

Risking-Me

C. C. Saint-Clair



Emilie is forty-six and rather self-conscious. She meets Alex. The similarities between the two women's life experiences and tastes are glaringly obvious, at least to the casual observer. But Emilie hasn't figured out, yet, that she is attracted to Alex's conversations and charismatic personality. They have so much in common that Alex could, at times, pass for Emilie's alter ego.

However, Emilie also meets Tamara, one of Alex's ex-lovers. Tamara is intelligent and sensual but, at twenty-eight, she might be here one day and gone the next. Despite this, Emilie is attracted to the young woman's physicality and to her youthful wisdom.

Risking – me is about triggers

As the candles flickered on the nightstands, as their glow danced sensuously across her face, her collarbone, over the immature creases of her stomach, over the length of her thighs, and the dark patch of springy hair, I knew that if I could draw I would've drawn her. Not on the spot, no, but later. I would've drawn her during a re-enactment of sorts. She would have let me draw her if I had told her of the dance of light across the valleys and planes of her strong and healthy body. If I had known how to, I would have told her about illusions, as well. About illusions of light and illusions of my own making as I delighted in the aestheticism of her naked body. I would have drawn her as she was. At ease inside her body. Her body at ease with itself and with her. Just as she was, watching me.
(Emilie)

'*Risking-me*', unlike the 'average' lesbian romance, looks at the everyday realities of women. C.C. Saint-Clair explores issues such as domestic violence, ageing and age difference between lovers, as well as the universal fears of rejection and impermanence. Within the context of these everyday realities, there are also fun times and moments of exquisite connection between women. Will Emilie's self-reflexive musings lead to insights which might gradually allow her to 'let go' and to risk becoming involved with Tamara, who is many years younger?

Layer upon delicate layer of erotic sensation and desire between Emilie and Tamara is portrayed subtly and passionately through Saint-Clair's sensuous language and imagery. This subtle, sensuous, slow spiralling of stimulation and sensation reminds me of the French confection 'mille-feuilles' (literally, a thousand leaves) - multilayered, simultaneously rich and light, creamily textured and delicious.

J. Dougherty, PhD

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C. C. SAINT-CLAIR:**

North And Left From Here

Benchmarks [currently in ebook format]

Silent Goodbyes [currently in ebook format]

Jagged Dreams

Far From Maddy

Morgan in the Mirror

SHORT STORIES

Awakening [currently in audio podcast–ebooklet]

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

The Whip Hand [free on C.C. Saint-Clair's website]

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Dedication

September 11 has come but it will never go away. Yet, at the time I scripted the incidental dinner conversation between Alex and Emilie, to have it weave in and out of such topics as female genital mutilation and the (early) plight of the Taliban women, the dealings of the men in the Afghan desert seemed to be of little interest to anyone who was not a committed feminist.

By mid-June 2001, *Risking-me* was in the hand of my literary assessor.

And so in a very humble gesture, I wish to dedicate *Risking-me* to everyone who, like Alex, thought, fought, petitioned and lobbied their governments on behalf of the women in Afghanistan, at a time when there was nothing more to defend and protect than these women who were unable to do so for themselves: invisible women unable to rise from under the weight of the Burqua.

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Dung beetle-like
I pull and tug and roll my bundle of non-answers
Of questions foraged in age-old mysteries
Mysteries of self and purpose just in case
Once baked by the desert sun
It might crack open from within
To reveal its insight
To my hard parched desert-bed of emotions
Amongst the ghost of desert rain flowers

‘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.

‘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—'

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‘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 splendored thing, 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.

'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's already stuck to my shoulders and breasts. I reach inside my shoulder bag to retrieve the mobile. 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?'

'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.

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'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.

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 pat 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's 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

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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 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.

'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, an 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 burning.
Breathe me in,
Deep.
Suck in that slow fire,
Down
And further down,
And deeper still,
Till together, we glow in the dark,*

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*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 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.’

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‘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 a 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 hillbilly in Deliverance, pivots on his heels and without another word 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 bullbar 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. *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 kid, 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 rain-water 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.

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

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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.

Two (Jill's story)

The magistrate leans forward on his elbows to better peer at Jill Mason.

'He was puffing. He was grunting,' she tells him. 'I told him to please let me up. My head was ... reeling from the first blows. I felt like throwing up. I told him, I did. I told him I had to get up. He put his hand on my mouth, I couldn't hold it in ... I just couldn't. I threw up against his hand. He shouted at me as he always did ... when ... you know ... if he's in *that* mood. He always shouts when he's in that mood. He's always sorry afterwards. He says he is and I believe him.'

I hold in my breath again and beg the powers that lie within the cosmos: please, please, let Jill Mason go on. *Make* her go on past the bit about believing in his remorse. Don't let her stop here.

