tenderly, one body snugly fitting the curvature of the other.

An unexpected pain uncurls in my belly and makes me wince behind my sun-glasses.

I trap it under my eyelids. I will it to stay and grow, to engulf me, but already it recedes, as does the tide ebbing across the pebbles, only a few metres away.

To this pain, I gave your name: Adrienne, in the same way as the name of the explorer who discovers a new landscape is given to the land itself.

‘What you’re saying implies that, for the French people, a lot of time and money are lost while they watch their new leaders reinvent the wheel every seven years.’ I join my



father in his discourse, hoping my comment actually fits the context.

Across the street, almost behind my father, a white seagull, soft wings neatly tucked alongside her chubby, little body, her red beak craned to the side, seems to be waiting to cross the road. She looks sideways at the bitumen before finally deciding to stay on her sidewalk. She moves away, carried by two slender, mauve, stick legs and twitching her grey-tipped tail feathers.

‘Some unfortunate patterns seem inherent in the French voting system,’ says my father, still ranting against the government of the moment, and against the *septennat*, the renewable, seven-year mandate every new president is given, ‘*Pour jouer avec le pays*, because, that’s all they do really, is play with our country,’ he adds, categorically.

In spite of a half-hearted attempt on my part to moderate his judgement, Father carries on with his acerbic remarks delivered in the type of categorical tone that precludes any contradiction. Not that I am thinking about contradicting him at all. I am not well-versed on the topic of French government policies and, besides, my thoughts at the moment are as scattered as the little white clouds that play at overtaking the sun straight above the lighthouse on the far end of the knoll.

Across the street, a large black dog is restless inside the dim cabin of a van that has just pulled up. Almost frantically, he pushes his large rubbery snout into the window opening his owner has left for that purpose, whipping the backrest with an emphatic tail swing, but he does not bark. Ah, he has seen the German Shepherd that is coming, on his own, towards us. He stops by one of the many anaemic palm trees

C. C. Saint-Clair

that line the Promenade, goes around twice, seems about to reverse the process but instead he raises a leg and sprays the exposed roots of the tree.

Once done, tail high in the air, he passes by the car and disappears around the corner, regally oblivious to the dog locked inside. The black dog now sits, behaved and relaxed, his profile staring ahead from the front seats. He is waiting for his master's return.

"If I understand you correctly," I volunteer, feeling guilty about the lack of encouragement I am giving my father in this conversation, "... every seven years the newly elected government sets out, the best way it can, to undo what the departing leadership, in this instance the Socialists, have set up during their *septennat*. However, they are likely to be re-elected seven years later, because the Right will have had enough time to become unpopular once again."

"Yes, that's the logic of the state of things. Unfortunately, the long-term effects ... I really hope this *septennat* thing is going to be voted out ... after Chirac goes. I've been saying that for how many years already, after Chirac goes! The best we can hope for is a *quinquennat*. The US model of four years doesn't seem to appeal to anyone here."

"So, Chirac will go down in history, if nothing else, for being the last President to have ruled the country for so long. That's political history in the making. Unfortunately, he doesn't seem very innovative when it comes to French homeland security and anti-terrorism--"

My father chuckles under his snowy moustache, "Well, on that topic, I have to admit that I don't think there's a lot he can do, not with some six million Muslims already tucked

away in and around Paris. You've been to Montmartre, you would've seen ..."

And we sit in a companionable silence for longer than my thoughts need to depart to somewhere else, far beyond his tanned face. I find you, I pluck you out of your office, I plop you right here, next to me in the vacant rattan fauteuil to my left. United in our silence, we sit. Hard-edged shards of desire cut through the diamantine glitter caught by the waves far beyond the Promenade.

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My large ledger-like notebook and I are perched on a low wall, a few metres from the sand. One lone pigeon is picking at the paving blocks that meet the base of my perch. It seems propelled forward by the jerky, toy-like movements of its neck.

The late afternoon sea breeze is cooling the air. It has been a beautiful day today, a day of warm sunshine, of unspoiled blue sky, of sparkling white seagulls. A day to sit on a terrace, facing the sea. It is a day to let the Mediterranean light permeate the darkest coils of fear to loosen them, to melt them. If I am so attentive to this pigeon's antics, it is in memory of another pigeon. To that other one you gave a piece of your chocolate waffle. It was late in the afternoon. Frozen on our little park bench, we had chosen silence as the best medium with which to express the bitter-sweet longing that raced within.

A second bird has just landed near the first, a soft flutter of grey silk. A shadow has just fallen across my page. The nib of my pen remains suspended, waiting above the crisp white page. The shadow lengthens. Slowly, my eyes slide up

C. C. Saint-Clair

the length of a striped Indian shirt and over brown, wooden beads, to the soft glow of sunlight on a young face. Gentle, brown eyes seem separated by the central part of long, blond ponytail, curling lazily on a young man's shoulder. A soft smile meets my frown.

'Is it a diary you're writing? A book? I've been watching you for a while ...' I would have liked to answer, 'No, young man, not a dairy, not a book. Just a bad ... bad taste, second-rate script.' I was indeed writing the last instalment of the shoddy courtroom scenario I had promised to finish for you.

At your request, Adrienne, I will not leave the tale half told. You are right in saying that, through the writing and the reading of that horrible series of events and spin-off thoughts, you and I relate together at a level that somehow offsets nicely the other way we 'talk' to each other. It is true that writing to you about the events back in Texas crystallises, though that is not the right word, the tenderness of your words as you write back in a way that could not happen if you were just giving me on-the-spot, face-to-face, comforting.

I am still not being clear. What about a visual image then? Let us say that your words are like the soothing, warm and delicate flow of clear water at low tide over dark, jagged, and craggy rocks. Okay, I won't overdo it, so I will leave it at that for the moment, yes?

Anyway, back to the young man. I remember clearly having looked at him, probably like a groundhog would, coming out of its cave into the sunlight. I was the groundhog. Mentally, I had travelled so far away from this beachfront perch that I had not seen him approach.

‘Me, I’ve always wanted to keep a diary ... but I’m too lazy.’  
He spoke softly with the singsong tones of Provence.

He hesitated, obviously waiting for an encouraging sign, but all he got was my tight silence and stubborn frown. ‘That’s why I was curious ...’ he added, undeterred. Poor young man. His timing was all wrong. He was keeping my thoughts away from you, and my pen was eager to resume its dervish dance across the page.

‘What I’m writing here is neither a diary, nor a manuscript. It’s merely the draft of a thesis bearing on the sexuality of French pigeons,’ I said with the closed voice of academia, eager not to hurt his feelings, but equally eager to return to my page. ‘More precisely, I am writing about the regional variations of their sexual behaviour patterns.’ Even I was surprised by the clipped tone of my retort.

The gentle young man’s smile faded from his lips, but his eyes narrowed with curiosity. ‘You mean to say they don’t–’ He leaned closer, a question shaping on his lips.

‘I need to get back to my observations,’ I said, pointing at the pair of pigeons that had just landed to his left. ‘*A plus tard*. See you later,’ I added, maintaining soft but firm eye contact. The tone must have left no room for appeal.

He glided away, feline-like in his tan handmade moccasins, casting sideways glances at one of the birds that was now standing perfectly still except for the mechanical forwards and backwards movements of its iridescent green neck.

I returned to the crisp white page, once again free of bothersome shadows. I returned to my thoughts. I returned to you. And to me, back up in the witness box, being cross-examined by Mr Bartley for the defence.

C. C. Saint-Clair

“Mr Bartley,” Judge Grimes’ voice was stern and cold, “the Court is asking you one more time to give up, to not pursue, that line of questioning.”

Mr Bartley backed away from the witness stand. “I’m sorry, Your Honour.” His back to the courtroom, he narrowed his eyes at me as if my mere presence on the stand indisposed him. As if I had breached the oath taken earlier to ‘tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.’

“Young lady,” he said, looking coldly into my eyes, “from now on, I need to ask you to be more explicit in your answers.” I watched him smooth his grey hair back with the palm of his hand. I never thought much of men who blow-dried their hair, even less when they were old, cold and snaky. “According to you, then,” I heard the naked sarcasm in the voice, “how had the accused allegedly forced himself upon you?”

I started to speak but the words did not follow. Anchor heavy, they dragged behind me, hampering me in my efforts to be accurate and remain strong.

“Young lady! Would you please speak up! And into the microphone! The Court Recorder cannot hear you.” My brain, my emotions were on overload but I knew this moment, above all others, was one of the decisive moments of this trial, of the trial I had initiated when I had decided to press charges four months earlier.

“The ... Josh ... Uh, I’m sorry,” I said, turning to the judge. “The accused had me pinned on the floor and he was supporting his full weight on his forearm as he ... He was crushing my throat, constricting my breathing as he heaved. I could barely breathe. I couldn’t scream. I couldn’t move. And he ... he ... he tore inside. Again, and again. Until he was done.” Like a deep-sea diver struggling towards the surface, I stopped and gulped for air. As an unnecessary afterthought

I added unsuspectingly, “All I could move was my hips.” There, I had twice admitted publicly that I had been raped.

But I had not been wary enough of the heinous nature of Mr Bartley’s specialty as he had chosen to exercise it when he took on the ‘UT rape case’ as a publicity stunt, when he had deliberately decided to help a guilty man walk free.

And so, I watched as he closed in on me, flapping the black sleeves of his robe, “Young lady, I am going to ask you to describe the movements that you could do while the man was ‘inside’ you. As you have just testified, you could move your hips. Is that correct?”

I nodded. “Speak into the microphone, please. And explain to the Court which movements you were free to make?”

“I could only move my hips ... my lower torso ...”

“I need to ask you to be more precise in regards to the part of the anatomy you could move at that specific moment. Do you mean your back, your hips, your pelvis? Which were you able to move?”

I looked at him dumbly.

“Which movements did you make with your shoulders, your hips, or was it with your pelvis?” he repeated, separating his words as if talking to a dumb, recalcitrant child.

“I ... raised and lowered my hips. I ... tried to ... to buck. I was—”

“Woah! Have we heard this correctly, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury?” asked the defence lawyer, whirling around to face squarely the twelve men and women of the jury. “We’ve just heard this young woman testify under oath that all she thought to do while the young man was inside her was ... rotate her pelvis and ... buck? Ladies and Gentlemen, as much as I am sure this young French woman

C. C. Saint-Clair

would like you to exonerate her of all responsibility for her actions, actions that have, clearly, precipitated the events that allegedly took place at the defendant's apartment, you have to decide whether ...”

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“Your Honour, I would like to bring out exhibit 8, if it pleases the Court.” The defence lawyer opened a plastic bag and dipped a pointer inside it. As he turned to face the jury, I felt my eyes widen. A pair of blue and white striped, skimpy knickers were dangling from the tip of his pointer.

“Are these the panties you wore on the night of your date with the defendant?”

“It wasn't a date ... I'd never— “

“I'll ask you once again to limit your responses to answering the questions asked. Are these the panties you wore on the night in question?”

“Yes.”

“You did say ‘Yes’, didn't you?”

“Yes, I said yes.”

“Then, would you be kind enough to explain to the Court, in your own words of course, how it is that these very thin and pretty panties, considering the amount of resistance you claim you exerted to keep the defendant from making love—”

“Your Honour! Objection! Really!”

“Sustained. Mr Bartley, I must warn you against repeating this tactic.”

“Considering the struggle you claim to have put up that night, please explain how it comes to be that these very thin, almost transparent, pair of panties are neither torn nor ripped.”



I didn't know what to reply to this question. But it didn't matter. It had only been a rhetorical one. He had never intended for me to answer it. He had already moved away from me.

Though his back was turned, I recognised the tone of his voice for what it was. He was mocking me, ridiculing me, and he was trying to manipulate the members of the jury towards the conclusion he had orchestrated for their benefit – that my stupidity defied logic.

A red flush of humiliation rose to my neck. I cringed, as far back as the unyielding high back of the witness chair would allow. As the heatwave spread, I stared blindly above the blur of heads that packed the courtroom. I trained my eyes on the round-faced clock affixed to the back wall. 5.32 p.m.

“Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, these panties that you see right here, these panties the witness testified are hers, these panties found at the foot of the defendant's bed show no rips, no tears. Not one single sign of violation.”

He then turned back to me, still dangling my underwear from the tip of his pointer, close to the microphone, close to my face. A limp flag of my defeat.

“You did state you had fought violently to protect your virginity. You did, didn't you? And yet—”

“Objection!” My heart sank further as I watched Mr Smith shake his head slowly then remove his glasses.

“Objection sustained!”

Wearily the Assistant DA rubbed his eyes. Then, without looking up, he pulled a white handkerchief out of his breast pocket and slowly, very slowly, wiped each lens.

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C. C. Saint-Clair

Self-preservation overrides pain. It did help me override my fear. I was alive. I had survived! Once spent, Josh had ordered me to strip naked.

‘Get on that bed and sleep,’ he had ordered. I heard the sounds he made scratching his body. And he had flopped against me, one arm across my waist in a parody of male protection of the weaker sex. The stench of him. The raw pain between my legs. The mad tattoo of my heart. The pain in my shoulder. Stillness in the room. Seconds stretched into minutes. And then came the sound of my reprieve. The rumbling sound of snores.

*The bastard’s asleep*, I spat silently into the heavy darkness of the room!

*Mon dieu*, ... thank you!

A slow-motion escape from under his arm, away from his hot, clammy body.

Only a few millimetres at a time.

Please, God, I silently begged, don’t let him wake up now.

Movements hampered by the tinkle of tiny Arab coins threaded as a bracelet around my ankle.

Can’t remove it without slicing through the leather thong.

Movements hampered by the groans of the mattress as I slid my weight across its width, one slow centimetre at a time.

Movements timed with the rattles of the air conditioner.

He must not wake.

Minutes into hours. If he wakes up, I won’t survive the next assault.

The image of the Bowie hunting knife that I had seen glinting on the Formica counter kept me inching away,

slowly, gently, while my heart beat madly inside my chest.  
Grope around for clothes. Shoes! Daylight's breaking.

And I realised daylight was indeed breaking dully.  
It was breaking on the other side of a blanket.  
A blanket nailed over the length of the window.  
It is then I understood the total darkness that had hampered  
and ultimately defeated me in my struggle, the pitch-black  
darkness that had me fighting blind.

The door. I could see it in the dingy grey light that now  
permeated the room.

Softly, slowly. Please, please don't squeak.

The hallway. Clothes under one arm.

Ann. I need to call Ann. The phone on the other side of the  
kitchen.

The hunting knife glints dully at me. Take it! Leave it.

Don't look at it.

Focus. The phone. Ann. Oh Ann, please! Find me.

Filtered through my frazzled brain, the dial tone was a  
startling, eardrum-splitting roar.

Oh, my god! What if – has he heard it? No, no, he's asleep.

Dial - keep dialling.

Each turn of the dial emitted that same eardrum-shattering  
roar. And another.

Can't keep dialling. Too loud. Can't risk it.

He's awake now, surely.

Out. Get out! Now!

Disoriented but spurred on by panic, I looked for the front  
door.

Wild pounding in my heart bounced against my ribs.

Breath constricted.

The lock! Can't undo the fucking lock. Numb fingertips.

Seconds into minutes.

C. C. Saint-Clair

He's heard. All that noise!

He's looking for me!

He'll grab me!

He'll grab me again!

I hurt.

I ache.

I can't think.

Survival instinct overtook the onset of hysteria. It made its priority over pain, over fear, over panic.

Hold on to the clothes. The window! Closed. Open it.

How? Jammed.

Slide it. *Slide it hard!*

The fracas released from the aluminium frame was thunderous to my ears.

I cringed but I looked down, too.

One floor up.

Jump!

No. I can't! Too high!

He's heard me!

He's coming!

Stay alive!

Survive this!

Jump! *Gotta Jump!*

And jump, I did, landing heavily, clumsily, naked in some kind of garden bed.

The noise from the window. He's awake now.

He's after me. Run!

My clothes.

Got to get dressed.

Not here, too close.

Run! Run faster!

Hide!

And so, I had zigzagged through the sleepy suburb, crouching behind parked cars. Listening for his footsteps.

Naked. A bundle of clothes under one arm.  
Dogs barked as I passed their gate.  
My heart pounded against my ribs, my pulse raced at my temple. Ann!

Eventually, I had risked stopping long enough to throw on the clothes I had with me. I had mistakenly taken his jeans, and my top, but only one of the shoes was mine. No time to lace it. One hand holding up at the waist, over my naked sex, the 501s of the man who had just raped me. I ran ahead blind. bare feet, lost.

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Mr Bartley was coming to the end of the final rebuttal for the Defence. “In my right hand, I hold a pen, while in my left, I hold the pen’s cap. Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, I ask you: how can this pen find its place inside this cap? How can this pen penetrate this cap, if my left hand keeps moving, if the cap keeps on moving?”

There would not be any penalty-setting phase. The fourteen women waiting to confirm Joshua D. Bell of 1604 Valley Ridge Drive as a repeat rapist had already been dismissed by the Prosecution.

And Robert O. Smith for the Prosecution concluded his own final rebuttal after the jury had listened to Bartley’s remarks for over an hour. “Ladies and Gentlemen, you’ve seen why so few rape cases are ever tried in our state. In our country,” he stormed at the jury. “You’ve seen, you’ve heard the reason why this courtroom has been packed for all of this week with lawyers, law students and journalists. They are

C. C. Saint-Clair

here because they do not get to observe rape case proceedings.

They do not get to observe rape cases because women, our women, our wives, and our daughters, are afraid to press charges.

They do not press charges because, as you have seen, the entire judicial process is cruel and humiliating for the victims.

Rape, Ladies and Gentlemen of the Jury, is the only crime in our land where the victim has to prove her innocence.” Mr Smith stopped to slide the glasses off his nose. Maybe, too, to give time for his words to penetrate the weary minds of the twelve people he had been addressing. “As you move off to deliberate, I urge you, not only for young Alexandra who has been so courageous from the moment her rape began to the last word of her testimony, I urge you to be courageous yourselves. I urge you to set an example. Set a precedent you can be proud of. A precedent the state of Texas can be proud of.”

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There you go, Adrienne. It’s all out now. And I have been able to bring back just enough of the fear, of the pain, of my helplessness and the humiliation I experienced, particularly in the courtroom, to exorcise some of the residue of this murky, dark and dank memory. Maybe this final recall made for you can act as an *exutoire*, the deliberate act of freeing

one’s mind of an emotional fog of guilt, fear and pain that occasionally threatens one’s ultimate sense of being.

But hold on, there's a little more you need to know. One day, years later in Brisbane, Australia, I received a letter from Ann with whom I had maintained an intermittent correspondence.

In the meantime, she had married an older man who owned a chain of furniture stores scattered around the state of Texas, but she had eventually divorced him after discovering one too many infidelities.

I was always a little disturbed by Ann's letters for they brought out in me a desire to feel superior about her heterosexual misfortunes yet, at the same time, a desire to shield her from more hurt.

I began reading with some curiosity.

*Austin 6.28*

*Dear Aly,*

*There's something in this envelope that'll probably make you want to yeehaah with joy. Well, maybe not joy as such but with relief, at the very least. See if you find it. Won't say anymore.*

*On the topic of my hysterectomy, no need to fret. All done, all gone. No time to think about it. No need to even tell you about it. Cervical cancer. Nothing anyone could have done about it, except of course get rid of the damn thing. Done! I wasn't fixin' on having any kids anyway.*

*So now I have the perfect excuse not to. Look at it this way: I'm very sexually active, if you know what I mean. Must be all this red deer and bobcat meat that my father still tries to feed me when I visit.*

*Remember when we used to go hunting with him? And how we had to get going before dawn and how you hated that pre-dawn part? That and the skinnin' afterwards!*

C. C. Saint-Clair

*Well, anyway, the good thing is, I don't ever have to worry about taking the pill any more, or about a guy being careless with his condoms. Mind you, now that I think of it, neither do you.*

*Anyway, I've been out of hospital for three weeks now. I'm resting at my parents'.*

*I still have the same bedroom there, though Dad has built an extension.*

*Never bothered redecorating.*

*Same décor as when you and I ...*

*Yes, well, weird maybe, after all these years, but I just want to keep it that way.*

*The only difference is that it's in this room that I've been keeping all the pictures I've ever had of you.*

*My parents really loved you, you know that.*

*My mother still asks after you. And Dad still calls you his 'lil' French gal'.*

*Anyway, I'll be back at work by the end of the month.*

*By the way, Sgt. Sam Dean, he's the one who send me the news clipping, he sends his regards.*

*Little one, you take care now.*

*Love and lots of hugs,*

*Ann*

Sergeant Sam Dean? Sergeant Dean? My gosh!  
That was truly a blast from the past. He was the arresting officer to whom I had had to tell my tale back then.

The same man who had taken a personal interest in my wellbeing during the trial because I had reminded him of his daughter. Okay, where was that thing Ann had enclosed?  
I shook the envelope.

A tiny square of paper fluttered to the floor.



As I bent down to pick it up, I recognised a newspaper clipping.

A very small one. An advert for something or other?

I read it silently the first time, then spoke the words out loud as I read it a second time. I needed for my ears to corroborate what my eyes had already understood the first time but could not believe.

Adrienne, it was a little News in Brief article, *un fait divers*, as you would say.

It simply said that one named Joshua D. Bell, of 1604 Valley Ridge Drive, had been found slumped in the doorway of his domicile.

Dead - from an overdose of heroin!

You see, the injustice of men had let me down. However, Poetic Justice was alive and well, riding fearlessly on her white stallion!

Later, much later, I remembered a picture Ann had taken of me years and years ago, but only a couple of weeks before I was assaulted.

I went searching for that picture of young and carefree me - aged 21.

I eventually found it in a box tucked inside the trunk in which I kept all sorts of sentimental, vintage memorabilia. I gazed at the smiling young woman in the black and white photo.

I had forgotten how very long my hair had been back then. A quiet sigh escaped from my lips. So easy to grab from behind to yank me backwards.

Astride a man's bike, hands of the drop handlebar, young Alex thought she knew for sure what the next day, and the

C. C. Saint-Clair

month after that would bring, but I knew she had been unaware of how much she was loving her life.

Seeing my 10-speed bike there after so long, I grinned at the memory of zooming around the campus, up and down Guadeloupe street, of stopping at market stalls, of dismounting at Baskin' Robbins for a double scoop of rum 'n raisin – of racing Ann home.

I remembered, too, the months that followed the assault. In the apartment. In bed, mostly. Hiding – or healing?

Dark.

I had dropped out of all my classes. Till, one day, realising the end of terms was nearing, and there would be finals I had to ace, if only to prove to myself I was still whole and intact, I rode to the campus and returned the lecture hall.

Popping No-Doz pills at night and slurping dark coffee, I crammed and crammed some more. Ann concocted dozens and dozens of gnarly questions to help me test myself.

At the end of that year, I had scored a 4.0-grade point average and earned a Cum Laude/Honours certificate. It is then that I knew the dude had not broken me.

Not wanting to revisit any of the traumatic moments suffered, I hadn't sought any therapy. And so, I nodded again at my young self in the photo.

"Alex," I whispered. "Thank you for having been so resilient. So strong. So brave."

Adrienne, I patted her face. "I owe you all that I have since become," I told her.

Beyond the constant jumpiness of fight/flight at the merest of unexpected sounds, the increased heartbeats and the

## BENCHMARKS

sharp spikes of adrenaline that come with it, nothing that man had done ‘to her’, to Alex, had altered her life in any way. He had not broken her.

You see, Adrienne, I have not deviated from any of the plans I had made prior. And, in answer to the question you asked me during our first lunch date, about whether or not I was a victim, I can say that Alex was a survivor, a strong one – and this is what I have become.



Austin, texas - 1974

C. C. Saint-Clair

## Paris, 27 February

Alex,

I know I won't get any letters you might have sent until Monday, as I'll be spending the next three days at Sophie's. I can't even begin to explain how terrible I feel at the thought of this imposed wait, but it's something like panic. There I go again, carrying on like a silly schoolgirl in love. Am I into my own remake of *Claudine à l'Ecole*?

Colette would turn over in her grave if she knew. The truth, though, is that while, age-wise, I should be well past such silly nonsense, I still find ways to re-live, daily, the heady moments spent with you.

I have to make do with your absence, and I give in to panic attacks. I have to be patient, though I'm torn apart. I'm as totally helpless as any schoolgirl in love with an impossible love. What makes it worse is that I don't feel there is anyone to blame. Who to punish then, as I look for an exit?

And on the topic of love, I'm now dreading the dinner Sophie's planned with Eli and Isa this Saturday night. She's invited them, most likely to socialise with them the way we used to do before ... and probably to spare us another weekend like the last.

No matter what we did, I felt totally disconnected. Not even Besson's latest movie, one I had missed seeing the first time it came out, gave me an escape, if only for a couple of hours.

Back at home, I felt like a ghost gliding past a shadow every time I brushed past Sophie. Now, I hate the thought of that dinner party. I'm afraid of what they, but mostly Eli,

might let slip, or insinuate, in front of Sophie, in regards to your visit.

Plus *précisément*, I'm afraid she might slide in a couple of her astute observations, as she did with you in Provins, and try her luck at getting me to confirm what I'm sure she's already guessed. You know how our gentle, caring Eli's been known to undergo a personality change come midnight and a fifth glass of wine? Anything is possible.

On a totally different note: much of the letter you wrote while on your solitary walk through the mountainous hinterlands was sheer poetry. I'm afraid my usual bland expression needs something more than a lawyer's jargon to transform it into memorable love letters.

And then, in another thick envelope, written another day and in a totally different style, I found the last instalment of your ordeal. I don't think you should underestimate the power you pack behind that realistic writing style. I'll probably say more about that later. I've read this one again and again, like each of the previous ones you've already sent. I read it on the little bench in the parc Monceau where, as you know, I often walk and sit when I need to take a break from the office. Or lately, when I need to be with you, if only for a few moments.

I tried to reach you earlier this evening, as I left le Palais de Justice, hoping to hear your voice, right there, as if waiting for me, as if hearing my voice was important to you, too. So, I called but D-ring! D-ring! D-ring! No one answered, no one was home.

I rang to find out how your lunch with Tashinka had gone and about everything else that you might have done,

C. C. Saint-Clair

dreamt or felt since our phone call last night. I'm really glad you've decided to let her know you were in Nice. I'm glad, too, she made the time to drive down. I'm glad because a little blast from the past, one of that kind, is usually a pleasant experience and I'm glad because, finally, something 'live' is happening in your life down there. I mean 'live' as in right there in the flesh, as opposed to 'in your thoughts'. So, anyway, I hope you'll let me know how it all goes.

Here's something to make you smile: from what you've indicated about your father, I think I already kind of like him. He seems to be into good wines and good humour. You find him fastidiously meticulous and not very spontaneous in the way he relates to the world, but for some of us that can be a plus. Well, maybe not his military precision for everything.

Do, please, write more about your past. How was it, initially, with your mother, Mayanne, when she took you away from your grandparents to live with her? You were already seven years old, you said. That must've had a great impact on the little girl that you were.

Tell me about that little girl. Like everyone who's ever been in love, there's so much I want to know about the focus of all my thoughts, about you. Maybe your *grand-mère* could give you a picture of you when you were a little girl. Maybe she would enjoy looking through a photo album with you, if it hasn't been done already. Even if she doesn't remember the 'when and the where'.

You see, if you don't allow me a picture of you as you are now, maybe I could still have one of little Alex? Her face would only be an *ébauche* of yours as it is now, a sketch of sorts, but it would be lovely. I imagine a picture of little Alex's dark green, brooding eyes under a thick fringe, a

stubborn pout on her lips, and a defiant tilt of the chin. I imagine your *grand-mère* would have left your hair long but cut in a straight line across the forehead, low above the eyebrows as was the fashion for little girls de *bonne famille* in those days.

I could tuck that picture away, somewhere in my office. As it is, I can only read from and about you. While I read, though, you're here with me. I actually see you, and I ache to touch you. But back to your father.

From your description of his early weekend wake-up calls, I gather he rises briskly and happily. But above all he has a wonderful daughter, exotic and delightful, visibly not big on tidying clothes (at least not during a whirlwind stay at Eli's – yes, I did have time to observe that much, that dreadful dawn), but one who writes things that make me capsize. I wish you were here, snuggled against me.

My hands need you. They daydream of caressing the length of your tawny body. This longing is such that it's too painful to indulge in, so I'd better stop here.

Don't forget to tell me about your lunch with that sexy mother of two who had turned your head, way back when. I hope it went well and as smoothly as you had anticipated. *Dors bien, mon amour.* Sleep well.

Adrienne

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C. C. Saint-Clair

## Paris, 15 March

Alex,

The hunger for you and the compulsive urge to write still wins out in the end. Every time it wins, I lose, though I've tried to keep the promise you managed to wring out of me. Let's say that I've honoured that promise for as long as I possibly could.

I've tried to push you out of my system, out of my mind, out of my heart, as you had ordered me to do. I tore up the many letters I so desperately wanted you to read. I dialled your number many a time, but found the will to hang up quickly, before the first ring, knowing that if you happened to pick up the phone, I would then lack courage to hang up.

Today, now, seated on our little green park bench, I surrender.

You do remember the parc Monceau, the only place where we were able to steal a moment away from the rest of the world? You loved the little ducks frolicking in the icy water of the pond, and on our bench, the bench where we sat, shoulder pressed against shoulder, thigh against thigh, in spite of the thickness of our winter coats, you enveloped me in your own warmth. I remember every detail of that crystallised moment. It was the day before you left, the day after the most frustrating night of my entire life; the night I spent fighting off every impulse, every cell in my body that demanded we make love.

Today, the air smells of spring. Today, as you're not by my side, it's with the tiny *piafs* picking the gravel by the



bench that I share a waffle topped with *sucre glacé*. The fine sugar sticks to my fingers, as always, I'm sure. But as I sit here wiping them on a handkerchief, I think of your lips. I think of the tip of your tongue. I think of the soft warmth of your breath on my face.

The lines of your face that used to be clear have begun to blur. I saw you such a little time really and mostly only at night, in dark bars, over dinners, though I now know that, from the moment we shook hands at Chez Lipp, I always had you in my line of vision. The important thing is that, for the moment, particular expressions and the memory of your voice are still intact. In fact, they still jump out at me at the most impractical moments, like during a consultation with a colleague, or when with Sophie.

It happened again this morning. Your voice, a happy chatter, came over something she was saying as we were about to get into the lift, only for a second, but long enough for my heart to stop and for me to stub my toe on the way into the lift. Here is something to make you smile: a few days ago, my clerk looked up from his manual on international law and handed me the pile of new briefs the courier had just delivered.

As he did, he stuttered, and his boyish cheeks turned pink, 'You know, Ms d'Anville, I'd ... I'd like to say ... but pl ... please, don't misinterpret me...' And then, as if his thoughts had gathered momentum, '... Ms d'Anville, I can't help but notice ... for a while now, you've had ... a ... (he cleared his throat) a ... twinkle in your eyes ... and your smile, it's ...' He then got up so suddenly, his chair rolled

C. C. Saint-Clair

backwards into the wall and a hollow thump saw him out of the room. There I stood, grinning from ear to ear, nodding to myself, knowing he was right, acknowledging the secret origin of my inner glow.

I need to add, though, that the flip side of that mental *étourdissement*, of this giddiness (I looked up that word this morning) is total physical exhaustion. It's not just an emotional exhaustion. It comes from lack of sleep, loss of appetite and from knowing that I'll never see you again.

You've made me agree to that. I wish I hadn't called you when I did, but you were so adamant that even if I hadn't, you would have written it down for me to read. To read and re-read, all the while hoping I had misread your words the first time around.

You want me to stop thinking about how and when we might, one day, sneak in some time together. You made that very clear. But I think that what you really want is for me to stop agonising about how the tenuous balance I am so far able to maintain with Sophie might be altered should we ever be in a position to do that. Mind you, I can certainly understand how you might be totally fed up with the wait and my dilly-dallying. Anyway, I promised. I tried and I failed.

Agreeing to stop fantasising about a reunion is one thing, but it's not easy pulling you out of me. I often ask myself what it is about you that makes me melt so. I can't explain the extent of my attraction. It goes against what I always believed about myself: that I was reliable, reasonable, settled, and totally immune to this *folie hormonale*. That's what this is, isn't it, a hormonal delirium? It has to be.

I wasn't looking for anything to change in my life. I didn't want more than what I already had. This must sound ... limited to you who wants so much out of life, out of ... everything. I was thankful, you see, for the quality of my relationship with Sophie; for the calm, loving, and settled aspects it brought into my life. We communicated well, we understood each other. We were happy. But tonight, I need to look at our old photo album to remember how it might have felt ... back then.

Ah, yes, I almost forgot. A while back, you asked about her past. She's already told you the gist of it but yes, that would've been a very long time ago. Anyway, I don't think it'd be a breach of confidence if I told you a little more about it. Listen to me speaking of breaches of trust! Really!

Truth is I would like you to know the whole story. It'd help if you understood better the trust thing with Sophie. Anyway, it's such a horrendous story I'll get this done as quickly as possible.

Have you ever seen the film, *War Zone*? If you have, it was a bit like that but it's her brother who used her for his incestuous needs, not her father. The poor man had died a few years earlier. So, they lived in the countryside somewhere north of here. She was only eight when one evening Patrick found her in the bathtub. She was already old enough to wash herself and she still thinks he genuinely didn't know she was there when he barged in. He was on his way out on a date. He's some twelve years older and he had forgotten his aftershave.

For some reason, he didn't just splash his *eau de Cologne* on his face and leave as he had intended doing. Instead he stayed in that bathroom and he talked to his little

C. C. Saint-Clair

sister and she was not disturbed by his presence. The thing is that, though he had never walked in on her that way before, she didn't have any reason to fear him.

Little girls are not usually aware of their bodies, you know, nudity, *pudeur* and all that, and he was, after all, her big brother.

Because he was so much older, he wasn't around a lot, but when he was, he was always nice to her. The usual big brother stuff, you know, like carrying her on his shoulders pretending to be a galloping horse, that kind of stuff. And he always smelt nice.

And so, he had sat by the side of that bathtub and he gently splashed water at her. And he made her giggle. And when he pulled the sponge out of the bath water, he ran it over her back and she giggled some more. Then he left, closing the door behind him. Sophie finished her bath, pulled on her flannelette nightgown and went up to bed. Her mother was already in her fifties, I think. Anyway, she came in to check on Sophie as she usually did, turned off the light and left. And Sophie fell asleep.

She woke up with a start, though, surprised to find her brother sitting on the edge of her bed. On his lap he had a little stuffed lion. And the lion said, 'Shhh ... *petite Sophie*. Go back to sleep. It's all right, it's only Patrick.' And little Sophie went back to sleep and so it went until one day, Patrick touched her. He caressed her, her legs, ever so gently under the sheet and always in a playful manner. Always with that toy lion that he had brought to her that night as his accomplice. He wouldn't drop in every night, of course, but a few nights every month.

And then one night, he slipped his hand under her nightgown and left it there on her little sex. She squirmed and wriggled but he somehow found a way to soothe her out of her instinctive recoil, probably with the help of the toy lion.

From here on, Sophie doesn't remember much at all. Only glimpses of ... sex. Of his sex near her face. Of his thumb hard in her mouth, hard against her tongue. Of a thick and red penis in his hand, while the bed shook. And the smell of cheap Aqua Vital cologne.

She can't explain why, in the early days, she didn't run straight to her mother. But when she did, sometime later, her mother slapped her violently across the face. She was a simple woman, you see, with simple values like the many who only know country life. And like a woman possessed, she went through Sophie's room to find these horrible pictures that she accused her daughter of having looked at. She was sure her daughter must have gotten hold of some pornographic stuff, maybe from a school friend. And that these *saletés*, these filthy things, had warped her daughter's mind. Not finding any, she locked up Sophie's bicycle in the garage and kept her away from school for a whole week. To this day, Sophie is sure that her mother never even tried to test Patrick out.

Alex, I really want to get to the end of this horrible story. This one, too, is an awful one to write about, but I think it's important for you to know why the trust that Sophie's placed in me is, to her, like a vital organ. You understand what I'm saying here? It had taken her some forty years to stop punishing other women, including her lovers, for her mother's betrayal.

C. C. Saint-Clair

She knows that Patrick, eventually, went all the way with her. She knows he penetrated her. She remembers the blood on her thighs but not the pain. Patrick wiped that blood off. With the bath sponge. She thinks he stopped coming to her room when he somehow found out his little sister had had her first period. And that was that. She hardly ever saw him afterwards. He went into the army, as was the thing for young men to do in those days. No finality for her. No counselling. Just a nightmare that never got a closure.

She ran away at thirteen. She was running away from the memory of that turgid sex, from the smell of sperm and Aqua Vital that, she said, still clung to the wallpaper of her room, inside her head. She was running away from her mother's betrayal, too.

You see, Sophie had tried to talk to her mother a second time. She had taken the toy lion with her, down to the kitchen. She thought that the toy would be the irrefutable proof that her mother wouldn't be able to ignore. But for her mother, there was nothing there but a toy lion and her young daughter's sick ravings.

As further punishment, she stuck Sophie in a nearby boarding school of sorts, run by nuns. Can you imagine, in those days, what it would have been like in a place like that? That was the kind of place where orphans, wards of the state, and other miserable children like that would be sent. She never saw her mother after that day and later she ran away with only a tiny suitcase. She didn't go to her mother's funeral either, though that was only a couple of years ago. I'll stop here on this story. I don't want to write any more about it. Not now. Later. Another day.

And I should really cross the street and go back to the office. But no, no yet. On a somewhat simpler note, the dinner party with Eli and Isa turned out to be pleasant enough. Two things though: first, everyone concentrated on not mentioning you at all, not in any way, not even a brief mention of the great times we all had together during that mad week you were here. Second, when Eli, who's never been known to volunteer for the task, offered to help me load the dishwasher, I felt trapped.

Thank goodness Sophie made such a fuss about guests never allowed in the kitchen that even wine-brash Eli realised she had only one option: to remain seated, near Sophie, in the living room. I don't think you can imagine how relieved I felt, alone in the kitchen, even in the company of dirty plates and platters. I didn't even mind the smell of cigarette stubs piled high in ashtrays beside the sink.

Anyway ... I'm still waiting to hear about your Tashinka. Since you've told me about her, I've been quite curious to hear what she's been up to, all these years, beside raising her little boys and sailing Europe on her catamaran.

*Un baiser*, a gentle, loving kiss for you. If only ...

Adrienne

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C. C. Saint-Clair

The glass of pastis sweats droplets of freshness. They glisten along its stem on their way to the tiny, circular puddle, where the glass joins the white, plastic tabletop. It is wonderfully pleasant, here, sheltered from the strong sea breeze busy blowing tufts off the cresting waves. I would love to close my eyes and let the gentle winter sun seep through me and melt my insides, but I cannot. I am far too tense.

I am waiting for Tashinka. The excitement I had initially felt, as I read that, yes, she would love to drive from where she now lived in the hinterlands of Cannes and meet with me over a lunch, had been tremendous. I was very much looking forward to reconnecting with her after so many long years of episodic correspondence. And ours had been such a dramatic connection!

Once we had resumed writing, having established early on that she had chosen to remain married to Ashleigh for reasons best known to her, she had added little about her life. She mainly wrote about her involvement with sailing, both as an instructor at the local yacht club and as a solo catamaran racer. She also wrote about frequent trips to the snowfields of Europe between the months of November and May with her now grown-up boys who had, apparently, become wonderful skiing buddies.