'He always shouts horrible things,' Jill Mason adds, 'like how *useless* I am. And ... and ... He ... he undid his ... belt. His fly.' Her voice rises. The stale air stands still around her words. 'He went into me.' Her voice breaks. My breath fuses out from between my lips. There! It's out. She *has* said it. The magistrate has heard her. Jill Mason has exposed her husband's callousness. Publicly, for the first time! *Yes!* The magistrate will have heard her. He can't possibly have misunderstood her words. Hallelujah!

'He did,' Jill Mason adds. 'He did. I know my husband is a nice man. I still love him. But, here, today, I've got to say that he did ... that to me. And, Your Honour,' Jill adds more firmly, 'I came here because I want you to ... You need to tell him to stop. He has to stop. He does. Please.'

Silence prevails in the courtroom. She's done it. I'm so proud of her. Discreetly, I run my hand over the cloth of her jacket. She only turns her head a fraction to acknowledge me

and returns her attention to the magistrate who doesn't seem offended by having been called Your Honour.

How I wish we were seated in a criminal court. I imagine Mike Mason at the defendant's bench. I'd like him to face so much more, so much more than a simple civil Protection Order. I'd like to see him spend time, a lot of time ... doing something very painful. Something he would feel in *his* flesh. *Years* of the most unpleasant, painful and grungy type of community service would do. Grungy and painful community service for him, for as long as it takes him to rehabilitate himself. Totally. Completely. Thoroughly.

'Your ... Your Worshi-' an angry man's voice calls out interrupted by a forceful, 'Shhhh!'

There's a commotion on the right hand side of the Police Prosecutor. Mike Mason's struggling to stand up. The magistrate is now peering at the little man from above his half-moon glasses. Jill Mason is startled. Her head snaps to the right. She leans forward to better see past the Police Prosecutor. I follow the action as if from the wings of a stage. From the back and to the left of it. The Police Prosecutor, half raised from his own seat, has laid a firm restraining hand on Mike Mason's shoulder who has no choice but to sit down again but he's clearly bristling. Bristling like a cockerel on its talons. And then he jumps to his feet again.

'I won't consent to this ... this Order being made.' Mike Mason has a thin but angry voice. 'It didn't happen the way she says. She's just a vindictive- She's just being vindictive!' His thin voice fits his thin shoulders. And his thin neck. And his thinning hair.

As if jabbed by a cattle prod, Jill Mason straightens on her seat. She grips the edge of the table in front of her. She doesn't dare to look again in the direction of her husband. Thumbs hooked under the table, her fingers are taut and curved like claws against the yellow wood.

‘Hey, Emilie,’ Mary calls out. ‘Graeme wants to know something about the Communications mid-term exams. He’d like you to give him a ring.’

Groan. Moan. Graeme. Graeme. Graeme. If I could wave my fairy wand three times and change my boss into a toad, I would. No one would notice. Wrong, everyone would notice the unusual sense of tranquillity that would prevail inside these walls.

A tall, fuddy-duddy, meddling man, Graeme can no more delegate than he can think quickly, than he can explain anything in a logical, efficient manner. An aging kinesthetic and a control freak, that one. He doesn’t need to know anything about the Communications mid-term exams, at least not at this stage of the process. Everything that concerns the Communications Department is, according to the clauses in my position description, my responsibility. I should only need to run outcomes and decisions past him, once there is something tangible and measurable that needs to be discussed or measured. Or should there be a complication beyond my control to fix, one that’d be looming darkly either over my, or the institute’s horizon. Neither is the case at the moment.

Though my position is a one-person position, Graeme’s been trying to make it a shared responsibility ever since he hired me some three years ago. And I often wonder why he picked me from his shortlist of ten. Surely, it can’t be because he thought me to be a potentially biddable and pliable little piece of female dough willing to be told what, when, and how to do what I’m amply qualified to do all on my own. I might get around to asking him this very question next time I rap my knuckles against his door. For now work’s waiting, encroaching on every square inch of desk space and inside

the computer's hard drive. First things first: the first batch of evening/morning e-mails.

I slip my half-moons on the tip of my nose and squint at the screen. My mailbox has been moved around the screen yet again. Mary-my-mate has struck again. She's the Head of the IT Department and the best person I know with whom to discuss progressive pedagogy but she *still* gets a kick out of weird screen savers and imported wallpaper images. Some change the colour of their mobile cover to suit the colour of their mood, Mary changes the wallpaper on the computer we share, along with the configuration of our mailboxes and other desktop icons. Not a problem, I reason, if that's all it takes to keep her sane while at work. Besides, that little mania of hers serves as a daily reminder that permanence (of anything) is only an illusion. So, as I scan the desktop icons in search of my mailbox, I practise not being a predictable control freak. So that means I'm not allowed to either frown, grumble, or even let out a teeny-weeny groan of irritation however mild.

A click on the e-mail icon and I feel the customary pinch in my heart. Though it's already been four months since our last contact, every time I sit at this computer to check the inbox I remember the time I had blinked, leaned back into my chair and had blinked again before opening Roberta's unexpected first mail. Breathe in slowly. Slow and deep. Let Roberta go.

'Emilie, it's for you,' Mary calls out again. I look at her blankly and notice the phone in her hand.

'Uh, right. Thanks.' As I walk over to her I mouth, Is it Graeme? She shakes her head and leaves the office, a wad of papers in her hand, probably on her way to the photocopier.

'Emilie Anderson speaking,' I say slipping off my glasses, totally aware of the futility of that movement. I know they'll have to be back on my nose in a matter of seconds.

‘Ah ... hullo, Emilie Anderson. How are you?’ says the earpiece with the nicely rounded vowels of private school education. ‘Tahmahra here.’

I smile upon recognition of that polished BBC timbre. ‘Hey, Tamara! I’m really happy to hear from you. How’d you get my number?’ A frown is already knotting my brow. ‘I mean ... how did you know where to look?’

‘Knowing someone’s workplace is often a great help in finding their work number. Works even in the megalopolis of Brisbane City,’ she replies, and I imagine her silent chuckle.

‘The question was really How did you ... *know* where I work?’

‘Straight from the horse’s mouth.’ She pauses. I wait for more. ‘You told us, sorry you told Alex, you worked at the Institute of Further Knowledge. Remember that night on the way to whoop-whoop to get that car of yours? There’s only one entry in the phone book under that name. Any problem with that? As long as I don’t pass on the info to the CIA. Or to the Cyber police?’ she asks cheekily.

Or Joh’s Special Branch, I add privately. I suspect that most gays and lesbians of my age living in Queensland still live under the shadow of the legendary Bjelke-Peterson, Premier of Queensland, leader of a repressive, conservative anti-gay, anti-abortion, anti-strike, anti-this and anti-that National party.

Onwards from the ‘70s was a tender period in history during which most other democratic countries and certainly other states in Australia were learning to extend their democracy *even* to their gay population. However Joh created his Special Branch, his Thought-Police. Its purpose was to flush them out - the gay, the lesbian, the abortionist along with the *aborte*, the marijuana smoker, the prostitute but never the john - and charge them, fine them and, sometimes, even imprison them. As far as *we* know, electroshock therapy and lobotomy were left to the Russians ... Just.

Some fifteen years in power and relentlessly, diligently, Joh fought the fight in the name of endangered family values though paedophiles were left to grope in peace. And, under tables, graft money swapped hands in brown paper bags.

And his legacy is still here to be felt, not only in the mind of a still vastly homophobic older community, but more wearisome in the case of the ‘lesbian in the classroom’ it still permeates the Department of Education.

‘Emilie?’

‘Hey, yes. I’m sorry. Uh ... you mentioned the CIA and well ... it just made me think of old Joh but that was before your ti—’

‘Hey, a legend’s a legend, right? He’s that old chook who should have been indicted but wasn’t because—’

‘Yeah ... the dark years of Queensland as a dictator state. But hey, no problem,’ I reply, aware I need to lighten up. ‘That’s history ... in a way. But talking about problems, the fact is that you are, right this minute, solving one of my own.’

‘And which problem might that be?’

Mary has returned to rifle through the folder opened on her desk. ‘I didn’t have any means to thank you and Alex for ... for your help.’

I remain evasive when, at work, I have to talk about even inconsequential moments in my private life. Old reflexes die hard even if Mary and I have come a long way in terms of collegial friendship. The change came about thanks to Graeme’s stubborn aversion to anything that might challenge the Board of Directors’ imagination, such as a new course concept.

‘I know,’ is all Tamara says.

Mary and I had spontaneously bonded over the issue. We had based our presentation to the Board around the concept stressed within the new Queensland syllabus; that of a *‘sustainable mastery of a repertoire with the text of traditional and new communications technologies.’* And much to our

surprise, they didn't feel the need to kick and scream before giving us a thumb's up clearance to innovate.

If it hadn't been for that break in the well-established shared-office routine, one I had been most keen to maintain, Mary and I would've kept to our separate sides of the office and would probably never have gone beyond the polite, distant interaction that I had put in place.

She had later floored me when over a coffee chat she had casually said that she had kind of thought, all along, that I was "probably more into women than men." By the time this conversation took place, I had already had the unpleasant encounter with Liam, the student who, within full earshot of his mates, had asked me point blank if I was a lesbian. So I shouldn't really have been so surprised by Mary's perceptiveness. Sometimes my naivety surprises even me.

'Right.' I shifted the receiver against my ear. 'So, Tamara, before we forget and you hang up, how about giving me a contact number? I'd like to—'

'And what makes you think I'm about to hang up?'

'Well ...' That woman has the knack for making me feel flat-footed. 'I'm a bit busy at the moment and I assumed I—'

'Of course,' she adds, cutting me off, 'I'll hang up but not just yet. Not without asking first if you might fancy a lunch break. I happen to be in your neighbourhood.'

'Are you really?'

'I am.'

'Where are you?'