So, I had already decided that I would do my best to shake her out of that quiet, introverted, health-nuttish groove. After all, she was still far too young and had been too vibrantly sensual to not be ... involved anymore.

But having come to this cafe overlooking the bay too early, having sat there for over half an hour with nothing to occupy my mind other than my purpose for being there, I felt myself slowly becoming anxious.



By now, Adrienne, I can say I am totally spooked, maybe even transfixed, at the thought of our imminent reunion. Not sure why really, but there is one thing I have been fixating upon and that is the awkwardness that I fear will prevail over my clumsy, stilted initial exchange.

We have not seen each other for years. And so many years have surely taken their toll. What if we are unable to recognise each other beyond our new outside appearance? What if the women that we were no longer are? As in not there anymore ... vanished?

What if we just fritter away our time together in a desultory banter, you know, something *décousu*, and cannot find the thread to lead us into a meaningful conversation? I am old now ... older. I have changed, maybe too much, maybe the wrong way.

An immaculate red Triumph is now parked across the street where a postal van had stood only a moment ago. I straighten up in the uncomfortable white plastic chair. A need to swallow contracts my throat.

In one of her recent letters, she had written about the pleasure and excitement she was getting from her most recent toy, a fully reconditioned British roadster.

*'J'ai acheté une p'tite TR4,'* she had written, 'all red and beautiful! I'll take you for a spin along the Corniche. We could keep going all the way to Monaco.'

It must be the one on the other side of the street. There can't be that many mint-condition, red Triumphs around, sporting a totally non-vintage but very sexy snug sport bar,

C. C. Saint-Clair

low behind the seats. Not even here. So, she's made it to our rendezvous!

She's here, somewhere, but where? Slowly, without seeming to, I survey the immediate landscape, eyes sheltered by the dark lenses.

The Tuesday afternoon fishermen are lined up, lines dangling, along the jetty; each has brought a coloured plastic pail and a folding chair. My shoulders are tensed and my eyes squint to probe deeper into the crowd milling below. The onset of a panic attack has my heart beating far too fast. God, how I hate feeling this way. I do not recognise her silhouette anywhere, but I know she is here, nearby, I sense her presence.

One woman stands alone on the furthest edge of the jetty, I could say she is looking at me, but at such a distance I cannot be sure. She does not have Tashinka's willowy silhouette, but I look away all the same, unnerved. I really hate everything I am feeling at the moment. What can I compare it to so you'll understand?

This feeling is somewhat familiar to me. I have felt that way waiting to be interviewed, say, for a job that, at the time, seemed to be my Golden Fleece. I have felt that way, too, minutes before an exam I knew I could fail but needed so desperately to pass.

And here I am again, anxiously fretting behind a mask of studied passivity, not wanting to be caught unawares. I remember my mother's admonishments in other nerve-racking circumstances when I was only a child, '*Mais enfin, Alex, sois naturelle.*' But I can no more let go and be

'natural' now than I could then. A masochistic penchant towards self-control, or at least looking composed, seems to have girdled me since very young. The more my mother would urge me to let go, at the times it suited her purpose best, the more I held on to my already emerging wall of surface indifference.

Looking back to those childhood days, there must have been something there that had led me to believe that the line of least resistance involved hiding my fears and hiding my tears. Maybe it was simply my mother's constant and contradictory admonishments to be brave, to be strong in the face of adversity, that somehow wedged me deeper behind my barricade.

I might have cried over a scraped knee. I might have cried because of a sense of helplessness in the face of a blatant injustice. Or as my heart broke upon learning of my puppy's sudden death. Or, much later again, at the moment of my first heartache. And I knew Mayanne would be expecting me to dry those tears quickly and pick myself up, either literally or figuratively. She wanted me to be emotionally strong. And, in those days, it meant that I should not cry. And that my sad heart had best be quickly sent on its way. Those lessons, I guess, are the ones that I have internalised best. I did not cry when the 'not guilty' verdict was confirmed, later on that evening in Mr Smith's office.

Even now when I feel I can no longer contain tears welled up behind my eyelids, I despise my weakness. And I make myself swallow harder and faster. A couple of runaway tears might, at extreme moments, slip through my shut-tight eyelids but most will not. So, for now, as I wait for Tashinka to find me, I am concentrating on projecting self-control and remoteness.

C. C. Saint-Clair

The ice has melted inside the glass on the white plastic table. All traces of coolness have by now evaporated. The yellow liquid is too warmly sweet to yield any kind of refreshing pleasure. I am aware of my shallow breathing made worse by a slouched position on this hard, plastic chair.

I need to free up my ribcage. I need to regain control of my breathing but I do not want to get up. I do not want to make myself overly visible. I'll just sit and wait. But I need to focus my thoughts on something simple, on something pleasant. Oh, yes, that seems appropriate: a travel back in time, to my days at the American School of Algiers, to that particular morning, the morning of April the third. I have not had time to tell you that part of our story.

Though that, too, happened many years ago, I still see the date she had so boldly written across the top right-hand corner of my blackboard. The night before, on the rooftop terrace of her Moorish mansion by the beach, we had fallen asleep in each other's arms and at dawn, on the third of April, we had made love again before separating.

She had to wake her young sons, Niko and Julian. We had to get ready for our school day. Before all else, we had to grapple for control of our emotions. I remember the many days in the preceding months when I knew I would find her ready for her students, ready for their Phys Ed class: a beautiful, proud, feline young woman, sporting long, tanned legs topped by a little pair of white sport shorts. Her dark curls were all tangled despite the grey and green bandanna tied on her forehead. With an inscrutable look in her eyes, she had reminded me then, as she often had, of the heroine of some teenage romance novel who, posing as a

pirate, had crossed many seas and encountered many hardships to find love. Except for the white Adidas shorts.

But Mrs Tashinka Jennett was not only married; she also had two gorgeous little boys, so I would force my mind back to more accessible topics.

One day, at the very end of March, she had stridden into my empty classroom, looking both defiant and uneasy. Bypassing any form of greeting, she had crossed over to where I was standing, by the blackboard. She had stood there, looking at me, silently rocking on the balls of her feet. And then, in halted tones she had let her fragmented discovery tumble out.

Apparently, that very morning at the end of March, as she had been drying her hair, she had caught her own reflection in the bathroom mirror. In the space of that fleeting moment, a dawning had arrested her in mid-gesture. At first, she said, she had been too struck to analyse its deeper meaning, but that a veil had lifted at that fractured moment. She became aware that she had fallen in love; that she was in love with a woman. I remember having looked at her intently, fascinated, but wondering why she was confiding in me that very private understanding. Then, as if through a haze, I had watched her move closer to me, close, very close. So close, I had felt her breath on my cheek as she had whispered, 'Alex ... I am ... in love with you.'

So, my basketball warrior, Mrs Jennett-mother-of-two, had fallen in love with me after all. I had never dared envisage such an outcome though I had been infatuated with her from the moment I had caught sight of her as she played a frenetic style of basketball with a motley group of senior boys, her runaway locks, wet with perspiration, coiled

C. C. Saint-Clair

around her throat. That was on the second day of posting at my new school in Algiers, North Africa. It had taken her most of the school year to meet me on that threshold.

“I can see you haven’t changed much! Always lost in another dimension.” The warm depth of that forgotten voice startles me back to the here and now, where I sit in a white plastic chair. My eyes snap open behind my sunglasses – Tashinka’s tall frame is shading my face from the sun.

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She left the red Triumph parked where it was and led me into a brisk walk to the nearby beachfront restaurant where she had already reserved our table. We caught each other casting shy and awkward glances, I, for one, trying to surreptitiously assess the inevitable changes that had to have occurred during the many years since I had last seen her but, beside a different hairstyle, found none immediately stood out.

Dressed in a navy-blue linen shirt and those narrow hips trapped inside a pair of white jeans, she strode towards the restaurant in the easy feline gait that I remembered, half a step ahead of me, turning back to catch what I was saying. The first snatches of conversation, as we had come face to face with each other, had been more like rapid-fire. Adrienne, I cannot explain how I would have liked that first moment to go, but as it was enfolding, I knew that what I had dreaded was happening.

Off-balance, *décontenancée* at finding myself looking into her eyes after such a long absence, I clumsily cut into most of her utterances. And then the trivial nature of our initial conversation brought on a nervous sort of cold panic.

I prayed for a divine intervention, a voice from above that would shout, ‘Take Two’, and allow us, allow me, to redo this scene in a more controlled, detached way. Anyway, she now wears her hair short and backcombed, level with her jaw line, but it still curls in rich dark brown, unruly tendrils.

Soon after we were seated, I signalled the waiter over for the menus, for something to focus on, in silence, while I regrouped. And we chatted a little more about totally trivial things before the conversation settled somewhat more comfortably on safe topics such as our respective daytime occupations and my life in Australia. The waiter came for our order and, after he had arranged the bottle of rosé in its little silver bucket and had wrapped a starched napkin around its neck as if to protect it from a rising chill, she asked me about my father.

So, I tried to describe my clumsy attempts at reconnecting with him because he had allowed a career in the army to take over his life after he and Mayanne had divorced. These choices had obviously led him to remain unattached too long, visibly beyond the point of no return.

The crazy thing is that, though single, he had not remained chastely alone throughout the last thirty years. Far from it, in fact. But that prolonged solitude, in turn, has led him to become more of an opinionated squarehead than, I suspect, any woman in her right mind needs as she contemplates the freedom of retirement.

I asked Tash about her boys and she explained how they had finally become young adults and how they were still her pride and joy. Better yet, the three of them had become the others’ best buddies and accomplices in times of mad capers.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Adrienne, you know what struck me first as I listened to her talk about pleasant moments with her sons? What struck me was that she does not smile anymore. Or if she does, it is not the radiant, easy, and exuberant smile I remember.

Then, I asked about Ashley. As his name passed easily through my lips, I became aware of an odd calm; I did not feel the familiar shards of anger that used to bite at my guts whenever I happened to think of this man. I guess all bile must have finally drained out of my heart when I wasn't watching. I just hadn't noticed.

Ashley, the husband. Ashley, the gentle man turned mad man. Ashley, the one who had made me eat sand through my nostrils, in an attempt to satiate his rage. The man who had tried to suffocate me in the Algerian sand dunes, leaving a ring of fingertip bruises around my neck. Ashley, who would have had the better of me, if his wife had not been strong enough to get him in a stranglehold herself. Ashley, who had blackmailed her into sequestering herself in her own house, well after I had caught a plane out of the country.

The only alternative he had offered her had been to expose her as an unfit lesbian mother while he would seek a divorce that would separate her from her little boys.

“That day, when he forced me, physically and through emotional blackmail, to stay away from you, though I was crazy with worry not knowing ... how you were,” she said, shaking her head sadly, “that day was the last time I spoke to him as a wife to her husband.” She raised her eyes cautiously towards mine and sighed softly, “But the damage had already been done. You had flown out of Algiers and settled in Mallorca. You were out of harm's way and I agreed



that, for the boys' sake if not entirely for mine, it would be best to go on sharing the house and start pretending.”

I watched her eyes. They are still clear, still deeply green and they are now the only place where a real smile can be detected if one looks closely. There, and in the pale lines that run up from the corners of her eyes, hidden under the tanned and smooth skin, to her temples. Her lips are still full but her mouth has lost some of its natural upward curve. She now keeps it firm and tight. Like the rest of her, really. Through the thin weave of her shirt and its open collar, I could almost feel the sinewy tautness of her shoulders, the control that lies in her stomach, flat as a board, bound by the leather belt that matched the green and blue of her suede deck shoes.

Another change I had not noticed at first glance is that she has lost weight, and her body which had been lithe and luscious in the prime of womanhood, though still supple and athletic, seems to have grown hard and taut. The dishes came and went, only asides to our conversation.

At some stage, she moved her chair a little sideways from the table to stretch her long legs and crossed one knee over the other. Her right foot dangled loosely closer to my chair, its paler inner side facing me.

Ah, Adrienne, I need to tell you a little secret, if you promise not to tell. I do not normally like feet at all, as they tend to be either bony, gnarly or podgy, but I've always had a thing for feet, naked and tan, inside deck shoes. I do find that combination very sensual. Maybe the turn on lies in the slim curve of a golden foot looking delicate by contrast to the thick seams and chunky leather of that particular type of footwear.

Anyway, I became aware that she had stopped talking, visibly waiting for my eyes to move away from her foot and back upwards to meet hers. I am sure I detected a glimmer of amusement in her eyes and I felt a heat rise inside my chest.

She did not get side-tracked. “When I felt it was safe to contact you again ... you sent me back to him, to the boys. *Tu t’ souviens, Alex?*” I nodded again. Yes, of course, I remembered. “You and I had managed to steal a few days on our own in Paris. *Juste toi et moi.*” Green eyes, wide eyes, windtanned cheekbones. “You sent me back, Alex, and you made me promise to shut the door on us.” Slowly she inhaled, pressing her long fingers on either side of her nose.

I felt disconcerted by the intensity of her voice. “And so, many years later, Ashley and I are still pretending to be a couple. We’re still pretending, though the boys are now independent. We pretend for the benefit of his Board of Directors, for the few friends and colleagues we need to entertain jointly. He thinks I pretend for some type of convenience, but he knows I despise him. I only ever speak to him when others are present.”

I didn’t say anything. What could I have said besides express my total lack of understanding for such an impossible lifetime compromise? Instead I averted my eyes again, this time choosing to tease the crumbs that lay scattered on the tablecloth, waiting for the conversation to take an inevitable, more personal turn.

She sipped her wine. “*Tu sais*, it’s really quite a practical arrangement,” she said slowly. The corners of her deep green eyes crinkled in what I was learning to recognise

as her new way to smile. I must have looked at her dubiously for

she clarified, “Well, remember, even back then, he was often away on business. Now, he’s seldom home at all. He’s gone higher up the corporate ladder and travels to more distant, more exotic business destinations.”

She saw I was still unconvinced about the practicality of her having remained in their home, if not so much by his side, even after the boys had become old enough to understand a straightforward divorce. She said something that, in a still obscure way, seemed to explain the barely-veiled amusement that still played in her eyes. “*Tu vois*, his long-term mistress lives in Toulouse; hours from where we live. He’s made her flat the base for his stopovers but it’s a totally impractical place for him. She cooks for him, though. She washes his clothes and takes his suits to the drycleaner’s. She loves him, you see. She makes love to him. I don’t. Not anymore. Not since well before that night in the dunes. Not since the end of March ... that year.”

And I waited, still not understanding why all that would make her eyes smile.

“Besides, Alex, the point is that all these years I haven’t needed the type of freedom a divorce would have brought me.”

“*Pourquoi pas?*” I felt the tight knot in my eyebrows. Why not, indeed?

“*Eh bien, quoi, Alex? Souris un peu,*” she urged, backcombing her dark hair with a hand. “You still don’t smile much, do you? And you still frown the same way, you know, like faced with a serious problem that needs solving on the spot.”

C. C. Saint-Clair

I was so wrapped up in trying to understand that impossibly dry and wasting relationship she had with a husband she did not even resent anymore, that I had not realised that I was the one who needed to smile and lighten up. But what could be worse than having chosen to prolong a life within the lonely, empty shell of a marriage that had stopped being?

“Look, maybe you won’t approve, but I’ve made my choices. Quite a while back now.” She had moved forward, leaning her forearms on the space in front of her now that the waiter had cleared away the plates. “But when I look back, the truth is that I don’t regret having remained Mrs Jennett. Don’t you see?”

I didn’t see, so I shook my head.

“Divorcing, once the boys could deal with it better, would have ultimately been offering Ashley an easy way out. A way out of his guilt. A way into a fresh new start. You see, I like knowing that he knows that I don’t need him for anything. If we divorced, by law I would keep half of all we own together and that would amount to a tidy bundle. So for him to still bring home his income is neither here nor there. A divorce would cost him a good lot more.” Her eyes glinted as she spoke about her ongoing resentment of her husband. “No, you see, my revenge for what he did to you and me back in those awful sand dunes is to pay him back in kind. I want him to think about my lovers. I want him reduced to being a simple commodity in my life. Oh, I know, that’s not charitable. But, as Niko says, remember my youngest?”

I nodded with a smile. Golden little Niko, beautiful boy. Used to give him piggyback rides. Of course, I remembered him. “Well, his favourite expression at the moment is, ‘I don’t give a flying ... fox about that.’ On the other hand, maybe my attitude helps him keep his Simone at bay. I’m

sure she'd rather be a wife than a lover." With a sly grin she added, "And ... he knows, even though I say very little, that I have a hell of a better time than he does with his middle-aged widow." She looked at me expectantly.

"What?" The dry quality of my tone startled me. What's with me? She's having the time of her life while punishing Ashley. Not charitable but great. Why are my jaws clenched?

"Well, I thought you'd be ... happy. Alex?" She reached across the space that separated us and very lightly covered my hand with hers. Happy? Ah, yes. Yes, happy; happy she's found a way to turn the situation to her advantage. But not happy as in yippee yahoo happy. More like squishy-happy. "You used to worry about my shrivelling up inside."

"Yes, I know. I did. But, now that I hear you talk like that, it feels strange ..." I felt flustered by the onslaught of mixed feelings I had not anticipated while I had been sitting on the uncomfortable white plastic chair of earlier.

"What does?"

"What does what?"

"Well ... what you've just said. Something that feels weird about my—"

"Well yes, you know ... imagining you and ... lovers." Would I have reacted differently if she had used the noun in its singular form?

"Oh, don't get carried away. It's not like I have hundreds at the same time." Her lips curled upwards in the rare smile of old. That, too, amused her. I forced myself to stop blushing. After all, she could not read my mind. All there was to read in my face was that I was nonplussed by it all and yet I couldn't stop the hot sensation from creeping up my neck and spilling on to my cheeks. I won't ask any

C. C. Saint-Clair

details. Don't even want to know ... No, I don't want to know if they are ever females.

And then to make things worse for me, Adrienne, a flash memory of rooftop lovemaking on our first dawn as lovers played itself on the white tablecloth as clearly as if on a makeshift screen. Her hand still lay lightly over my own.

Heat rose again to my cheeks and aware that I was keeping my eyes averted made me squirm inwardly.

I silently berated myself. Don't go there, Alex. Leave well enough alone. What does it matter? That was so long ago. Just think of the lovers you've had yourself. Don't be a hypocrite. And so, what if she's still heterosexual? Oh, no! Even worse. Not males. That'd be too gross. Too gross to imagine.

With a sinking feeling I did my best to struggle from under that clinging netting of childish insecurities, but that was not easy. You and I can talk about that later. But I think I had been, in some kind of hypocritical way, prepared to feel sorry for her.

Prepared to be judgmental of her choices. I thought she had settled for being a Mrs Average who still could manage to be civil to her husband when he was in town, but a Mrs Average who was dead inside, as the empty chrysalis that clings to a twig.

However, while I was prepared to shake her out of such a horrible, wasting groove, I had not been prepared to hear how she had refused that groove many years ago; how she had refused to play the game, anyone's game. I was struggling to appreciate that my Tash was totally in charge of her sexuality and was standing by the choices she had made.

My Tash? Get a life, Alex. Even now, as I write to you, Adrienne, I really can't explain why I felt the way I did. Crazy.

Droplets of warm condensation slid down the smooth curves of the ice bucket. Breadcrumbs, tan and pale, were lying embedded into the lacework of the tablecloth. I chose not to look up, not to meet her gaze, not to remove my hand from under hers. Instead, I turned it palm up, to better hold hers in mine. But I did, ultimately, have to look up. She was smiling a slow smile. Deep green eyes wide on my face.

"Hey, you want to know something?" she asked.

I shrugged at the paradox she was unwittingly presenting me with. She did not wait for an answer. Maybe she remembered I was not very good with the idea of her and lovers, be they plural or singular. Luca was his name. He had been her lover before me. But not after me.

"What I enjoy most of all is the freedom I have. The freedom to sail my catamaran. To enter races anywhere I want around here or the Atlantic. I should've brought some pictures. I think you would have liked some of them. Action ones. Sunset ones." She paused. Her eyes covered mine briefly but she lifted her hand away from mine to brush it through her hair, tucking the right side behind the ear as she moved away from the tabletop. "See, Alex, the honest truth about the whole thing with Ashley, for me, is that besides it being my sweet revenge, I enjoy not having to ask permission of ... anyone. It's not really about my lovers. I mean, to all intents and purposes, I'm single, right? I just give plenty of advance notice to ... whoever might ... feel concerned. And I go away for a few days. On my own. Or with the boys. Nothing weird, nothing kinky." She glanced

C. C. Saint-Clair

at her watch and I remember thinking that she did look in charge ... of herself. She was living by the choices she had made. And surely, I, of all people, had to be glad she did. “But of course, some people feel insecure when faced with such a freedom,” she added. “Some feel insecure knowing that I would drop everything in mid-stride if my boys needed me ... for anything. Some just don’t understand why I’m not divorcing. Why I don’t want to start a new life ... with them. I could tell them ... but so far, I haven’t felt that was essential.” She looked around, as if for the waiter, but continued. “It could be argued too, that I haven’t felt I wanted to be dissuaded from that choice made so long ago.”

I just sat there, Adrienne, feeling she had covered every trail. She did not need any advice from me.

“*Tu vois*, Alex, only Ashley and I know why we’re still ‘together’. And you, now. And well ... there’s a price attached to the fact that I don’t commit. Not in the conventional ways that people recognise easily. And so, there’s a high breakup rate, you know, in my relationships.” She sighed, fiddled with a little piece of baguette, and caught me off guard by asking, “But you haven’t said much about yourself. You in Nice. You, at this very moment of your life. Tell me what you’re up to.” “Oh, well, it’s ... it’s pretty much as I said in my letters.” I was not going to tell her about you. About us.

So, I reminded her of my correspondence. “You know ... my letters have told you pretty much all about my life. You know all about my attempts at looking for happiness.” Initially these attempts had been about finding a post-Algiers, post-Tashinka happiness. Then they had been about finding a post-Diana release. And then ... and then, as I had gotten older, they had finally been reduced to a never-



ending, convoluted search for an elusive partner, one with whom the post-lust lull would grow into a satisfying, deepening relationship: and so on.

And here I am, involved with you. You in Paris, me here, and my old friend/your partner and her silent vibes are keeping us at country lengths from each other, as surely as if she had us manacled at different points of this rather small country.

Now, in some of my letters to Tash, while I was still in Australia, I had written about moments when I thought I might be succeeding. And so, I had written her about the woman with whom I was falling in love and unfortunately, later, about the woman with whom I had already fallen out of love, though she might not necessarily have been the same person, between one letter and the next. You see, Tash and I, like Sophie and I in a way, managed to keep a correspondence going, good year, bad year, but it was always at an episodic level, on and off, if you know what I mean. With many, many gaps and silences in between.

“But at the moment I gather you’re free ... footloose and all that? Yes?”

Footloose, she said. I saw that word neatly shaped on your blue correspondence paper. The way you had written it so many times already. Tashinka’s question hung in the air between us, unclaimed.

“*Alors, Alex?*” She moved closer to the table, peering into my eyes, almost as if she had suddenly become near-sighted.

I hesitated. Adrienne, as I said, I had not planned on telling her about us. And yet, she had just presented me with a choice. And I realised that I did not want to leave her with the impression that I was, as she had said: ‘free and footloose.’

C. C. Saint-Clair

“No ... in fact ... No ... I’m not. I mean, footloose. I should be ... but I’m not.” It must have been my imagination, no doubt, but I would swear that even the gentle sea breeze that had accompanied our conversation so far, held its breath as seconds fluttered by.

“Actually, neither my heart nor my mind are free at the moment.” I looked at her squarely but threw my hands up in the way the French claim helplessness. “*Je n’ suis pas libre.*” Circumstances beyond my control. I’m not free at all.

Adrienne, I told her about you. Did I invoke your name as a protection of sorts, as an oral talisman against ... something? Maybe I did, maybe I did a little. But I can clearly say to you that well before that conversation was even begun, well before that day, I had been needing, almost desperately, to bounce the sound of your name against one other being. I wanted to give you a life, a life outside my brain, as you are, after all, more than a simple figment of my imagination. To make you happen ‘live’.

Now that I have walked you through my lunchtime conversation with Tashinka, I am sure you are on the edge of your seat wanting to know how we parted. You did ask for the long-play version, didn’t you?

Well, we parted quite simply, really. Though she seemed to be genuinely surprised that I should be in love, again and so soon after my arrival here, she listened while toying with more breadcrumbs by the side of her plate. I walked her through an abridged version of how you and I had met and separated. I think it is the love part (not preceded by ‘in’) that she found most surprising. That, and the fact that you and I had not yet found a way to meet and make love. And the fact, too, that in spite of my feelings for

you, I had asked you to give up the idea of a contrived encounter.

After a while she had stopped interrupting and did not ask any more questions. Once I had finished, we both sat in silence. I, for one, was again too full of you to casually step back through the gateway that had been opened. I could not come back to the here and now as quickly as one snaps out of a hypnosis session.

After a couple of minutes, she simply leaned towards me, "*Tu m'excuses, Alex?*" I nodded, assuming she was on her way to the restroom. However, when she returned to the table a very short while later, she didn't sit down. Instead she stood by my chair, her narrow hips impossibly close to my face.

I had to look up past the vague contour of her sex, there, behind the thick double stitching of her white jeans and past the green and blue leather belt buckle that rested flat against her stomach. And upward past her breasts that still do not require wearing a bra. As in slow motion, I watched her run a hand through her hair to brush it away from her face. She bent her head to look down into mine. I felt the dry warmth of her other hand on the back of my neck as I tried to stand up. It all happened very quickly.

Once I had more or less made it up to eye level, she simply said, "*Allez, Alex*, let's call it a day ... I don't think you're in the mood to drive around Monaco, top down in my little red car."

"Well, no ... I mean ..." I felt disoriented like I feel when I am awakened too brusquely from a nap. As I reached for my bag, I remembered the bill, "Attends. Let me fix up the bill."

C. C. Saint-Clair

“I’ve already taken care of it. Alex?” I looked up.  
“I thought we might ... Never mind. I’m off. Gotta go!”

I swung my bag over a shoulder, “Yes, got to go too, but ... Hold on!”

Her deep green eyes were once again right there to meet mine squarely. “Alex, I’ve heard what you’ve been saying ... about Adrienne. Let’s just say ... I was hoping my timing might be better ... just this once.” She brushed the air with a hand as she grinned sheepishly “... if only for a little while.” She swung her bag over a shoulder and skirted the table. “Take good care of yourself, Alex. And keep in touch,” she called out.

“I will,” I promised automatically.

She did not linger for a farewell, a hug or a kiss. She simply kept on walking past the array of cane chairs and tables and crossed the street. When she was halfway across, she raised her hand in a wave behind her head. She knew I’d still be looking. From where I was standing, I could see the little red Triumph parked at the far end of the street.

Without looking back, she stepped over the low-slung door, not bothering to unlock it from the outside. She eased her body down into the seat, indicated quickly, and held a dark four-wheel drive at bay long enough to break into the traffic. I need to be totally honest with you, Adrienne, and so will admit that I plopped back on the seat, a definite lump in my throat accompanied by a momentary sense of loss. I stayed seated right where I was and ordered another strong coffee.

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**Paris, 19 March**

Alex,

*Chérie*, how should I start this letter? I must admit that I'm upset by the conversation we had this morning. A weird malaise, in the French sense of the word, has latched on to my skin and won't let go. I'm upset, too, by the contrast between your words this morning and the tone of the two letters I found yesterday when I got home. The mail does take its time getting here. It's often that on the same day I get letters that you've written many days apart.

Of course, I understand what you want, what you need. It's also my want, my need. But how can I give that to us? I'm not strong enough to 'abandon' Sophie. I'm not strong enough to ask you to forget me. I'm not strong enough to push you away in earnest. It's true; months go by. And yet we're not getting anywhere. I feel as if a spider web has us and won't allow either of us movement toward the other or away.

As you said, it's also like the needle stuck in a groove, or as the record stuck under the needle, we go around and around, unable to break free of the dizzying circles. You're right, we go around but not forward. The sharp tone of your voice betrayed you this morning. And I'm drained.

My father's taken yet another turn for the worse but I'm still allowed to visit him most evenings. You might remember it's already been five days since he was admitted. My sisters have decided to take turns in coming up from Lyons. It's now Christine's turn to stay with me, in my apartment. She sleeps in the living room, on the sofa bed. No real privacy either for her or for me. I don't have any time to myself.

C. C. Saint-Clair

When I go to the hospital, I can't possibly get home before nine. Then my sister wants to know everything about papa's mood and state. Then, I have to call Sophie who also loves him dearly, and fears the worst, as we all do. She still spends the night at my place but less often now, while either of my sisters is here. It just gets too hectic in the mornings in that flat. And I can't just leave and go to Sophie's. There are a few reasons why I don't want to do that. Then let's add the workload at the office, the growing number of briefs to review, research and process. Anyway, *c'est infernal*. I'm like on edge, raw.

Then, there's the fear that's been in my guts since this morning when I realised that you might be about to give up.

As you said, rightly again, something has to give. Too sarcastically, you said that you were the footloose one. 'I'm the only one who's free to move,' you said, '... in any direction.' You're throwing that 'footloose' thing at me because back in January I said that was what frightened me about you. Your unreliability, or is it your independence, already then, was making me feel inadequate. Yes, already then. But you're right. You are the only one who is free ... freer to move.

The mad thing is that I tired myself even more by thinking that you might, one day, see me as I am, tedious and plain, not really able to keep up with your energy and your enthusiasm. You are, after all, quite a bit younger than I am. I spin my wheels, I get stuck in the mud, I feel sucked into it, as in quicksand. Like you, though, I believe our confusion would be less painful if we could own it and be allowed to deal with it together. But for now, another threshold, another

benchmark, takes me plus loin, further away, from the solid and stable person I used to be.

Anyway, *Chérie*, don't forget I love you; not 'a lot', not 'incredibly much', just simply: I love you. *Je t'aime*.

Adrienne

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Today, again, I will not stop by the post office to mail what I have written to you during the last few days. The faded woman behind the old counter might well wonder what has happened to me, the woman with spiky silver hair who writes so much, so often, and to the same person, to an A. d'Anville in Paris. 'Used to drop in every day but hasn't been around for a while now,' she might say. 'Must've been a tourist on holidays. She's probably gone back to her A. d'Anville by now.'

You see, this woman who has lines on her face and creases in her tired frock began to recognise me after half a dozen visits or so. And from behind the dismal beige counter she would engage me, avec bonhomie, in a ritual banter.

In the palm of her open hand she would feel the weight of the envelope I had placed flat on the cool surface in front of her, and she would smack her lips appreciatively, 'Eh, she's a heavy one that one!' She did tend to think that my letters to you were, on average, fairly weighty.

And I would smile and try a light-hearted response like, 'Ah, les mots! Words, they weigh much more than the paper on which we write them, don't you think? Or, less cryptically, I might have answered, '*C'est pas grâve*. The

C. C. Saint-Clair

more they weigh, the more of your beautiful stamps will have to go on the envelope.'

It was true. I did enjoy the long row of colourful stamps she would pat onto the white envelope. And it was quite seriously that I had told her that words are often a lot heavier than the paper on which they are written. But again, what about my other belief that feelings and emotions are not meant to be expressed, they need to be lived out?

Anyway, over the passing weeks she had internalised my preference for a varied selection of stamps as opposed to only the one or two that could have met the fare. French stamps are such thumbnail masterpieces! They are rich snippets of history, beautifully drawn snatches of melody, reminders of a bygone era of artists, of explorers, of makers of cathedrals. There is, of course, a new generation of stamps here like everywhere else, bright and simplistic, feel-good stamps, but I stay away from those. Too greeting-card-ish.

The placid, mouse-haired woman who sat on a stool behind her sad little counter used to select the patches of colour - amulets that would ensure the safe passage of each of my letters into the other world. Into the world that I cannot reach, the world that is beyond mountains and lakes, the world that has the Parc Monceau as its geographical centre. Once done, she would add, in the tone of the baker who is pleased with the feel and the appearance of his golden loaf, '*C'est bien joli tout ça.*' Very pretty indeed.

I feel like indulging in a little fantasy, Adrienne, so let us pretend that over the past couple of months this woman, who has weighed each of your letters and affixed the white



and blue *Prioritaire* sticker on the bottom left-hand corner of each envelope, has become curious. Let us pretend, just for the sake of passing time, that she has become curious as to the type of person this A. d'Anville, who lives in Paris, might be. And that, in quieter moments, while she looks at the sunny world on the other side of the grimy revolving door that brings an eclectic dribble of humanity to her, the dispenser of pretty amulets, she has, as in some life-imitates-fiction scenario, constructed her own A. d'Anville.

By my jeans and loose T-shirt, by the large straw bag that usually hangs on my shoulder, she would have figured that I, who often came in the middle of the afternoon when the traffic through that post office was minimal, was not a working woman.

The envelopes I gave her to process were often quite thick but visibly not likely to contain 'business' matters. You see, she would have noticed the format of these envelopes that always seemed too small, too tight, like plump plums ready to burst out of their over-stretched skin.

To her, they might have looked like envelopes worried that their glued seams might come unstuck along the way. In time, undoubtedly, she would have taken note, too, of the untidy, often haphazard way the address was written. Rue Gabrielle. What a beautiful name for a street! You would have noticed too, you who have such tidy, efficient handwriting. Developed for speed and clarity.

After weeks of weighing and gluing and stamping around your name, she would have correctly decided that these envelopes had to contain letters to a lover.

Too old to be a newlywed, she would have thought of me, and no one writes that feverishly to a husband. So, she

C. C. Saint-Clair

would have cast you, A. d'Anville, as a man. Yes, as a man, and most likely one in his fifties, a respectable age for her who sits behind the drab post office counter. Or maybe not. Too predictable.

She might have preferred to cast you as an outrageously sexy, young lover. After all, the French are quick to say, '*C'est dans les vieux pots qu'on fait d'la bonne cuisine,*' something about the best cooking being done in old pots. Personally, I find this double entendre a little crass but it is, after all, a well-worn colloquial expression.

And undoubtedly there has to be some truth to it, both literally and figuratively. Let us just assume that she would feel more comfortable with a lover a few years older than herself. And towards which options does that fantasy take her?

Would she imagine you as a dark and mysterious lover who spoke with the warm accent of exotica while he looked at her with melting deep-dark amber eyes?

Or would her fantasies lead her to a bronzed erstwhile sun god who still turns heads as he steers his wind-surfer through the last crested waves that lead him, hot sea-warrior, to the golden shore of soft sand, to the feet of mesmerised sirens?

I guess the casting of you, Ms d'Anville, would depend on the character that the post office woman would feel most able to lift her out of the mediocrity of the dull, tethered life which, for the sake of my little fantasy, I need to impose on her. So, maybe she would prefer being rescued from her grumpy, sloppy husband and snotty, screaming children by a gentle professor, certainly not a mad one.

No, we are clear on that. That would be far too complicated, erratic and demanding. Too intimidating. No,

no, she would be longing for someone more like a gentle, romantic poet, one with soft unruly hair that meets the fuzzy curls of his soft beard, a shade darker than his tousled hair. A bit of a bumbling, absent-minded, gentle soul with faded pale blue eyes behind steel-rim glasses. Yes, she would like such a man.

A man such as this fantasy would allow her to nurture him curled up against her breasts. But he would rub her weary feet and swollen legs when she would rush back to him after another tedious, neon-lit day, behind her painted concrete counter. Except that, as she flips through her books of paintings, tiny enough for Alice to hang in The Rabbit's den, she thinks that if she had a gentle lover who loved her enough to massage her weary legs and smooth away nascent varicose veins, her days on the grungy side of the revolving door would be less grungy, less beige.

Yes, indeed, a gentle, sensitive man who would walk around with his hair tousled like that of a newly-awakened child, would be good for the weary woman who sits in front of a faded wall and dusty fly-blown posters inside this worn out post office. But tell me, Adrienne, which of these cutout characters, if any, would you pick as your *homonyme*, as your namesake?

I am not going to stop by the post office but, on my way home, I am going to pick up the photos taken in Paris, in Provins. I finally could bring myself to have them developed. Only one will be of you alone. It was taken by Sophie as you were leaning against the age-stained door that led us into the little dark, damp chapel. She had returned the camera to me, saying 'This one of Addy is for you.' She always calls you Addy. So, does everyone else it seems.

C. C. Saint-Clair

I do not imagine ever wanting to shorten your name, Adrienne. It is so ... you.

I remember having simply thanked her with a puzzled smile while I should have said, 'That's nice, but why?' I regret not having thought of anything to say at the time. I did not keep our conversation going. But again, at the time, there might have been nothing that needed adding. Instead, I casually strode to the chapel's door to scrutinise the intricate designs carved deeply in the thick age-tempered oak panels and chose the segment best suited for macro photography.

Did she sense, then, that something a lot messier than mutual appreciation had already dropped its larvae in the palms of our hands? Should I have told her that if this picture was truly intended for me, she should have brought your face into tighter focus. And wait to see in your eyes that mute, stricken tenderness with which you would look at me, later that evening at Le Prince Noir restaurant.

I refrained from getting that roll developed until the day I asked you to pull the plug on us and on any thoughts you might still have been harbouring of getting us some quality time in Paris, behind Sophie's back. That particular roll has been on my mind every day since I removed it from the camera. I guess the purpose behind delaying such a simple pleasure is the same as that of the little girl who decides to keep her bonbon, her candy for ... later.

She knows she will delight the most in its sweetness when the craving for it is beyond tantalising. So, I postponed the discovery of your face on glazed paper until the time the image of you, locked inside my mind, became imprecise,

until the desire to see you, to look at you, reached its apex. Until I felt I would never get an opportunity to ‘see’ you any other way. I am now unable to bring back the precise colour of your eyes, though a deep and rich shade of polished chestnut comes to mind. As words, though, not so much as a colour. More a feeling than a colour. I do, however, still see the corners of your mouth, as they turn up, as you smile, allowing tiny dimples to form on either side of your lips. But you see, Adrienne, I can no longer bring up the whole of your face, in sharp focus.

There is one long shot of you that visits me regularly but there never was a negative of it; you are on the other side of the street as I have just caught sight of you, caught sight of your green woollen coat, through the thin iron bars that fence off the Parc Monceau. One foot, shod in a tan leather court shoe, taps the edge of the sidewalk. Your impatience, your need to cross that avenue, to reach the park, where you hope I am already waiting for you, shimmers all around you like a transparent aura.

‘*Verde, que te quiero, Verde.*’ I do not remember anymore why Federico Garcia Lorca wrote his lines on ‘Green’ but yes, like him I can say, ‘Green, how I love you.’ I love you when you are that green, the very particular shade of green of her winter coat. ‘*Te quiero, Verde*’ as I wait to see her reappear on the crowded sidewalk. That green, your green will signal her return to me.

Briefcase in one hand, your wonderful green coat buttoned high against the chill winter wind, you are held back by the unrelenting flow of cars which rush by, unaware that they are depriving us of some of the most important minutes of our lives. Finally, you see me, seated on the scaly-green park bench, looking at you. While the pounding of my

C. C. Saint-Clair

heart muffles the sounds of traffic, I see your smile, honest and shy. Then, I watch you pass through the massive wrought iron gates that lead into the park.

And you are here, close now. Very close. The hem of your coat brushes against the other green of the park bench. Tight close up now, as I look up. The faint bluish shadow under your eyes is the silent confirmation that you, too, have failed to find any form of respite since our last moment together.

As I look up at you, you bend down to leave a kiss near the corner of my eye. I knew then that, if only one ounce of bad luck was ever attached to my name, I would end up loving you.