'In my car, double parked in front of the main entrance to your building. But I have stuff to do, a house call to make. I won't be free for another hour or so.'

'Are you a Blue Nurse making house calls to elderly people? Meals on Wheels, or something like that?' I am joking. At least, I think I am. She sure as hell didn't look like a medic but again, I haven't had a good look at medics for quite some years.

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‘Something like that. I work in the DV Division of Queensland Health.’

‘DV?’

‘Short for Domestic Violence.’

‘Oh.’

‘Right. So, what say we meet at the Coffee Spot? That’s next door to you. Makes parking easier. 1.45 do?’

I shift papers away from the agenda open on my desk. I glance quickly at the day’s entries. ‘Uh ... yes. Can be done. See you there, then.’

As I place the receiver back on its cradle, I’m aware of Mary. I can tell she’s glancing at me while searching for whatever other document she isn’t quick to locate. As she looks up, our eyes connect. She blushes and I smile.

‘It’s OK,’ I say, ‘It’s impossible not to overhear, I mean in such small confines, but it wasn’t a personal call. Not as such.’

The thing is that I never get personal phone calls at work. My friends, the very few close friends I have, know to call me at home. My mobile lies permanently turned off at the bottom of my bag. Roberta didn’t call me here either for reasons of privacy, her own as well as mine. Besides, she didn’t have to, as we e-mailed each other at least once a day. Read, delete, and trash. Send, delete, and trash.

We used to meet for lunch, Roberta and I. But at the beginning of it all we’d only meet for coffee on Fridays when time and work circumstances allowed. She visited the institute on that day of the week, taking time off from her busy veterinarian practice to work voluntarily with a group of our students as a ‘Visiting Expert’ in Small Business Management.

Later on, our Friday coffee chats became longer lunch-time conversations. And later again, Tuesdays became our other private days. Initially, Tuesdays provided us with a brief opportunity to touch base over yet another cup of coffee after

work. Further along our timeline, when came the inevitable consequence of the long and slow intellectual seduction of the other, Tuesday and Friday afternoons became the days we'd meet at my place. By then, we met at my place to make love and seldom had any time left over in which to fit in a cup of coffee or a chat.

Afterwards, I'd see her back to her car, burying one last kiss in the dark red, shower-damp curls on her neck. A kiss that was to keep her warm in my love until next time. Until either the following Friday or the following Tuesday. Only in the early stages of our acquaintanceship had we met at the institute's cafeteria and at the Coffee Spot next door. That was before we became aware of a mutual need to meet away from prying eyes.

The mirror tells me I look tired. I feel tired. I don't *look* grey but I feel grey. I need a haircut. I hitch the collar of my shirt back in place, higher up my neck. A quick rub of the fingertips to awaken the drowsy strands of hair that, in the absence of the customary morning hair-drying, their reward for my having missed the first series of alarm beeps, have decided to snuggle down, flat against my scalp. A line of kohl applied just as quickly on the inside of the bottom lid of each eye and I hitch my leather backpack over a shoulder.

Down a couple of flights of stairs. From inside the lobby I can tell the day has turned into another Queensland scorcher. Strong, naked sunlight streams through the sliding glass doors. Unseasonal temperatures in the mid-thirty range.

The first time Roberta had walked me back to my car under a similarly harsh sunlight, I remember how she had stood by my car door, one thumb hooked under her bag strap. Tawny eyebrows frowning. Red hair ablaze under the intense early afternoon sun. The tiniest glints of silver shone on her temples. Must not keep her standing here too long, she'll fry, I had thought from inside the Jeep's cabin. As her eyes had

touched mine, I felt a surge of tenderness, an urge to protect her from the sun's bite. Her *and* her delicate redhead's skin. It had been about the urge to protect the fragile network of wrinkles that webbed away from her round blue eyes. And more than that, I had felt the very strong urge to protect her. *Her*. Full stop. From everything. From her own impulse towards me, from me too, if need be. Breathe in. Slow and deep. Let her go.

'Hullo, hullo. Turn around and to your left.'

I recognise the tone of Tamara's voice behind me. I've walked right past her, lost as I was in my memories of Roberta.

'Tamara, hi. Glad *you* were paying attention. I was totally lost in space. Sorry.' I drop my bag on one of the three chairs vacant around the table, pull out the one directly facing Tamara and flop into it.

'Not a problem provided you don't attempt crossing a street when you're that lost in space.'

I smile quickly. 'Hey, that's the first bit of useful advice I've heard all day. Been here long?'' Silly question, I reprimand myself, realising belatedly that the table is absolutely bare of everything except for the standard issue aluminium ashtray. Readying myself for another of Tamara's playful taunts, I'm caught off guard by her direct answer.

'No, actually, I just got here myself. My visit lasted longer than anticipated.' The same husky tone I remember from that night, at the Triangle, a couple of weeks ago already, when she had tried to engage me in a conversation I didn't want to be engaged in. 'Couldn't just wrap it up before its time. Some things you just can't rush.'

'Absolutely. Was it a difficult ... visit?' I ask, aware I'm treading gingerly over unfamiliar ground.

'Yes, in a way. The woman, herself, is coming along well. As well as possible but for the fact that her lover isn't abiding by the Protection Order against her. She's making

things more difficult than they need be. Like I would have thought she'd stay clear on her own side of town.'

'Why should the poor woman be unable to go where *she* wants to go?'

Tamara looks at me blankly. 'Uh ... No, not the victim. I'm talking about her abusive partner.'

'Her *lover*?'

Tamara nods.

'*She*, the lover? Surely you're not talking about violence in a lesbian relationship?'

'I am.'

'Oh,' is all I can think to say.

'In this case the abuse is even more emotional than physical and that's what's positively freaky. On top of violent.' Green cat eyes smile seriously. 'Look, I really shouldn't discuss specifics, you know, like outside the framework of professional involvement, but I'll say that, yes, the woman I've just visited is a victim, a survivor of lesbian domestic violence, as bad as it comes.' Tamara's non verbals match the tone of the words. Her face is calm and serious. Her hands, her fingers are toying with the branches of the sunglasses in front of her on the black Marblelite tabletop.

'No kidding!' I am surprised to hear that in the mad world out there, some women victimise others.

'What's the problem?' Tamara asks frowning. 'Didn't you think women could do that as well as any male?' Her frown is set. In it I recognise the frown of someone who hasn't yet disengaged from an unpleasant reality.

'Honestly, I've never stopped to think about it.' I'm feeling clumsy, intellectually clumsy. 'I just ... well, I guess I always assume lesbian relationships are about ... well ... certainly not about violence.'

'And what are they about then?' Tamara asks, more playfully, placing her sunglasses atop her forehead. Back at The Triangle, my first impression had been that Tamara's

eyes were catlike and clear in the neon light that came from the bar. And that first impression was accurate. Her eyes are green eyes, as green as Daiti's, my last cat.

'Now, that's a question I thought you might've worked out by yourself. You're young, but you've been around. You know what lesbian relationships are about.'

'Come on, say more. What *should* they be about?' she asks, gently correcting me on my generalisations.

'Tenderness, softness,' I begin, stating what for me has always been the obvious. 'A baseline woman to woman connection and all that. The usual,' I add, with a shrug and a flash of hands. I know what I'm saying is not at all original but again I've never envisaged that chronic violence, emotional or physical, at the hand of a lover could be a part of any lesbian's lot. I thought women needed men for performances of *that* sort. I always thought that excluding men from a woman's life equation ensured that she would be as insured against violence as I have been. So far, anyway.

'I'm happy for you.' Tamara's smiling. 'Happy you've been spared,' she adds, 'but reality out there is that lesbians have like, suffered the same pain as any other woman. Nothing, in any woman's life is built-in to shield her from pain. Not even from confusion and frustration. You know what I mean?' I nod. 'And for some, well, pain and confusion translate in a momentary lack of control. Those, when not handled, become repeated, and stretch into regular doses of battering. Or doses of emotional abuse, blackmail or whatever.'

'Physical violence, really?' I enquire, showing how little I know on the topic.

'Physical. Emotional. Both part of that equation.'

'I guess it makes a certain kind of warped sense. Haven't we always said that whatever a man can do a woman can do—'

‘A woman can do better?’ she asks without stopping for confirmation, and carries on with a frown, ‘Goes for everything except for what we’re talking about. I wouldn’t go like as far as to say women do violence *better*. But, yeah, some can do it just as well and create as much damage.’

I try to catch the waiter’s eye. I’m terribly thirsty. And I need a prop for my hands.

‘But, tell me, just to move off topic for now,’ Tamara redirects, a playful expression of her face, ‘a while ago, you said I was young, right?’ I nod. ‘Lucky for you, you didn’t say *too* young.’ One dark eyebrow cocked, she wags a finger. ‘I would’ve had to ask, too young for what.’ It’s my turn to smile. “‘Young but been around”, you said, meaning what?’

‘What? The young part?’

‘For starters.’

‘Right. Should’ve said younger. Younger than I am. I’ll hazard a guess and say by some twenty years.’ I look at her wholesome and expressive face, clear of any wrinkles. Only fine and tiny lines rest lightly at the corner of her eyes, still undecided about whether to stay or blow away with the breeze.

‘Mmm ... maybe,’ she answers non-committally. ‘And the “been around” bit?’ She twirls a hand in the air, in a gesture that suggests a whirling top.

‘Ah, that’s in regards to the ease with which you engage women in conversation. Strangers. Like the way you did with me at The Triangle.’

‘As you said, it was with you. Your observation might not be worth generalising. Like it might not apply to all strangers, to all and *any* women, you know.’

‘I bet.’ I answer flatly, clearly not thinking, not even for a moment that Tamara might really be a shy and introverted little violet who decided to shrug aside self-consciousness just because it had been *me* seated at the bar that night.