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Tonight, you will call, as planned. Again, and probably as awkwardly as last time we spoke, you will begin your conversation by asking me how I am. And again, you will ask me why I have not resumed my writing. Your last letter told me, before you did, that my tone during our last phone conversation had upset you.

When you asked how I was, I know I should not have asked whether you wanted the truthful answer or a placating one. I should not have let sarcasm taint my words when you asked why I had not written.

Tonight, I must not answer the way I did this morning. Your call had caught me in one of the now frequent bouts of frustration that strip away the veneer of protective rationality I want to hold on to. Tonight, I could flatly answer your concern about my wellbeing with something like, 'I have

started a new manuscript. That takes up all my spare time. Very therapeutic. Great crystallizer of thoughts.

What more can I ask, seeing that I am, after all, only an antipodean on holidays?’ But again, maybe I should simply give you the other truth. I could simply say that I have never stopped writing, I have merely stopped mailing.

So, you cannot, after all, keep your promise to move on and away from us. You claim that you cannot refrain from looking for a breach, for a way to find time away from Sophie. For a way to see me. And yet, you cannot imagine a way to free yourself for a few days, either, while remaining in Paris or by flying down here.

The truth is, Adrienne, that it is an excruciating effort for me to come to terms with the realisation that, again, I am at your mercy to either plan or postpone or cancel the plans we were so excited to make over the phone only a few days ago. You announced then, bubbling over with excitement, that you had just heard from Sophie that she was planning to accompany whatshisname, her boss, to an international conference in The Hague. You begged me to agree to put aside my natural repulsion for stolen moments, to forget loyalty and guilt and everything else I had been building into a scaffolding behind which to isolate, or is it insulate, myself from you.

And you wanted me to fly up to Paris for the five days of her absence. Then came your other call. You were totally panic-stricken. Breathless, you said that she must have sensed you would take advantage of her absence. That she had cancelled her trip to The Hague certain that her boss would be able to fend for himself. That she had not given

C. C. Saint-Clair

you any more explanations in regard to her last-minute decision. And that is making you very nervous.

I feel nauseous. The aborted plan hurts more, now, because we should never have schemed such a plan, any plan that played on the hope of actually being able to spend some time together. Will we ever again be able to sit facing each other, to talk, to listen, to watch, and to caress each other with words, with silences, with the soft promise of love in our eyes? I dare say not. And I think we need to find a way of getting on with our separate lives. That is why I am no longer mailing what I write. Which is why I have already asked you, though not in so many words, to lay us to rest gently on an imaginary stretch of sand, to sprinkle us with stardust and let us evaporate into a moonless onyx night.

For now, though, I can say that I know the panic the diver feels, when oxygen no longer reaches her lungs and the pale puddle of light above her head is only very faint. I need to see you again, if only once, to understand with you, my face against your throat, your arms around me, being comforted by the hot tears of helplessness which would escape from my eyelids, as water seeps from behind a broken dyke, and drowns my cheeks.

Instead, I am left with the gnawing need to demystify this love that is yet to be made physical. I am left, too, with a rosary to recite, to hold on to the precept of moral value, to remind myself that we would never be able to build anything lasting on the rubble of her pain. You are all she has left. I do remind myself of that. I remember the trust thing too; the betrayal antidote, the 'vital organ' bit, and how you are the only one she's finally trusted enough to love.



You have helped her heal. I do not wish her ill, it is simply that tonight, I am suffocating under the weight of her loyal friendship and the irregular correspondence she kept going all these years, even as I floundered, only guilty, then, of a waning interest.

Just like with my relatives, here in Nice, Sophie and I have not shared an awful lot together, though our correspondence spans close to fifteen years. Just like them, she has always been on a different side of the world from me. The same side as theirs, the same side as yours.

If I had known then what I know now, I would have terminated my tenuous connection to Sophie a few years ago. You see, Adrienne, if I had, you and I would never have met. There would never have been that first handshake at Chez Lipp. There would never have been a tear-in-the-backdrop moment at Le Chicago. There would never have been that burst of unexpected desire ripping through us, unprepared for it as we both were. And there would never have been any of our actual ghost entanglement. At the time, Sophie would have been a little hurt by my decision to cut her loose but again, knowing what we know now, she would have been a lot better off. But, of course, we all know that the problem with hindsight is that it always comes after the event.

You know the story of how Sophie and I came together in the first place. Not just in another place but more importantly, truly in another life. She was thirty-eight at the time. I was twenty-six. I came upon her inside a narrow boutique in a bazaar in Tangiers. Its low ceiling seemed held

C. C. Saint-Clair

up by piles, pillars, and columns of stacked rugs of varying heights and thicknesses. Visibly, she was one tourist who was not about to let her choice of rug and its price be dictated either by the overweight, sweat-stained Moroccan vendor or by the endless rounds of mint tea he poured for both of them in little glasses. Our paths met then, in Tangiers, where I was doing some freelance interpreting work for the management of a large international resort that had just opened over there. But Sophie did not need me as an interpreter.

Later that afternoon, once we were seated in the coolness of a white-washed courtyard, sipping wonderfully thick coffees served in glazed terracotta demitasses, she had unrolled her rug for me to admire. It really was quite beautiful. It was not a very large rug and it did not have a busy pattern. Its beauty lay in the richness, in the depth of its colours. In the red of its inner rectangle, in the depth of its dark emerald *rosace* and outer band, in the delicacy of the myriad of tiny green and white flowers woven in by skilled hands, and of course, in the thick density of its pile. She explained how she had loved that rug as soon as the vendor had unrolled it. She said, too, that she loved driving a good bargain. That she had been determined to make the sweat stained vendor sweat through every pore of his many rolls, not only some of his natural fat reserve but also every drop of mint tea he had plied her with, and every dinar or dirham that she thought in excess of the rug's honest value. I liked her humour. I liked her strong temperament. We made love. We spent the rest of her holiday together.

You, of all people, can guess how ours was destined to remain an embryonic relationship. You know that because you know her. You know her fear of bonding emotionally

with women, particularly the women she would have most liked to trust. You are the only one to have made a breakthrough at that level. I understand that.

But the fact remains that now, you and I have met, and we have fallen in love, though I know some would be quick to suggest we should ditch the 'love' word and replace it by 'lust'. Yes, they might be right. It is quite possible that we have only managed to fall in lust. To lay this point to rest is one reason why I, almost desperately, need to connect with you, if only just once.

In the meantime, whether it is love or lust, desire or greed, envy even for what belongs to another, the pain is the same. I am back to the 'beyond any shadow of doubt' principle. I do know that if one has ever said, 'Thou shall not covet,' I am coveting. I am coveting in a major way. Or, as little Emmanuelle might say, I'm like *soooo* coveting.

But let us go back to Sophie. As I stand today, I am a galaxy away from my twenty-six years of *d'antan* and I realise that, somewhere along the way, I have depleted my reservoir of free-spiritedness.

Having been a rolling stone for so long, and not necessarily by choice, I am now more interested in gathering moss. And, as far as she is concerned, I am not just an indifferent other who happens to be attracted to you. You have touched on that last point in one of your letters. You are right, this is where *le bat blessé*. This is where, for Sophie, the shoe pinches.

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C. C. Saint-Clair

On the way to the beach: tulips. A palette of vibrant colours was spilling out of the florist's front window and onto the narrow sidewalk, their bright corollas made translucent by the striped afternoon light that filtered down from the rooftops. The first bouquet, the only one, I had time to offer you was one of tulips. Tulips to brighten the walls of your office, otherwise bland and grey on that wintry afternoon in Paris. Here, in the south of France, they herald the nearing of spring and, like notes on a music sheet, they are everywhere. They meet me wherever I go.

Their fragile shapes are heaped on rough wooden carts, in stalls, in vases, in buckets, at the open-air flower market in the old quarter of Nice. Their *feux d'artifice*, their fireworks, have no rivals here, this time of the year. Next to them, the roses appear stiff, tight and unyielding. Mauve tulips in tiny makeshift vases at the terrace of a bistro make me smile. Further up the street, sun-yellow tulips in thick, squat, terracotta jugs. Their limp frailty is reminiscent of the swooning, delicate courtesans of bygone days, the ones who swooned in literary salons, or at the feet of their sweetly-scented, secret lovers.

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**Paris, 18 Mars**

Alex,

Spring is in the air here, too, not a day too soon. The bay window behind my desk is wide open, though of course the air is still a little chilly. You see, from here, I can hear what

you heard when you were by my side on our bench below: the cascade, the twittering of birds, children playing and, of course, the froufrou, the flutter of wings as the pigeons come to roost on the ledges of all the windows facing the park. The unfortunate thing about the pigeons, though, is that they leave behind many unromantic traces, and so, millions of Parisians consider them as pests. That's fine, we do know this is not yet a perfect world. But, hey, plastic pigeons just wouldn't cut it.

This morning, I got a phone call from a notary I didn't know. She was explaining some kind of legal bind she wanted me to advise on, when my heart seemed to seize. Even my speech was affected by the time I uttered, or should I say stuttered, the answer to her question. It was her voice. She must have found me totally odd, to say the least. But the thing is that her voice was your voice coming through the earpiece. I mean she talked just like you. Her intonation was yours.

As soon as I could politely hang up, I did, cutting short my muddle. Then I buzzed Helene in the ante-room, to tell her I wasn't in, not for anyone. And then, you see, the dam that I've been trying to consciously erect around me to exclude you, it just broke. I put my head on the desk and I cried and I cried.

This is why, in spite of the chill, I needed to bring fragments of our park inside my office. Don't worry, *ma chérie*, tears, as you know, can provide therapeutic release.

Alex, please, stop by the nearest mailbox, drop something in it, anything on which you will have scribbled my address. I have you on the phone, when I can, when you're home. But it's not the same as deciphering your handwriting, not the same as reading the flow of your words,

C. C. Saint-Clair

not the same as letting your thoughts wash over me as I lie on the sofa, warm in the soft glow of the halogen light, or in bed, the shutters shut tight against the intrusion of the night beyond. I miss your envelopes with reams and reams of ... you. I had so gotten used to them. I miss them. I miss you so terribly.

I kiss you, gently, tenderly, right now, and each time your face breaks into my thoughts, each time your smile reaches all the way here to soothe me.

Adrienne

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A flashback: I see myself in the Air France jetliner, seated near the porthole window. Grey, grey nothingness, not even the line of a horizon on which to tie a fantasy.

The plane had left Paris only a few minutes ago, but already I was writing to you. These first private words scribbled on an airline paper napkin, the first since our one dinner alone, thirty-five hours ago, had come to me in the shape of a quick poem.

Already then, I had felt the need, an urgency to confirm through clumsy words, the respect I felt for what you and Sophie had built together, like two birds making a nest, twig by twig. A nest based on shared moments, tested trust, daily love, patience and understanding; the very thing I was searching for. That need had been a catalyst in regard to my departure from Australia, a week earlier. I was longing to experience that commitment at least once.

However, only minutes into my flight away from you I was aware, already then, of the danger I posed to your arrangement. And my melodramatic thoughts, spurred on by the frustration of having run out of time with you, went something like:

*Ten years of sharing life  
A monolith set deeply into earthy foundations  
Two lives entwined  
No longer one reed and one elm  
Not even willows  
You became one oak  
A centenary oak  
An oak that can only be felled  
By the powered teeth of a saw*

*Already the birds scatter*

C. C. Saint-Clair

*From its tallest branches  
In a frenzied flight  
Away from their panic  
The squirrels usually brash and cheeky  
Now bounce against the roots and the rocks  
Maddened by the shrill scream of the saw  
The forest curls up on itself*

*In pain in shock blinded and deafened  
Its heart cries  
Its fibres tear  
Your soul bleeds  
The saw jams under the weight of its bite  
The wound is already deadly  
An acrid smell fills the still air  
The giant trunk creaks  
Its many circles of wisdom lie exposed*

*It cracks  
It snaps nest-bearing branches  
It collapses heavy and dead  
In its final resting place  
The undergrowth is crushed in the embrace  
But the slain oak no longer trembles  
Silence tears at our ears*

Soppy and over the top for sure, but these unsolicited thoughts still offered a reasonable analogy with the power of emotional destruction you and I could unleash.

You see, Adrienne, already then, while still so raw from our miserably unsatisfying *nuit blanche*, from our sleepless duel against reciprocal desire, I needed to reiterate this: we are more than leaves blown away from purpose and reason



by a mindless, vagabond wind. What pitiful self-indulgence it would be to say something like, ‘The summer breeze tumbled me this way and that. But it’s not my fault if I follow its pull. I’m only a little leaf, after all.’

Adrienne, I strongly believe that we do control our destiny. Together or separately, we must take action, one way or another. The oak has to be left standing.

Already, the jetliner was tipping its nose towards the Baie des Anges, jewel of the Riviera. It was the signal for me to fold away the metaphor of the stricken forest, but more difficult, to tuck you away while I tried to compose myself for the momentous family reunion about to take place. My father and relatives would be down there, somewhere, assembled behind a wall of glass, peering at the sky, ready to welcome me after a very long absence. All I had to greet them with was the shadow of your smile in my eyes and a torn, sick heart.

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“Alex, each in our own way ... we’ve been longing for another visit from you, but we’ve been apprehensive about it at the same time.” My aunt, Marie-France, was speaking to me, in the kitchen where she had ushered me for a little quiet talk. “We often asked ourselves whether you ever thought of us when you stayed away so long. Not Emmanuelle of course, she wasn’t even born when you left. I had never expected another child so late, but life has its own ways ...” Then she added perkily, “Hey, I hadn’t even met her father then. I mean, really, that’s how long it’s been. Over ten years!” Marie-France was busily foraging inside the pantry for the makings of coffee. The *tartelettes*, *éclairs* and *mille-feuilles* were all ready to bring out to the other

C. C. Saint-Clair

eight members of my family, engaged in an animated conversation, in my grandparents' living room.

From where I stood in the kitchen, I could hear my father's strong intonations. Marie-France pointed to a little oblong sponge cake, oozing sticky sweetness, topped by a maraschino cherry. I looked at her, and then I remembered, exclaiming, for her satisfaction, "My favourite! The one and only *Baba au rhum*."

Pleased with my reaction, she nodded, and returned to her initial thought, "Then, we tried to imagine you as you might have become. Women do change a lot at your age. And then we worried. We thought ... well, it's difficult in a way, that type of reunion." I followed her movements around the kitchen, watching her as she sighed, wiping her hands on a flowery tea towel. "You see, we worried that, by now, after so few visits, so far in between, you might see us as strangers, no longer like the family who looked after you when your mother went away."

The percolator had stopped its bubbling. She reached for it and frowned, "Your father and I, we even came to the conclusion that too much time has gone by, that the gap has become too wide to fill properly." She looked up from the dainty demitasses she was filling to the brim. "Your life has been so different from ours, ever since your mother took you away. I mean, really! Straight to Africa you went. A new American stepfather and all. Who would have ever thought?"

Marie-France absent-mindedly caressed the smooth percolator handle. "And all the countries you've lived in," she added, "... and the unique experiences that's brought you ... and all."

I nodded and I smiled inwardly at the ‘and all’ as she carefully arranged the demitasses on a silver tray. She was right about the enormity of it all. Right, too, about the different turn my life had taken away from theirs the moment Mayanne had come to take me back with her.

I remember my grandfather’s thunder I remember my grandmother’s tears the day they heard, by *télégramme* I think, that Mayanne, remarried and now secure in a stable union, had decided she was ready to resume her responsibilities as a mother. She had already landed in Nice and would be collecting me two days hence. You want to know what I remember of my own reaction. I am not sure. Not much at all actually. Only tears. Tears and anger. Not fear, though.

I mean, I knew who Mayanne was, well, vaguely. She was the nice woman who had visited us a few times. The beautiful nice woman who had a very small dog with her, a Toy poodle I found out later, as white as a new-born lamb. Later, much later, I found out, too, that my mother was twenty-six years of age. When she visited, I remember she would bring me fairy tale books.

Tears and anger though, mine and my grandparents’, when the moment came for me to go with her. Or, more specifically, at the moment I understood that I was to go away ... for a long time ... without them. I kicked and I screamed. Then there is a blank. I do not remember how we got to Mayanne’s suite at the Negresco Hotel on the Promenade. I do remember the burly black and white Toy bulldog that barked when I pulled on its chain. She had bought it at the hotel boutique on the way up to our room. She had bought, too, a little tan monkey that, endlessly,

C. C. Saint-Clair

flipped around and around and around a parallel bar. He wore a pointy little red hat but I cannot remember what trigger made him go around and around like that.

Anyway, back to my aunt, Marie-France. She is happy and rotund now. Warm and welcoming too. So, in her kitchen, I smiled and I nodded that I did understand her fears about the disparity of our lives and the void left in the wake of the thousands of yearly joys and sadnesses not shared. I kept on nodding, I kept on smiling, wondering whether, one day, I might trust Marie-France enough to tell her a little about the ‘and all’ she was probably not yet suspecting. Or was she? Had she ever wondered why I had never married, not that it was too late to do so ... but the optimal moment, if ever there is one, had certainly passed.

In the meantime, I bit my tongue, so strong was the urge to say, ‘You know, Marie-France, all that I am, at this very moment, is a woman in love with another woman. Her name is Adrienne. I only met her a few days ago, in Paris, but the one thing I want most of all, even as I speak to you, is to make love with her.’ Instead, I helped her reach for the dessert plates.

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Memories in black and white glued to the pages of a well-thumbed family photo album. Marie-France is thirteen, her hair is braided into two, long, smooth and shiny plaits. In her hand is the hand of a toddler, bundled inside a thick woollen jacket, her little head protected by a white beanie.

“Do you remember? I taught you how to walk in the park.” Marie-France looked up from the heavy album resting

on her lap. “How to get down a flight of stairs, too. That was trickier. You were afraid to use both feet, you know, alternating. You’d only go down with your right foot forward, at each step, never the left one. You don’t do that anymore, do you?” Good-naturedly reminiscent, she was happy to rekindle the fading memories of my early childhood, from where we sat on a comfortable bed, among a profusion of pastel paisley cushions thrown over a quilted bedspread, embossed with soft lace. The half-open door to Marie-France’s bedroom swung on its hinges.

“*Alors?* Already plotting things together, I see!” My father had just discovered our temporary hideaway. The half-smile, tugging at the corners of his moustache, seemed to be checking whether his intrusion in our ‘girls’ talk’ might be excused. He stood by the door, tall and tanned, visibly waiting for an invitation to join in. His hesitancy suggested to me that he was careful not to impose, wanting to sit close to his stranger-daughter, not yet knowing how to go about it. So, I reached for his hand and made him sit on the bed, next to me. He smelled of dry, spicy cologne and strong cigars.

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I am thinking of the Mediterranean Sea, so wide, and forever lapping exotic lands, beautiful, here, now, as it is alight under the lower rays of the afternoon sun. Yet, it stubbornly resists the moon’s efforts to bring her tides, the cleansing tides she needs so desperately, to avoid choking on its own stagnant filth. Like her, Adrienne, we will reach the stage where all beautiful desire and emotions, all *déchirures*, the tearing and the pain, all uniquely intense vibrations will sink into murky depths, pile up on the muddy,

C. C. Saint-Clair

rotting bottom of the sea. There, where all that is too fragile to survive dies.

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Why did I have to ask you that question, late last night? Your unexpected phone call was a most welcome surprise. You simply had to hear my voice. But I spoiled it by asking the one question for which I already had intuited the answer. Was it to feel, more than hear, the hardness of your tone? To experience the pain created by your words? Maybe it was to force you inside a trench, where I hoped you would hurt yourself. Or was it simply to have myself jolted, on command, out of the incoherent reverie in which I had been wallowing since our last phone conversation? You did not fail me. Your words came as the answer to a secret masochistic need of mine.

I know, now, that a pain is not a pain, *is not a pain*. That pain, last night, was not at all like the pain of desire against which I close my eyes, tightly, to tame it, or to nurse it longer inside my belly, to have it obliterate everything that is not of its essence, if only for a few seconds.

Last night, as my ears were already hot from the prolonged contact with the earpiece, my eyes followed the contours of your voice, helplessly drowning behind closed lids, in wells of silent tears. But you did not know that.

You did not dwell on the topic. In fact, you said only one sentence about it. And that sentence was embedded in innocuous rambling babble. And yet that sentence, because it had been borne out of your thought, had planted itself there where I could not *not* hear it. Incongruously potent. It is not

that you said something I did not expect, or had not thought of. It is more the matter-of-fact manner in which you said it that echoed through the earpiece and found my heart as a willing target.

It was just a tiny little thing that had to do with a special, time-off merriment you were planning to celebrate Sophie's retirement this time next year. You had not paused for effect. You would not have intended any effect, I know. You simply moved on to your next thought and so, you missed hearing the pain raking through my ribs. Already, you were back to planning how and when, one day, hopefully soon, we would finally be able to snatch a couple of days together. And then, though you were seated comfortably by your window to better listen to the night, you finally heard my silence.

You decoded it, belatedly but accurately. You tasted my tears. You guessed the pain. Then, momentarily, you insulated me from it. Through the plastic earpiece pressed against my ear, I allowed you to wrap me up inside a cocoon of long-distance tenderness.

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At the edge of the waterline, a gleeful, blonde little girl is trying to skim pebbles on the white foam of the ebbing tide, unaware of the murk that filters from below. Her body, toasted by the day's play in the sun, seems even smaller in the faded denim overalls, obviously passed down from an older sibling. Feet in the air, she cartwheels. Sand sprays all around, and she topples over into the foam that hems the lazy, indolent, greasy ripples.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Suspended seconds of hesitancy, as the little girl's psyche hovers between tears and laughter. Still seated on her behind, lapping wavelets tickle her pixie-like feet. She laughs. Her chubby little hands brush the wet sand off her knees. I watch her get up and make her way back to dryness. And suddenly then she reaches deep into the sand and tosses it by the handful. A shower of shiny, golden grains thrown against the setting sun shape a halo, a golden aura around the little girl. Then, they too, one gleeful handful at a time, blend into the compact darkness of sand moistened by the tentative tongues of tepid seawater.

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**Paris, 25 Mars**

Alex,

Almost three months ago, you walked into my life. I can't quite say unannounced though, because Sophie, so excited at the news of your visit, almost bored us silly with the retelling of the old and, by now, familiar stories about her friend Alex, even weeks before you were due to arrive.

Anyway, during these past months, I've circled heaven and hell and touched hell again, yesterday, when I felt your pain. For the second time, I thought, for a split second, that I would never again hear the sound of your voice. That fear tore my heart away. Please understand that in the literal sense, so real was the sensation of loss. And then, your voice again, wet and broken.

Alex, I'm unable to pull away from you just as it's impossible for me to even wish it. I know. I've tried both. You're either inside or around my thoughts every hour of the day, as soon as I look up from my work. I'm forever busy talking to you, writing to you, in my mind. And in real time, too. If we're still apart, it's only because of the distance between the Eiffel Tower and Nice's Baie des Anges and the lack of a fated opportunity to negotiate that distance. And that is solely because I can't bring myself to deceive Sophie ... further.

Adrienne

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## Part II

### (DÉCHIRURE) *Where from here?*

**A**drienne, have we reached the point of no return, or have we simply reached the point of no healthy return? What do you expect from me, now? I am not empowered by a decisive hand of cards that I can either gamble or play with. I have only one card, and that one card, alone, does not yield a game, it does not constitute a hand even if, according to you, my card is nothing less than the Queen of Hearts.

All I know is that I need the curves of your body, rounded and softened, along mine. My heart runs to you only to meet a void, or is it a hollow, a cavity in which emptiness becomes oppressive. As much as my lips crave to shape three little words intended to confirm what you already know, I will not allow them to liberate their prisoners. I will keep them my captives. I must not, and certainly not for the sake of cheap sentimentality, say, breathe or do anything that could possibly render me more vulnerable than I already am.

Will we go on keeping our correspondence a secret? The role of the wolf in sheep's clothing that I have taken on is, now, too burdensome to carry. Ah yes, Adrienne, I sense your shudder, as you might think: what if she comes out to Sophie? I can almost hear you beg, 'Please, please, Alex, *surtout pas*. Don't even think about it!'

I imagine her tears, if I did come 'clean', her disgust in the face of the double treason. The double irony: though it

was a male who tore at her soul, it is women she sees as wearing masks to better hide their deceitful nature. Women, she would say, make you love them. A woman can crawl inside another's heart, make it hers, to better split it open from the inside. The betrayal of a little girl by her mother refracted through each one of us. The sin of the mother, a sleeper inside each one of us. Waiting to awaken.

Oh, yes, I can clearly see the jagged turmoil in her grey eyes. A double confirmation that, all along, she had been right not to trust. Except that she had, in the end, hadn't she?

This dawning would be so much more insidious than all others imagined since the little girl had been betrayed by the mother. More damned than any other, bar that one, could ever have been. Because you owe her trust. You owe it to her because she gave it to you in the first place. Yet I suspect that, like the reed, Sophie's life experiences have shaped her into a very resilient woman. Her inner strength is, mostly, what had made her so attractive back in Tangiers. Such strength and determination in such a frail-looking woman. I know that had fascinated me at the time.

What I mean is, that once the devastation of the tempest becomes post-trauma followed by an eerie silence, her instinct for survival, and yours to make amends as a means to expunge your sin of lust, will push you towards a reconciliation. The foundations on which you rebuild will be made stronger by a genuine attempt to understand intimately the other's more secret self.

You see, Adrienne, at the moment, I cannot conceive of anything worse, in terms of intimate relations, than the silence in which both of you have walled yourselves. You,

C. C. Saint-Clair

under the pretext of sparing her; she, because of her fear of getting sucked into the crack you have laid open at her feet.

How complicated it is to attempt writing down these mind wanderings, in a vacuum, with only my pen and paper as witnesses. It is much like attempting the mental, painstaking peeling of a tiny, pink prawn, in space, where it cannot be pinned to a plate. Knife and fork are replaced by the power to concentrate on each of its circular scales, their individual

points of detachment and the careful nip of the blade that exposes the soft, pale underside.

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## **Paris, 4 April**

Alex,

Just a quick word tonight, my love. I'm tired and need refuge by your side. The evening's been particularly trying. Papa's health is worsening. In fact, he's reached that stage where his doctors, knowing that they can't help him, want him to go back home, back to Lyons, to make room for another patient. One that is not yet condemned to die.

At the two extremes of life, people have the same needs; warmth and the soothing presence of loved ones. I haven't told you much about my father or his illness, because the moments we spend together, on the phone or in writing, are too precious to be warped by a topic as sobering as encroaching death. Just like I don't want to waste these precious minutes talking about work-related strains either.

But tonight, I need to talk. I'm frightened by the speed of my father's decline and mother's unwillingness to admit *ce qui est maintenant inévitable*. The doctors are categorical. She's normally strong and reasonable, but that's because he's always been by her side. They came from the same little hamlet in Bourgogne.

They played together as children. He used to carry her books on the ten-kilometre walk to and from school. Can you imagine? I'm very lucky to have had them as parents; salt of the earth they are. Simple but with honest values. Warmth in the hearth and in the heart is what I grew up with. That's why Sophie is so fond of them. Her own father died in a work-related railroad accident when she was only little, and her mother, well, you know. I'm afraid of not being strong enough to offer my own elderly mother the emotional she will need, any moment now. After he's gone.

On another note, *chérie*, next weekend, finally, we're off to Honfleur, with Isa and Eli. We haven't seen them since the dinner party, though we've had one or two brief conversations on the phone. As I mentioned once before, I'm sure they noticed something, on the last night we were all together, your last night here. If Eli had, indeed, caught our silent exchange that night at Le Chicago, then she's known all along.

Anyway, they seemed to have decided to drop out of sight, until now. I assume their intention was to give us privacy while Sophie and I got on with the famous 'hocus-pocus-abracadabra, Alex-disappears-now' circus trick. And so, here we are, facing a 'fun' weekend as a happy foursome. Be that as it may, a foursome is bound to be easier to handle than a twosome, as Sophie and I are not handling the tête-à-tête routine well at all.

C. C. Saint-Clair

I'm going off on a totally new tangent now but all these repressed, pent-up sexual emotions are making me think about my own sexuality, something I really haven't thought about a great deal, not since my first crush on a school girl friend and certainly not much at all as an adult. But a while back, you said something about choices. About it being important for you to know that you actually chose your sexuality. Some women would rather think they didn't have a choice, you know.

When my mother heard on TV, or maybe she just happened to read it in a women's magazine, that some scientist in the States had isolated the 'Gay' gene, she almost cried. With relief. Can you imagine? I didn't have the heart to tell her that, though that man may well have found something in his Petri dish, his detractors had been quick to point out that there were many other factors involved in being Gay. Conditioning and free choice are still viable ways to travel the same path. The thing is, she was so happy because, to her, it proved that I hadn't deliberately chosen to be a sinner. I might still be held back in Purgatory but I wouldn't go straight to the fires of hell!

On the other hand, you were saying that you were so glad you had had a first and long lesbian relationship before your rape. You said you would have hated knowing that your sexual life-choice might have been forced upon you. That you had become a lesbian simply because you couldn't deal with a man's sex as a result of your rape. That your rape had made you a 'sexual cripple'. You are proud to have made your choice freely. How does your mother feel about the 'Gay' gene though?

With Sophie, again, it's different. She's convinced that it's her brother's incestuous torment that's made it

impossible for her to even think of sex with a man. One reason she doesn't even like going to the beach much is because of these skimpy bathing suits that men tend to wear over here. You know, by design, they leave very little to the imagination.

When she was about eighteen, she came across a flasher, I mean a guy who was masturbating behind a tree, in a park, not far from where children played and lovers kissed. Anyway, the way she tells the story, it's really very funny. You know what a great raconteur she is. So, she comes upon this man. From the movements of his arm, and the way he's partially hidden behind the thick trunk of a large *platane*, she knows exactly what he's doing. So, she drops her bag, she runs towards him, bowls him over and would probably have beaten him to a pulp if passers-by hadn't dragged her off him.

In those days, each public park had a guard of sorts, not a groundsman and not a policeman. Anyway, someone had gone to get this guard who, as it turned out, knew about this masturbator but hadn't been able to actually catch him in the act.

The guy was then hauled to his feet, bleeding nose and all, penis dangling, unable to zip up his fly because ... oh, I can't remember why not any more. As I said, you should really hear her tell that story. She's fine about it all now. I mean, she's refused to undergo therapy but she knows where she stands. She's seen a few psychologists because I thought it might do her some good, somewhere, but basically, she says she doesn't need to put that much time and effort into it.

She knows she's not good around half-naked men and masturbators, that she wouldn't make a good public pool attendant, but basically, she's very comfortable being a

C. C. Saint-Clair

lesbian. But the point I'm making is that the choice has been made for her by adverse circumstances.

How did I even start on that topic? And there I was telling you that this letter was going to be a brief one. I guess I need to spend more time 'with you' than even I thought I did, if you know what I mean. I'm really all over the place.

I'd better finish telling you about that weekend away and how I worry at the thought that one of them, most likely Eli, might isolate me if only for a few minutes. First, she'll interrogate me without mercy, then she'll confidently state what she understands of my situation. I won't admit to anything, but that won't make any difference to her. She'll end up giving me a smarting but totally wasted lecture. But, really, Alex, the reason I'm so uneasy about it all, is because I know I'll have to deny you, out loud, for the first time.

It's raining in Paris tonight. The sharp gusts of cold wind have returned. Over dinner, Sophie and I threw a few poisoned darts at each other. And you are on the other side of my world! Was it you who said France was a little country? Not so little to cross when you're at ground level.

I'm happy to know you're off to the mountains in a couple of days, with your aunt and her daughters. You were right to accept their invitation. The clean air you'll breathe at that altitude above the cloud cover will do you good. Think, too, of the beautiful women you might meet on the slopes; caramel tan, fluorescent ski suits, sun-kissed hair, seated as you'll be, at a mid-slope café, sipping pastis. So, no skiing for you this time around?

It does hurt, you know, imagining you there, free, and desirable. It hurts, too, to love you without ever risking to touch you. It hurts too, that I'm such a coward. But again, I



tell myself that real courage is to actually stand by Sophie, be it out of loyalty, be it because of the remains of the love that only a few months ago had us snug and safe. And I know that, sooner or later, you'll disappear, in love again, with some exciting woman, most likely younger than I am, who'll give you all I'm dreaming to give you. Or you'll disappear somewhere else. Even back to the antipodes where you come from. This, France, me: we're just so many stops along the way to wherever.

I found your letter, as I came home from yet another tiring day. A treat! Your words, free, sensual ... I can't describe the tenderness they make me feel.

So, congratulations. You've found the type of part-time work you think you might enjoy. Real Estate work, what a good idea.

You'll be out a lot checking out beautiful houses tucked away in the hinterlands, and apartments from which you could dive straight into the sea, and these will bring you into contact with a lot of people you wouldn't get to meet otherwise. I want to be your secretary, simply to be by your side, to protect you from in-house politics, to keep away all the frustrations that could spoil your day.

You'll be vulnerable in this environment, confronted by the brash and aggressive pace of the world of Real Estate, particularly in the south of France, where big money is often at stake. But before you're due to start, you'll have two weeks off with Marie-France, Joceline and Emmanuelle, off to the snow.

Months go by, *chérie*, but tonight in the metro, back from the hospital, I saw your face in the grimy glass pane. Your eyes were shining in the night. I miss you so much I could scream. I kiss you with all the tenderness I have in me.

Adrienne

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**10.35 p.m.** I was expecting it. I was waiting for it, eyes glued to the clock, counting the clicks made by the second hand and yet, I jumped, startled, as the first ring electrified the taut network of nerves that lay just under my skin. Reacting to the urgent vibrations of that second impatient ring, I felt my heart thud against my ribs.

You see, Adrienne, my heart, too, has integrated the fact that, lately, these night-time rings introduce conversations that seldom follow the intended script. Maybe because of the pent-up energy, the repressed frustration badly concealed, they ignite in me thoughts otherwise tamed and controlled by the pen. On the third shrill trill, it was anxiety and fear that moved me towards the phone. I picked up the receiver, slowly bringing it to my ear.

“*Allo?*” Not quite a silence and not quite a bad line static. “Adrienne ... I can hardly hear you.” I guessed your voice more than I heard it. An odd silence floated shapeless along the telephone cable. “Adrienne, talk to me! What’s wrong!” Hand gripped on the receiver, I willed it to yield the sensual, warm tones of your normal voice. Static on the line, its presence seemed to make your silence more audible, or simply more transparent. And I understood even before your hoarse whisper reached my inner ear, “Alex, I’m scared!” And these simple words told me that, once again, our latest scheme to meet in Paris was not going to eventuate, as stillborn as the previous ones.

“What are you afraid of? Adrienne?” My heart had already constricted itself to protect its vital core, in anticipation of a major blow.

“Alex, this time, it’s not about Sophie. She’s good, really. She’s left me ... she’s left me some breathing space.” Another silence. I could feel an impatience rise where my fear had just lain.

“Then, what is it about? Adrienne, talk to me! What’s happened?”

“I’m afraid ... I’m afraid of not ... of not being able to ... to cope.” You steadied your voice, imparting it with some semblance of resolve. “I’m afraid of the ... the emptiness. I already ... imagine it.” What emptiness?

“I’m afraid, it’ll be worse when you get back on that plane again. When you go back to Nice. When once again, you will leave me alone ... all alone to manage my life ... to manage ... everything all alone.” A silence. A muffled snuffle. “Don’t you know I’ll ... I’ll ... flinch every time ... when I look up and see her? Every time I catch her looking at me ... I’ll be feeling ... so ... bad ... so guilty ... when you’re gone again.” Your panic was flowing and spilling over the telephone line. Not only could I hear it, it was close enough to feel, but I did not try to stop you. “It’s the thought of more lies, Alex. You ... you don’t have to lie to her. Not in her face ... not when looking into her eyes, you don’t. You just lie by ... by...” By my silence. “I can’t stand the thought of all the ... other lies ... worse ones I know I’ll have to tell. Reasons for this and that I’ll have to invent ... Each one will be more ... difficult to mask. And my father ... Oh, Alex, I hate all of that! I can’t stand any of it. Not anymore!”

As I listened, eyelids tightly shut to better anticipate the contours of your other, as of yet, unformulated thoughts, I sensed there was still the hope of reassuring you.

Of reassuring you about Sophie, about yourself, if not about your father.

C. C. Saint-Clair

I hated never finding the right words to tell you on that topic. On the topic of your father's imminent death. Only dry banalities come to me each time I try to comfort you. The thing is that I am not practised at illness-related conversations. I do not know hospitals. I do not know their smells. I

do not know the smell of approaching death. I do not know how death looks on the face of a loved one. I have never lost anyone. No one I know has ever been seriously ill. I thought I could talk you out of the spiral of fear that seemed to have lifted you off the ground. I felt confident. I relaxed the grip I had on the receiver.

And then, your voice now firm, "Alex, don't come!"

I was no longer braced against the implication of these words. It was my turn to flounder in a vortex of unfocused thoughts. "What do you mean ... 'don't come'?" I inhaled deeply. "Of course, I'm coming. I'll soon be with you, in Paris, as planned." Then I added, blindly refusing to acknowledge what I had understood, "Will you be at the airport to meet me, or shall I take a cab? To Monceau ... or to where exactly?" Was it the echo of my words that bounced back into my ear, or was it simply the echo of your silence? Maybe it was the holographic shape of your weakness that muffled your voice and appeared behind my closed eyelids.

"*Non, Alex, ne viens pas!* I don't want you to come ...Not any more. *Ne viens plus.*" You were no longer pleading. You were no longer hesitant. The cold, clipped tone of Ms d'Anville, the lawyer, finished me off.

I felt empty, chloroformed. I felt sick. I felt nauseated by the depth of a cowardice I had only vaguely sensed, pending more evidence. Now you wanted to know how I was

feeling. You wanted to help me deal with this. No, Adrienne, I will not allow you to be both the giver of the blow and the healer.

“Adrienne,” I said, teeth clenched against the slow rage I could already feel congesting my throbbing temples, “what I am thinking at the moment is no longer any of your concern.”

Your sigh rose towards me, but I refused to grab it. I refused to give it meaning. I refused to latch on to it. The compliance with which I had lived and breathed our sterile passion had been entirely based on the premise that one day we would meet again. In a simplistic way I had assumed, at the time, back in January, that a reunion, albeit a brief one, would be imminent. I had assumed that, face to face, together, we would know how to best make things work out. I had assumed that we would be able to reach an agreement and honour it bilaterally.

And so, everything that I had thus far swallowed, endured, made do with in the name of patience and understanding, surfaced as bile and bitter resentment. Odd double silence on the line. But again, I took it upon myself to not unleash that resentment. Self-control. Remoteness must always prevail. I have already explained that strange reflex of mine. And it is at times like that that it activates itself. Useful, isn't it? Everything else that is on the outside, that is me, my churning guts and my fear of abandonment, *we* remain raw, bruised and battered. But the point is that this pain must not show.

“I understand your ... apprehension but ... Adrienne, you have to understand that ... by telling me not to come, you are tolling the knell. The death of our ... relationship.” I caught myself with my free hand gesticulating the quotation marks

C. C. Saint-Clair

around the word relationship, a silent bitter admission that a relationship was, of course, the one thing you and I have never had. “*Ce soir* ... it is our story that is dying here, no matter how I choose to interpret your justifications.” “Alex, *je t’en prie* ... Please, try to understand!” Oh please! Spare me!