I am very much aware that my days as a babe-magnet truly belong to a past that becomes ever more distant as the months flit by. The ever receding shore. Whatever magnetism seemed to have worked in my favour during an earlier period of my life has slipped off the face of *that* compass.

‘Don’t bet,’ she counters, equally flatly.

I used to like seeing myself in photographs. Now, I know why so many mature-age women groan and grumble the instant they see a camera pointed in their direction. Even mirrors are more flattering than pictures. Poorer lighting conditions indoors have become gentle friends to my face. Impossible to hide anything from the strong Queensland sunlight. In any case, my father used to say, when I’d rebuke him for the fatherly pride with which he’d pass around pictures of his only daughter, ‘The camera can only take a pic of what it sees, Mil.’ The depressing thing is that, in spite of all technological advancements, the camera can still only take a pic of what it sees.

‘OK. Then, the question going begging is, why did you find it so simple to approach me *and* persist in spite of my obvious indifference?’

‘Oh, you weren’t indifferent.’

‘I beg your pardon? I thought I’d made it clear I didn’t feel like talking.’

‘You did, but it’s not like you came across as being indifferent. Just not in the mood to talk. You said yourself.’

I sit back in my chair and chuckle. ‘You’re cute, Tamara. Really cute.’ She opens her mouth to object. ‘And like all young, *younger* women, you don’t like to be called cute.’ She closes her mouth over a Cheshire cat grin that lingers. ‘How old are you, anyway?’

‘You have an age thing or what?’

‘Didn’t used to but yes, I do now.’ Hand in the air, I’ve finally managed to catch the waiter’s attention.

‘That age thing, does it allow you to talk to a woman younger than you?’

‘It does indeed. Haven’t you noticed? But only when I’m in the mood.’

‘So, you’re in the mood now?’

‘I’m in the mood enough. A little impromptu lunch chat is good. A break from work. Not as good as a holiday but a break’s a break. Just hold on a minute.’

The waiter stops by our table. ‘And what can I do for you, ladies.’

I wish I had a dollar for every time I lacked the nerve to tell table staff, anywhere in Australia that, unless they felt I was a *lady* of the capital L variety, I’d much rather they didn’t tack on *that* word at the end of everything.

‘Two coffees?’ Tamara suggests.

‘No, thanks, I’ll pass on the coffee. I’ll just have a mineral water. Perrier, if you have any.’

‘Perrier we have. And what kind of coffee would that be?’ the waiter asks Tamara.

‘Just a flat white, tah.’

‘And would you, ladies, like to have a look at the menu?’

Tamara nods. I wonder if the word ‘lady’ has the same teeth-gnashing effect on her as it has on me. Probably not. None of my friends seem to understand the problem I have with it. ‘That’s just being polite,’ they say. ‘They’re not going to say *women*, now are they? As in ... And what can I do for you, *women*?’

Right. But why not just ask the question and leave it at that? Why tack on anything at all? Why can’t they simply say, ‘And would you like to have a look at the menu?’ And sales people could simply ask, ‘Are you being served?’ As opposed to, ‘Are you *ladies* being served?’ Why make things complicated when they can be made simple *and* Emilie-

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friendly? OK, enough already. Don't be such a grump, I admonish myself silently.

The waiter slides a short menu encased in a Perspex frame over the tabletop. 'There you go, ladies,' he says with a professional grin. Order book in hand, he wheels away towards the bar.

'Right, we should really have a look at what they do with their paninis or bagels, don't you think?'

Tamara quickly scans our options. 'Here. Have a look,' she says, sliding the Perspex frame a little closer to me. 'I'll go for their straightforward bagel, ham and cheese combo. That one right there.' Looking up from the menu and seemingly apropos of nothing, she asks, 'Do you like to go out with women younger than yourself?'

'Go out, as in what?' I ask genuinely surprised by the question.

'As in like, go out, and make love. That kind of stuff.'

'Uh ... well, I ... I used to, yes.' I was younger then, they were younger too. Now that I'm older my lovers are older too. Hadn't thought about it in such terms before but that certainly is the way it's been panning out, at least for the past decade.

'How much younger.'

'Who's getting nosy?'

'Not nosy, not really. Just chatting.'

'New acquaintances don't usually jump straight into personal info.'

'Not usually, unless there's a strong and immediate attraction,' she comments, her eyes back on the menu. 'But again,' she says, looking up and catching what must have been my startled expression, 'if you're even remotely like Alex, and I kind of think you might be, you're not into sudden and immediate attractions.'

'No, I don't think I am.' I blink. I swallow. I don't like being caught off guard. 'No, not anymore.'

There hadn't been any sudden attraction with Roberta who, as it turned out, was older than I. The seduction had been a slow moving one. More like the unhurried flow of the tide than the crash of a tidal wave. Her red hair, her gentle blue eyes in that handsome face of hers, the aura of mature, self-contained energy that she exuded, and her way with words, all had played a role in the slow seduction of my mind. My mind had been seduced long before my body. One coffee chat at a time.