You had more to add. “What would we do ... What would I do if instead of stopping the fire, your four days in Paris ... with me ... made it worse, you know what I mean? What if it ... fanned the flames?”

My throat tightened further as I listened to your words. You stopped there but I sensed you needed to say more. You could have. I was too busy holding in deep breaths. Too busy making myself exhale slowly, quietly. Too busy smothering the sarcasm that would be impossible to stem once past my tight lips.

Your voice had resumed with a newly-found penetrating eloquence. Your brain must have stopped seizing. My ear, having gained an insight of its own, disconnected itself from the receiver. And I let the projected images of the total osmosis we had so carefully, so crazily planned only a few days ago, shrivel up further. The picture of a withered rose, lifeless on a nasty yellow plastic tablecloth, its dried heart exposed, stiff petals curling inwards superimposed itself on the vague voice that still filtered through the receiver. And yet, until tonight, until ten thirty-five p.m., our words, our thoughts, our desires had followed the same trail, hand in hand. Or close enough.

Ten forty-two, said the clock. Why was it still ticking? I brought the receiver back to my ear. “Alex ... Alex ... you’re still there?”

“Of course, I’m here. Where else would I be?”

“Alex, *écoute!* Listen to me!”

Haven’t I listened enough already? Have a heart.

“Everything I read in your letters, about your feelings for me, they’re all ... echoes of my feelings for you. Don’t you see?” Your intonations seemed tainted with pain as you added, “The images, the cravings, the mad emotions you craft so cleverly with your words ...” My ear had resumed its position, tightly pressed against the plastic earphone. “I feel them ... for you. Alex? You understand?”

Oh yes. I understand. But we’re past that kind of understanding, Adrienne. Understanding has become superfluous. As helpful as a toothpick for kindling wood.

“Yes, Adrienne, yes ... that may well be so, but tonight, for the first time since Le Chicago and Le Prince Noir restaurant, we are no longer synchronised,” I said, aware of the level of impatience creeping into my voice, aware that this conversation had already peaked a while ago.

A long sigh trailed behind your words as you whispered, “If only it were as simple as that!”

With something akin to dismay, I realised you were regrouping your thoughts, that you were about to open another window in your argument. You see, Adrienne, by then we had reached the last instalment, the last sequence of our scenario. The time had come for the heavy curtain to drop down on us and suffocate us. There would be no curtain call.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Our script had been terrible and though we had battled on valiantly, our performance had been even worse. Our characters were weak. Our acting had been tepid. We had lacked determination. A quick closure would have been the only progression out of the corner in which you had painted us. And yet you mistook the cue. You thought you needed to say more.

“*Mais enfin*, why don’t you understand, Alex?” It was your turn to sound exasperated. “Don’t dismiss me so quickly. There’s ... there’s more to it than ... I haven’t explained it well. What I mean is ... “Your voice had become that of a frightened little girl who is afraid of letting go. Tears welled as I listened, unable to hang up. “What if you ... disappear after the few days spent with me? Do you understand? No ... you don’t.” You sighed again. I heard the tightness in your voice.

“What if ... Alex ... what if I found an ... indifference in your eyes ... afterwards?” A pause. “I make myself sick over this fear, the same fear I’ve had all along. Alex ... how can I say it so you understand? I’m afraid that the ... reality of me will ... disappoint you.” Silence. Thoughts whirled around my head. You had sounded as if you had just offloaded something heavy or had finally mustered the courage to lance a metaphoric boil. “No ... more to the point is, what will I do ... when ... when I notice a smile of relief as you wave one last goodbye?” you asked again.

I pressed the tears from my eyes and brushed a hand under my nose. I did not want you to hear these tears. I made myself breathe again.

“Adrienne ... Adrienne, listen! What you are afraid of could just as easily have happened to me ... don’t you see? You, too, might have ended up with your own expectations unmet. You, too, might have been disappointed. And



relieved that it was finally all over. That is how it was supposed to have happened, isn't it?"

Somehow, unintentionally, my verb tense reflected that all was already in the past, no longer an option to either choose or dismiss. In a muddled way, I was being cruel to you who had cast the die. I was not allowing you any space in which to manoeuvre. The present and the future had just been bounced into a past time warp.

At the time of this conversation, I would have liked to ask you if you ever had truly wished for anything else but a closure. I do not think so. Ah, but not a closure based on my disappointment ... of ... of you ... of your performance? Not one simply based on my walking away. Is that the rub? Would you have preferred a strong closure based on a heroic strength of character? Had you fancied that a negation of a full-blown love or unquenchable lust would make you forever a martyr to the virgin of Fidelity? Could that be so you could beat your chest and clamour, 'I've been strong for you, Sophie! For you. For us, my love!' Am I being unfair?

And still you over-explained. "Sophie won't make it if I get any closer to you, emotionally closer. She's giving me more room to move, yes. We've only seen each other once this week ... for dinner. She doesn't call to say goodnight as she always does ... did ... when we're not spending the night together. She says I need the rest but I know she's giving me more space. But you see ... I know her. If she feels she has to move even further away ... she'll ... rush things to ... to pre-empt. Her judgement won't be good and she'll—"

"Adrienne, please! Don't labour the point anymore, please!" I shouted into the receiver, by now feeling the

C. C. Saint-Clair

weight of your endless justifications as accumulating dead weight on my shoulders.

And the urge to throw a barb at you surfaced. A nasty urge, a nasty barb about the particular way in which, for the last three months, you had looked after Sophie's best interest. The barb hit the target. I could tell I had aimed it well. You did not even try to shake it off. You let it dangle from the point of impact, letting your wound bleed silently.

For the first time since you had taken up the habit of nocturnal phone calls, eyes wide open, I followed your voice. I used to like keeping them closed, to draw you close into a cocoon in which vanished both exterior reality and the sharp white beam of light that hung high above the phone in my father's living room.

"Why are you so intent on listing the many reasons, real or imagined, for which you have aborted our plans?" And I did not resist the urge to add, "Adrienne, the time has really come to dismantle our invisible but messy entanglement. I mean, what with Eli breathing down your neck and all, it's all getting too risky for you, isn't it?" And then, slyly, I asked, half bee, half scorpion, "Why are you persisting with this conversation? All that needed to be said has been said."

*"Parce que je t'aime. Because ... because I love you."*

I drew in a breath. In slow motion I moved the receiver away from my ear and gently, ever so quietly, my hand brought it down to rest in its cradle.

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The sail of a solitary windsurfer, like a butterfly wing torn off by a cruel child, immobile in the distance, is carelessly planted into the grey skin of the angry sea. The wind pulverises the sand over the esplanade. Sharp grains, hard and stinging. The passers-by brace themselves against

the gigantic, erratic breath that pushes against their backs. And they pass by, clutching the collar of their tops and shirts against their throat.

Spindly, anaemic palm trees seem maddened as they shake and wave their once dusty fronds to a sky in tones of pewter and silver that remains impervious to their agitation. Storefront signs strain to break loose, and boats tethered to the jetty are eager to snap their mooring. The wind trills and shrieks. The only fixed point of the landscape is the watercolour sun that sits smugly poised low on the watery line of the horizon.

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### **Paris, 11 April**

Alex,

Our little parc Monceau already smells of spring. The little ducks you found so pretty are frolicking in the pond, ducking [no pun intended] under the large lily pads. I've been observing them from our park bench, and I lost track of time. Yes, the three Muses still dominate the pond. The mossy folds of marble that had fascinated you are still clinging to their feet, to the hem of their robes.

In exactly twenty-one nights, you'll be right here, against my shoulder. I know ... if I hadn't been so childish ... you'd already be here by my side. I know it's my fault. I know there's a price to pay for being a fence-sitter. I know the Humpty-Dumpty story. OK, he was sitting on a wall.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Same painfully messy result. But that's all over now. The important thing is that you're coming, soon, relatively soon, as soon as you can manage it. We'll be watching the ducks of this pond together, side by side. We'll share a *gauffre au chocolat* and maybe one with icing sugar, too, still warm from the nearby kiosk.

*Ma chérie*, are you as happy as I am? Hard to tell now. You seemed to take the news of my latest decision matter-of-factly. I didn't hear you chuckle with glee. I didn't even hear a sigh of relief. I know you're both weary and wary by now. I know, too, that you're expecting some sort of deliverance from your visit.

Yes, you need the freedom to breathe. And your mind needs to be as free as your breath. I share these needs, but I think I've just about stopped breathing altogether. I must be subsisting on the barest minimum of oxygen necessary to a fully-formed middle-aged female. I smile as I remember how adamant you were a good while ago, as you tried to convince me that I was not middle-aged. My argument still stands. I have no reason to think I'm likely to live to be a hundred years old. Heaven forbid! So my age, at the moment, puts me somewhat past the 'middle' of the life expectancy I have set for myself.

And my own feelings are mixed: happy and full of dreams like when I was a child before Christmas and I used to sneak around sticking a finger against the wrapped presents my parents had hidden away. But you see, I never had the courage to open one to look inside. I'm not sure whether I didn't because my parents had trusted me not to, or because I knew, even then, that an early peek would've spoiled my surprise.

I'm also in a state of paralysing fear. I feel like one of the rabbits I occasionally catch in the blinding glare of my headlights while driving back from my parents' place in the country.

I did try to break free, mostly to save myself and, somehow, to protect Sophie. You might suggest that, maybe, I could also have thought about you, about your feelings. Alex, the truth is that I'm constantly thinking about you. Which is why I can't breathe. The weekend in Honfleur turned out to be fine, weather-wise, which is never to be taken for granted in Normandy, but the dreaded confrontation did take place, to some extent. Let me tell you about it.

There we were, all four of us, sipping our Courvoisier, lost in our thoughts, looking at the flames in the fire the owner had lit for us, when I heard Eli ask, 'Has either one of you heard anything from Alex, lately? I mean, it's strange she hasn't called or written since her 'thanks for your warm welcome' card.'

Silence. I could hear only my heartbeat and the logs crackling. Then, next to me, I sensed Sophie shift in her armchair.

'If they had,' Isa finally answered for us, 'they'd have mentioned it. I'm sure Alex is very busy with her family and whatever it was she expected she would find in the south. I'm sure she's not giving us much thought ... well, for now at least.'

I held my breath, watching her sip from her balloon glass, 'She'll get in touch with us when she's ready to.'

C. C. Saint-Clair

Eli answered, 'I don't see it that way at all. Really, if she's sightseeing all over the south of France, then she certainly would have time to send us a couple of postcards. What about it, Addy? Don't you think so?' Cornered.

'Well, it depends. I mean—' I tried to explain, but Eli was already revving and she cut me off. 'You mean she might be too embarrassed about ... Well, I don't know, but there's got to be a reason for the fact that she seems to have crossed us off her address book.'

And Sophie asked, 'And what could Alex possibly be embarrassed about, Eli?'

With my heart in my mouth, I sat there, hoping Eli would find a way to stop what she had begun.

'Ah well, that's a question you should really ask—'

'Elisabette! *Chérie* ...' Isa had come to my rescue. Or maybe she just wanted to spare Sophie. '... we should really go up to our room. Look, it's almost 1.00 a.m., already. And tomorrow morning, you promised you'd help me find the lake the innkeeper was telling us about. So, it'll be an early start, 'cause once there I'd like to get some fishing done. Come.'

Before Eli had the chance to add anything, Isa was already pulling her off her seat.

'Yeah, right. Sleep well, you two ... I guess we'll catch up with you around lunch, then,' she said, blowing a kiss but clearly only in Sophie's direction.

Now, Alex, can you believe that after we were finally tucked inside a large and comfortable farm-style bed, it's I who re-started that conversation? Well, I couldn't. I couldn't believe it was actually my voice, me, asking Sophie what she thought Eli had meant. It served me right when she replied that, of the four of us, I'd be the one most likely to know that

answer. Now, I could've dropped the conversation then and there, right? But I didn't. I asked why she had said that.

She replied, 'Because you're the one who's been writing to her and who is on the phone, talking to whom, I wonder, after ten p.m.'

Feeling as foolish as a schoolgirl caught lying, I was terribly thankful for the darkness that had flooded the bedroom as soon as we'd turned off the light. Couldn't even see my hand in front of my face. Pitch black. And I imagined her dialling my number for whatever reason and yes, she'd have found my line engaged, still, and again. And yet the next day, day after day, when she and I were together, I never volunteered any information on any of these 'mystery' night time phone conversations. She never asked, I never volunteered.

As I lay stiff as a board under the eiderdown, in that very dark room, besides wondering how I'd ever find the bathroom without having to turn on the light, I understood the repeated mistakes I'd made. And I grasped how far back Sophie must have seen through the amateurish camouflage that I had thought so well constructed.

You see, the thing is that I'd have told her about any of these conversations if I'd been on the phone with anyone, be they friends, relatives, colleagues, partners or staff. I would've told her about any of them, even if they had been simple nuisance calls. That's the kind of relationship we had.

And then, Alex, to make her point even clearer, from the far side of that large bed, she had added with that hoarse, bruised voice of hers that still gets to me, even after all these

C. C. Saint-Clair

years, ‘Adrienne, *ne t’ fous pas d’ moi!* Don’t fuck me around. I don’t think I deserve that.’

That conversation ended there in an awkward silence. I feel sick in my stomach but for what it’s worth, I now know that she knows about you. I mean about my ongoing contact with you. Is it why I feel sick? Or is it because I’ve been found out? The other thing that throws me is how calm she sounds each time she delivers one of her truths. At times I really believe she sees through me. Ah, but she does. I’m so transparent!

Later, as I lay unable to fall asleep, I remembered the day I’d found your first letter in my mailbox. Sophie was with me. As usual, she had glanced over my shoulder to see if there was anything interesting in the pile. Some of our friends would as easily write to her at my address as at hers.

I thought I’d been quick enough, dextrous enough, to keep the envelope that I just knew was yours, covered by another. But I remembered how, at the time, she had glanced at me ... in a strange way. And I had tripped, as I often seem to do lately, on the grate as we got inside the lift.

Anyway, on another front, we’re losing papa. We know he’s trying to hold on until Easter, for my mother’s sake. So that she won’t be crying on that special day. You see, both of them are very religious. In a way, I think that might help her when the time comes to say goodbye to him. He’s always been a good man ... so ... you know ... he’ll probably shoot straight past Saint Peter, through the Pearly Gates, and claim his spot in Paradise. I do dread the moment, though.

You, you’re off skiing. As agreed, over the phone, I won’t try and get in touch with you. I’ll practise controlling my heartbeats, as I walk up to the mailbox, knowing there



shouldn't be anything from you there. You warned me; you won't be writing from Les Orres. But ... maybe ... just maybe, you might.

You did say you'd call, though, as soon as you were back at sea level. By then, it'd only be a few short days before you hop on the plane to come here, to me. So maybe I can already practise not writing to you and save everything for you ... face-to-face ... for when we're sitting on this bench.

You'll come back to me, still tanned, healthy and fit, while I've never felt so grey, so tired, so empty. You might actually walk right past me and not see me. I'm counting on your presence by my side to bring oxygen back to my lungs.

Adrienne

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## *Les Orres, Hautes Alpes*

**F**ramed by the half-open windows, a life-size gnome was looking at me. His little red bonnet sat comfortably, pulled down as far as it would go, wedged between two cauliflower ears. His round tummy hung slightly over the wide leather belt that was holding up a pair of frayed and patched but bright green trousers. I raised my still-foggy head off the lavender-scented pillow, puzzled by this most unexpected vision, only to bring into focus another six little dwarves, plaster pick and shovel at the ready on their shoulders. Frozen in time, they

C. C. Saint-Clair

seemed about to whistle off to work, or were they, in fact, on their way back home towards the warmth of Snow White's hearth? Will she have already eaten the poison apple when they find her?

I pushed aside the warmth of the hand-quilted eiderdown, now eager to bounce out of this strange but comfortable bed, eager to discover what the night had hidden from view as Marie-France had driven us up here, myself and her two daughters in tow. This hamlet, behind Les Orres ski resort, already lay under the high moon, tucked into the darkness of the mountain face.

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Who would have thought it possible that once again, you have readied yourself for my visit? You now expect to find me, in a few days' time, seated on our little green bench facing the pond in the parc Monceau. But I will not be there. You will not see me as you wait impatiently for the traffic to let you through. As you pass the wide wrought iron gates of the park, your heart wild in your chest, your eyes will zero in on our bench.

You will find it empty. Or maybe there will be a mother sitting there, keeping an eye on her children as they lean closer to the little ducks. You will look again, disbelieving. Your eyebrows will knot themselves, perplexed, afraid, uncomprehending like every other molecule in your body. So sure were you that I would be there.

Dutifully waiting for you, after all this time. After all the false starts, false hopes, and cancellations. Small deaths each time. Tiny rebirth at the very end. Just when I thought all life had departed.

You will cast your eyes around, refusing to yield to the taste of incipient panic that would be rising to your throat. You know that if you did, your judgement would no longer be clear, no longer rational. You know that impulsive decisions do not work well for you. You need to stay calm and think rationally.

You will cast your eyes a little further away towards the kiosk. There they will find me. I will be there for your eyes to find me. I will be there to see the drop of your shoulders as you release the breath that you have kept locked under your ribcage. I will see you release the constricted muscles of your shoulders. As you surrender to the reality, to the fact that I have made it to our rendezvous. That I am here, only a few metres away from the pond, from our bench, from you. You will convince yourself that, for this once, for now, all is well. That we have four days in which to get reacquainted, to better separate.

So, your eyes will find me waiting by the waffle kiosk, leaning against it for support. Waiting for you with the same doubts, the same emotion, the same relief, the same release of tension accumulated in my own hunched shoulders, as I would have been waiting and doubting ... and dreading but not yet succumbing to my own panic. And there you would be, only a few metres away from me. Smiling, quickening your step.

I will have positioned myself in that way so as to give me maximum time to settle my heart as I would see you on the other side of the avenue, as you came down from your office. And to have the earliest confirmation possible that you were indeed on your way to our rendezvous. I will be

C. C. Saint-Clair

standing by the kiosk to spare my heart by shortening an otherwise blind wait by a good five minutes. You see, I will be able to see you further away if I wait standing up and back from our green bench.

And so, probably as one contemplates an apparition, I will watch you, your impatience as you wait for a break in the traffic, before crossing, before you pass through the heavy, wrought iron gate that opens onto the park. Ah, this first contact in the park frightens me.

In the meantime, I want to gallop, every day as I did today, through this fairy-tale mountainside. It makes me yearn for the imagined comfort of knowing that, when I finally find my way home, nose and cheeks red from the cold air, exhausted from the effort of walking through freshly-fallen snow, I would find warmth inside my lover's arms and a shared tumbler of *vin chaud*, or *migeot* as my grandmother used to call it.

Happy and contented, tomorrow we would walk here, or on another trail, hand in hand, away from the ant-like colony of skiers, black and tiny in the distance, as they rush down the slope while others cling to their wire on an uphill slide. For a short while, we would be trapped by the shadows of tall pines thrown across our path by the setting sun.

You and I, Adrienne, we would play, we would love, we would be made giddy by our cocktail of love, crisp mountain air, high altitude, the moist angel-kiss caresses of snowflakes, the silence of the mountain. Yes, here, together, we could again learn how to breathe, how to shed the clinging greyness of the past months, how to tell whether we were in lust or in love. Never mind. I will shed my grey skin and come to you rejuvenated. Ready to share a new radiance, a new equilibrium with you. Yes. I will bring you oxygen and sunshine. If only for a few days.

A little shiver reminds me I had better get going on that snowy trail, and weave my way down, back to the village, back to Marie-France and the girls who will be waiting for me come sunset.

By the time I get there, the fire will be roaring in the hearth. The smell of burning logs will already be permeating the living room. Little Emmanuelle will probably be warm and limp on the sofa, fine blonde hair glowing shiny copper as the flames cavort upward to better lick the dark and secret recess below the mantelpiece. My aunt will be reading. Joceline will be writing postcards to her multitudinous horde of friends and colleagues as per her pre-dinner habit since we have arrived here.

This time around, on this trip, though a skier myself, I really have no gumption to rush to line up at the ski lift, or at the gondolas. Anyway, I was saying that I still feel no urge whatever to hurtle downhill, ducking snow boarders and other assorted, out of control, madmen. And men they certainly are. So, while the two of them do just that, I do what I have never done before. I feel the snow. I commune with nature. There! I've said it. Sounds real corny, though. Like so formal. So spiritual-like.

Marie-France and her daughters do ski. Their day begins with a three-hour lesson somewhere on the green slopes that offer an intermediate level of challenge; that goes for my aunt and Joceline. The little one goes to her own ski class that doubles up as kindergarten till 4.00 p.m. Emmanuelle just loves it. She brings back countless anecdotes about all the new friends she has made during the day, be they instructors or little mates her own age. Some of these little guys, apparently, get up to some pretty funny capers. But I am not big on children. I suspect that a close contact with this little girl is good for me.

C. C. Saint-Clair

It reminds me that children are truly little people in their own right, with already formed, full-on personalities, and a life of their own. I cannot remember that far back, so tell me, did we, as children, have a life of our own too, or is that the privilege of modern children?

From what I gather from Emmanuelle's bubbling accounts, their interaction with each other is driven by the same essential needs that grown-ups have. First comes the need to be recognised as an individual, then, to be appreciated for something or other. And then kicks in the need for that special friend, like the one with whom Emmanuelle shares her afternoon *goûter*, the same one who, yesterday, went home with our little one's jacket on her back while Emmanuelle came home with her friend's. Sylvie is that other little girl's name. There are times when listening to my little cousin's stories makes me a little sad. Or does it make me sad in little ways?

The few moments I remember of my own early childhood around other children are all made of shy self-conscious moments of ... unease. I would have hated being made to socialise all day with other children. Socialising has always been an effort in a way that one-on-one friendships have never been. I just know I would have been the most miserable child there, the introverted little thing with a dark frown on her face and a defiant tilt to the chin as if to defy anyone to make her enjoy herself. Odd expression that, of enjoying oneself. Is it truly myself that I did not enjoy? I had always assumed, already then, that I was simply socially indifferent. A little recluse who preferred her own company to the complications that never failed to arise when others got involved. But did I really?

Too late to get an objective answer to that question. Yes, well, I know I would have been utterly miserable in a

claustrophobic sort of way. The same way I still feel when I know that for whatever reason it is expected of me that I should socialise; get to meet new people at a party or workplace and approach others, perhaps more familiar ones with whom I should consolidate. Ah, yes, networking. I do not like networking. But, back in those days, I would not have cried, that I know. I would have tried to hang around the edges, trying to remain inconspicuous, dreading to be called in to join, hating to be left on my own. Anyway, I am quite enjoying my evenings at the chalet with Marie-France and the girls.

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I remember you telling me that too often I tended to analyse, to intellectualise everything. That might be so, but as things stand now, I do not feel any further sexual pulsation towards you, not since that nightmarish phone conversation. I remember the snail trails left on my cheeks by silent tears. I remember listening to you, eyes wide-open though sightless. I remember the other justifications you had sent my way in the form of a short note: 'Ever since Provins, I've not been able to go through my days without relating everything, big or small, however tiny, back to you. Until then, I'd been happy with Sophie, definitely content. So, yes, besides protecting myself from that irrational pull towards you, and from an eventual hurtful or disappointing encounter, I do want to preserve something of what still remains between Sophie and me. If it's not too late. Only time will tell.'

I probably only think I love you. I can add that I am, most assuredly, in love with you. Do you agree with a differentiation in terminology, or is it intellectualising too much? In any case, because I am in love, I am open, not only

C. C. Saint-Clair

to introspection, but to the giddy world of roller-coaster emotions, emotions that make me feel raw, vulnerable, but also alive. I feel more like a part of the real world. I have been forced out of my natural rhythm. Out of my natural remoteness.

Do I say that because I still remember the tenderness of your lips, half open to desire, half-closed out of timidity, and the urgency your restrained desire awoke in me? I remember too, having shared with you what, at the time, had been a heartfelt wish; that of walking with you in the fields and forests of Burgundy, the birthplace you love so much. You fascinate me, in a way, because you understand the meaning of 'roots', you feel strongly tied to the soil on which you learned to walk, on which you learned the first lesson of love from your parents.

I do not have any roots, at least, none of the strong and tangible type. So, I wished to know more of yours. I wished to hear twigs crackle underfoot, to have you teach my ears to read sounds, deep inside the thick shrubs. I wished for you to teach me the patience necessary to glimpse a flock of quails tucked inside the grooves cut by the plough, or the games squirrels play when they think they are alone.

What I wanted was to learn about you as your heart beat along with mine, as we strolled and played through your countryside. Wanting to discover all this through you, because I know it is there, is what has made me fall in love with you, I who had managed to walk through life, in a happy-go-lucky sort of way, though deaf and blind.

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Once again, I have found the large dune-like mound of iridescent snow that I discovered yesterday, the one that



should carry our initials to the summit and beyond. Only birds flying overhead would have been able to decipher the message of interlocking curves of the double A's of our initials entwined in the snow. I like this spot and the narrow, winding trail that leads to it. Every night it erases my footsteps, just so I can rediscover it, uncharted, under a sparkling white layer of snow.

During the long walks of these first few days, I have come to agree that since the evening spent at Le Chicago, you and I have been dreaming desires that tear us up. Exhausted, we fall asleep in each other's arms, in beds separated by nine hundred kilometres of inaccessible land.

And then you tell me, 'You know, Alex, a story like ours is indeed worth its weight in tears.' Bittersweet humour rules.

For now, Adrienne, I wish I could send you the photo I took, just now, while stopping for a break in a nook blanketed by thick snow. I took it for you, using my pole to press down the shutter. I would so like for that image to travel to you on the wings of a local golden eagle! Still, if it turns out more or less as intended, I might be able to show it to you someday.



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Far, far away, the stars blink as they drown in a sea of China ink. A solitary figure, much taller than my little army of garden gnomes, I wait, turned towards them. Why won't these little guys tell me what I am truly waiting for? Ostensibly, I am only waiting for Marie-France and the two girls to step out, ready for a short walk back to the village. Though my muscles still ache from the day treks, Fondue Night with the three of them will do me good.

Marie-France's oldest daughter, Joceline, is quite lovely really. As with many young women of her generation, she is considerably taller than her mother. Quite tall and thin. She wears her hair in the fashionable short shag of the moment,

the type that feathers and brushes against her forehead and delineates her cheekbones. She has her father's brown eyes, Marie-France's first husband, the one who used to beat her up with clockwork regularity every Friday night; begging for forgiveness with flowers and tears every Saturday morning until she left him, her daughter who was only six at the time tucked under one arm, a couple of suitcases under the other, to find refuge at my grandparents'.

Anyway, Joceline is already twenty-three and quite a liberated twenty-three at that. She has taken time off work from the advertising firm where she is employed as an assistant to someone-or-other, and she is taking time off, too, from

Sébastien, her boyfriend. They live together and, though she is obviously very fond of him, she still cannot fully accept his arrested maturity. It is apparently something quite beyond boyishness. He seems to suffer from a strange mix of utter slovenliness when left to his own devices for more than eight consecutive hours. And that, according to Joceline, in turn, is compounded by already advanced signs of the 'Peter Pan' complex. Sébastien, though he does not look it, is somewhat older than Joceline; he is already in his thirties.

Of course, I have met him a few times, a handsome man all right, but I was not, then, in a position to pass judgement on his bathroom habits or on his need to surround himself, every weekend, with old university buddies. And he did not stay long enough to show the first signs of basketball bouncing withdrawal, though he had already turned his cap backwards by the time he said his goodbyes.

Joceline is fun to have around and is clearly enjoying her break away from it all, including Sébastien and work.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Marie-France dotes on her and so does Emmanuelle who simply adores her.

Joceline is obviously keen on getting to know me better. Sweet, of course, but something tells me that her interest in me lies partly in figuring out the type of person I am attracted to. And I do not think she wants to know about hair colour and height or about a penchant for such-and-such Zodiac sign, or even to which enneagram type I relate to more easily, knowing that I am a Type 6 personality.

Anyway, call me paranoid, but I am sure Joceline is trying to get me to open up enough to admit I am a lesbian. Mind you, I am sure Marie-France must have her own thoughts on the matter, but she has never asked. Now of course, my father knows.

He knows because Mayanne told him all about it, at the time of the business with Tashinka's husband. She was, it seems, at her wits' end with worry, thinking that I was henceforth doomed to fall in love with married women and have their husbands chase me across town.

She was already imagining them hounding me, a lust for vengeance sharp on their cuckolds' horns, outing me wherever I would be working and so on. My father, not one to get emotional, had very stoically replied that as I was no longer a minor, I should be considered free to do with my body as I wished.

His view on the matter was that my deviation was, indeed, unfortunate; that when he would come across these lesbians covered in tattoos and astride motorcycles, he would remember his only daughter had chosen to become one of them. But he had added dryly, I would always remain his daughter, his only child. The one with the gigantic flaw.

The one you can neither return nor exchange. The one you have the option to ignore.

In those days, the Sydney Mardi Gras and the Dykes on Bikes contingents were not even beamed across to Europe. They are now: the closing, good fun segment of France's national news hour.

I resented his false acceptance. And I resented his detachment from the situation. Particularly easy for him to close his eyes on the matter since the other choice I had made, besides that of my sexuality, had been to exercise my sexual 'deviation' thousands of miles away from him. I guess I would have liked him to be more supportive of Mayanne's genuine fear and more helpful by defusing it. Anyway, I figure that if the topic unsettles him so, he would not have talked to my aunt about it, and young Joceline is not going to hear it from me either. Not tonight. Not on this trip.

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The first time I discovered that dune of zircons, I touched it, shyly. At first, it was hard against my naked palm. Its coldness crept upwards, along my wrist, until all feeling had gone. I patted its flank. A fan-shaped trail of frosty snow followed the caress, and settled in between my fingers. And I stood there blinded by the sparkle, by these gems, left there, just for me.

As an edelweiss pushes its delicate crown of white petals through the crusty snow, frail but at the same time sturdy, a tiny ray of wellbeing warms me up from within. The late afternoon sun is gentle on my sunburnt face. A soft breeze nurses the furry, dark green *mélèze* branches to help

C. C. Saint-Clair

them shed the excess snow weighing on their tips. Silent sprays of crystals glisten as they plummet downwards, silver shooting stars, quick, magical and ephemeral.

As a make-believe tracker, I watch out for signs of nocturnal drama, imprints left behind by the little animals that come to life as we suspend ours, comfortably snug in our beds. Four little indentations per paw: a squirrel danced at the base of this tree. Four round, larger pads imprinted deeper in the snow: a fox came this way looking for food. I deviate from my path, not wishing to come across the flurry of tracks caught in a demonic death dance, sprinkled with carmine droplets, that undoubtedly lie ahead.

Soon now, as the temperature drops quickly towards night, the ice will once again tighten its hold on the trail and keep it encased inside a slippery, glistening crust, until the morning sun begins its warm ascent across the spotlessly blue sky, high above the clouds. It is time to head back towards the early flickering lights of the village.

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I lose myself inside the tendrils of violent orange, swirls of red, and tongues of translucent blue that warm my feet; the tranquil healing power of fire, tamed inside a fireplace, as it skims over and inside the black, glowing logs. From the comfortable depth of the grandfather chair where I found refuge to soothe the aching muscles of my legs, I take pleasure in unfolding the memories of the day against the red glow of the hearth.

This morning, I discovered that walking with snowshoes is not as easy as it looks when done by Eskimo trekkers on

an Imax screen. I played a little game of trust with the snow but it was not a fair game. I tried to convince the crust of snow, lying just under the fluffy layer that had fallen during the night, that, in fact, I was not as heavy as I seemed.

For a few seconds, it did what it could, it seemed to believe me. It gave me the benefit of the doubt. It supported my weight, heavy on its back. But then it gave up. With a muffled cracking sound, it caved in under the snowshoes. It lowered me, gently but firmly, inside two, knee-deep, oblong holes, leaving me to extricate one shoe at a time, lifting each knee high up, able to plant it down again, but only a few centimetres in front of the other.

After some time and relatively little progress made, every muscle along my legs and back, taut and burning, screamed inside its sheath. My breath caught inside my ribcage, laboured upwards along a parched throat. I rubbed a fistful of snow over my face, burnished by the high sun always hovering above, during these long, solitary walks along the mountainside. I closed my eyes, unaware then that, at that precise moment, I had stopped thinking about you.

But there was still a connection to you. You have asked me to tell you more about my early childhood memories, and last night this is exactly what Marie-France and I ended up talking about while Joceline prepared dinner for us, and while Emmanuelle lay curled up on the sofa, exhausted from her day in the snow. She has her own jacket back and what makes her happiest this evening is the feel of her little friend's borrowed ear muffs against her cheek.

You see, these days away from the city are providing us with the first opportunity to actually talk to each other, in a way that we cannot do across the table where the family is

C. C. Saint-Clair

united for a cheerful dinner or a celebration of sorts. Or when my father is around. Of course, Marie-France and I could have met somewhere for a coffee and a little privacy, but we clearly had not felt moved to do so any earlier. She, too, has asked about my first contact with my stepfather and Africa. She would have been in her early twenties when Mayanne came back to fetch me.

I am afraid you might be left unsatisfied with my recollection, as I believe my memories of that momentous occasion would be somewhat inaccurate, the tangled composite of a seven-year-old's hopes, fears and kaleidoscopic impressions. I just do not know how it went. But I will tell you what I do remember.

So, at first Mayanne took me to her hotel, right. I have no idea what happened that first night away from my grandparents. I do not know if I cried. I do not know if I was subdued or awed by something or other. Don't remember where I slept or if I slept. I do not even remember Mayanne's snow-white poodle cavorting around the suite. Did he sleep with me? Did I sleep with Mayanne? Did I sleep alone? I cannot honestly say.

My next real memory is on board a little plane that, I was later told, was a DC8, where I am fastened in my seat, the little dog is on my lap and Mayanne next to me in a startling white suit trimmed with a thin navy-blue strip all around the collar and lapels.

I remember her saying something like, '*Allez, chérie*, repeat after me. One more time: I am very happy to meet you. Ready?'

I nod hesitantly and gulp for air before launching into what was clearly expected of me. 'Aye amm ... vereee ...apee too ... tooo meet ... tooo—'



‘To meet you, Alexandra, meet ... you. You see? Stretch and round your lips like that. *Regarde bien*. Yooo.’ I can still see my mother rounding and stretching her lips, urging me then, as now, to shape myself around her expectations. ‘Only to help you better yourself, Alexandra,’ she would say.

“Meeet ... meeet ... yooo.” I mimicked, docile.

My very first sentence in English. Cute, don’t you think?

And so, it went, I imagine, until the engines roared and the plane began to shudder and vibrate as it hit and bounced off the tarmac, only to be jerked back in a heart-stopping lurch. A sudden stop at full revs. That, I definitely remember. How the unrestrained little poodle fared through all this, no idea. I do, however, remember being totally shaken by all the quaking, rattling and shrieking sounds that came out of that aeroplane.

Then, I guess, I would have met my American stepfather, John. I know he was there, at this little field airport somewhere between Pointe Noire and Brazzaville, dressed in the standard white man’s khaki-green safari gear. He had come to take us home. Home was somewhere in the Congo.

Did John get to hear those lines Mayanne had been so intent on teaching me for that purpose? She says he did. He says he did. I do not remember delivering them but I guess I must have. The thing is that I do not remember any of these first moments of my new life and not much at all of the ensuing year and a half in Africa. I did manage to find some memories though. I found them glued inside the many pages of Mayanne’s photo album. They were in the section a calligraphy pen had boldly emblazoned: Alexandra in the Congo.

Marie-France thinks that it is not ‘normal’ to not remember anything of that transition period. After all, she

C. C. Saint-Clair

says, for a seven-year-old to go live in Africa, to discover a stepfather and, to all intents and purposes, her own mother, that should rate at least a couple of memories.

Being separated, somewhat brusquely, from the ones who had looked after her during the toilet-training years, surely that, too, should leave ... something in any little girl's mind. That is what she says. She is convinced that our little Emma's head is already full of the stuff that, in time, will become her memories. What do you think?

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Droplets of molten ice ran slowly inside the creases that held them, shut tight against the glare. I even felt one lone droplet as it separated itself from the others, leaving a feathery, ticklish trail along the arch of the eyebrows, along the ridge of the nose, as it gathered momentum.

From there, as in slow motion, it dropped on to the tip of my waiting tongue, warm and salty. Inside the palm of my hand, another handful of cold, sharp, little crystals lost their tiny teeth as they melted along my wrist, no longer cool. I was regaining the ability to exist, to feel something else, something that was not related to you. You were no longer, at least for this moment of reprieve, at the centre of my consciousness.

To the left, a tiny, glassy tinkle caught my attention, my eyes alert for the sound my ear had heard. One lone stalactite came into focus. It made its crystalline music as it gave back its tears, drop by drop, to an earth which had no need for them. Kneeling to reach under the little ledge from where the stalactite hung, I drank from its tip. I drank diminutive stars, tiny suns and minuscule rainbows as they glistened and

shimmered inside each drop. Their cool tingle was a surprise, a delight to my parched tongue.

As I rounded yet another bend, nearing the end of the field, civilisation came up to me: three mounds of dog droppings, dissolving in soiled snow, an empty packet, torn, gaping and red. A little further, as I reached the bank of trees that lined the road, a half-eaten sandwich and a broken bottle, thrown there by careless hands.

I turned around, to catch sight of the corridor of virgin sunlight I had just left, but already, like the collapsible décor on a grand stage, it had disappeared, swallowed by the bend. A sigh escaped from my lips. Off came the snowshoes and resolutely I anchored my weary body and sunburnt soul onto the cracked bitumen that led through dingy patches of snow to the south side of the village. Wearily, I searched for a deck chair, somewhere, at the terrace of a café, there to sit and sip a sunlit pastis, cool and strong.

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The fire still burns strongly in the hearth. I feel contentment for the second time today. The radiated warmth of the flames has untwisted my guts and unknotted my aching muscles. The state of anxiety I thought permanently tattooed on my solar plexus has once again dissolved. I must have lost it somewhere in the valley today, as one might lose a stalker glued to one's own footsteps.

Maybe it was the enchanting, enchanted tinkle of the stalactite that had charmed it away, though it did return later that afternoon as I sat on the terrace by the edge of a slope.

C. C. Saint-Clair

But I was able to keep it away from the nascent feeling of tranquility.

In a few days I will have left ‘my valley’; a few days later I will be sitting on a dark green bench facing the duck pond of the parc Monceau.

Exactly four and a half days after that though, I will be back to the reality of whatever my new day-to-day routine will be, back in Nice, finally severed from you.

Daunting but good. And I will dress up to make an entrance as a newcomer to the real world of Real Estate. Scary but cool.

In the midst of these adjustments, I assume there will be moments when I will be grieving. Mourning what had never been mine, mourning because of the still empty space in my bed. Grieving being severed from the ever-so-fragile little cord that had linked us during the past months. A kite cut loose.

As the time nears, any thought of our reunion releases a wave of anxiety that washes through me. A fire from hell it is too, a flame that laps my psyche, cool in tones of blue, red as it glowers and burns through its orange tongues. A fire from hell that smothers it into a cracked, crusty and charred matter from which it feeds, before rising again, red-hot and refreshed, ready to pull me back each time I try to convalesce from you. The sun deck is empty, most people are still on the slopes. Marie-France and Joceline might well be among them.

Though on its mid-afternoon descent, the mountain sun is strong enough to bore orange holes through my closed eyelids. Head back against the rough log wall of the chalet, I let the heat rise inside me and weave torpor-inducing, shimmering heat waves that keep me pinned back against the striped chaise-longue. Fields of cotton-crisp white land are

unfurled just beyond my feet. Only the occasional dragging sounds of loosened ski boots on the deck below keep me connected to the present.

I am thinking of you, I am thinking of us, I am thinking of Sophie, I am thinking of you and Sophie. At the moment, I imagine you thoughtful at your desk, your warm brown eyes downcast onto a printed page, showcased by the simple elegance of your reading glasses. Ah, if only the lines, the words you are reading could look back, could look up at you. If they could, they would for me, who cannot see you. I imagine your dismayed clerk, as he looks surreptitiously into these eyes that do not see him, now wondering if the sunshine he had seen in them a few weeks earlier will ever return.

Do your thoughts occasionally break loose from the lines aligned on that open page to roam a mountainside, somewhere in the Hautes Alpes, searching for me?

Though the sun has already left the valley below, here, away from the slanted shadow of the furry-tipped *mélèzes* trees, the glare still rages, trapped behind my closed eyelids, projecting a fiery orange backdrop, now and then pierced by fountains of blue, each trimmed by a fringe of gold. Like molten plastic, the crimson screen curls up under the heat of the sun, revealing a flickering gauze of vibrant aqua blue. And the sun-induced torpor draws me back to you and to the little park bench where we will soon be sitting side by side.

Thoughts of the park, cold in winter as it is fixed in my memory, of us sharing a warm waffle, icing sugar on our

C. C. Saint-Clair

cold fingertips, of your body kept warm by the deep folds of your electric green coat. Thoughts, too, of the impossibility of ever being together. All these thoughts play leap-frog behind my sunburnt eyelids. And a quick poem forms behind them.

*Sucre glacé, mains glacées, ciel glacé  
Mon cœur nage dans un océan de douleur  
La moire de la mare brille de froid  
Tout comme les petits canards  
Qui s'y enfoncent  
Pour trouver la tiédeur en profondeur*

So, you see, I go back to the ducklings of the Monceau pond and how they would dive deep inside the freezing water to find warmth. And I go back to the pain in my heart and to the pale ice of a wintry sky and to the powdery pale ice of the sugar on my waffle, still warm from the nearby kiosk.

*Mon âme s'insinue à travers les fibres  
De tes vêtements pour y trouver  
Ton frémissement  
Elle t'étreint pendant que moi  
Je ne peux que te regarder  
Tes yeux s'assombrissent de désir*

And yes, of course. I have to get back to that expression of desire.

*Je voudrais te découvrir  
Et tout découvrir avec toi Je  
n'en ai pas le droit  
Tu es mon Fruit Défendu  
Oh ! La méchante ironie de notre sort.*

Yes, desire and the need to discover you and all ... through you, knowing all along, of course, that Evil Irony herself has picked up our scent and will never let us be. Okay, so this little titbit is totally off the cuff. If it stays with me long enough to be written down once back at the chalet, well, I guess I will show it to you as we sit on our bench. I will not need to mail it to you.

More thoughts crowd in. In a few days, we will be able to fall asleep in your bed, no, not in your bed. In the sofa bed of your living room. We will be tightly wrapped around each other, my head tucked inside the hollow of your shoulder, my lips brushing the roundness of your breast.

Flares of desire fuse around my belly. Suddenly startled, I open my eyes, sitting upright, away from the cradling stretch of canvas deck chair. Equally startled, my heart pounds against my ribcage with the resonance of a battle drum aboard a galleon, readying the crew for the ramming. Though wide awake now, I can feel myself drowning, my hands flat and cool on either side of your face.

That strange sensation remains, even as I force myself to break away from it, away from the crisp, white snow, away from the sylvan surroundings of the snowfields at my feet. Your eyes draw me back to you, trance-like. You answer the mute question, not yet formed by my lips.

‘And what about Sophie?’

You answer it by tightening your embrace around my body, as it presses against yours. And with your breath lightly teasing the whorl of my ear, you whisper: ‘Listen ... we, too, are entitled to tiny slivers of joy. Surrender with me, Alex. Come ... feel my desire.’

C. C. Saint-Clair

Your lips follow the fold of soft flesh, and the tip of your tongue, soft and warm, awakes a new wave of desire that ripples and peaks, forcing a sigh of imaginary contentment through the smile on my own lips.

The fingers of one hand intertwined with mine, your legs encircling my belly, your breast pressed against my shoulder, you continue softly, ‘Having you here, right here, is what happiness is about.’

Your breath against my cheek pauses for thought.

‘Even if tonight, we should simply fall asleep.’ Your fingertips are tracing a tantalising web of delight across my ribs. You continue, ‘I know that, should I wake up in the middle of the night and feel your body against mine, I’ll know I’m not dreaming.’

I turn to look into your eyes. I see them fill with tears, as you add, ‘Let’s make ... the most of these very few, very precious days. Alex– “

My lips reach for yours to silence the words I know you are about to shape.

The moment passes. ‘Look ... *chérie*,’ you say, your thoughts having changed direction, ‘Sophie can’t be hurting at the moment.’ And, to reassure yourself, you add wryly, ‘She’s miles away. She’ll never even know you were here.’

You pull a little away from me, adding gently, ‘Later, when she’s back and you’re gone again, I’ll punish myself. I’ll deny my pain. I’ll take little ant steps towards her. I’ll be gentle, tender ... I’ll be empty but I’ll be by her side.’



Whoa, there! Too much, far too much sun for one day. Too real, that scene, as it unfolded against the crimson screen of light boring through eyelids tightly shut again against the glare of the mountain sun.

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Too real, too sad too, even now as I reminisce hours later, sinking low into the enveloping folds of the grand old leather armchair of the chalet. I let myself be hypnotised by the dance of the revived flames as they bite into the new log. Marie-France has just stoked the fire.

Joceline, stretched on the rug near the fireplace, is playing a little game of Scrabble with Emma. The flames backlight the baby-fine blond hair of one and the rich chestnut brown of the other.

I remember having gotten up from that terrace like a wounded animal searching for shade. I walked into the first dimly-lit café I came across and, almost blinded by a sudden and incongruous chiaroscuro, I made my way to a table, following an instinctive need for a cool and dark corner out of the way at the far end of the room. And there I sat, head bent, looking at my hands splayed against the coolness of the tabletop.

“*Oh, la belle!* Caramelized by our radiant sunshine! Right here in my bar!” The wide and rounded vowels and the rolling r’s of a *montagnard*’s jovial brogue startled me.

A frown of irritation creased my brow. Loud voices have always jarred my nerves, so I glowered from afar, feeling as I always do about loud, self-important males. My

C. C. Saint-Clair

eyes tried to retrace the path the voice had taken to reach my ears. But what is one male voice among many?

Then a tall lumberjack figure came towards me, swathed in a large green corduroy shirt, black padded ski trousers, braces dangling against the hips. Long-john white sleeves pushed up high above thick, tanned forearms, a self-assured smile splashed across a russet beard. I looked away, hoping to avoid the intrusion, but the reflection that looked back at me from the mirror panel on the wall to the right of my table arrested me, in mid-movement.

A face, tanned to the deep hue of copper, frowned back at me. The fluorescent pink bandanna I had rolled across my forehead earlier that morning was still tight against my forehead. My own reflected forearms, naked and folded over the tabletop, were indeed the colour of melting caramel. The leather thong holding the two snowshoes was still stretched across one shoulder. A snow Indian, I thought to myself, surprised by my appearance as the man stood by my side trapped, too, inside the gilded mirror panel.

I turned to face him. Gentle giant, he stood there, as if ready to wait all day for a smile. As he saw none forthcoming, he bent towards me. "Welcome to my bar, lovely lady. I didn't mean to offend, though ... I think I did." He stroked his beard thoughtfully. He added, "It's just that, when I saw you come out of the sun, glowing from our mountain sunshine ... I thought—" He stopped again, hesitant.

It is only then that I realised he had been the one whose voice had boomed across the half-full room. And that I had been the one he had addressed. I could tell he had meant no harm. The time had come to rescue this big puppy from

further muddled apologies. I smiled. Relief visibly spread over his features, and once again, his white teeth flashed through his red beard.

“Let me get you a drink,” he said, adjusting his braces over his powerful shoulders. “On the house. What’ll it be?” I quickly tossed between a strong black coffee and a second pastis, opting for the latter.

“Eh, bon sang,” the bar owner said cheerfully, “a woman who’s not afraid to drink before sundown.”

He probably guessed more than saw my re-emerging frown of irritation, so he splayed his hands in front of him, his palms outward, in a gesture of male helplessness, and grinned, good-humouredly, before turning on his heels. I slid the snowshoes to the wooden floor, keeping them wedged between the mirror wall and the table legs. Before long, the man was back, bringing with him a tall glass of cold sunlight, and a large bowl of olives.

“We don’t grow them here,” he said, smiling again, “but my *grandmère*, she lives closer to the coast, she prepares them for my customers. You’ll taste how good they are. Everyone loves them.” He hesitated before adding, “You too, I hope.”

“Well, then, to the olives,” I said, lifting the glass to my lips. As I raised my head to take that first, most refreshing sip, I noticed that a waitress, back at the bar, was following our interaction with great interest while loading glasses on a tray. I saw her pick it up, her eyes trained on the bar owner, trying to see past him, or simply, through him.

C. C. Saint-Clair

As if in slow motion, one tall glass, brimming with a frosty bright green *sirop de menthe*, swayed on its base as the waitress raised the tray above her shoulder. The glass tapped its neighbour full of a Martini-red liquid and, as if doing the Saint-Guy dance, both glasses swayed and knocked the other three on the tray now level with the waitress's ear.

I would swear I actually saw the split-second moment when the five glasses jumped over the tray, splashing and splintering as they crashed, one by one, on the counter. Ice, mingled with glass fragments, slid across the glistening counter and seeped into the sawdust-scattered wooden floor. And yet they skidded further and further, beyond the first row of tables and chairs.

"*Ah, merde,*" exclaimed the waitress between clenched teeth, "*Y en a partout!*"

The bar owner exclaimed grudgingly, "Ah, les femmes!" while raising his hands to the ceiling, maybe in a parody of something he had seen done on TV, and he made his way towards the bar.

With a little chuckle and a sigh, I settled back on the comfortable cane seat, letting the inviting smell of crepes and molten cheese lull me into a relaxed state of being. I did not want to turn my thoughts back to you. Too painful, too hard. I wanted something simple to think about while the strength of the pastis warmed up my heart.

Little Emmanuelle, or Emma as she prefers being called. 'Too many letters in my name. They make me feel old,' she complained to me a little while back. So cute, really. Have I told you she is only nine years old? Can't remember. In any case she is a true bundle of blond energy. Quite lovable, I am sure, but then again, I still do not feel entirely comfortable around her, around children in general. The thing is that I do

not know what to do with her, with them. I do not know what I should talk to them about.

I always feel they want something from me, something that I cannot give them. Even when, like Emma, they ask for nothing. Maybe it is simply I who feel I should give them a little more ... of something. Unsettling.

Like death, really. No, no, hold on. What I mean is that like death that I have not experienced close up, as in through the death of a loved one, I have no experience of little children either. I mean, my friends do not have any. I, for one, decided on a permanent moratorium on sperm, regardless of its packaging, be it from a well-intentioned randy pal or the handy turkey baster. IVF was not an option then, not that it would have changed anything about my decision.

Besides that, I am an only child, one who has spent a lifetime away from other child relatives. And when I was a child myself, as I said before, I do not remember any friends of my own, except ... for Lauren.

Lauren and I were boarding school friends. We used to compare the flatness of our chests, desperately trying to convince the other that our own had started showing a definite ... swelling under our little brown nipples. Ah, and then there was Mary, but that was different again.

Mary. I do remember her but when was the last time, aeons ago, that I had last thought about her? Goodness. Tall and gentle Mary. She might have been seventeen. I was about eleven. She looked after me like the big sister I had never had but so desperately wanted in those days. She used to shine my shoes on Inspection Days, she used to help me make my bed and do my homework. She had been assigned

C. C. Saint-Clair

to me as a buddy of sorts; the older girl looking out for the younger one.

I remember that upon my arrival at the school, I had been given the bed next to hers. And because I hated being at Saint Bridget's, always surrounded by other children and worse, being expected to belong, I had over time made myself thoroughly miserable. And so, she would hold my hand until I fell asleep. I adored her. I owe my very first heart-aching flutters to Mary.

The café was filling up around my table by the mirror wall. People were drifting out. More were drifting in to reward themselves for yet another beautiful day on the slopes. Or maybe for not having broken any bones, either in their bodies or, worse but utterly possible, in someone else's. Bits of melting snow still clung to their boots. And many had the high-altitude sun's mark etched on their skin in tones varying from intense pink to deep mahogany. Except for the white areas that had been sheltered by sunglasses.

It was getting late in the season. The sun had gotten quite strong. Closer to the base of the mountain, other resorts were preparing to convert to their summer activities. But here, on top of the world, we still had all the snow we needed. Everyone looked healthy, smiling, energised by their day high up nearer to the sky. Some were weary, too, and they dragged their boots across the floor to get them to move forward. A healthy weariness that would see them fast asleep tonight. Others were loud and playful. Good-naturedly so. Nothing like the gratuitous, rambunctious and unnerving chaos engendered by bored, suburbia-penned-in, young males at play.

I used to hide little surprises for Mary, candy mostly, that I would tuck away deep inside her drawer at her assigned place at the head of a very long dining table where she had to sit with other older girls.

I would furtively look in her direction to catch the moment when she would find the surprise hidden in the dark recesses of that drawer, under the white neatly-folded napkin that she kept fastened with a multicoloured knot of rope. I could always tell when Mary had come across the candy. A most delicious smile would play on her lips and when our eyes met, she would wink at me. She would nod, too, a tacit encouragement for me to finish eating all my soggy vegetables. The alternative to that would see me assigned to table-clearing duty.

When Mary failed to return to school at the end of the summer holidays, once past initial disbelief, I remained devastated for months. Like abandoned. The bag of chocolate I had talked Mayanne into buying for my best friend ever, turned pale within its cellophane wrapper until one day someone, in charge of cleaning, threw it away.

Adrienne, I have realised, in that café at the bottom of the slopes, that my reaction to the loss of Mary when I was only eleven must have set the template for my pattern of responses in the face of similar pains of abandonment to come. It all makes perfect sense to me.

The adult that I have become still struggles with that obscure sort of pain in the same haphazard, ineffectual way. Anxiety, panic attacks, an uncontrollable urge to alter the unalterable. That is what I still do when faced with emotional crises, such as ours, that are beyond my control to fix.

C. C. Saint-Clair

I duplicate the painful shimmery feeling in my stomach, the shortness of breath, the relentless drive, the energy drain, the longing for what is unattainable.

The strong and moving strains of an enduring tune, *Femme Avec Toi*, wafted through the bar from speakers fastened against the stucco walls. I closed my eyes, letting the woman's voice put you back to the forefront of my thoughts. Why did I fall in love with you, you who, unlike the object of the singer's desire, do not smoke, are not Italian, and who has no particular interest in horses, not even the white ones that galloped, as in the song, across long forgotten lands, *sur les terres d'antan*?

You see, the memory of that first-time feeling is very similar to how I feel now, how I feel about not being able to hold you. About not being able to hold you long enough to really, really, reach you. You do know what I mean, don't you, Adrienne?

I felt very strange seated at that table having just conjured up the memory of those bygone days with Mary. I felt as if I had somehow come across a forgotten DNA printout, one on which my reactions as an adult woman had been encoded all along. A perfect match with that well-worn, twisted and fathomless sort of helpless confusion of now.

Why such lack of control from the grown woman that I have become? Why the crippling self-doubts that whisper to my subconscious that, if I had been more lovable, right from the start, Mayanne would not have left me behind?

She would not have been able to. Mary would not have abandoned me, her little friend, to the woes of boarding school life. And if I were more lovable, wouldn't you already



have found a way to clear your head, to garrotte your guilt and snuff out whatever else is still getting in the way?

It's all very simple really. If the little girl that I was had been 'adequate', then the ones who, like you, came to her of their free will would not, then, turn away from her. You would not even think of abandoning her.

A freaky thought has just entered my mind, Adrienne; how much of my actual turmoil really belongs to you, to our specific circumstances? When will the pain of unresolved issues dissipate and leave a clear path for the present? Why is my attraction to you so strong? Is it truly so strong that a genuine determination to cut you loose, like a beautiful but unmanageable kite, would still not free me of you?

And so the last few days rolled on: trekking by day, drinking pastis in that bar where, strangely, I had felt at home in the late afternoon, sitting by the log fires by night with Marie-France, Emma and gently-probing Joceline, listening to music and getting lost inside our separate thoughts.

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C. C. Saint-Clair

## *Baie Des Anges, Nice*

**B**ack in Nice, almost on the eve of my departure for Paris, from beyond the mountain range a maddening wind was sweeping across the Promenade. *La Tramontanne* irritated all my nerve endings.

The usually blue sky had turned to pewter. A sense of loss, of sadness, had seeped inside each of my pores. I thought I might already be missing ‘my valley’, its silence, its immaculate coat of shimmering crystals and its stillness.

An impulse urged me away from the windblown Promenade des Anglais. I thought all I needed was to block out the shrill whistle carried by each gust as it raced into even the tiniest of alleyways, snapping angrily at the storefront awnings that slowed down its mad race to nowhere.

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In the mailbox, an unexpected letter from you lay in wait. I recognised the little blue envelope. My eyes seized on its corner, slightly askew, as it lay in the untidy bundle left by the mailman. A presentiment of dread descended on me like a shroud.

We had spoken over the phone on the night of my return from the Hautes Alpes: everything was set for our desperate bid to find release in the few days of stolen togetherness. You had even sounded as impatient as a child at the base of the Christmas tree. I was simply relieved to hear you confirm that, this time, no unforeseen obstacle was going to deprive us of our reunion. However, as I stood by the mailbox, looking at the blue corner of envelope that I knew bore your

handwriting, a tingle settled in the tips of my fingers. Delicately, so as not to upset the bundle that I had wanted to leave in its cache away from the wind, I pulled your envelope out from the others to lift it to my eyes. Just then, as if to shelter me from its content, a gust of wind almost wrenched it from my fingers. I looked at your handwriting, neat and firm, devoid of unnecessary curls and flourishes. I looked at the date of its postmark, as I stood by the mailbox, bent forward against the push of the wind at my back. Where did it want me to go? You had mailed it the day after our last conversation. Inside this envelope lay, I knew it, the real cause of the day's unease.

I released the pressure of my fingers ever so slightly, slowly raising the pale blue fold high above my head, an offering to the wind. Greedy and starved, it snatched it from my fingertips, lifting it higher and higher. Against the dull, grey sky the pale blue rectangle fluttered and danced like a kite that no longer felt the tug of its line.

It tumbled and plummeted towards the street. The wind, too, having lost interest, had released its grip. It is then that I should have turned my back on this last letter from you. Instead I felt compelled to follow its course until the moment it would disappear from sight. I saw it roll one more pirouette, set on a course leading to the churning waters of an overfilled drain at the bottom of a garden path. Then, suddenly, that little fold of paper stopped dancing.

It lay there, blue against the brown soil, flat against it, as if holding on to it, as if waiting for me to come and rescue it.

C. C. Saint-Clair

‘Ladies and gentlemen, we are about to begin our descent over Paris. Please, remain seated and fasten your seatbelts.’ The piped voice brought me out of my daydream. “*Paris, la ville des amoureux*”, I whispered to myself, sighing. A glance through the porthole window revealed only a thick cloud cover spread over the City of Light. Another glance at my watch confirmed we would be disembarking at the *aéroport* d’Orly at around 9 p.m. I forced myself to breathe deeply and counted to eight before exhaling. And again.

Breathe, Alex, breathe! I reprimanded myself one more time for having allowed that shallow breathing pattern to creep back in and tighten its grip inside my ribcage.

I swallowed hard to loosen the tightness in my throat but the content of your last letter, retrieved in the nick of time from the gutter where the wind had abandoned it, brought back a bile-like taste to my mouth.

I opened the powder-blue envelope that lay in my mailbox. A little like the much-famed Pavlov dog, my heart had learned, not to salivate, but to pound, at the sight of that soft blue paper, lying in wait. As I reached the door, I paused, the envelope balanced between two fingers, still calculating the risk involved in opening it.

Arms akimbo, my heart in limbo, I realised that I should have listened to the intuitive voice that had warned me against the content of your letter, in view of the off-again, on-again nature of our Paris reunion. I should not have opened that blue envelope.

By reading what you had intended for me to read, I had allowed myself to get hooked back on your line, back to you,

to be better dropped once again. Indeed, I was not half as wise as I thought I was. But again, I had to know, didn't I?

How was I able to guess the gist of that last letter? I had had no wish, no impulse to read it. I just knew that, once again, the words couched within that soft envelope would be words delineating your fear, words that, once again, would negate me, words written to force me to cancel my trip to Paris. I had truly wanted the exasperating gusts of wind to snatch it up and symbolically rip you away from me, quickly, permanently, in a way that I had not been able to achieve by myself. But Fate had her own Machiavellian plan. She had wanted me to read. She had wanted me to see. She had wanted me to suffer just a little more.

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## **Paris, 13 May**

*Dear Alex,*

*A delightful picnic in the woods with Eli, Isa and, of course, Sophie. Eli was once again pleasant towards me. She seemed to have recovered from the aggravation she had felt on Sophie's behalf, when she suspected my infatuation with you.*

I fiddled nervously with the corner of the page and once again looked at the cloud cover below. It was thinner now and I could already make out the diminutive rectangles of farmland and fields, in all shades of browns and greens, nicely laid out side by side, like patchwork on a quilt held

C. C. Saint-Clair

together by knobbly seams. As soon as my eyes had found the word 'infatuation' I knew I had been right. A rush of nausea had risen to my throat. But, like a voyeur hooked on an act of indecent prying, I had read on.

*Sophie, too, was at her best, witty and charmingly brash as she can be when the mood takes her. No longer acting like the shadow of her former self, at least not then. At the end of the day, we agreed that Eli should spend the night at my place, and Sophie would stay at Isa's. What for, I hear you ask. Well, it's quite simple really.*

*During the afternoon, it'd become obvious that the four of us wanted to feel better about the gap that had formed between us, because of my silence and passive resistance. I needed to talk to someone about what had happened. To someone other than Sophie. I also needed someone, anyone, to know that nothing had actually happened between you and me.*

*As it turned out, Sophie needed to begin healing in one direction or another. Like maybe move away from me altogether to begin a grieving of sorts. Or grieve about what had been and make more room for what there might still be. I don't know. What I needed was simply to give in, out loud. To out my confusion of these past months.*

*Eli, though another of your ex-lovers like Sophie, can, unlike her, afford to talk about you, though maybe not totally objectively. She still sees you as a bit of a ... what was her expression again? Something about a loose cannon. Can't remember the exact words but whatever she said seemed to fit at the time. You probably know what she meant.*

*So, while Sophie and Isa paired up for the evening, Eli and I spent that time together, with me talking about the*

*weird turns and twists that I had considered. It was all very positive, really.*

The vibrations of the engines changed patterns. The plane had begun its descent. I tightened my seatbelt further, gesture symbolic of the tightness inside my chest.

*Alex, during our last phone conversation, on the night of your return from the slopes, you said that you had been able to regroup your energies during your long solitary walks through fields and forests. You said that you were feeling something like a sense of wellbeing and now, I need to be honest with you, too. You see, there is something I realised, but only after I had hung up after our last phone conversation.*

*Fifteen days without hearing your voice, and I no longer see you. You understand what I mean by that, don't you? I no longer have to organise my work around the privacy I needed, until recently, just to think of you. The urge to write is gone. I no longer feel like the smoker who can't move from one room to the other without taking cigarettes, ashtray and lighter with her. I feel suddenly unencumbered.*

*Sophie has cancelled her trip to Brussels. But this time, we both know why. We need time to consolidate what remains.*

The searing constriction around my lungs intensified as the plane tilted its nose towards the numberless garlands of lights, now all a glitter far below the plane belly. My eyes went back to your words, masochistically, to rub more salt in the wound.

*So, there is no need for you to come to Paris.  
Not anymore.*

C. C. Saint-Clair

No need! No longer a need, not even one born out of a longing, or simply one out of a frustrated sexual desire. No need anymore for me, though the very need to see me, to hold me, to write to me, to hear my voice had filled and transformed the quality of all your waking moments, leading up to and including our last phone conversation. No need, not even one for a decent finality. You had written, ‘The storm has passed.’

My equation was as simple and as direct as the wording you had couched in that last letter. No need equated with no desire which, in turn, equated with no longer a need for you to pursue the elusive ghost of an ephemeral emotional connection with me.

Jim Morrison’s doomsday voice reverberated from somewhere, from within a cache where old memories lie forever trapped in time, ‘This is the end ... my friend ... This is the end, my friend.’ But why had you lacked the courage to deliver your message directly from your mouth to my ear, live? Why hadn’t you dialled my number back in Nice, one last time, to deliver the message of your newly-found need to nurse a fledgling peace of the heart with Sophie.

And I read on.

*I’m sorry for the lack of tenderness in my words, but I need to be clear about my new priorities. I want to give all the attention I can to my father who is still fighting, mostly I suspect, to stay with my mother another day, one more day at a time. Yes, he’s made it beyond Easter. He’s still in Lyons and that makes it even more difficult in a way.*



*The Crab Catcher and the Fish Whisperer*

*All I can do for now is call him every day. And of course, my other priority is to find ways in which to reconnect with Sophie, ways in which I can let her get closer to me. There too, it's got to be a one-day-at-a-time affair.*

*I don't think the airline will refund you the plane fare at such short notice, so please, Alex, put your pride aside and cash the cheque I've enclosed for that purpose.*

The cheque: your formal signature, seen for the first time, elegant, neat, compact; the sum rounded off a little over the price of a return fare. Torn, shredded in anger, in pain, in humiliation ... but mostly in anger.

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## *Montmartre - Paris*

The fog was low over the Sacré Coeur, the top of its massive, white *coupoles* partially eaten by the mist. From where I sat, sipping a piping hot café au lait, the world was indeed golden.

On the other side of the street, the Venetian merry-go-round, at the foot of the butte, was ablaze and glorious.

Its ornate gondolas glistened under their gold leaves, angry stallions from another era were frozen by time, nostrils flaring; Equus, turned to plaster, in memory of his master's sin. Here I was, a stone's throw away from your apartment in Rue Gabrielle. No, not for me the shared pleasures and the secrets whispered from the depth of the bed I had so fantasised about.

With a sigh, I reprimanded myself. I had boarded the plane, earlier that evening, strengthened by the resolution to make the most of my pre-paid ticket. That trip to Paris would actually be good for me. Why, indeed, waste a perfectly good plane fare, to Paris of all places? Among its many enticements, it can be said that Paris is a magic city, even for the depressed. Some would say, especially for the depressed, so vibrant, so energising it is.

I also knew that I could use some of my time there to meet up with other relatives, on Mayanne's side of the family, the ones I had planned to visit when I had first landed here, back in January. As it had turned out, I had been so busy and involved during those few days with the four of you that I had not made the time to contact them.

And then, on the evening of my second trip to Paris, the Sacré Coeur dominated the Montmartre panorama,

enormous, in shades of dingy white, against the grey white of the encroaching night. Making my way back to the hotel through the lively but winding, narrow streets of the Butte, I plotted the next day's activity, to the rhythm of the music escaping from the many little restaurants and sidewalk cafés jostling each other along my path.

Into the night, back turned to the hive of lively entertainment, I took in the skyline blocked by the century-old slate rooftops, bristling with TV antennas planted among the long chimney pots. Naked light bulbs cast crude, strange shadows that slid across the windowpanes.

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The bells from the little church of St Augustin, on rue de la Bienfaisance, tolled three times. The majestic, black and gold wrought iron gate to the parc Monceau lay straight ahead through Boulevard de Malesherbes, then left on Boulevard de Courcelles, only a ten-minute stroll away.

The pull of the park was too great to resist. The temptation to go back to our green park bench, to smile at the ducklings frolicking in the pond, once germinated, quickly took root. My watch confirmed five minutes past three. Mid-afternoon: you would be either tucked away inside the dark grey, impenetrable façade of your office building or at the Palais de Justice. At that time of the afternoon, Ms d'Anville would not be feeding pigeons in a park.

I did not wish to see you. That was very clear to me. I simply needed to finalise our entanglement with what I construed as an epilogue of sorts. By visiting one last time

C. C. Saint-Clair

the place that, through our long-distance involvement, had become so important to us. I wanted one last pilgrimage to the mystical shrine of our mythical togetherness.

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I reached the intersection of Boulevard Malesherbes and rue de Monceau. I hesitated. I had reached the immediate vicinity of the park too quickly. I was not ready to go through its black and gold gates. Knowing that I could be sitting on our bench within five minutes proved to be a sort of anticlimax.

I needed to delay that moment further: six months, so many hours and just a little longer. I turned left into the rue de Monceau, as it is not, in spite of its name, the one that leads directly to the park, then left again into rue Murillo, to reach the front entrance of the park the long way around.

And there it was, on my right, the smallish artery with the pompous name of Avenue Velasquez, and the thick, grey façade behind which I could almost sense you, at your desk, eyes lowered, poring over your most pressing briefs, in that office I had never visited; in that office where you had put the bouquet of tulips I had offered to you, long ago, it seemed; in that office, the one that has great windows that you liked to open wide to the park to listen to its sounds, when you missed me; in that office where you will now, forever, remain focused, your eyes neither sparkling with sunshine, nor clouded by the helplessness that comes with being too afraid to do any more than desire.

My heart fluttered, it missed a beat. I missed a step. But I hurried on to put more distance between you, inside your

walls, and me in the street below. I could have cut right through the park by going through the side gate in Avenue Ferdousi Ruysdael but I decided against it. I had to earn the pleasure of sitting on my little green park bench by delaying the moment further, and I had to go in through the main gates.

I had watched you come through them, once. I had watched you tap an impatient tan court shoe on the sidewalk, that day when the anticipation of making visual contact with me, of sitting tightly wedged against me on a park bench had visibly agitated all your senses. It only left room for your impatience towards the unrelenting traffic on the Avenue. Its uninterrupted flow stole minutes from us, minutes that you thought, then, were too precious to waste. I passed Avenue van Dyck that also traversed the park, making my way to the other side of Avenue de Courcelles.

I breathed deeply as I made my way towards the wrought iron entrance still a little distance away. I passed in front of the restaurant where you had taken me that day, the restaurant so impossibly close to your office that it could not offer you any privacy from passing colleagues.

Behind the glass of the enclosed terrace, I saw a couple seated at our table. Whereas you and I had hardly touched our meal, their plates were empty except for the skeleton of a fish on one and chicken bones on the other. These two are obviously not lovers, I thought to myself. I can tell.

It was at that table that you asked me if I had been a victim of rape. ‘A survivor,’ I had glibly replied, in a vain attempt to side-step your question. As things turned out, that question of yours had taken both of us on a journey, a hard journey, through very dark days. At the same time, though,

C. C. Saint-Clair

it had provided us with something concrete, something intimate to share. Yes, intimate and very personal, and yet removed from 'us' as we cautiously began the long mile towards emotional intimacy.

But then, when during our lunch in the restaurant close to your office, you had reminded me of the other conversation Eli or Isa had started the night before at Le Prince Noir, I had not known that our short conversation would have struck a more direct chord in Sophie, the topic having been the sexual abuse of children. More so than the rape of adult women. Though, as is most often the case in our society, we talked about little boys' sufferings and not little girls'.

At the time, you see, I had quite forgotten what little she had told me of her own ordeal with her brother. Though this is neither here nor there, I find it amazing how male violence has a way of lashing out, swiftly, brutally, as efficiently as the lurking goanna's jaws crack the thin protective shells the mother bird has so cleverly hidden.

Snakes that slither on their bellies are only different in that they swallow the whole thing. I have come to realise that male violence cracks chunks of our lives. You, my love, seem to have been overlooked. You must have been born under a lucky star and the angel of violence has left your door untouched. I wonder about little Emma's door and hope your talisman is on it.

So many half-baked thoughts foamed inside my brain but all I was truly focused on, at that very private moment, were the wrought iron park gates. I swallowed harder, needing to stop the pounding of my heart as I passed through

them. It was there, the park was there, neat and contained, familiar and yet foreign. Perhaps it was because bloom and foliage had taken over every branch and every piece of protected soil.

Winter frost on naked, gnarled, brown branches was, too, a memory. Now, little *pâquerettes* had made it their business to sprout through the otherwise manicured grass, as soon as the gardener had trimmed the last blade. Maybe it was the afternoon light that, today, made everything bright and cheerful.

The pond itself had not changed, it had only added more sparkle to its mossy water. No ducklings in sight, they must have metamorphosed into the large and majestic ducks that glided past, as if reviewing the day's parade of onlookers. Yes, I thought sadly, feeling suddenly empty even of apprehension, time has moved on.

My next objective was to find the bench.

A sudden thought yielded something akin to panic. What if it is taken by a mother watching her child feed the ducks? Where will I sit? I had not waited six months, and a few hours, just to sit on any park bench. Briskly, I made my way around the pond, circumnavigating tricycles and little dogs that were walking their mistress on very long retractable leashes.

And then I saw it: vacant and not a child in sight. It was, as I had remembered it, scaly paint in a *camaieu* of green, a little to the side of the white marble Muses: a solitary bench in a romantic photograph.

I touched its roughness. I could not have guessed the number of scales of a different green that were now exposed. Before sitting down facing the pond, legs tucked in tight

C. C. Saint-Clair

against its rounded lip, eyes closed, I caressed the wooden backrest, feeling for marks made by the passing of years, fingertips grazing other lovers' benchmark moments scratched into the paint.

I sat on that little park bench, letting the gentle sun ease the tightness in my brow and the pressure away from my heart. Away from my throat.

I played back that day in January when you had taken me to the kiosk, a little further inside the park, to buy us a crème de marrons waffle, another topped with powdery white icing sugar and two strong, very hot coffees in thin plastic cups. To your coffee, you had added a *nuage*, a cloud of milk, so little in fact that I had asked you why you even bothered.

'*J'aime cette couleur,*' you said, eyes shining from the cold but also from the shimmery feeling uncoiling once again in your lower belly. '*La couleur de ce café ...* it's almost the colour of your tan. Tantalising and rich.' You had leaned a little closer to me but you looked away as you added, 'Just as rich and full of promises.'

And now, as I walk alone in this park, I shake my head, jaded by the suggestive power of the words that roll off the tongue of a woman in lust!

At my left, a toddler's sudden shrieks startled me into a more upright position to check that he was all right. I opened my eyes.

My heart hiccupped, thumped and kicked inside my ribcage like a wild stallion in a stall.

You, there! Standing still, frozen in mid-stride while rounding the bend that lead to the front part of the pond. You had already caught sight of me. I saw you a fraction of a second too late. At a showdown at OK Corral, your bullet



would have pierced my heart, while my hand had only begun gripping the pistol butt.

Fight or flight: a decision needed to be made. No time in which to make it. I remember hearing myself think, ‘You’re seated ... stay seated.’ A second, truly frozen in time, freeze-frame. As in an echo chamber, or the other end of a stethoscope, only my heart kept on pumping, wildly. Something had to give. It did.

You moved forward, slowly. I watched you, as I might have watched you on a big screen. In this scene, the slim auburn-haired woman, smartly dressed in a soft-grey business suit, looks stricken, as if in the clutch of strong emotional turmoil. In her hand, a briefcase. Over one shoulder, the strap of a handbag the colour of her suit. Each of her tentative steps brings her forward as the gravel crunches underfoot. No one yelled, ‘Cut!’

I saw you look at the trail, at the centimetres of trail, as they disappeared under each of your shoes. One step and another, and another. You had, finally, fully rounded the bend of the little gravelly trail. You kept on coming towards the green bench, obeying the urge you had felt, back in your office, to just go out and sit on our bench.

The knee-length hem of your dove-grey suit had brushed against my jeans and became still. I looked away from it and upwards. Our eyes met. Flashes of desire uncoiled from where they had nested, in my lower belly. They wiggled and quivered up and down my spine, to my groin, through my thighs, back up through my belly, through my heart and around and around it they danced.

C. C. Saint-Clair

You were here.

You were motionless, your face bent slightly towards mine, your eyes squinting, almost peering into mine. As if to make sure, doubly sure.

Again, something had to give. It did.

“Adrienne...” said my voice huskily, “I ... I thought ... I didn’t think ... you’d be in the park.” Was I apologising for my unscheduled appearance in this park, on this bench, for a second intrusion in your life, for being on your territory? “I ... assumed you’d be ... at work,” I added, somewhat more firmly.

“I was.” Your eyes softened as you added softly, “But I got called away.” I looked at you, quizzically. I patted the empty space next to me on the bench, an offer for you to sit down. As you did, I slid a couple of centimetres away, to give you more space, to not give your thigh the option to not settle against mine. You looked straight ahead in the direction of the marble Muses.

“There I was, doing what I do best ... and then,” I saw you hesitate. Were you afraid of divulging a vulnerability that you had hoped to have, by now, buried deep, deeper, so deeply that you had believed it to be forever inaccessible? “But then ... I don’t know what happened.” Your hands moved away from your lap to brush the air in front of you, a gesture that emphasised your incomprehension of the whole thing. “I just had to come down here ... for a walk.”

Bile rose to my throat for the second time since reading the opening paragraph of your last letter of cancellation. ‘Infatuation.’ I almost snorted out loud. Instead I sneered silently. Your need for a walk had to have been dictated, solely, by a need for fresh air. Obviously not by any

emotional impulse to connect with me one last time, in absentia.

Long seconds slid silently past while we remained awkwardly quiet, staring ahead. The photographic potential of a tight close-up of the moss as it rose from the pond's surface to creep over the Muses' marble feet still appealed to me. It stained the lower folds of their robes a fuzzy, dark-emerald shade of green.

But the pond became blurry. The Muses suddenly looked unexpectedly ghostly. Loose and imprecise whitish shapes. The children's voices were muffled, as if trapped under a thick layer of snow. I made myself swallow hard and blink.

I sensed you turning towards me.

I heard you ask softly, "Why are you here?"

The bitter taste of bile gave my words an edge I had not intended, "Where else should I be?" I glanced at your face and I turned away from it, adding, "You do remember, don't you, that I had been planning a visit ... to Paris?" I hesitated, wondering whether or not to labour the point further. "You do, don't you?" And more words fused, with a mind to challenge you, with a mind to hurt you, "In spite of many twists and turns, all inexplicably convoluted ..." I had used words you had written in that dreadful letter because I could. Because I wanted to deride you. I was angry. I wanted to hurt you. "... I bought a ticket. I boarded the plane yesterday as planned and ... here I am." Trying to sound nonchalant, I added, "Pretty simple really. I am happy to see Paris in full bloom. It is a first for me, you know."

"I know," you said very quietly, choosing not to acknowledge the double entendre intended. I fought against the urge to look at you, to look into your eyes, to look into

C. C. Saint-Clair

your face. To take it between my two hands and shake you, asking, ‘Why, Adrienne, why?’ But I did not. Instead, I made myself breathe, deeply, surreptitiously to protect my pride. Self-control. Composure always, if only on the outside. You were not going to see me dissolve. I was not going to whine. I was not going to ask ... anything. And surely, you were not going to be callous enough to ask whether or not I had received your letter on time. Surely, you were not going to ask why I had not cancelled my trip.

“No reason whatsoever. Or at least no good ones.”