'So, tell me. When's the last time you did *anything* like with anyone, say, in her thirties?'

From late teen crushes to affairs and imaginary loves in my twenties, to heartaches in my thirties, it's now all about relationships, albeit short ones or impossible ones, with women my own age, women in their mid to late forties, or women in their fifties. And life goes on. And life goes by. 'Let's just say it was a long, *long* time ago,' I tell her.

'Why's that?'

'I stay away from women much younger than I. I don't go where—'

'You avoid them, like Alex does. You don't go where they hang out.'

'That's correct, I don't go where they hang out. Now, why the grilling?'

'Well, I'm not grilling. It's more like I'm trying to figure out why women like you and Alex have this thing about age.'

'Alex can't have much of a thing about it. I mean ... seeing as the two of you are together.'

'Ah,' Tamara exclaims. 'You're like a few years too late, Emilie.'

'For what?'

'Some four years ago, you would've been right about Alex and me. But not now.'

'Go on!'

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‘We lived together then.’

‘And what, not anymore?’ I ask, still surprised. The night I met them under the rain, I thought they looked so good as a couple. Tamara shakes her head and her dark hair sways like dark silk on either side of her face. ‘What happened? You seem so close.’

‘We were, we are. But at the time I went on to do what I had planned to do before I met her.’ She twirls the aluminium ashtray on the black Marblelite surface. ‘I had planned on going back to Europe for a year, so I went back to Europe for a year.’

‘Well, there’s your answer about why women like me prefer to stay away from younger ones.’ From women like you, I almost said. She looks at me quizzically. ‘Young women are, for the most part, totally unreliable.’

‘Possibly,’ she replies, visibly not taking offence where none was intended. ‘But again, I’d been planning this trip, you know, the usual backpack tour of Europe, back home to London, long before I met Alex.’

‘Does your father still live there on his big schooner? Alex just said that you—’

‘My ... Yes. Yes, he does.’

‘That it? Just yes? You’re not going to say more?’ I ask, surprised by her sudden skid.

‘I didn’t go there to see him, my father. But Black Night is still moored in Cornwall, in the estuary. That’s where I grew up, on Black Night, a beautiful boat. A modified replica done with 100 year old hard pine. Anyway ...’ Tamara swats an invisible fly in front of her. ‘Alex being Alex, she didn’t try to talk me out of it and I was grateful for that. Like, I really wouldn’t have wanted her to plead, and bleed, like get emotional and all. Then, when I went away, I thought she’d join me there for Christmas. Or in Paris. That had been the deal. But she didn’t. She sent me something that read a bit like a Dear Jane letter. A very nice Dear Jane letter it was.’

Tamara makes a tiny snorting sound of derision. The light aluminium ashtray skittles from the fingers of one hand to the fingers of the other. ‘She explained that, you know, now that I was over there, I needed to be free and most particularly “free to explore, not only the sights,” that’s what she’d written. Her conclusion had been that there was no point in her coming over. I got really pissed off, I remember. Like I tore her letter up and thought to hell with her.’

Tamara is a fidgeter. She slides her sunglasses on the table before her. Roberta was a fidgeter, too. She’d pick paper-serviette corners to shreds. ‘And so, it’s like we lost track of each other,’ Tamara says, sliding the ashtray to her left. I look up, just as the waiter is about to lay a glass and the pear-shaped green bottle in front of me. He sets the white cup and saucer directly in front of Tamara.

‘There you go, ladies.’ He smiles pleasantly. I nod a silent thank you. ‘And would you like anything else?’

I let Tamara order for both of us.

‘See,’ Tamara starts again after the waiter moves away, ‘older women are not that reliable either. She didn’t have to do that, cut me out of her loop so quickly.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t know about that. So, when did you get back to Brisbane?’ I ask, splashing gaseous water in the tall glass in front of me.

As it turned out, Tamara who had no particular reason to rush back to Brisbane, had stayed in Europe longer than she had initially intended. She had roamed the English countryside and when she ran out of money she took to the road, following the grape picking, apple picking, strawberry plucking, wheat harvesting and corn shucking route. That route had led her through France and Italy. She had, apparently, loved every minute of it.

‘So’, she concluded, ‘I stayed in Europe an extra two years. Only got back some twelve months ago.’

‘And Alex?’

‘I looked her up. One afternoon, I waited on her doorstep at a time I knew she’d be likely to come home from school. Hoping she’d come directly home.’ Tamara lifts the cup to her lips and smiles, shaking her head again ever so slightly. ‘She still had that funny little cat of hers. A little Siamese. Do you like cats?’

‘I do.’

‘Do you have one?’

‘Not any more.’