Stricken, I realised I had spoken my last thought out loud. I turned to you. Our eyes met squarely for the second time since we had met so unexpectedly. I was hoping my face was wearing its mask properly in place, the hard one, the one created for just such a moment. You said, “Alex?”

I arched an eyebrow, lifted my chin and said stiffly, “Yes?” I watched you look away, again in the direction of the pond. Your eyes trailed behind a hairy little dog. Untied from its lead, snout in the air, it trotted past our bench. And then, you dragged your eyes back to mine.

“Alex, nothing I could try to explain would make sense to you.”

Right. Don’t try me! Not anymore.

I moved a hand towards your words, to stop the flow of what I thought would be an apology of some kind. I did not want one. I had no use for one. Words can never excuse the pain created by other words before them.

At best, they can only redirect.

They can only justify the intent.

They can never cancel each other. Though, as mere words, they are free to beg.

They can actually beg for forgiveness, on behalf of the one who had carelessly given them life. Some react well to that. Some even say they forgive.

When they do, though, they are also asked to forget.

The reply to that is often, 'I will. Just give me time.' And there the matter rests. Everyone seems content with that. Both parties pretend to believe the lie. A lie it has to be.

A lie said and done in the name of one's love for the other.

"Sophie ... she's away. She's in Brussels ... as planned. Well ... at least I think she is," you added, turning to face me. I stopped breathing. "You see ... God, Alex ... there was never any talk about her not ... not going. About her not going to Brussels as planned ... yesterday."

Something lurched in my stomach. I stared at you, at your eyes, searching for clues that would help me make sense of what you had just said. What had lurched in my stomach solidified almost instantly into an ice rock. A rock, not a block. A heavy jagged rock. And yet, at the same time, the rush of hot anger rose from it to my chest. How did I ever manage to just sit there with the sphinx's stoicism? Oh, how I wanted to hate you, Adrienne. You would have seen me tense as I looked away from your face but you could not see the conflict of emotions that whirled within me at that precise moment.

I cannot explain clearly what happened, or more to the point what I felt, not even now, but at some stage the Muses, the pond, everything receded to the end of a long black tunnel. I knew you were talking to me but I did not hear your words. Not even muffled sounds. To this day, I do not know what you were saying at that very specific moment.

C. C. Saint-Clair

And then I felt a tug at my sleeve. The dark tunnel between me and the pond was still in place, sooty-black and palpable. At the other end of it, the pond was tiny and bleak and far away, as if seen through the wrong end of a spyglass.

Another tug at my elbow. I became aware of my own breathing, of my chest rising and falling. Of the air coming in through my nostrils and cooling the back of my throat. I blinked. Bits of the tunnel became cleaner, clearer. Other fragments curdled to better separate and vanish. The pond and the Muses zoomed back into the normal full frame focus. A little child was laughing somewhere close by. The late afternoon sun was warm on my face.

“*Alex, parle- moi ... please.*” You wanted me to talk to you! What did you want me to say to you? Was there anything at all you could not wait to have me ask?

Teeth clenched, I dragged my eyes back to your face. The brown of your irises was soft, gentle, though intense in its focus. Just as I had remembered all these months. Though your face was not and your lips were not, your eyes were smiling at me. I sensed a smile of my own soften my jaw, my mouth, my lips, but I had not put it there. I did not want it to be there. Not so soon.

“*Alex ... listen ...*” You had begun the unravelling of your confusion. You pursued your thoughts more gingerly now. “Sophie and I did ... we did have a very pleasant time that day away with Eli and Isa. It was like a break, a break from what had become our routine ... during ... well, during the past months.

It was nice, really. We did have a feel-good talk of sorts with each one of them, I mean me with Eli and Sophie with

Isa. Eli did come back to my place. She had a good go at you. I think she'd been saving it, probably not aware of it herself since whenever. Anyway, she did try to knock some sense into me, to convince me of the foolishness of ... of ... well ... of any involvement with you."

Once again, you looked away towards the pond. I watched you smooth the grey fabric of your skirt under the palm of your hand, patting its hem against the soft pearly sheen of your stockinged knee.

My eyes had followed your hand to the angular, sensual shape of your kneecap and I made myself look away, suffused with a re-emergence of desire. I was confused, not knowing whether to bring back my anger or just to let it die out, and let a sense of relief peak in its place. I forced my thoughts back to your words. I needed them, if anything, to soften the fresh scar tissue on my heart.

And by the time you turned to face me, I was finally able to let my eyes float over your face as they wished, relinquishing any control I had previously exerted over them.

You continued slowly, deliberately, "She's right, of course." I frowned and almost glowered again. "But not for the reasons she gave."

Fair enough. I could well imagine Eli's reasoning. Many, many, many years had passed but some wounds, though healed, remain tender to the touch. Just like I knew mine would. In Elisabethette's case, she had just turned nineteen, I had just turned twenty-five.

C. C. Saint-Clair

We were both Leos born in August. She had gone on with her life and had recently found Isa. However, the slightly raw spot that might have lingered, in spite of the passing of years, could certainly have prompted her to warn you off.

She would have reminded you, too, as any good friend would, of the worthiness of the feelings you could still salvage for Sophie. If only you tried. If only you chopped me away from your consciousness. Yes, I could replay that night's discourse, as accurately as if I had been there. Subtext and all.

And of course, I had to grapple with the notion that, once again, you had chickened out. Again, you had sold me out in a panic. Panic selling. Panic ditching. Or was it out of a sense of duty? Out of a sense of responsibility? Because of your guilt, maybe? Because of an acute sense of loyalty? I did not say anything. I did not ask anything, not then, and not later. You and I had skirted that quicksand pit often enough to know that if either one of us were to dip in more than a big toe, it would swallow us whole. Too late, then, to clutch at words and crawl back to the safety of dignity and reason.

You said that you had no idea why you told your secretary, Helene, that you needed to go home early. There was nothing awaiting you there.

Up to that moment, you said you had been totally focused on finding the best outcome for the client firm whose name was written in black block letters across the cover of the thick file open in front of you. Then you looked up from the sheaths of paper. You had tried a vague stretch. You had thought about getting yourself a cup of coffee, but



you knew that it was not a need for caffeine that had interrupted your concentration.

You said that the sounds of the park, though filtered by the large windows closed behind your desk, seemed to have become louder. Enticing you. It is then that you thought of the coolness of the pond, of the dense bloom that covered every shrub and every branch, and of the late afternoon sunlight, as it would dance across the foliage that hung above the little park bench.

It is then that your connectedness to the present had fully returned. You had identified the cause of your unease. You remembered that, if you had not posted that last letter you would, indeed, have been in a tremendous rush to leave your office early. With trepidation, you would have rushed out to find me in the park, on our bench, to sit briefly next to me, your eyes alive with desire; the desire to take me to a place where you, where I, where we could finally embrace, devour, love each other.

So, as it were, you had heaved a heavy sigh, sad again and still not comprehending your own reasoning. Then, you admitted to yourself that the time for undivided concentration on your work had passed, and that if you were going to mourn whatever might have been you needed to do it, now, alone. An anonymous woman, on an anonymous bench, in an anonymous park.

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## *Heaven was nearby*

**A**lex? *Chérie*, now that I've managed to tear myself from this bed, from you ... mineral water, tea, coffee ... Tell me, what would you like?"

"Well, actually, there is a little more choice here than you might think. Even without resorting to room service." You looked at me quizzically, short love-tousled hair sticking out at odd angles, uninhibited by your nakedness.

I grinned, imagining a waiter coming into the room with a trolley laden with pre-dawn snacks, the kind lovers indulge in. He would find you, as you were, by the large ornate mirror that encompasses three quarters of the room; a tasteful imitation quite likely intended to remind the tourist that the real splendours of Versailles were no longer that far away. And then he would find me on the big double bed, visibly naked, too, beneath the loosely twisted sheet thrown sideways across my body.

"There's a fridge inside that console over there," I said, pointing at the cleverly sculpted piece of furniture in the corner.

"*Ah, mais c'est super ça!*" you exclaimed, a little surprised. "Very practical, but not very Montmartrois. And this brings in a nice touch, too," you added, patting the leafy plant set atop the *secretaire*. "It's very lovely here." I was pleased you were pleased with my choice of hotel, of *décor*. "Glad you didn't book yourself into one of those impersonal franchised hotels like the *Mercure*. So sterile, they give me the creeps every time I have to go in and visit someone."

I watched you move around the room, shaking that imagined creepy feeling off your slender shoulders. You moved back towards the little fridge, opened its little door and peered inside. The tan marks you had accumulated each summer, and especially those of last summer, the summer

Sophie and you had gone to Turkey, divided your body into two distinct parts, each separated from the other by the band of alabaster cream etched across your slim buttocks. Contrasted with that pale silkiness was the soft tan you had retained, more pronounced on your upper back, more diaphanous, I had noticed earlier, over your small breasts and belly.

Little did I know back in Brisbane, when I had scattered, on the coffee table, the pictures Sophie had sent of your recent holiday around Istanbul and Cappadocia, that a few months later I would be making love to you. That you, the one in the turquoise bikini who smiled so sweetly at the camera, visibly dripping wet from a dip in the hotel pool, would, so soon, become my obsession. And I a Jezebel.

“So, now that we have all these things to choose from,” you said, pulling out the makings of an incongruous snack, “tell me what you would like? *Là, tout d’suite.*” Right here, right now.

Your back still turned to me, you were near the large reproduction of one of Degas’ studies; the naked back of a woman bathed in the warm and earthy tones that gave her body a quiet and deeply sensual strength. This pastel might well be entitled *Woman Drying Her Hair*. You, by comparison, looked very frail. As my point of focus shifted, I saw you looking into the depth of the mirror, and I became

C. C. Saint-Clair

aware that, all along, you had been quietly studying my own reflected image framed by the gilded mirror.

“*Chérie, alors?*” you asked again, smiling smugly before pivoting to face me. In your hand was a fully ripe mango, a fruit from another world. I had bought it the night before, during my solitary walk through the streets of Montmartre, as I had found my way back to this hotel. In a disbelieving sort of way, I pondered the turn of events that had led to your presence, here in this room. To you, naked in front of the bed where we had made love, frantic and desperate love, satiated love, sleep-waking love until dawn.

To you, holding at breast level the fruit I had bought from an Arab vendor, in rue Caulaincourt, at the time when, unaware as you were of my presence in your neighbourhood, you would have been tossing in your own bed. Possibly regretting having sent your last letter. Possibly imagining yourself in my arms. Possibly feeling sorry for yourself, despite your endeavours to make sure that would never happen. Because of that and all the rest.

“Would you like it now? It’s a beautiful fruit, big enough for two.”

Unaware, you had struck the pose Botticelli had carved in Italian marble for *Le Fruit Défendu*. You did not know that, while in the early throes of desire for you, I had brought back from the Louvre a black and white reproduction of that masterpiece.

That was on the day before I left you, having just found you, to board the plane for Nice. That was on the afternoon of the night that had led us into our first dawn; that most awful of dawns spent pressed against each other, pressed against the door to Eli’s flat. Too afraid to let ourselves in.

Too afraid to lose control. Too afraid to have our exploding desire lead us into an inextricable remorse. Instead, for you, for me, that night became one of regrets.

Regrets of not having dared.

As I lay there watching you, propped against the headboard, in room 23, hotel du Cheval Blanc, you were unwittingly taking me the full circle. I sighed contentedly, only because I had never learnt to purr.

“Or, I could make us some little camembert and *saucisson* canapés. Little toasts, yes?”

“Adrienne, you really want to know what I would like now? Beside more of you?” I asked teasingly, back to the here and now. You detached yourself from your twin, your own reflection in the mirror, and came back to sit on the edge of the bed.

“Actually no, Alex, *chérie* ... too late for that now.” Gently you brought my thighs close around your buttocks. You leaned back against my breasts and caressed the back of my knees. “I’m the one who is going to tell you what you can have.” You turned to face me and brushed your mouth against the tip of my nose. “Lover ...” you began, with feather-light lips against my eyelashes. “*Chérie* ... right now,” you whispered on the contour of my cheekbone, “right now, Alex, you can have all of me.” Your voice trailed off in a low murmur.

You held me tightly, your breasts pressed against mine, your legs intertwined with mine. “You can have as much of me as you want and ... I’ll even throw in a strong black coffee for two ... later.” The soft tip of your tongue moistened the corner of my mouth, igniting a trail of desire, as it travelled away from my chin, down to my throat, tentatively into the hollow of my collarbone, flutter-light around one nipple, and

C. C. Saint-Clair

down into the hollow of my navel. “Just the way ... I know ... you like it.”

I sighed as your breath, warm against my pubic hair, tightened the muscles in my sex.

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I woke up in that rumpled bed. The faint rays of pale light that filtered through the shutters and the muted sounds that rose from the street signalled that dawn had let in the morning. Your arm was folded over my breasts. You were pressed against my back, the curve of your body tightly moulded against mine. Your breath came softly, regularly, as you slept, forehead against the nape of my neck. Instinctively, I reached behind to caress the small of your back and for the satiny feel of your buttocks.

A sigh and a smile of wellbeing met on my lips. And I lay there, your arm around me in the large bed not yet bathed in the Montmartre morning light. I watched it creep inwards though, mute, frail and ghostly, through the dark shutters as I watched over your sleep. As I listened to your slow breathing. As I counted the rhythm of your heartbeat right below my shoulder blade.

We were only a stone's throw away from the Venetian merry-go-round at the base of the Sacré Coeur. A stone's throw away from your own apartment. And the words you had uttered earlier floated back to my consciousness, “Right now you can have all of me.”

“Yes,” I sighed, “for right now, right now I can, have all of you.” You stirred against me. I shifted position to caress your hair the way one does to soothe a child who should

sleep a little longer. I wanted to remain silent that little moment longer, alone in our cocoon.

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“*Alors, Mesdames*, ready to order?” A waiter clothed in the Parisian black and white tradition, had finally made his way to our table wedged between the great counter and the wall. The hem of his thick black linen waistcoat rested gently on the top of the long, white, immaculate apron folded across his middle.

“*Pain Poilâne* for two, *s’il vous plait*, the Henri IV cheese platter et ... your *plateau de charcuterie Périgourdiennne*.” You glanced at me, seeking confirmation, and switched to the wine list. “And a bottle of your *Nuits St Georges*. This one, right here,” you said, pointing to the list.

The waiter, confident in his knowledge as wine advisor, as all waiters had to be at this Henri IV restaurant, arched his eyebrows, and clicked his tongue in disapproval. “May I suggest ...” he started, but firmly, albeit politely, you confirmed the choice you had made on my behalf.

“*Non, non, j’insiste*.” And smiling at me you added, unabashed, “It’s Madame’s favourite wine.” I grinned back, mimicking his quiet ‘tsk, tsk’ of disapproval, as the waiter moved away. You reached for my hand and caressed my fingers, letting the warm chestnut of your eyes melt into mine.

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Your hand tucked in mine, inside the large pocket of my linen jacket, arm against arm, shoulder against shoulder, we strolled to the tiny, ever so quaint Place Dauphine, only a couple of streets away from Quai de la Tournelle but

C. C. Saint-Clair

seemingly forgotten by time. The bay windows and terraces of the half dozen restaurants that lined it on either side glowed softly to the swaying rhythm of the candles, alight, on each table. The chatter of voices spilled into the narrow street, though muffled, as we ambled, hand in hand, without a word, too contented to talk. Then you took me to la Passerelle des Arts, that frail metallic bridge painted cast-iron green that links the narrow part of the Seine on the Rive Gauche to Quai du Louvre on the Rive Droite. You wanted to share the white fullness of the moon with me.

Anonymous lovers, we leaned on the parapet as the Bateaux Mouches glided below us, trailing shimmery ribbons of light - blue, green, gold, red and orange - on the glistening back of the river. I turned towards you, to look into your eyes blackened by the night, to reach for your lips, to take their warmth, their desire unto mine.

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Later that evening, my thoughts had turned towards a bed for the night. I had assumed we would go back to our safe haven in room 23 but you said, “Non, *chérie*, not tonight.” Your tone was unexpectedly sombre. Not tonight as in ‘Thank you m’am’? As in, ‘Don’t call us, we’ll call you’?

My heart sank. We had not yet reached the stage of easy comfort with each other. And it was far too soon to take you or your desire of me for granted. How to control the old fear that spikes each time little Alex, surely it has to do with a child-within thing, feels she is about to get left behind? How to hide the acuteness of my distress at the thought that you



and I had so suddenly reached a cul-de-sac; that you had ventured as far as you had felt it safe to do; that this was it.

You were struggling for the right words but the words you were after did not come easily. And so, an awkward silence had settled over us as I let you lead me away from the traffic of the main street. I was bracing myself. Whatever truth you were having difficulty formulating had to be faced stoically.

A mad inner scramble to rebuild defences, rendered utterly ineffectual by the last couple of days of total abandonment, churned into a self-protective mindset, the shield I needed at such times when I did not know exactly where the pain would come from. From you of course, but from what part of you? The lover-you or the faithful-partner-you? The lustful-you or the guilt-ridden-you? You stopped walking abruptly and turned me around to face you, one hand on my sleeve.

“Alex, it’s about Sophie.” I held my breath, the shield not yet in place. “Before she left ...” you began guardedly, “... she said she’d call a couple of times.” Surprisingly your voice softened and your shoulders relaxed into your words in unison with mine, “Only once actually, as opposed to ... to every night as she would normally have done ... before.” I exhaled stale breath and breathed in, deeply and strongly, wishing to gulp the cool night air. I could deal with what you needed to do. It had been a false alert. You paused and raised your chin to the lamppost that towered over us, “She said she’d only call once ... on her third night away, before she went to bed.” You glanced at me and softly, you added, “... just to see how I am.” Your eyes held mine squarely. “You understand?”

C. C. Saint-Clair

“I understand,” I answered flatly. I did understand, of course I did. I had obviously assumed, without dwelling on it, that Sophie would call, at least a couple of times, during her five days’ absence. Yes, of course, to share the highlights of the conference with you, but also to check up on you. But the fact that it was to be tonight, and that I knew she had been totally accurate in her overall suspicions, both jarred against the silken smooth backdrop of our evening.

Something else jarred, albeit differently – you had not told me about your obligation to be home that night at any prearranged time. That made me irrationally angry. I felt that I could easily slip and vent some of that anger by throwing a tantrum, ‘No problem, Adrienne!’ I could say in that hard-hitting, clipped tone that becomes mine when I want to be cutting. ‘You go home now. Make sure you’re nicely tucked in bed by the time she calls. You can always find me at the hotel when you’re done.’

But I did not. You would not have understood and it would have left me with a nasty feeling to dispose of later, because that outburst would have been unjustified. Besides, I reminded myself that I did not do tantrums. I gave them up in the Congo.

“So, I want you to come home with me.” Your eyes met mine. “I want you to see where I live. And I want to get there before she calls.” You slid the cuff of your sleeve upwards to glance at your watch. “Anyway, I can’t live forever with the one change of clothes I happened to have had in the back of my car, right? So, a night at my place will take care of that, too.” So that was it? No impasse. No farewell under a lamppost. What to do, then, with my half-in-place shield? Which command to give shield: Upgrade to total deployment! Abort! Dismantle! Stand by?

The truly nasty thing about that basic insecurity of mine is that the alarm it triggers, even once dissipated, never yields an equivalent strength of euphoria, not even of release. It just thins out.

Behind the resorption of my initial fear lurked another. That one did not stem from not wanting to see the mailbox where all of my letters had lain waiting for you to find them and secret them away. It was not connected to your apartment, the living room in which you had spent so many hours, painful ones lately, on the phone to me. It was not even because I minded spending the night there with you that this other fear had settled there. It was a simple resentment born out of having been left in the dark in terms of your evening arrangement with Sophie.

And once my first uncertainty had been assuaged by your placating tones, I understood that my residual unease, my reservations about spending the night in your apartment, were grafted on something you had said at the parc Monceau. And that something had remained sticky in the back of my mind.

We had reconnected on the green bench facing the pond, and you had just admitted that Sophie was, after all, in Brussels, as planned, but you had added with a flitting frown, “Well ... at least I think she is.”

That hook had stayed embedded in a dark little corner of my thoughts all this time and I had not dared show it to you. And even as I trailed a little behind as you stepped into the lift, I did not know how to broach the possibility that Sophie might have been giving you just enough rope with which to hang yourself.

C. C. Saint-Clair

But I let you lead me to your landing, and to your door. You were aware of my reticence too, but I doubt you had identified its cause correctly. How could you have? To your credit, though, you did what you could to ease away the shadow that had descended upon us too quickly, like the night sky that comes too suddenly at the end of a winter afternoon. I, on the other hand, must admit to not having done anything to help you in your attempts. Passive resistance was, I admit, a poor front behind which to let my apprehension run wild.

After the last turn of the bolt, you opened the front door and moved aside to let me go in first. I shook my head.

I could see that your apartment was in total darkness, and I had just had an alarming image of Sophie sitting patiently on the sofa, lying in wait to greet us with an exultant, '*Alors les nanas? Surprised?*' as the lights went on inside the living room. I tried to reason away my qualms, or was it my guilt? But it was only after you had visited all the rooms, looked under the bed and inside the wardrobes, at my request, that I agreed to sit, albeit atypically stiffly, on the sofa next to you.

You soon got up again to pour us a drink. Walking past the console on which your telephone and answering machine were set, you noticed an accumulation of messages, for you activated the message bank, perhaps absentmindedly.

A voice that could only be that of an elderly woman filtered back to me. She sounded worried and tired. She wanted to know that you were all right. She wanted to know why you had not called for news of your father during the last three evenings. He had asked after you and the caller, who was obviously your mother, had told him a fib to keep

him from fretting any more. She had signed off saying, Addy, *appelle-moi demain matin.*” You would. Tomorrow you would be back at your office and you would return your mother’s call.

A digital voice with an incongruous American accent informed you that the call had been placed at ‘9 Oh 2 pee emm.’ Then came another voice, pleasantly sensuous and clear. I was a few seconds late in recognising the contralto tones of Eli’s voice. She and Isa wished to have the two of you over for dinner soon, any night next week. Then came the series of beeps that usually indicates that the next caller had hung up. And again, a frown creased your brow.

You opened your mouth to speak, but you remained silent while you poured some whisky into two heavy cut glass tumblers and added a couple of ice cubes to each. Distractedly, you took the tumblers with you, one in each hand, to the other side of the living room instead of setting them on the coffee table. I was watching you sort through a stack of CDs when the phone rang. Its electrical pulse jarred all my nerve endings. You turned to look at me; you were ashen. You snatched the receiver from its cradle.

“*Allo, Chérie, oui ... .. Ça va? ... .. Oui, ... .. Oui, pourquoi? ... .. Mais pourquoi tu demandes? ... .. Ah, non.*” You looked awkward. You sounded awkward. Avoiding eye contact, I moved to retrieve one glass from the bookshelf where you had set them. “*Mais oui, bien sûr. Tout va bien d’ton côté? ... .. oui, oui. ... .. Raconte un peu.*” Your eyes met mine where I had retreated, to the other side of the living room, my own heart aflutter. “*Non ... .. mais non! ... .. Ben oui, comme d’hab.* Yes, late from work ... No, not with Helene. She left way before I did. No ... you know ... the usual stuff ... .. Yes, I did but only from a walk ... ..

C. C. Saint-Clair

Around the block of course ... .. Why am I out this late? *Mais enfin!* Because I felt like a bit of fresh air. *Il fait superbement doux ce soir.* It's a beautiful night here ... So, how's the conference coming along ?”

You glanced at me, lips tight, as you listened to Sophie's reaction to your first overt lies. One fist nervously clenching and unclenching near your thigh, the other tight around the phone, you frowned to a near squint, teeth firmly set on your bottom lip. She obviously wanted to know more about how you had busied yourself during these past two nights.

Had she picked up a trail, a clue in your initial hesitation, a suspicious break in your voice? Or was she simply the same caring lover-partner she had always been, simply surprised to find you a little strange? Smiling awkwardly, you moved one hand in my direction to make contact and cocked your head to one side. I read your pantomime correctly; you were sorry.

You could not help whatever it was you knew you were handling badly. I left the room to afford you the privacy you needed to pull off what was obviously a difficult conversation.

I guessed Sophie had called earlier, earlier than had been planned. Around dinner time. Not finding you at home poring over your briefs, as you should have been or would have been if ... she had hung up without leaving a message, suddenly spooked by the number of beeps she had heard before your machine had allowed her to hear your taped voice. The tell-tale beeps told her that you had not yet listened to the evening's messages. Why was that?

She would have called back, bypassing the redial key, just to make sure she had dialled the right number, all the time acutely aware it was a rather silly thing to do. Hadn't it been your voice that had told her that you were too busy, not able to pick up the phone but that you hoped she would leave a message you would be sure to return at your earliest convenience?

Then, in her hotel room, one eye on her watch, the other on the TV set because she was no longer able to concentrate on her own work, she would have waited for the agreed hour before calling again. She would have started the conversation by teasingly suggesting that perhaps you had not been where you should have been that time of night. And were you having fun? Did you swallow the hook and choke on it? Did she, in an omniscient sort of way, already know of your betrayal?

Intuiting, though not absolutely knowing, what had made you falter from the beginning of this conversation, her metaphoric teeth were justifiably locked around your ankle. While your own efforts were geared towards making her talk about her work at the conference, she was not making it easy for you to free yourself.

Standing at the balcony I had found adjacent to your bedroom, I sipped the whisky you had had time to pour. I breathed in the night, the muffled sounds that came in from above the trees. Here, above the irregular rows of apartments, yours was sheltered from the noisy exhilaration that prevailed in the streets of Montmartre, particularly at this time of the year, when the tourist season was well under way. Paris in springtime.

C. C. Saint-Clair

The sips of whisky made their way down to my belly, soothing, smoothing my constricted muscles as they went. I forced myself to give in to the warmth that had begun to radiate from my solar plexus. I breathed in.

Strong and deep, Alex. I breathed out, loosening the tension in my shoulders, back to the real situation you and I were in. You and I, Adrienne, had reconnected against all odds, in a synchronistic sort of way. We had made love passionately. We had made love tenderly. The ‘in love’ kind of love. We had walked through some of the most beautiful streets in the world. We had walked through them hand in hand.

‘*Deux femmes amoureuses,*’ I whispered into the night. Two women in love. The waiter at the Henri IV restaurant could certainly be Sophie’s witness in a court of law. ‘*Ah mais oui,* of course,’ he would state categorically. ‘It was obvious that these two women were *amantes*. Lovers, for sure.’ So might other passers-by, the ones who had whipped around to double check that, indeed, they had just passed by two women in love.

These would have been us, as we kissed on a bridge overlooking the Seine; us, walking hand in hand as opposed to arms linked, as is the customary way for women, for lesbians to do, even in ‘swinging’ Paris. These would have been us too, stealing a private moment by the moat of the castle of Vaux en Vicomte where you had driven me for a little dose of romantic French history. That would have been only moments before a goose, a white goose, a huge snapping, wing-flapping, cackling goose had come upon us on her way to somewhere. She had chased us away from our solitary vantage point. Back towards the flock of historically-minded tourists.



All these moments combined had been but a part of the reality of our time together. As I looked, eyes unfocused, into the night, something disquieting was taking place inside your living room, settling inside your head. And that was the other part of our shared reality, a bigger picture type of reality. The reality you shared with Sophie, one which she could not let go, one which you needed to hold on to.

And no matter what had happened between us, I was still the only truly mobile member of our trio. Only I was able to move on, to move away. All the way. The difference between us was only one of aptitude. I could if I wanted to. You could not, even if you wanted to.

I had come to Paris for my own form of healing, not to see you. I had had more than I had ever expected. Lady Fate had smiled upon me for the first time since the beginning of our entanglement. She had given me unexpected moments of stolen pleasure. I should not anger her. I should not be greedy. Like the gambler, I should know when to stop.

The clink of ice cubes sliding around in a glass brought me back to where I was on your balcony. You had finished your conversation with Sophie and you had come to find me. I did not turn around, opting to let you choose the move you felt comfortable to make. I stood immobile, now focused on the glittering city lights that peered at us through the trees. One hand on the balcony railing, the other holding my glass, I felt the warmth of your breath behind my ear.

I felt you move closer in behind me. I felt your forehead against my neck, your arms around my waist. I felt you gently pull me backwards against you. I had not realised I had been holding on to my breath as much as to the railing,

C. C. Saint-Clair

until it came out through half open lips, long, deep, emptying.

Inside your embrace, I turned to look into your face. Your eyes were dark, dark as the dark glistening Seine as we had gazed at it, before gazing at each other, earlier that night. I felt your desire as surely as I felt the widening crack on the brink of which your emotions teetered.

“Did Sophie believe you?”

Callous question. Though I had spoken softly, the words, or was it the implication behind the words, startled me. Your fingers twitched where they lay against the small of my back.

“Yes and no,” you sighed wearily. “I’m not sure really.”

I could have added, somewhat caustically, ‘Surely it can’t be from the lack of trying.’ But I did not. I waited for you to say more. Instead, you took my hand and led me back through the chiaroscuro of your bedroom into the subdued halogen lighting of the living room. The phone was back in its cradle, mute and once again reduced to its state of inanimate object, no longer a channeler of lies and fears, no longer the relayer of sweaty palms and half-truths. No longer able to denounce you to Sophie.

You motioned me back to the bottle-green velvet sofa but you sat, at my feet, on a thick and colourful rug. A beautiful rug, obviously Moroccan in design and colour. I had not immediately noticed it but, as I watched you tuck your feet under your buttocks and rest an elbow across my knees, totally unexpected pictures superimposed themselves, rapid-fire, behind my eyes.

Sophie, cross-legged in front of the sweat-stained Tangiers vendor. Sophie, proudly unrolling her golden fleece rug for my appraisal in the little white-washed courtyard where our affair had begun. The rug, where she had spread it, at the foot of the bed in her resort bungalow. That rug, your rug, the rug on which, exuberantly, she had wanted to make love. ‘Once christened that way, that rug will have real sentimental value,’ she had said teasingly, beckoning me to her side on the rug. ‘Come here, darling,’ she had urged, reaching for my hand. ‘Feel how soft it is.’ How more awkward can this whole thing get? She had obviously given you the rug but had she also given you the sentimental story that was attached to it? I was not going to ask. I was just going to feel awkward about it.

“So, how is she?” I asked, relieved that, head bent as you sat, you would miss my blush of embarrassment.

“*Stressée*, tired and ... suspicious,” you answered, noncommittally, your eyes on the lovely pattern of flowers on the rug’s inner border.

“Might she come back early ... just to be certain ... either way?” I inquired, trying to sound equally remote. “After all, she’s only a couple of hours away.” I meant to add, ‘It’s not as if she were on the other side of the world.’ But I did not.

“No, I don’t think so. Sophie wouldn’t leave anything half finished. Even if Paris were burning,” you said, fidgeting with the woollen fringes, “I don’t think she’d abandon her work at the conference.” I remained doubtful. “Besides, she wants to believe me.” As you looked up, I knew how helpless guilt looked in your eyes. “After our talks with Isa and Eli, that Sunday, she seemed more hopeful, more confident. More trusting than ... you know.”

Great! That really makes me feel better! You stopped abruptly aware of what you had just said. You remained

C. C. Saint-Clair

silent to better feel the echo of your words, one elbow resting on my knee, the fingers of your other hand tangling the rug's woollen strands.

So, I leaned forward to soothe the soft auburn ruffles of your hair, "And? ... Or is it a 'but' you want to tack on to what you just said?" I asked, attempting a little light-heartedness. You smiled weakly, "But ... if that silent hope of hers didn't make me feel better at the time, it makes me feel even worse now."

"Why now?"

"Because, then I had only one fear in mind."

"And now?"

"Until yesterday afternoon when I came upon you seated on our little park bench, my only fear had been that you might always be dancing just at the edge of my mind, and with that had come the realisation that I actually wanted to keep you there. On the edge of my thoughts. *Dans mon jardin secret*. My fear was knowing that I didn't want you to fade away, ever."

"And now, what's changed?" I asked pointedly, stroking the nape of your neck as you hid your face against my knees.

"What's changed?" you asked, jerking your head up to meet me square on.

Your eyes were brimming with tears. "What's new ..." you began, discreetly wiping the corner of your eye, "What's new ... is that up to the moment I found you on our bench, Alex, I could toy with the idea that I might have fabricated an aspect of you." You paused searching to connect with the next thread of your thoughts. "I was feeling reasonably safe while I was thinking that it was only in my mind that you were the absorbing person who was keeping me awake at night and away ... mentally away ... from my work during the day." You looked up again. "Now, I know you are that

way ... for me.” You dropped your forehead against my knees, banging it a little. “I’ve had you in my arms, I’ve kissed you ... I’ve walked and eaten with you. We’ve spoken nonstop. We’ve fallen asleep together and woken up together.” You raised your head once more. Your voice was quivering, “Now, Alex, what’s new is that, now, I know why I fell in love with you ... the way I did.” You paused. Confused, vanquished? Shouldn’t I have been transported by the sincerity of that acknowledgement? We both sipped from our glasses. I knew some of your mannerisms already well enough to know you had more to add. And so I waited, sphinx-like, my heart in my mouth.

“Alex ... I cannot afford to move further into it ... into us.” Your voice was once again firm. Ominously controlled. “I cannot give in to that love.” The blade had fallen. You pushed yourself up, away from the rug and away from me. You stood up, whipping a quick hand to your face.

“*Allez, chérie*, another whisky. This isn’t the time to be sad.” Then, did I hear you mutter, ‘That part can keep till later’? Or was it the ugly twin of my love for you, my dread, that had whispered that the time for sorrow would come soon enough?

For the sake of getting my blood pumping again, I got up to stretch and have a look around your interior while, your back to me, you topped up our drinks from the antique, wrought iron trolley that served as bar, at the other end of the room. Warm, welcoming, intimate; three words that best described your decor. Yes, I could understand that a sterile hotel room, colour coordinated in shades of grey, would give you ‘the creeps’ as you had said back in room 23.

An impressive bookcase lined the wall to the left of the sofa. Books, books and more books: law books, easily

C. C. Saint-Clair

recognisable by their old-world leather and gold spines, juxtaposed with what probably amounted to Agatha Christie's complete collection translated into French. Luce Irigaray and Ellen Kuzwayo shared another shelf with many others, while Françoise Giroud, Doris Lessing and Hanan al Shaykh were on the one below, tightly pressed against, perhaps oppressing, a Kandinski biography.

Somehow, I was relieved to detect an apparent lack of order in the way these hundreds of books had been stacked in the bookcase. They were arranged neither by theme nor by alphabetical order, and obviously not according to their date of publication, as another friend of mine had tried to make me do with my own books.

FNAC concert tickets on the console near the phone. Intrigued as to where your taste in music lay, I picked them up for a closer look. Two tickets for the Opera Bastille to see none other than Erica Vaughn-Dreis, the twenty-nine-year-old mezzo-soprano the operatic world had already hailed as the rightful hybrid heiress to Leila Guensche and La Callas.

I would have given an eye tooth to see, to hear Vaughn Dreis live. At the edge of the ticket, the date for which these seats were reserved was clearly visible: the evening of my flight back to Nice. Two nights away, the night of Sophie's return. Here in my hand was the indisputable confirmation, did I need it, that you had intended all along to go on living your life with as little disruption as possible.

These seats at the Opera would be a loving way for you to welcome her back into your old life, her old life. They were the tacit understanding that, steadfast in your decision to stay by her side, be it out of guilt or weakness, you were

going to make sure your lives remained full and rewarding. Either way, I wondered how long ago you had bought these tickets. Before or after you cancelled my trip to Paris? Before or after the letter that had cancelled me back in Nice? Why not share that very special recital with me? To celebrate a different, worthwhile moment.

I had made up my mind. I would finish the drink you had put inside my hand before disappearing into a hallway. Then I would rise, plead a sudden tiredness, decline your offer to drive me back to the hotel, and call for a taxi. I would take my leave and go. Yes, the time had come. The decision felt right. Why postpone? It would never get any easier.

“Six months is a long time,” you said, interrupting my thoughts. I looked up. You were standing by the sofa holding out a tray, heaped with slices of *foie gras*, smoked ham and crackers. Your face was tear-stained, like that of a child. Your ruffled hair showed where your fingers had raked through it.

You pulled the low table on the other side of the arm rest closer to me and lay the laden tray on top of it. “See how neurotic I am ... six months with you ... but six months without you. With you in my thoughts, but without you ... here, like tonight. And now that you are ... here ... in this living room where I so often imagined you ... right here, next to me, I’ve spoilt it all.” You laughed a little hollow laugh as you headed back to the trolley to retrieve your glass. But instead of coming back to the sofa, to the tray of munchies you had thrown together, you stayed there, your back turned to me.

And your back rose and fell as you breathed deeply, to steady your nerves. And I did not come to you. I did not come to you until I could not stand it anymore. Then I got

C. C. Saint-Clair

up. I came up behind you and encircled you in my arms, both hands on top of yours as they lay, curled tightly around the brass rail edge of the trolley.

As I snuggled behind you, my lips brushed past your ear. And you let me hold you. And we stayed immobile in the middle of your silent living room. I think we stayed that way for quite a while. Together and yet lost to each other. Separately lost.

And when, finally, you stirred, your cheek brushed past my lips. Spontaneously, I tightened my embrace and, like a familiar lover, I circled your ear with the tip of my tongue, circling in and around its fold. Your body relaxed as you leaned back against me. We rocked gently back and forth, back and forth, standing feet slightly apart. Slowly, you released one hand from under mine. I felt you run it, tentatively, down your hip and across, to meet in the middle, in the warmth of your thighs. Your buttocks hardened against my lower belly.

Over the thin weave of your shirt, I cupped your breast. The hardness of your nipple rubbing against the palm of my hand electrified my untimely desire of you. We were breathing in unison, more quickly now, my lips on the side of your cheek, in your hair, my breath at the nape of your neck. My hand found its way under yours, frustrated by the unyielding, unfeeling, rough seams of your jeans. Palm open, you guided gently across the mound of your sex.

I cupped your sex as I had your breast, gently, firmly. You arched your back. Your tight buttocks pushed back against my hips. My body, still anchored to the trolley by one hand, supported yours, from head to toe, as we stood there rocking while the cool night air outside your window ruffled the curtains.



You slid my hand against the firmness of your belly. I caressed your thighs. My free hand guided by yours reached for your belt buckle. I curled a finger under the top rivet of your jeans and around the second, the third and the fourth. Slowly, you guided me under the knobbly seams of the denim, under the silk of your panties to the soft, springy curls of your pubic hair. Hesitantly, my fingers found their way into the wetness of your lips, around and across. They fluttered across the little ridge of flesh, throbbing against it like tiny little heartbeats. As it hardened under my touch, my whole being focused on your soft, wet warmth. Your breathing was shallow and fast.

You had moved your left hand back to the liquor trolley for support. With your other hand, you pushed your jeans impatiently away from your crotch, down below your knees. Loins on fire, my hips and thighs pressed against the tautness of your buttocks, I surrendered to the blinding white light that your shudders had unleashed in the pit of my stomach, in the depth of my own sex.

“Chérie ... sur le tapis. The rug,” you urged, your breath short and throaty. “Alex ... quickly. Now.” You guided me to Sophie’s rug. Oh, no! Not on the rug! And there we collapsed. As I lay there disoriented, you exuberantly pulled your shirt up and over your small, erect breasts, over your head and flung it aside. Then you lay down on your side, your back turned to me. You sensed my hesitation, so you reached for my hand, to wedge me against you. “*Comme tout à l’heure ... Alex ... like before,*” you whispered, between quick breaths, your face nuzzled against my shoulder.

C. C. Saint-Clair

I resumed the position we had been in, my breasts tight against your back, my sex against your buttocks. Then, in one deft movement, you rolled from your side onto your stomach, bringing me on top, astride you. I closed in around you, hips, stomach glued to your back, my mouth brushing your ear as you rode my fingers, as they gently pushed upwards and against your sex. And together we rocked, locked in unison, locked in our embrace.

A moment later you stopped suddenly. You arched your back. Your body shuddered under mine and a breath of air pushed through your lips. You lay still for a few seconds. “Alex ... *chérie* ...” you murmured, twisting around to clasp me against you. “Alex ... look ... look at me,” you whispered, reaching again for my lips, pushing me away to see my own desire still trapped under closed eyelids.

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You stirred, then rolled to one side, pulling the sheet with you, then wedged your warm body against my belly, inside the hollow made by the angle of my tucked-up knees. I tugged a little of the sheet back across my own back and closed my eyes, wishing for a little more sleep.

The muffled sounds climbing up from the street to this bedroom, somewhere on the third floor of a building in rue Gabrielle, suggested that it might be nearer to morning than dawn. I straightened out my legs and tightened my arms around you. It is then I heard them: the soft hum of the lift and the thin metallic scraping as its doors slid open. The soft jiggle of keys and a scrape into a keyhole. One turn of the lock. Another scrape. Sophie!

I sat bolt upright, my heart pounding, panicked at the thought that any second now, Sophie would come in through your front door, through the hallway and through the half open door of this bedroom. I did not know whether I wanted to hide, or jump out of bed, or get dressed, or run to the sofa while there might still be time to pretend I had spent the night there on my own. The vision of our clothes flung over the carpet and rug, of the half empty whisky glasses and the tray of unfinished delicacies added to my alarm. And you, you lay there, peaceful in your sleep, unaware that your life was about to take the one turn you had been too indecisive to initiate yourself.

In a flash, I imagined the expression of pain, of betrayal, or would it be one of surprise, that would be the first to twist Sophie's features as she found us, naked in this bed. No, no, one thing was sure, I reasoned, grappling with colliding thoughts, if surreptitiously she had come back to Paris, so close to dawn, it would have had to be with the precise intention of exposing last night's lies. She would not be genuinely surprised then. Instead, she would be vindicated, the suspicions of the past months legitimised at last.

I did not know how to wake you, how to tell you there was no time. But you must have felt me stir and move as I touched one toe to the floor. You tried to pull me back to your warmth, mumbling something my seized-up brain was not able to process.

I whispered to you the immediacy of what was about to happen. You stiffened. You listened. We both heard it. The sound of a closing door. I had expected you to fly out of bed

C. C. Saint-Clair

and do ... something ... anything but instead you sagged back into the mattress.

The rigidity that had, momentarily, overtaken your sleep-softened body, had left as abruptly as it had taken its hold on you. From deep within your lungs came a sigh of intense relief. Only then did I understand my mistake.

“It’s next door, isn’t it?” You nodded silently. Though the danger had never been there, you had tasted some of my panic. You did not trust yourself to talk.

A red-hot flush of anger surfaced and burned my cheeks. That anger was only directed at myself. I was angry for having allowed myself to be in such a ludicrous situation.

“Nothing’s happened, Alex ... *C’est rien*,” you said, trying to lull me out of the space I was in. “It’s OK. It’s all right. Come ... here. Against me. Here ... let me hold you.” You scooted behind me, encircling me in your arms, whispering soothing sounds to my ear, gently pulling me against you, rocking me.

While you thought you were soothing away my fears, I was in fact, coming to terms with them, understanding them. And much later that morning, I recognised that we had come through another full circle. To the place where the starting and finishing points met. To the exact second when a final decision has to be made. And kept. I turned to you. I gave you a gentle kiss, and a reassuring smile, and I mussed further your sleep-tousled hair.

“*Allez*,” I said, perhaps a little abruptly. “I’ll race you to the shower. And then, because it is after all ... only six fifteen, I will treat you to a delicious breakfast, the kind I could only dream of back in Australia. The kind I was dreaming of in Nice for an entirely different reason.

What about a couple of freshly baked *croissants au beurre* and a café au lait? Like when I was little but with you, my lover, to gaze at.” I grinned, pleased with the romantic idea of an early breakfast in a Montmartre café.

“Oh, yes,” you smiled back, teasing me, “Please! How can I refuse such an unusual and daring treat in this neck of the woods?”

“Now, you, emotional illiterate! Don’t you go pretending you don’t know how significant such a trivial moment will become ... for me, once I’m back in Nice,” I retorted, with pretended annoyance. “Anywhere between here and your metro station will be just fine. Your choice.”

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“I really don’t feel like going to work, you know. I mean really, with you right here! How will I be able to concentrate while I imagine you walking alone, somewhere between here and Le Marais?” You looked up from the rim of the wide breakfast cup you held in front of your lips. Your chestnut brown eyes seemed to dance on that white arc of porcelain.

“Just can’t take another day off, not even an afternoon.”

“I know. That’s cool. I can keep busy on my own.” You looked sad.

“Hey, can’t be too greedy. I have had you all to myself. Almost two whole days and considering—” I added that playfully, not finishing my sentence, but you frowned, not

C. C. Saint-Clair

wanting to be reminded of the ‘weak way’ (your words) in which you had tried not to face our situation. Which meant that you were unable to shift any significant slot on your schedule. I patted your hand to placate that frown, to see your eyes sparkle again.

You pulled your leather-bound diary out of your briefcase. Ms d’Anville was going over her day’s commitments. You flipped through a couple of pages, pulled out your Cross pen from its sheath inside the diary cover, scribbled a couple of notes, crossed out a couple of lines and looked up, pleased with yourself.

“The bad news, *chérie*, is that we won’t meet for lunch. I’ll be at the Palais de Justice from 12 to 3. The good news is that I should be back with you by around 6. I’ll pick you up at your hotel.”

You looked up, wanting reassurance that it would be OK. I nodded. “Then ... “you said, reaching for my hand across the marble tabletop, “... tonight’s on me. First stop will be Chez Lipp for a couple of drinks and to watch the world go by. I’d like to go back there with you. I’d like to be there with you to remember that night, that first night we ... Well, that first night we connected.” You noticed my raised eyebrows.

“A bit daring, isn’t it? You might bump into someone you know.”

“I might but the odds are slim on a weeknight. And it’s only really you-know-who ... our two friends ... I’d worry about. But Isa and Eli don’t do the café scene much anymore. And as I was saying, most of us don’t really go out weeknights. We entertain at home. Simpler in many ways.” You paused, thinking ahead, “But before that ... we could go for another stroll, around the Odeon district ... or Saint Michel. Or Rivoli. It’s going to be such a pleasant evening,

yes?" I smiled. Visibly, that prospect had just added a touch of colour to this otherwise bland day at work. You were smiling again. Your eyes were warm and shiny. "Then, I'll take you to Chez Paul. We ... I don't go there often but I'm sure you'll like it. Lovely and quaint. Lots of artworks on the wall and a lot of plants. And the food there's delicious. Will you be in on this plan?"

"I'm in." I tried to muster up a cheerful smile, for myself, for you, but poised on the edge of your seat, one hand on the handle of your briefcase, you were glancing at your watch.

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An absent-minded glance, as I walked past la Fontaine Des Innocents, in the Chatelet district, and the plan you had formulated over breakfast, came back to me; a stroll around *quartier* Saint Michel, at dusk. The wish to walk there, now, on my own, was growing stronger, perhaps because on the afternoon of my arrival in Paris, I had sat by the Saint Michel fountain and had watched him, frozen in bronze, as he slew his dragon. That was shortly before my steps had started me on the long walk towards our park.

As I ambled through the streets, casting a cursory look at the displays spread inside the shop windows, I revisited the early morning incident that had startled me out of my wits. The measure of my guilt. I wanted an explanation, not for that awesome rush of adrenaline that had left me weak and shaken, but for the irrational anger that had followed. With hindsight, I was coming to the realisation that it must have been more, much more than the sheer fear of an embarrassing moment caught in the glare of Sophie's eyes that had struck such a panic chord.

C. C. Saint-Clair

So, I sat on the edge of the fountain, letting Saint Michel, as he held his dragon at sword point, tower over me. I breathed in Paris, Paris on a sunny morning, shiny and clean in the morning light. Should I have told you, any earlier, of the awareness that had, insidiously, crystallised in me? When did it get there? I only became aware of it this morning.

I think that each time you aborted our plans, at each of your cancellations, during Sophie's phone call last night, and particularly afterwards when you reiterated that in spite of your feelings, you could not, would not, give us a chance, a little something must have grown, though I did not know it was there. It must have remained undetected behind the constant screen of my anxiety.

Maybe like the grain of sand trapped inside the oyster shell calcifies into a pearl. In my case, though, that something is more akin to an emotional ulcer. In any case, that awareness and the anger felt this morning have already twisted themselves into a lump as hard as fossil coal. Adrienne, as the French say, *la boucle est bouclée*. The circle is complete.

At my feet, the erratic rhythm of the pigeons' emerald green necks propelled them, in their never-ending cobble stone picking quest, as they warbled gently inside their throat. The imagery of the felled oak, the metaphoric poem quickly etched, months ago, on the plane that had taken me away from you, to Nice, raw from having just discovered you, had returned to me. It had flitted on and off, during the past couple of days, as I saw us ostensibly creating a careful parody of the 'carefree lovers'.



The perfect cover photograph for the Lesbians' Guide to the City of Lovers.

Some lines came back to me: 'A monolith set deeply into earthy foundations, two lives entwined, the forest curls up on itself, in pain, in shock blinded and deafened, its heart cries ...' Was it that envisaged devastation which had put me in such a state, earlier this morning? Was I, in fact, attempting to shy away from the direct responsibility of being 'the saw' that bites into the centenary oak, the saw that, though it might jam, will have inflicted its fatal wound?

You and Sophie were too enmeshed in her insecurities, into your weakness-induced guilt. You would never know how to tell her of your newly-found desires, of your wish for autonomy, not even of your wish to simply stop and breathe, to reassess, if only briefly, the direction your life might need to take.

As I sat there, immobile, I understood that any palliative arrangement with you would always be with the thought of her, betrayed, bleeding, a ghost rattling your chains. You were immobilised, and so was she, being as she had become, too emotionally dependent on you. I, on the other hand, had always been mobile, maybe even too much for my own good. Certainly too much for your own tranquillity.

Was that freedom my Achilles' heel? It clearly frightened you. Or was it just a pretext? Something conveniently questionable in someone my age? '*Pierre qui roule n'amasse pas mousse.*' Something about a rolling stone not gathering moss.

Going through life solo is a two-way street. How had I made that choice? At what point of my life had I made it? Had I made that choice or did circumstances make it for me? I remember the moment when I chose to become a lesbian,

C. C. Saint-Clair

as opposed to being a woman who had simply dabbled, experimented in same-sex love.

I clearly remember, too, when I decided to not have any children. I remember the circuitous path my reasoning had meandered through before reaching that conclusion. But I do not remember having ever decided that from a particular day onwards, I would do my best to remain single, footloose and fancy-free.

Was it Luck or was it Fate who had guided other choices? Or had it been simple laziness? Had I been too lazy to work hard at making some of my relationships more successful than they had been? Too lazy, or simply not committed enough?

As I stood still by the fountain, as people brushed past me, I was acutely aware of my own resilience. I was dependent on no one. Not for the good times, organised just for one. Not in the bad times when the price to pay for solitary living, penalties and limitations befell no one but me.

Inside my line of vision stepped a young man wearing little dark round glasses perched on the thin ridge of his nose. With long black hair loosely tied into a queue de cheval, he looked like a young poet, maybe too, because of his much wrinkled, black linen suit, shiny with wear, the sleeves a little too short above his wrists.

Under one arm, he held a pile of papers that I imagined as a compilation of his own poems. He looked restless, fidgety, not unlike the pigeons at his feet. Raw and vulnerable, he seemed. As if trapped inside an unexpected beam of light from which there was no escape. As I saw him

sit on a bench and spread his sheets on his lap, my thoughts took me deeper into my own introspection.

My lack of reliance on anyone is what has kept me mobile in a way you and Sophie could no longer be. Like the mighty oak I held in awe, you rested on the strength of your combined roots. Enough with that metaphor! Away with it!

Abruptly, I sat upright on the marble edge of the fountain. It was as if the dragon of bronze had unwedged itself from under the saint's avenging sword to bite my backside. A jolt, a blinding flash of insight.

You often use the word 'benchmark'. You used it in your letters to me, you used it again last night, after Sophie's phone call, to explain how your lies to her had ratcheted more tightly the level of deception that stood between the both of you. And as I sat by the side of the fountain, I reached a benchmark of my own. Nothing had ever been so clear, not since the moment our lips, our hands, our bodies lost reason, not since we had lost ourselves in unfulfilling embraces jammed against the door of Eli's apartment.

I stood up, aware that I had to move quickly now, if I was truly determined to dismantle the thin backdrop that had been put in place during these precious couple of days "... and nights," I added, wryly. Then, a violent bump interrupted me in mid-thought.

"Watch where you're going!" I exclaimed, more startled than angry. And there he was, the young poet leaning forwards, taller than I had guessed, thin and pale, fumbling with his loose pages as he did with his apologies.

"*Oh ... Excusez-moi ... je ...*," he began. Then he bent lower down to pick up the other sheets of paper the impact of our collision had scattered at our feet. I bent down too, to

C. C. Saint-Clair

help him. Each sheet was covered with the lines and elegantly drawn notes of a musical score.

My young poet was, in fact, a musician. I smiled as he renewed confused apologies mingled with thanks. He felt the need to explain, "I wasn't ... watching." And as I was still squatting beside him, trying to keep his sheets from fluttering away in the breeze, he gained in composure. "I started this piece months ago, for her ... for Mireille ... She needs to come back to me, I need her back ... to finish ... this." He was pointing at the sheets he had clumsily wedged under his elbow.

I looked at them, secretly hoping he had remembered to number each one of them as he had composed, his heart in his fingertips, on the keyboard. The silly thing was that, just then, I was wondering if indeed, sheets of music were also numbered, like pages of prose. The fumbling young man was intent on unveiling more of his predicament, "You see ... without her by my side, it's no good ... I start things ... it's slow in coming ... she got impatient. About that ... and other things." With his sigh as cue, we both straightened up.

I handed him the last handful of sheets. He smiled a sad little boy smile "*L'amour*, you see ..." Then, as if suddenly aware of the intimacy of his disclosure, he turned away from me, hesitated briefly, then disappeared into a narrow street to the left of the Saint Michel fountain. "*Ah oui, l'amour!*" I said, wistfully. We had something in common, my musician and I: good at starting things, lousy at finishing.

Thus chastened, I affirmed my decision. I pushed on through the streets of Paris, drafting as I went, the most painful letter I had ever had to compose.

I needed to make my way back to Montmartre, back to l'hotel du Cheval Blanc, back to room 23. I needed to pack my travel bag quickly. I needed to flag down a taxi that would take me to Orly airport. I needed to stay there until I could board a plane on standby, a plane that had Nice as its destination. But first, I needed to find a florist.

I needed to have the attendant create a bouquet, fireworks of colours. Tulips were no longer in season, but I needed to offer you a bouquet, a huge bouquet, one that would wake up the walls of your office. I would have it delivered at your office between one and two, while you were at the Palais de Justice doing what you do best.

My throat constricted around a particular memory of you; that of you, happy as you were this morning, as we played under the shower, as your eyes shone large and brown

above the white porcelain of your cup. You were looking forward to our evening together. All that had been only a few hours ago. So much since then. *Mon dieu!*

Preferring to avoid, for this last time, the claustrophobic rank atmosphere that always prevailed in the metro, particularly on such a warm pleasant morning, I hastened over the Pont Saint Michel. I crossed over to l'Île de la Cité, bypassing the incomparable charm of l'Île Saint Louis in view of the long walk ahead, and aimed north on the long rue Montmartre.

I imagined your surprise when, returning to your office, you would discover the bouquet, its profusion of colours laid tenderly across your desk by your clerk. I imagined your delight as you would tear open the sealed envelope on which my handwriting had already given me away as the sender.

C. C. Saint-Clair

I imagined your pleasure as it would turn to disbelief as you scanned the lines I had penned for you. Then, the calm-headed lawyer that you are, you would ring l'hôtel du Cheval Blanc, asking for me in room 23. Then, the coldness of incredulity cloaked in dread would flood you from within.

I imagined you might, then, run downstairs in too great a haste to wait for the old 1920s wood and wrought iron cage of the rickety lift. I pictured you, once more, tapping an impatient shoe against the sidewalk. I saw you, once more, as you waited for the traffic to allow you through, into the majestic entrance to the parc Monceau.

I pictured you, walking briskly towards the little green bench by the pond, half sure, half hoping you would find me there, repentant, a little sheepish for having caused you such a fright. You might push as far as the kiosk where you would hope to find me ordering a cup of coffee in a thin plastic cup and a waffle au *sucre glacé*. And the understanding that I had been true to the words accompanying the bouquet steadily grew at each turn.

Then, you might retrace your steps. Oblivious to the tight schedule you had, only this morning, confirmed for what remained of the afternoon, you would sit on our little green bench, letting its cool greenness seep into you.

You would let the pond and the Muses and the twittering birds and the gleeful cries of little children at play calm your erratic heartbeat. And you, too, would breathe in, deep and strong, as you retraced the intensity of the last thirty-six hours, indeed, of the last six months. You would be hurting, you would be torn, but you would know, deep inside your bones, it was for the best.

You would understand it was the one unselfish act of love I could ever do for you. It is only then that you might reach inside the pocket of the fawn jacket I had picked for you as you were readying yourself for work. From its recess, you would retrieve the crumpled letter you had shoved inside it, before rushing down the three flights of stairs.

And then, only then, would you be ready to listen to my heart as it had chosen the words that would help you understand why, as you read, I would already be high in the sky. I would already be somewhere above the forests and lakes and mountain ranges that separate Paris from the south of France. You would understand, too, why I was asking you, begging you, not to resume your phone calls to Nice. Not to resume a correspondence with me.

So, I pushed on through the streets of Paris, into rue Fontaine, and through to La Place Blanche, mentally composing the most painful letter I would ever have to write. That letter, pinned to the bouquet, would set both of us, indeed the three of us, free.



C. C. Saint-Clair

Dear Reader,

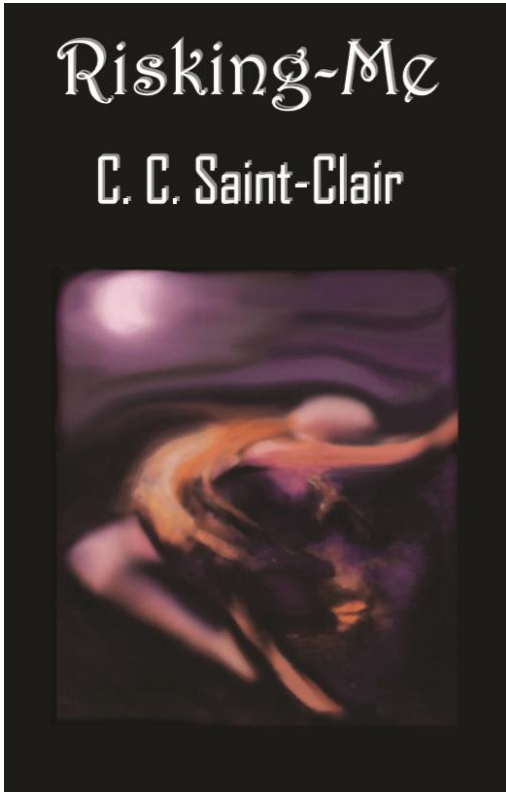
I'd like to think you have enjoyed *Benchmarks*, and so it is my pleasure to introduce the opening chapter of *Risking-me*.

To provide you with a different reading experience, I have also added **The Crab Catcher and the Fish Whisperer** [Erotica], a fairy tale devoid of fairies.

Enjoy!

*c.c. Saint-Clair*





## **Risking- Me**

‘Hey,’ says a voice; a husky, intimate voice right behind me.

‘Hey,’ I reply, turning around to meet that voice. ‘What’s—’

Green eyes, green cat’s eyes smile right into my own. ‘Do we know each other?’ I have to ask, a

frown already tightening my forehead. I’m not big on party tricks. I don’t like surprises.

‘Nope.’

‘Right.’ I turn my attention back to the dance floor, enjoying the momentarily unblocked view. Crude and elongated red and blue beams of light cut through the smoke-filled air.

‘Hey.’

‘What’s up?’ I ask curtly. ‘Am I sitting on your stool?’

‘Nope.’

‘I’m glad. Wouldn’t want to finish my beer standing up.’

The Triangle is a busy place this time of night. Men and women stand pressed together, two-deep by the bar.

C. C. Saint-Clair

‘Well, there you go,’ the woman says cheerily, ‘you can stay seated. And you can also talk to me.’

I scoot the barstool a fraction to the right to add a little to the space that separates me from that intruding stranger. ‘Ah, well, I don’t know about that.’ Her face is still so close to mine I can’t quite focus on all of it. Dark hair. Young. ‘The thing is,’ I add, feeling the need to explain, ‘I’m really not a talker.’

Green, very green eyes in the neon light that emanates from the bar. ‘I bet that’s when you don’t *feel* like talking,’ she says looking around, almost furtively, ‘But, hey, why wouldn’t you *want* to talk to me?’ A broad smile breaks on the woman’s face. She sounds earnest, as if the notion that anyone would actually *choose* to sideline her from conversation would be committing an act of sheer lunacy. She holds out her hand, ‘I’m Tamara,’ she says with an accent I associate with English private school education. Tamahrah, she said, with the emphasis on the second syllable.

Lacking the nerve to ignore her outstretched hand, I shake it. ‘Well, Tamara, nothing personal but I didn’t come here to talk. I came here to listen. And to look,’ I add conciliatorily.

‘Listen and look only? Weird.’ Her judgement passed, the young woman turns her attention briefly towards the dance floor. ‘Why not *talk*?’

‘Not in the mood. But I’m sure no one minds. Anyway, I also came down here to have a beer. See?’ I lift the bottle of Corona by its long neck and raise it to eye level.

‘So, you’re happy just listening, drinking Coronas and ... looking. What exactly are you looking at? I mean, there isn’t much action at all over there.’ A tilt of her chin indicates the sparsely populated dance floor.

The DJ's techno segment seems endless. Only two clusters of patrons, a dozen males dancing around each other and three or four females have been moved enough to get up and stay up. Near the edge of the tables, they wave their arms above their heads, half-heartedly pounding about on the wooden stage near the mirror wall that multiplies each dancer by two.

'True, not much happening over there.' I look around the small room packed with bodies milling around. 'I'm looking at movement. Movement's good. Noise is good. Beer's getting a little warm, though.'

'Came here to talk. And drink,' she says just loud enough to be heard. 'But mostly to talk. And dance.' Dahnce, she pronounced it.

Silently I envy this young woman's ease with strangers. I would've had to do some serious psyching up of myself before accosting a lone woman in a gay venue. What if she thought I was making a pass at her? Worse still, what if I was and she wasn't interested? What if I never got to know whether she might have been interested because one of her friends showed up out of nowhere making it clear that I was intruding?

I'm always hopeless at approaching strangers when my motive is not pure. *Pure*, in this context means neutral, like asking for the time because of a genuine need to know or to ask for street directions. In a club situation, rocking up to a woman just to ask her if she's got the time would probably appear terribly unimaginative and where do we go from there? And street directions are not easy to give above the din and within an enclosed space.

‘Sure. A lot of people go to bars to talk. But I don’t,’ I say looking at the young woman who meets my gaze unhurriedly. ‘Most people like talking. I don’t. Should’ve brought yourself a talking partner,’ I add, to make the point that if, as a talker she hadn’t come prepared, the lacking was of her own doing and she needn’t bother me with it.

‘I have. I am with someone. Over there.’ She points to one of the tables near the support beam on the left. ‘But she’s talking to someone else and I got bored. Thought you might be bored too. Thought we could combine.’

‘Combine what?’

‘Boredom. Yours and mine.’

‘That sounds like the makings of a mega boredom if you ask me. But I suppose you thought we might also have a dance and liven up.’

‘Nope. Just thought we might talk. But, hey, if you’d rather dance—’

‘Uh, look ...’

‘Tamara.’

‘Right, Tamara.

Nothing personal,  
really.’ I wave my  
hands. ‘I’m just not in  
the mood. I’d much  
rather—’

‘Are you French?’

There we go. That question always surfaces as is, or in its many disguised forms. And follows the usual barrage of questions. Which of the two places do I like best, Noumea or Brisbane? Wouldn’t I rather live in New Caledonia? It’s such a fun, exciting place. Strangers I don’t want to talk to always ask me these same questions.

‘No, I’m not French.’

‘You sure?’ Tamara asks, doubtful.

OK, let’s feign surprise. ‘What, am I sure I’m not French?’

‘Well, yes,’ she frowns, visibly puzzled. ‘It’s not like you’ve said much or anything but I’m sure there’s a little something French in your voice.’

Tamara might just as well be in a pet shop, perplexed by the yelp quality of a little puppy. *Are you sure this little guy has a pedigree?* she might ask. *Cute and all but hey, with that odd little yelp, it can’t possibly be pure-bred kelpie.* I give up. The shortest way out of that loop will be by telling this persistent young woman what she wants to hear.

‘Well, yes, I’m sure I’m not French but my mother is.’

The green eyes are smiling again. Almond-shaped eyes I can’t help but notice each time I turn to face her. Too old to be a baby dyke. But still young. Mid-twenties maybe. Youth, as a many splended things, is relative. And I need the use of a comparative to say *younger than*. She’s younger than I am by quite a few years.

‘I knew it,’ she exclaims, pushing herself off from her leaning position against the bar. ‘There’s a little something there,’ she gestures towards my lips, ‘that reminds me of Alex.’

‘Who’s Alex?’ My voice is void of curiosity. I only ask because I sense it’s expected of me. So, I ask.

‘My friend over there. The one’s who’s talking to someone else. Red shirt. Short hair.’

I cast a more attentive look in the direction Tamara’s pointing to. Indeed, a woman wearing a red shirt is leaning over the table, her back to the bar, talking straight into another woman’s ear.

C. C. Saint-Clair

‘The music’s even louder over there,’ Tamara explains.

‘You sound just like her.’

‘Oh, well that’s OK, then.’

‘I’ll bring her over later. You guys can talk French.’

‘Look, Tamara, as I said, nothing personal. It’s not *to you* I don’t want to talk. It’s to anyone. Anyone means even your friend.’ The woman with the red shirt has turned around and is waving in our direction. ‘Hey, I think your friend’s trying to get your attention,’ I say, hoping Tamara will take that lead and get back to her table. ‘Looks like you got your talking partner back.’ She looks across to her table and waves back.

‘Well, I’d better get back over there. What’s your name?’

‘Emilie.’

‘Ah, that’s a sweet name, that. Emilie. OK, right. If you change your mind—’

‘Right, thanks ...’ I hesitate before using her name.

‘Tamahra.’

‘Yes, thanks ... Tamara. I’ll be right. I won’t hang around here much longer.’

‘Beer’s too warm?’ she grins.

‘Beer’s too warm.’ Cute.

The rain’s still coming down steadily but typically, for the season, the air is warm all the same. I was hoping the night might’ve dried up while I was holed up in The Triangle, high above Ann Street. What the hell! A little rain won’t hurt, I remind myself. Can always do a little *Singing In The Rain* routine, minus umbrellas and heel kicks.

I hum the tune as I round the corner, one key inserted in between each finger to form a makeshift grizzly bear

claw, just in case something nasty might jump out of the shadows. Unpleasant things have been known to happen in this part of town, The Valley, as it is called by the locals.

A short brisk walk to my car parked some two hundred metres further into the dark back street. Now that's weird. Shit. Where is it? Where *is* my bloody car? Oh, god. Don't tell me it's been stolen. I quicken my pace. A Jeep's parked a few spots back but it certainly isn't mine. Even from where I stand, I can see it's pink. A pink Jeep, really. Gay-boy stuff.

Oh shit, how do I get home? Thoughts are dropping inside my head as clothes do at the end of the dry cycle. In my days of Laundromat washing, I used to watch as slowly the clothes climbed upwards inside the sluggish tumbler before dropping from the apex, one at a time, in quick succession.

How will I get to work tomorrow? In spite of myself and feeling silly for it, I run back to the corner to double-check the street sign. No question about it, this is where over two hours ago I had left my car. Oh, great! I hope they're not joy riders. Or bank robbers. I want my vehicle back with all its alloy bits, the Alpine CD player, and the soft-top intact.

What to do now? Call the cops. What will they want to know? Rego number and what else? What's my what's-it-called number? When's the expiry date on it? No, they won't ask for that. Can't believe this! If I allowed myself to, I'd be stamping my feet and cursing out loud. And that bloody rain, just to make matters worse.

My shirt is already stuck to my shoulders and breasts. I reach inside my shoulder bag to retrieve the mobile.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Oh, great, what number do I dial? I mean, it's not an emergency. It is, but again, not as such. Shouldn't clog up the 000 line. It's only *my* personal emergency.

My crisis. OK, then, let's go through information. I'll just tell the operator where I am and she might be able to give me a number for the nearest police station. Why she? What if it's a he? Hope not. Would hate to sound stupid like, 'Oh, hi there. My car's not where I left it. Would you happen to know which police number I should call?'

There are quite a few things I haven't been handling well of late. But then again, I'm suppressing an almighty *Fuck a duck! Jeez, Can't believe this is happening NOW!* Why tonight? Bloody hell! Well, at least I'm still doing the self-control bit reasonably well. Later, I'll have to ponder why I even bothered. Why not just let it rip and be rude, huh? Loud and rude. I am alone here in the pelting rain. Not a single cat out, not even a black one.

'Hey, lady! Looking for your car?'

I jerk my head up. A man's hanging over a balcony railing two storeys up. 'Yeah, the Renegade that was here. Just here!' I shout pointing at my feet.

'Yeah, well. Bad luck, ain't it.' My *bad* luck, another talker. Should definitely have stayed home tonight. Could have curled up with the latest issue of *Computer Arts* and I'd be nice and safe at home. My car would be nice and safe in the garage.

'Well, what's happened to it?' Why am I asking him? How would he know? 'Did you see what happened, I mean, thieves or anything at all?' I ask, neck craned. 'D'you happen to know which police station is the closest from here?'



‘Won’t do you no good, lady. The cops ain’t got it.’

Triple bad luck, a moron, ‘Yeah, I know they don’t have it but they—’

‘Save your spit, lady. It’s been towed away.’

‘What d’ you mean, towed away? Why?’ I ask, wiping rain off my face.

‘They do it every time, that’s how I know.’ He points to the garden across the road from his balcony. ‘The old geezers who live right there. That’s their gate.’

‘Here? That one right here?’ It’s my turn to point to the overgrown weeds flattened by the rain. The double line of cement that separates the overgrown lawn in two very small runners seems too narrow to be of use to any car. ‘It’s ... like abandoned. I mean you don’t drive a car through that,’ I shout upwards, fuming. ‘Anyway, I didn’t block it,’ I add, realising too late that I don’t need to justify anything to the man on the balcony.

‘Well, they reckon you made it difficult for them to get out. They’ve got a clapped-out four-wheel drive. Only a small one. Still they go in and out. Not often but they do.’

‘Oh.’

‘Truth is they weren’t even going out. I know for a fact. They always do that. Works every time. I reckon they must own that wrecking yard. Or the tow truck, more likely. That, or they’re real nasty. Could be that, more likely.’

‘Hey, small world.’

I whip around. The chatty young woman and her friend in the red shirt are striding towards me.

‘What’s up? Chatting up the neighbours? Thought you didn’t like to talk—’

‘My car’s been towed away,’ I answer curtly.

‘Towed where?’

C. C. Saint-Clair

‘How would *I* know?’ I snap. If I didn’t feel like talking earlier, I’m even less inclined now. ‘It’s been towed. No idea where.’

‘I reckon it’s at the Salisbury Wrecking yard,’ the man shouts down at me.

‘Right. Where the hell’s that?’

‘Half an hour that way, give or take,’ he gestures over the rooftops.

‘My cabinet-maker has his shop in Salisbury,’ says the short-haired woman in the red shirt. ‘This man’s right. It *is* about a thirty-minute drive from here.’ Under the street lamp, the short tufts on her head are silver with rain. My own hair feels totally plastered against my skull and neck. I can feel the longer bits channel the rainwater directly into my collar. I must look a fright.

‘Yeah, OK. Thanks,’ I call out to the man and nod goodbye to the women. ‘I’d better get back on Ann Street and flag a taxi. Or call one. Would you happen to know the Yellow Cab number by any chance?’ I ask them.

‘Nope,’ replies Tamara, the chatty one. ‘But, hey, Alex,’ she says tugging at her friend’s sleeve, ‘maybe we could give her a ride. It’s close to my place.’

‘Yes, but didn’t you want to spend the night at *my* place?’ The red shirt tries to put it nicely to her friend but that merely increases my embarrassment.

‘Hey, no,’ I interject waving both hands in their direction. ‘Look, that’s really nice of you but—’

‘We said your place,’ the younger one persists, ‘but mine’s fine too, you know. Hey, we’d have it to ourselves for once. Marg and Jill are away for the weekend.’

‘No, no,’ I start again, just wishing they’d leave me alone to get on with whatever it is I have to do to get my car back. ‘Really kind of you but I’ll just get a cab—’

‘Lady, I’d take ‘em up on their offer if I were you,’ calls the voice from above. The man is still on his balcony, protected from the rain that is now falling quite heavily by the overhang of the balcony above his. ‘You’ll be out there for a stretch. You’d have a long wait for a taxi, this time o’ night, what with the rain and all.’

‘Alex.’ The young woman pulls on her friend’s bag strap like a child demanding attention, ‘She’s the half-French woman I was telling you about. You know,’ she insists, ‘the one I said sounded a bit like you. Difference being *she* doesn’t like to talk.’

This Tamara, I conclude silently, must be the type of woman who insists and persists until she gets what she wants but I have to admit that her ease to tease me, as if we were old mates, is more engaging than irritating.

‘*D’accord, c’est bon.*’ Alex smiles for the first time. ‘A sister *and* a half-compatriot in distress. I guess we had better get out of the rain and find that car yard in Salisbury, then.’

‘*Uh ... bon ...* if it’s not too much of a bother for you. *C’est gentil.*’ I smile an awkward smile. I hate being indebted. I hate feeling I need rescuing.

Alex looks at me appreciatively. Must’ve been the French that did it. ‘OK. Let’s get on with it,’ she says now taking charge. ‘Blue Honda over there.’

‘Uh, right.’ And to the man on the balcony, ‘Thanks, mate.’

‘No worries,’ he calls back, already heading back inside the neon lit apartment.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Alex strides toward the midnight blue sedan and beeps its alarm as she makes her way to the driver's side. Tamara flashes a thumbs up behind her back. The signal lights blink and she opens the car door on her side to let me in the back. Gosh, when was the last time I was in the back of anyone's car?

Tamara shuts the car door and the rain stays outside. A smell of damp fur rises from pale sheep-wool covers. I slump onto the back seat. I ruffle my hair to encourage it to perk up. Useless without a brush. And I hate the feel of wet tangled hair through my fingers. It reminds me of the stringy dampness of a mop. Wet and clingy. The sight of Alex briskly rubbing her own scalp with two hands brings a little smile to my lips. Short-cropped hair has got to be the way to go.

I sigh, finally admitting to myself that I am, after all, relieved to be taken care of. At the same time, I'm already fretting about having to make conversation. Particularly with Tamara, though she is quite cute and obviously well intentioned: she's the one who, after all, has scored me the ride. My preference for silence is not personal. It's a thing I have about chitchat and the relentless pressure of coming up with appropriate rejoinders when cornered. It's knowing that I can't just get up and politely walk away. And then 'The Gnomes' as I call my—'

'You do know it will set you back a couple of hundred dollars.' Alex has turned her head slightly towards me in the back. I push away from my seat to lean in towards her.

'That much?' Shit—Almost half the car's annual insurance. 'These old codgers, as the neighbour called them,

must really be bitter about something to have called the police.’

‘I’ll say. I mean, the driveway really looked unused and I couldn’t have been more than what, a few inches across? Surely they could’ve manoeuvred out without having to call the cops.’

‘Well, could be they are sick of manoeuvring. Who would know?’ Alex changes gears. ‘So, your name is Emilie, or so said young Tam over there.’ Whereas the young one’s accent has BBC overtones, Alex’s comes out in precise and unabbreviated bursts. Probably learnt her English in America, I conclude.

‘Yes, that’s right.’

While Alex pushes the car’s gleaming dark hood through the curtain of steady rain, Tamara seems quite happy to beat time with her head, fingers drumming on her thigh to what I recognise as a Sheryl Crow song. Hey, I could almost feel like one of the Generation Y groovers.

Only a few weeks ago, though, I had been totally unaware of this singer. That was until the day I had walked into my classroom to find two students who had preceded me, bopping around a desk, hooked to a slick and silent silver discman.

‘Hey, miss, you like?’ one of the young women had called out as soon as she had detected my presence in the room. One black plastic earplug was embedded in her ear, while the other was in her friend’s, another student but one I didn’t know.

‘Hey, Erin. Do I like what?’ I had asked, unsure as to what it was I was required to pass judgement on as it could’ve been anything from the wide band of meticulously executed zigzags that parted her hair instead of the more conventional straight line, to the new line of rivets she had

C. C. Saint-Clair

stapled to her ear. ‘And what’s happened to the usual, Good Mornin’, Miss?’ I chided.

‘Mornin’, Miss,’ Erin had replied easily. ‘Sheryl Crow. Good sound, hey?’

‘Wouldn’t have a clue. Can’t hear a thing, you know.’

Before I had had time to admit more of my ignorance, Erin had unceremoniously transferred the earplug from her ear to mine. I accepted with a grin and listened, blocking my other ear with a finger. And so I became acquainted with Sheryl Crow’s music. As good a way as any. A strong but sensually lazy type of voice. Interesting phrasing.

Yes, a good sound. I nodded a smile to Erin, not yet ready to relinquish the voice. Something *about a beer buzz early in the morning*. Reminded me of the post-dawns I used to have while at uni. Party all night on weekends. Way into the other side of dawn. In and out of the shower come Monday mornings. Not long enough to totally clear away the remnants of my own Tequila buzz. Hop into a different pair of jeans. Throw on a different but equally crumpled shirt and pedal like mad on my ten-speed to the Forgan Smith building. I wasn’t often at my best on these first-up Monday morning lectures. They were the days, though.

Staying up late still is something I can slide into quite easily. It’s the having to get out of bed *and* in gear after less than eight hours of quality sleep, no allowance made for any thrashing around, not even on my own, that’s a totally unfair expectation.

At the ungodly hour of 6.30 a.m., as the first hit of caffeine and the pungent smell of Vegemite take their time waking both brain and olfactory buds, I usually stare blankly

at the already sunlit window. While I find solace in a comforting second toast, still warm from the toaster, evenly spread with butter and more Vegemite, I am cruelly aware that alarm beeps have become the bane of my working life.

In the back seat of this stranger's car, I feel the pressure to add more to my bobbed tail of an answer, to make myself sound more sociable than I am. 'I didn't really feel like talking back at The Triangle but Tamara, she managed to wangle that much out of me.'

'That's my Tam! She cannot help herself. Are you from Brisbane?'

'Oh yeah. She said I sounded a bit French, a bit like you, but *you* are not Australian, are you?'

'No, not born here but sometimes it feels like I was and have never left.' From my position off to the left of her I can see her eyes dart from ahead of the bonnet to the rear-view mirror and to the side mirror as she flicks on the right-hand signal to turn and shifts down a gear. 'That is when I get depressed about the isolation of Oz, you know, so far away from Europe, from everywhere. And depressed about my work.' The rounded 'r' of the American accent rides over the French. Left hand over the gearshift, she engages the car back into third gear. 'I teach. High school,' she states as if that says it all.

Groan. Why is it that I only ever seem to come across teachers and nurses? Nothing wrong, of course, with teachers and nurses but where are all the other lesbians, the ones who actually took up the Girls Can Do Anything dare of the eighties and eased themselves into something not so female, earmarked as the 'caring professions'? I'm still hanging out to meet a couple of jet fighter pilots. Or even a firefighter. That'd be cool.

C. C. Saint-Clair

‘It is not as rewarding as it used to be,’ Alex adds about her own occupation. Though unaffected, the way she speaks every word in full, not using any contractions, lends a certain formality to her words. Yes, I can imagine her standing in front of a classroom.

‘Know what you mean. I teach too, in a way. Institute of Further Knowledge or as the kids call it, the I-o-Fuk, a tertiary establishment. Privately operated. Not more rewarding but probably easier. Students are older. Post high school for the most part.’

‘That has got to be the better way to go nowadays. You do know the wreckers will want cash, don’t you? I would be surprised if they accepted your credit card or a personal cheque.’

‘You’re kidding, now, aren’t you?’

‘Nope, she’s not.’ Tamara’s now turned toward Alex. I had thought her lost in the music, silently drumming as she had been, eyes half-closed, but she’s obviously been following our conversation. She reaches over the handbrake and rests her hand on Alex’s thigh.

‘Jesus. I don’t go out on the scene with hundreds of dollars in my back pocket.’

‘We can stop at a hole in the wall,’ Alex replies, ignoring my temper outburst. ‘There should be a couple between here and there. It will be all right.’

‘Ah, thanks. You guys are god sent,’ I say to make amends.

‘Ah, ha. Finally, something nice from that *half*-compatriot of yours, Alex,’ Tamara chimes in, a perky grin on her face. ‘I was getting to think that apart from you, Alexandra, the French, even the *half* ones, were all as stuck up as everyone says.’ Tamara’s still stirring me.

‘OK, point taken ... and deserved. Sorry, Tamara.’



‘Tam, to friends.’

I lean back against the seat, smiling. Most likely my first smile of the evening and night combined. I stretch my legs and listen to the sluicing of the tyres while the laser moves on to the next CD. More vocals. I wonder if Alex is into classical music. That’s what I need, right here, right now, eyes closed, nerve soothing oblivion. Vivaldi’s *Motets* would do just fine, just loud enough to obliterate all else. Out of reach above the wipers, red taillights ahead lie dotted on the windshield.

Friendly women. Straightforward. But I really should’ve stayed home. I mean, really. Why even think of going out during a tropical downpour? It’s not as if I had had a hot date lined up or anything that couldn’t wait. The truth is, I just didn’t want to stay home. Didn’t want to ring up Merredyth and Joan. I didn’t want to think of Roberta though I’ve been thinking about her less often lately. That’s good. Healing’s underway.

Gentle redhead, Roberta Ryan. In spite of myself, I slowly shake my head with a sad little smile. She’d made a choice, her choice, a choice only she had to make. Now that she’s no longer a ‘Visiting Expert’ at the institute, the I-o-Fuk, where I work, it’s easier to let her slip away. Letting her go is getting easier. Letting the image of her slowly fade is now, finally, within the realm of feasibility. I settle further into the sheepskin covered seat. What we had had time to share had ridden mostly on the back of the words, on the back of thoughts exchanged and some of Roberta’s words still pop up, often at the least expected moment.

*You pick me up, set me alight, she had written.  
I am held in your fingers,  
Burning, I am in  
your mouth, Still*

C. C. Saint-Clair

*burning. Breathe  
me in, Deep.  
Suck in that slow fire,  
Down  
And further down,  
And deeper still,  
Till together, we glow in the dark,  
Replete, complete, consumed.  
Silence around us for a while.*

*I rise to go, she had added, But  
the smell of me  
Sticks to your fingers,  
Will cling to your hair,  
And the taste of me  
Will be on your  
tongue.  
And like a cigarette you can't quite give up yet,  
You reach for me again.*

To explain desire, Roberta often used the cigarette analogy. The weird thing being that neither one of us had ever smoked. Her bad girl alter ego obviously did.

‘It appeals to the bad girl in me’, she had explained once.

‘The bad girl who takes risks, the one who lives on the edge, though I don’t seem able to myself. I put the brakes on my behaviour,’ she had added, ‘but I don’t wish to rein in my imagination. Not when I think of you, Emilie. Thoughts, words, are all I have as an outlet.’

Ah, Roberta. So near you were, so close you were to staying on my raft, of taking the leap of faith with me. But Julia, her partner, won out in the end. What’s ironic is that not having known how close she had been to losing her, Julia

didn't know to rejoice in Roberta's decision. One can't celebrate keeping what one didn't know was almost lost. Then again, maybe she did.

Roberta's returned focus and active presence by her partner's side, surely, wouldn't have gone unnoticed. Be that as it may, Roberta and I tacitly have agreed to drop out of each other's orbit and heal our respective and very different wounds on our own. After all, we did end up executing a double sabotage. We sabotaged both the emotional and the sexual elements of our entanglement.

'Hey, Frenchie. Looks like we've found what you're looking for.'

'Tam, don't call her Frenchie,' Alex rebukes gently. 'I bet she doesn't like it anymore than I do when people—'

'I'm not people. We've just made friends. Haven't we, Emilie?'

'We have. But I'm not French,' I remind her, 'only my mother is.'

A brightly lit open-air enclosure lies ahead. Crystal rain pours through the harsh white light that illuminates the wreckers' yard. Nowhere, not even for the smallest of shadows, to hide from the floodlights. An eight-foot high metallic fence. Cars, wrecks. Rusted wrecks layered high in slab formations. On the furthest side, cars parked. Parked on their tyres. Still alive. Waiting to be claimed.

Tamara opens the car door and jumps down and I follow her, feet first in a puddle. My eyes roam the yard, searching for my Renegade. Dogs bark. From the far end of the yard, black blurs hurtle towards us. One Rottweiler, two Rottweilers. The high fence clicks and rattles under their

C. C. Saint-Clair

combined weight. Shiny black snouts pulled up over bared teeth. Their sharp barks bring out a man clad in grimy overalls. He's carrying a flashlight. Why a flashlight when there's so much aggressive light all around, I wonder.

'Grom! Grommet! Sit. Blackie! Sit, Black.'

Grommet and Blackie aren't ready to show off any of the skills learnt at dog school, if they ever attended. Burnished black claws grip the fence links.

'Sit!' barks the man. The dogs don't sit but their bark changes to a low, throaty rumble. He hooks a hand under each wide leather collar, flashlight tucked between index and thumb of his right hand. 'Whatta you want?' he asks gruffly.

'My car. A Renegade.'

'The tarted up one, I bet.'

I'm not going to defend my taste in custom designed alloy with this man. 'She here?'

'Rego number.' His question's as good as an order. This man barks when he speaks. So, what *is* my registration number? That's the part I always hate. That and having to key in a seldom used PIN number, unsure whether I'll get it right the first time or even on the second. I'm afraid to look like I'm tinkering with something that isn't mine to tinker with.

Merredyth had plugged me into her latest discover yourself tool and I did my homework looking for a validation of the odd way I've been wired, probably from birth.

As luck would have it, I turned out to be a Six. The Questioner. That's cool, I thought. Upon further reading, though, it turned out that I was, still am, a Phobic Six. What is a Phobic Six? I had asked myself. Well, it happens to be a quiet little mouse type of personality that allows anxiety to

peak pretty much unimpeded. But the fun part is that a Phobic Six is also one who's *so* worried about it all, and self-doubting, that she goes out of her way to stand right in the middle of train tracks and defy emotionally risky situations. Like one might spit in the wind.

Meagre reassurance to know that this odd behaviour is amply documented and supported by a long list of famous people who have come good against *that* kind of odds. Never mind, I can do this, I can answer the barking man's question. I know my license plate number. Easy.

'Two, three, four, dee, eye, kay,' I spell out to the man with the scrawny face and grimy overalls.

Tamara puffs at my side. 'Is that a personalised plate you have? Duh eye Kuh? As in sounds like *dyke*?'

'Not even. Pronounced like *dik*. Not as good. Didn't get to choose.'

Shuffling slightly ahead, she still adds, 'What a hoot.'

Alex has joined us but I wish she hadn't. I would've preferred her to stay out of the rain, comfortable and drying instead of getting wet all over again. She's standing close to her friend. Alex, obviously the eldest by quite a few years, is more reserved than Tamara. Two dark heads, different complexion. Alex's is matt, Mediterranean in tone.

Young Tamara's is English pale. There are two colours I associate with the British; racing green and many shades of pale. Anyway, one with light green cat eyes, the other with eyes that are darker.

Both very appealing women, in their separateness. A nice couple they make.

The Rottweilers growl a low rumble in the back of their throats. Their handler, quite possibly related to the hillbillies in Deliverance, pivots on his heels and without another word

C. C. Saint-Clair

drags them back, ostensibly, towards his office shack. Tamara parallels him on the other side of the fence to the yard entrance. And Alex and I follow not quite side by side and out of step with each other. She wipes the rain from her face and something in her gesture suggests weariness. 2 a.m. says my steel-rimmed watch face. I, too, want to get out of here as fast as possible but not without my Renegade.

Sloshing as through a marsh, puddles connecting to puddles, shirts plastered over our shoulders and breasts, the three of us traipse to the far gate. Through the mesh I spot the Jeep, shiny red. Its chunky bulbar and side steps glisten, not from any polishing done recently. Rain-shiny. A sigh of relief gets past my lips.

Alex looks at me sideways and smiles. 'Found it?'

'I have. I'm so darn relieved,' I say. 'It's over there.'

'Where? Oh, *that* Jeep. I have not seen one of those for a long time! A '71 limited edition, yes?'

'Yeah.' I grin surprised by her familiarity with that particular model. 'She's a bit long in the tooth but don't let all the chrome bits blind you. She still does good grunt work through ruts, sandpits and all. No mud baths though. I draw the line at driving her *intentionally* through muddy bog holes. Uh ... thanks for having held my hand through this ... little ordeal, Alex.' I look at the man coming out of the office shack. 'I, uh, I admit I felt a little overwhelmed, you know, back there in that street. A small thing really, my car getting towed away, but I was ... caught off guard, I guess,' I explain lengthily, clumsily.

'Well, no one enjoys that type of a surprise, particularly not late at night and even less when it is bucketing down,' Alex says graciously. 'Besides, my theory is simple. The law of Positive Return I call it. One day I might need a helping

hand too, and you know how it goes, someone might just be there for me.'

I nod. 'Now, I bet Tam over there's helpful to just about anyone, isn't she?'

Alex nods back, 'That's because she is curious about everyone and loves to talk. I am not. I don't. Not much. Not usually.' She gives a grin of the sheepish variety that makes me think she might have involuntarily admitted one of her shortcomings. She shrugs. 'So, where is that French mother of yours really from?'

'Noumea. Long story,' I say, aiming for a shortcut.

The way I see it, there's no need for anyone to launch into a family saga story at the best of times, and even less under the pouring rain, as we both tread gingerly through water puddles and mud. On the other hand, considering the circumstances, I feel I should try to extend myself a little more. 'In a nut shell though, my French grandparents migrated to New Caledonia way back when. The call of the exotic.'

I turn away from the puddles at my feet and catch Alex's profile. She nods without looking up. So, I continue with my abridged version of a three-generational migration away from mainland France. 'New Caledonia, Noumea, were like a little slice of paradise for most of the mainland French. You know, an island in the sun, the bungalow on the beach and a little wooden boat to putter around in. And sunshine. Well, you'd have heard about the thing the French used to have for Noumea, even from your own parents, yes?' Again, she nods keeping her eyes lined up with stepping stone puddles ahead of her. 'Well, for my grandparents, living there became a dream come true and an ideal place in which to raise their children. Much higher wages, too, than back home.' My, my, I am doing well. My mother would be really proud of me.

C. C. Saint-Clair

*Emilie is actually enjoying an impromptu conversation with a stranger, she'd say, almost clapping in glee. There's hope yet.* Except that she'd say that in French. 'So anyway, Mum grew up in Noumea. Then she met my father who was an overseer of sorts in one of the mining projects out there. And, some time later, they migrated over here, to Brisbane and they've never looked back.'

'Where's your father from?'

'Hometown: Brisbane, Australia. A fair dinkum Aussie. Anderson's his name. Emilie Anderson, that's mine.'

'Well, glad to meet you, Ms Anderson. Alex Delaforêt, *à votre service,*' she says with a quick smile in my direction. 'Did your mother maintain her French?' Without waiting, Alex answers the question by herself, 'Ah well, I guess she did which would explain the *souçon* of an accent that Tam picked up on back there and your own fluency.'

'Good ears for one so young as Tamara. Anyway, to answer your question, yes. And more than that, my mother ended up acting more French than the French ever do back home. She never quite became a part of the Australian scene. Much to my father's dismay. And in turn, that became their bone of contention. Their only bone of contention.'

'So, what did she do?' Alex asks, apparently interested by all that.

'Oh, nothing outrageous, poor thing, but on day two of her arrival here, she got involved in the *Alliance Française* crowd, you know, to hang around with other expatriates. So many years later they still take turns inviting each other over to play bridge or canasta. She only ever cooks French and she still drags Dad, almost exclusively, to French-owned restaurants.'

I mean, I love her dearly, my mother but, as a child, I could never invite my friends to the old Sat'dee arvo barbie,' I explain to see if that might make Alex smile. It does.



‘They would’ve expected sausages and meat galore, right? But *Maman* would’ve served fish, razor clams, or rabbit pieces. Nice, juicy and totally wonderful with her delicate garlic and herbs sauce. Just not really what my school mates were into in those days.’ I can see from her profile that Alex is still smiling. ‘So, to this day, *Maman* and her friends, and poor Dad by association, have yet to miss a Bastille Day celebration and they still swap their French tapes with each other as if, in all this, lay their lifeline.’ A long lifeline that spans almost half a century which means that in less than a handful of years, I’ll be half a century old myself. Such a wonderfully perky thought!

Alex splutters. I turn back to her. She blinks away rainwater and smiles a quick, very wet smile.

We’re almost at the gate. I can see the man waiting for us under a sheet of corrugated iron that projects precariously from the tin roof of his shack. Tamara has sheltered herself under an army tarp stretched above piles of chunky engine parts. She pokes at them with a booted toe.

Alex points at her. ‘She was brought up on a sailboat. A huge one. A child of the universe but short of playmates for the first seven years of her life. She makes up for it now,’ she explains with another shrug and a wave of her hands.

The dogs are nowhere to be seen now. Nowhere to be heard either. Their warning show of fangs over, I suspect they’re happier inside the office, out of the rain, delegating responsibility to their handler. The man produces a clipboard on which a release form has been clamped.

Clipboard in one hand, he extends the grimy palm of the other towards me. ‘Two hundred. Cash.’

I glance at Alex. She simply cocks an eyebrow. She was right. If it hadn't been for her, I would've made it all the way here, in a taxi, with only fifty bucks in cash and a useless credit card. That would've been a real nightmare.

'OK, Emilie. You get into that car of yours. And we will be on our way,' Alex says.

'Right, great. Can't wait to get out of here, too. Thanks a lot. I owe you. *A plus tard*,' I call out, bounding through puddles behind the cousin out of Deliverance.

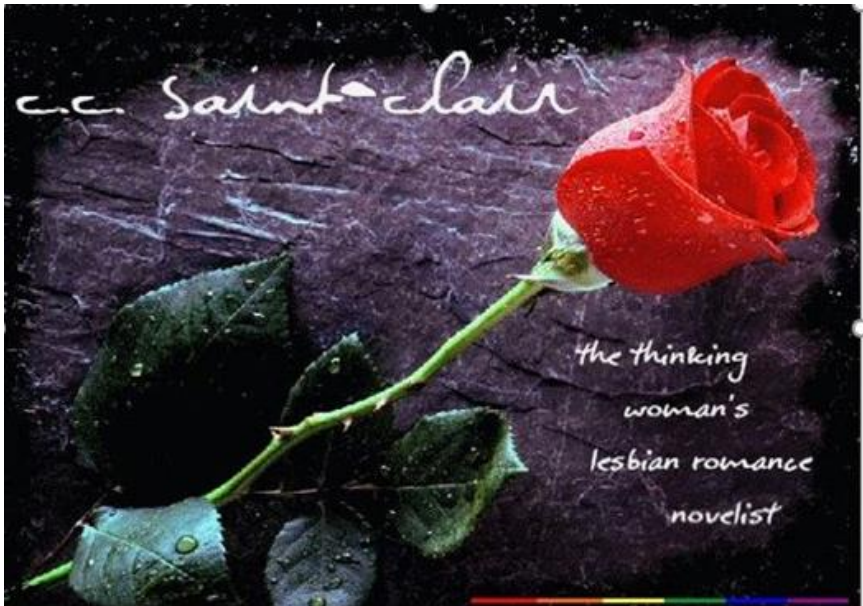
Reassured by the blinding white lights and the presence of the two women who are still within shouting distance, I follow him to the far side of the yard. Glad I don't have to hang around for the keys. Glad about my imminent return to normalcy, me behind the wheel of my own vehicle.

As I roll out of the gate in first gear, the man pushes it shut behind the Jeep and in the rear-view mirror, through the cordons of rain, I see him loop a three-inch wide chain through and around the huge wire panels.

Ahead, Alex's taillights are already receding on the other side of the watery curtain. Bet they, too, are glad to get home. Oh shit. Dismayed, I realise we haven't exchanged phone numbers. How am I going to do this *à plus tard*, thank-you thing, with them? Oh, that's bad. Nothing's gone right tonight. Should've stayed home. Hey, I remind myself, would've been a lot worse without them around. True. But now I feel such a shallow shit for not having taken the extra time to make sure I had the means of getting in touch with them, to thank them properly, Tamara, Alex, and the midnight blue sedan that got me here.

*The Crab Catcher and the Fish Whisperer*

From a distance I follow the glow worm of their taillights until they disappear out of sight. As my own headlights fend with the wet night and the deserted road that's brought us to the outskirts of Salisbury, I keep an eye out for any familiar sign. No idea where I am and I'd best stay on this road until I find a couple of intersecting street signs, then, I'll Refedex my way back to my own part of town. A quick anxious look at the petrol gauge. No need to stress, a good third of the tank remains. Cool, no more bad surprises for tonight. Home's ahead. Bed.





*The Crab  
Catcher and  
the Fish  
Whisperer*

Once upon a time in a faraway land there sat the village of Shulderstronge. This village, instead of sitting by the sea like most other villages, had only a stream for its boundary on one side and mountains on the other side. The unhappiest people were the fish trappers for, in the utter absence of tides, they could harvest only steelhead trout, the single species of fish in the stream, and in two directions only - downstream at sunrise and upstream at the hours of the long shadows.

There was not one fish trapper who didn't rue the day the founding fathers had erected their shacks on the bank of the stream, no matter how mighty a stream it was. What they truly detested each morning as they went about the business

of relieving traps of their squirming burden was the downwards journey on the strong back of water, for they knew how arduous it would be rowing upstream, all the way back to the village, canoes laden with glistening mounds of trout.

Life was somewhat easier for the crab catchers, as they never had to go very far to catch their daily quota of fresh water farahs – the local crustaceans. And it was in this village of Shulderstronge that there lived a maiden, a crab catcher herself, by the name of Sarai.

Like that of every other woman in the clan, Sarai's skin was adorned with the inked drawing of a carapace intricately interlaced with as many legs as years had passed since her fifth birthday. Thus, the tattoo of an eleven-legged crab already spread from nape to shoulder blades. The following year, the last thin crab leg drawing would be added to the overall design – the official signifier of her womanhood reached.

There would have been nothing unusual about Sarai if it had not been for the fact that she had never danced at the time of the Moon Night, the time in the cycle of nights when the moon was as big with yolk as a trout's belly, and maidens declared a momentary interest in a boy of their choosing. She did not ever go, not as far as anyone knew, to the place behind the knoll where exploring maidens went to play with the manhood of any consenting young males. And so, by day, Sarai went crab catching with other women. By night, as wicks flickered over her cheeks and cast sooty shadows over the earth-dyed threads that glided beneath her fingers, she would weave more rows on the loom.

One day, The Clan Mother would cut the wrap to free the cloth. One day, she would shape the cloth into a cape,

C. C. Saint-Clair

Sarai's cape, and with it on her back, Sarai would finally leave the village. She would simply ride the stream downwards and stay there forever. This was her secret.

One day, the Thrower of Bones spoke of changes. She spoke of hunger settling on the village. She spoke of fish made only of bones. The very next day a fish trapper died. Her fellow oarsmen said that a steelhead trap had appeared empty. Like the greedy one who wakes to find her coffers empty, the trapper had leaned too far overboard to grope and tug at the mesh until it simply pulled her in.

"She didn't thrash about," said the oarswoman. "She just vanished in the water. She melted into it like ice into broth."

No more fisherwomen died that year, but increasingly more traps were found to be empty and the fish trappers no longer needed all the power of their shoulders to row back upstream.

"This is so terrible," Sarai said to her mother. "What is there that can be done?"

"Daughter, when a stream is as bare as the fields in winter, there is nothing one can do."

The next day, Sarai was once again by the stream, conscious of each of her movements, as she shook loose the dozen of farahs that had crept into her trap. She was quick to spot the ones that had molted only recently and she shoed these back into the water.

They would be no good to anyone with their body-meat loose and floppy in their new carapace. She flipped open the females' aprons to check the density of their egg sponge - the bigger the better to barter with, as the subtle saltiness of

the egg clusters was much prized by all traders who stopped by the village.

Mindful of the great claws, she reached for the mature crustaceans, the ones with algae growing on the shell. As she had been taught to do by her mother, Sarai gripped them firmly between the index and thumb of one hand then pressed the thumb of the other firmly on the abdomen plates to check for fullness.

The sorting done, using her big toe to secure each knot, she went through the task of tying them, string under and around, pulling the ends as tight as possible, ensuring the claws were hard up against the shells. With her catch secure in a hessian bag tossed over a shoulder, she began winding her way back to the village.

Though still young, the morning sun was already aggressively hot on her skin and she had to wipe the sweat off her brow with the back of a hand. It was then that she felt it. One egg. A miniscule orange crab egg between the back of her hand and her forehead. She plucked it, tiny as it was, and stared at it on her fingertip. And that is when Sarai did what no other from her village had ever done before.

All senses suddenly on alert, Sarai furtively scanned the village just beyond the field of wild reeds.

“The females,” she said to the breeze. “The females with eggs should not be taken. They should not be taken any more.”

Squatting on the bank, she quickly lined up all the female crabs that were ready to spawn. She severed their ties and quickly jumped out of their path. Thick sword arm raised defiantly above their heads, the crustaceans scurried sideways into the stream.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Mind in a turmoil, she watched them blend with the water and disappear. She would declare her actions and the Clan Mother would find a fitting punishment - a compensation for the loss of six mature, egg-bearing crustaceans. As surely as the stream ran down through the fields, the Clan Mother's punishment would be both swift and nasty.

"From the village midden of cracked shells," spoke the Clan Mother, "you will reconstitute thirty crab skeletons. Each chitin will have its original two claws, its own six legs and the two back paddles given to it by Mother Nature. Each skeleton will be complete to the last bit of their stomach plates. Thirty crabs, Sarai, complete to the last beady-black eyeball!" The Clan Mother did not shout. She never had to. Her pronouncements, everyone knew, were final.

For the rest of what turned out to be a very long day, the longest Sarai had ever endured, she rummaged through the huge village heap of broken crab shells. Picking and flicking away bits that did not match, picking and keeping some, all the while pricking and cutting her fingertips, she had reconstituted six shells and three claws, though she had not managed one single matching crab leg or back paddle before the hours of the long shadows arrived.

She slept exhausted at the foot of the midden and again the next day and the days that followed. Sarai could not go back to her village until she had completed the task set by the Clan Mother. If she did, she would suffer a further punishment invisibility to all, even to her own mother. And so, fingertips cut to shreds by the sharp edges of the many shards she had already picked up and flicked away because



they did not match, she let her tears flow until they pooled around her in an ever-expanding watery circle.

“Sarai.”

Sarai heard her name, but she was too tired to be startled. Too tired to answer. Besides, who would be calling her name while she was invisible to all?

“Sarai.”

Sarai sat up, her face turned to the stream.

“Sarai. Look into the dark water.”

Sarai peered into the stream. All she saw was the elongated shimmer of the moon.

“Come into the heart of the stream, Sarai.”

Sarai had set but one foot into the dark waters when she was pulled right under. It was as if the stream itself had curled up around her to bring her down. Bubbles gurgled in her throat.

“Sarai,” the water whispered through her hair. “Your good deed shall be rewarded.”

Sarai opened her eyes. Darkness surrounded her. It was icy and it was still. Then it rippled and shimmered around her like black silk in the breeze. She shut her eyes tight, already fearing the creature that lurked on the other side of the darkness.

The water whispered again. “Open your eyes, Sarai. Those who do great deeds must never fear.”

Sarai opened her eyes. “What dee-”

Wrapped from wrist-to-shoulder in a pod of inked steelheads, wild hair dancing to the breath of the stream, there, right there in front of Sarai was the most beautiful sea creature she could have imagined. Something stirred deep inside Saira – something hot but diffused. Something

C. C. Saint-Clair

shimmery, coiled and electric. Something she had never, ever felt before.

Eyes drawn to the handsome fish woman's ripe and round breasts even before they were drawn to the bejewelled fishtail that sheathed the woman's lower body, she asked, "Who are -"

With a finger gently against Sarai's lips, the fish woman shushed her. Where she had placed her finger, she placed a kiss. Sarai's first kiss.

Whatever sensation it was that had made her heart beat madly, Sarai wanted more of it and, instinctively, her hands fluttered to her mons. They only lingered there for the time it takes an eye to blink, but she was able to hold on to the unfamiliar but delicious searing a moment longer.

"You have returned the female crabs to the stream, Sarai. You have remembered the Law."

"Who ... are you?" Sarai asked, still faint from the brush of the fish woman's lips.

"I am the Fish Whisperer, Sarai," the finned woman answered, as if that was to mean something to Sarai. "I am one with the Fish and all the creatures of the stream." With these words the fish woman flicked the fluke of her tail and brought it softly around Sarai.

So strong and so yielding, Sarai thought as she dared touch the tail fluke, albeit hesitantly. As fine as golden filigree was the striated network of blood vessels. Warm and wonderfully soft was the large muscle that stemmed upward

from the fluke to release from its scaly sheath the torso of a gorgeous woman with coral-green eyes.

“You make the fish stay away from our traps?” Sarai asked. “My people need fish for barter. They will -”

“There will be no more bartering of my kin until each and everyone in the village remembers the Law as it was passed on to them by their forbearers.” The creature’s mighty tail twitched threateningly. Sarai felt the motion like a field of energy rippling invisibly, displacing water somewhere below her feet. “The fish belong to the stream, not to the villagers. The stream gave freely, long ago, when the villagers respected the law of leaving the mother fish and the young. But, unlike the fields, the stream will not be fat for harvest come the next cycle. The stream is done giving. But you, Sarai, must make two wishes. The one you wish for the hardest will be yours.”

Never had a task been so painfully difficult for Sarai, not even that set by the Clan Mother. Her mind pulled one way but her heart pulled equally hard the opposite way.

Sarai wished very hard for the crab midden to sort itself out, as if by magic, just so she could become visible again and resume her life in the village. But just as her wish was about to take shape, her heart pulled her hard in another direction. To her surprise, she wished that the fish whisperer would kiss her one more time.

The Fish Whisperer watched Sarai, very much aware of the conflict that divided her. So, she waited for the seesaw to stop. She waited for the one wish to become much stronger than the other, so that Sarai would not regret her wish once it was granted. She closed her eyes, drew in her breath and released her wish.

C. C. Saint-Clair

When Sarai opened her eyes, the looming pile of cracked crab bits stood in front of her. Lined up near her feet she saw thirty crustaceans' skeletons. Clearly once broken and clearly empty of meat, they had nonetheless been carefully reassembled, piece by piece, from the shards yielded by the village heap.

When the Clan Mother greeted Sarai, the girl knew her punishment was over. She was very happy to be back to her everyday life in her mother's house, but the more she tried to call sleep unto her that night, the more she tossed and turned and tossed some more until her fingers curled around the foreign object lodged under her pillow.

In the palm of her hand shone the most beautiful fish scale she had ever seen. Much bigger than a thumbnail, it was blue and it was green and yet had the transparency of water. It shone with the colour of gold and yet it had the silver sheen of the moon when high in the sky. Sarai understood that this fish scale was a secret present from the Fish Whisperer.

She pressed it hard against her breast, closed her eyes, and the Fish Whisperer came to Sarai. She came to her as a lover and together they glided to the bottom of the stream amidst a flurry of iridescent bubbles.

With its flying buttresses of polished rock and its spires of red coral, gigantic stone guards on all sides, the crypt had the majesty of a watery cathedral vault. Just like one, it concealed the lovers from all. Through the swaying light-splattered curtain of emerald kelp only fish glided past, deep in thought, graceful and silent; rainbow fish, gold fish, silver fish, polka-dotted fish, striped fish, and masked fish; as

many varieties of fish as there were wild flowers in the fields above.

Sarai who had never seen any other fish but steelheads would have been entranced by the silent parade if she had been alone. But she was not alone at all. Reclining on an elbow, hair as wild about her as a spray of golden seaweed, the Fish Whisperer was caressing her with the long and furry plume of an anemone.

“So lovely, Sarai. So young. So strong. So responsive.”

Sarai ached to touch the fish woman and draw out of her the same dizzying craving that had gripped her, but she could not bring herself to even attempt movement. And so she lay spread-eagled, wrists and ankles loosely shackled by braided cuffs of kelp while the fish woman continued a dreamy exploration of her body.

From the tip of her chin, to the points of her erect nipples, to the flatness of her belly that cradled her belly button, to the smallest of her toes, eyes closed, gasping softly, Sarai pulsed with a desire she knew not how to control.

“What on earth are you doing! Dirty, dirty girl!”

Sarai’s breath caught in her throat. Her eyes snapped open.

Leaning on her walking stick and towering above her was Sarai’s mother.

“Go wash that hand, daughter! Immediately!” Sarai cowered under the coverlet pulled up to her chin. “Don’t just lie here, gasping like a fish out of water.”

Sarai’s mother yanked the coverlet loose from her daughter’s fingers. “Up!” Just as she was about to turn on her heels, her eye caught something she should never have seen. “My daughter?” She blanched, cane pointed at Sarai’s breast. “You?”

C. C. Saint-Clair

Sarai looked down at the spot where her mother had poked her as if she had been a diseased steelhead, and she blinked and gasped again.

Inked a couple of fingers' breadths above her nipple was the image of a fish scale. It was as blue as it was green. As transparent as wild water. It shone with the colour of gold and yet it had the silver sheen of the moon when high in the sky. Sarai's mother was horrified. "The mark of the Fish is on you!" she cried.

Long, long ago, Sarai's mother had urged her to look at the moon. "Look at Her, way over there, little darling!" Sarai had looked. She had even scrunched up her nose to better see the fish shape her mother said was there, all curled up inside the diaphanous moon-disk that lay fat and low above the village. Only very young she was then, but already she knew all about the Great Fish Spirit who, the villagers were convinced, guided the steelheads into their traps.

In thanks and honour of the Fish Spirit, on the night of every full moon, at the time when it is the fattest, the villagers would gather by the stream to sacrifice the largest female fish caught that day.

Many, many times, Sarai had watched on as the clan Mother sliced the plumpest of all fish from lip to tail to offer its heart in exchange for stream waters that sparkled, and its roe-worm in exchange for the fertility of the fish. Consequently, the folks of Shulderstronge held the belief that, should the Fish Spirit ever become dissatisfied with the villagers' offering, *She* would choose Her own sacrificial being in the form of a village maiden. On her, they had learnt to believe, *She* would leave the mark of one of Her scales.

Too confused to be dismayed, Sarai remembered the fish scale she had retrieved the night before from under her pillow. She checked inside the palm of her hand for she remembered having fallen asleep with it clutched against her breast, but she was no longer holding it. She looked under the pillow. She inspected every crease of her sleeping mat. She shook the coverlet carefully, but nowhere was there the beautiful scale she had clutched during the night. Sarai sat up, a quickened pulse erratic at her throat.

“The scale of the Fish Spirit on the tender bosom of a maiden,” sing-songed the clan Mother, as she would an old nursery rhyme. “No longer hers is the commandment to bear children. Destined to a life with Moon, a moon-dweller she becomes. The Bringer of Fish she becomes. Destined to live with Moon, she is.” The old woman looked deeply into Sarai’s eyes. “How could I have been so blind to not expect it!”

Sarai frowned. “Expect what?”

“Child, what with only fish bones as offerings moon after moon, the Coming of the Sign has been duly heralded! The Spirit of the Moon expects more, much more from us. And rightly so.”

Sarai echoed dully, “The coming of the sign?”

“Daughter of the Crab Catcher clan, you, Sarai, daughter of Genubra, are the Chosen!” The clan Mother beamed. “Rejoice, young Sarai, for you are the one who will return the steelheads to our traps.”

The clan Mother was very busy during the days that ensued, because preparations for the imminent full moon ritual were as numerous as they were sacred.

The flowers and leaves of the *hawsonia inermis* shrub had to be prepared into a dark brown unctuous cream and

C. C. Saint-Clair

left to ferment to ensure a lasting dye. Sarai had to be bathed in the waters of the mighty stream, and her lithe body oiled with the finest ointments that the clan Mother had garnered from the bartering tables and secreted away for special occasions. The tattoo on Sarai's breast had to be painted over with red clay so as to keep the spirit of the Fish linked to the earth that held the village.

From the time the Coming of the Sign had been recognized for the solemnly auspicious moment that it was, Sarai had been kept in a state not unlike that of suspended animation. Twice a day, the clan Mother cradled Sarai's head on her lap while reverently, one hand under Sarai's silk-pale throat to better prop up her head, she guided drops of treated cactus juice to fall between Sarai's lips, as carefully as if it were the distilled essence of the moon she held in the minute crystal bowl.

On the second afternoon, that of the ceremony, elder women of the clan were brought in to apply intricate designs of dark dye to the soles of Sarai's feet - filigree-fine fish tails intertwined with traditional patterns of exquisitely crafted crab shapes, framed by loose-stemmed algae formed a dense but delicate web that spread upwards to her shins.

Finally, dressed in a flowing white robe, the bride of the Moon, the Fish Spirit was readied just as the last branches and stumps were added to the ever-growing pile of wood erected on the bank, very close to the spot where Sarai's ritual bath had been administered.

By the time the moon rose above the village roofs, the pile of wood would be neatly arranged into a flat-topped pyre.



The sturdy drumbeats that had resonated dully but steadily for the past two days, stubbornly holding back at the edge of the village, suddenly broke forth. Reverberating against walls and glancing off the stream's back, the drums' cadence called in the Spirit World. Each striker brought such depth out of the drums that their fullness filled the villagers' ears and rattled their ribcage.

And then all sound stopped abruptly. A flame peaked from the base of the pyre, timid at first. In the stillness of the moon rising, the villagers watched, spellbound, slack-jawed, as the flame grew denser and brighter. They watched it birth one then two, then ten, then hundreds of little flames that also grew dense and bright and hot. The flames gained in unity and, noisily, they combined heat and strength to rush to the top - hungry for Sarai's young flesh.

As the strongest of the fire-tongues licked the edge of Sarai's robe, the villagers intoned, "She is not leaving us. She is just changing shape. She is not leaving us. She is just chang-"

Suddenly the stream rumbled mightily. The villagers turned as one to face it. Pillars of stone, they watched round-eyed as the stream spread its ever-widening back over the bank. Unable to run, they watched until they no longer could, a massive wave rise and rise.

They watched it tower above the pyre. They watched it till it shattered, releasing enough water to flood the village in such a way that infants would have been swept away if they had not been strapped to the backs of their mothers. Dogs and cats were not so lucky. When the clan Mother was finally able to scramble over what remained of the pyre,

C. C. Saint-Clair

Sarai's body could not be found amid the calcined wooden remains.

Meanwhile, far below the surface of the stream, tail coiled protectively around Sarai's body, the Fish Whisperer held her tightly, head pillowed against her breasts.

"Only fools would turn to the moon whilst their salvation lies within the stream to which they are tied more tightly than a cartwheel to its rim."

She bent her head towards Sarai and blew over her three times. Once over the crown of her head. Once over her forehead and once over her heart.

"Only fools would ever believe that the sacrifice of virgin flesh could ever atone for their greed and selfishness."

When Sarai's eyes opened drowsily, the radiant smile of the Fish Whisperer was their first point of focus. Sarai smiled back before her features rearranged themselves in a perplexed frown.

"Am I dead?"

"Sarai. You are where you belong, Sarai," is all the fish woman replied cryptically.

Sarai opened her lips to speak again, but words were too slow forming. And what she tasted between her lips was the salty tip of the Fish Whisperer's tongue – the gentlest of all caresses.

Warm and soft and utterly penetrating, the touch electrified Sarai. Body ignited by a desire she had learnt to recognize, she clung fiercely to the finned creature, as fiercely as one drowning clings to a passing log. The fish woman smiled, as she scooped up Sarai to lie her gently on a bed of coral-green sea-grass.

The Fish Whisperer undid each of the many tiny buttons that were aligned lengthwise on Sarai's billowing white robe. One pearl button at a time, from high against her throat to below her mons, she freed Sarai's body from its shroud. She caressed her young breasts and let her hand run freely along the length of Sarai's thighs.

Wedged snugly against her, Sarai sighed the sigh of the traveller who has found a haven. Body taut and hungry, she reached for the fish woman. She reached to feel her body solid under her hands, but the sea creature refused the touch. Instead, effortlessly, she rose a few hand spans above Sarai.

Arms open wide to the power of the universe, golden hair wild about her, scaly sheath riding low on her hips, the Fish Whisperer remained still, face uplifted to the moon above. Time suspended. And then, as if once aware of Sarai, the fish woman allowed the wide trailing edge of her tail to sweep slowly above Sarai's prone body. A watery shiver rippled over Sarai, igniting her skin, her thoughts, her tongue, her loins, her mons. She gasped, hands hard on her lower belly, knees opening to better guide the fish woman.

Overcome by the need to hold and touch, she called out, perhaps brashly, "Come to me, Spirit of the Stream."

The fish woman dipped and came to rest head to tail alongside Sarai who was quick to link her arms around the bejewelled hips. But the fish woman's tail would not be restrained and it flicked up before settling in a hovering pulse low, almost but not quite touching Sarai's face. The sensation was dense and palpable as if there had been touch. Sarai arched her hips again.

C. C. Saint-Clair

The Fish Whisperer slid a hand under her buttocks to better bring Sarai's mons to her lips.

"Sarai," she whispered, "Sarai, you are where you belong."