‘Anjo died too, and Alex doesn’t want to get another one either. Anyway, while I was sitting there on top of the landing, I noticed some movement like near the hedge in the neighbour’s yard and a cream ball popped out of it, running hell for leather. It stopped near the bottom step. Anjo, the cat,’ Tamara explains again, green eyes looking at me, ‘she hadn’t seen me perched where I was on top of the stairs. Now, I was curious as to why she had bolted so quickly out of the bushes. So I watched, half expecting a dog or another cat to come tearing after her. Nothing happened. She just sat there, very properly, demurely almost, near the bottom step and wrapped her tail around her front paws. A few seconds later, though, the pink Jeep edged into the driveway. There we were both, Anjo and me, separately, watching Alex pull up.

‘In a *pink* Jeep? And I thought I was being original driving a red and chrome one. You think the cat recognised her car engine?’ So maybe that explained her familiarity with my Limited Edition Renegade, that night at the wreckers’. Alex is a Jeep aficionado.

‘I’m sure Anjo recognised it, and I bet that every day while Alex was at school thinking her cat safe at home, old Anjo would be careening in the neighbourhood but always with one ear cocked on the engine sounds coming up the road.’ Tamara takes another sip. Light green eyes grin over the rim of a white porcelain cup. The Perrier bubbles tickle

the roof of my mouth. The waiter waltzes back with two ham and cheese bagels. I nod again in his direction.

‘And so, what did Alex do when she saw you?’

‘She stalled the car.’

‘There, you see,’ I say to make clearer what I had said earlier. ‘That’s another reason why some women like me stay away from women like you.’

‘What is?’

‘Everything’s so simple for you guys. You go for a yearlong footloose, backpacking experience. It’s all very simple. You come back unexpectedly some years later into someone else’s life. It’s a surprise. It’s still simple.’ She looks at me while I formulate my punch line. ‘For us, older women, who choose to stay away from much younger ones, such things are anything but simple. In fact, for someone like me, they’ve become downright complicated, involved. Personal and intense. Like magnified. Old doubts and maybe even old wounds surface. Little bits of badly buried shrapnel. Right below the skin like big deal things.’ In a way that *you* can’t possibly understand, I would have liked to add. But that could’ve sounded like a confrontation, a challenge at the very least. The mineral water is cool in my throat.

‘Well, it could all be kept simple, couldn’t it? Like, why make things complicated when they can be kept simple, huh?’

I do whole-heartedly agree with that philosophy but I’m tempted to shake my head and pass on to a different topic. ‘Ideally, yes, of course.’ The coffee shop is emptying quickly. I’ll need to make a move soon and get back to the office. ‘Look, Tamara. Nothing personal here as I hardly know you. But here’s a little analogy; the least you own, the easier it is to travel light. True?’ Her eyes are serious. ‘What I mean is that the—’

‘Hey, I know what you mean,’ she frowns. ‘You’re saying that, I, for example, haven’t had enough time in which to

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like accumulate, deal, digest, carry injury or choke on disappointments and pain.'

'Yes, I'm impressed,' I say tapping the back of her hand on the tabletop. 'Well,' I add gently, 'at least that's the way it should be. A time, a process, and a season for everything. It's cool.'

'Actually, you'll laugh at this, but when I looked her up, I thought that if Alex wasn't seeing anyone we could, like reconnect.'

'See, that's what I mean. No time lapse. Only time compression.'

'Keeps things simple,' she says softly, as if to herself. 'As it is, they *are* simple. Simple and platonic.' A touch of nostalgia brushes over her usually playful tone.

'Well, you know what we say here in Queensland, in situations that have to do with a road already travelled?' I ask to jolly her along. She shakes her head, dark hair following the motion near her jaw line. She brings the cup to her lips. 'Been there, done that. That's what we say. Get it?' She nods. '*That* particular ground's been covered, time to graze elsewhere.'

As the words move away from my lips I remember Roberta's enigmatic words about pleasure and pain and how, one day, she had said, '*Being* there, *doing* that.'

She had adapted the local expression, thinking that from these words I would understand that she, too, was feeling the butterflies, the dips and churns of desire, the ache that I felt each time I thought of her, which had been far too often. I hadn't understood her coded message and had spent another few days agonising on how to open myself, my feelings to her, all the while bracing myself for rejection, already planning a face-saving exit.

'Well, I guess I was like, thinking we could simply take up where we'd left off. Alex wouldn't have a bar of it but she was nice enough about it. And patient. I mean, I did go

on and on about it.' Tamara smiles, shaking her head a little, almost disbelieving the memory of her antics as she had tried to make Alex reconsider.

I can almost imagine some of these antics. I can imagine Tamara's soft and husky whispers close to Alex's ear. Tamara's green eyes, intent on the other woman's face who would have patiently explained to the younger, brasher one, why their earlier episode couldn't, shouldn't, have a sequel. I can easily imagine Alex's restraint, or had it been a test of willpower, to not capitulate? To not give in to the temptation of Tamara's lean and taut body hungry for love?

Reject it out of principle, Alex probably would've urged herself, even as she found herself still alone in her large bed. Just like I would've said, though I suspect she, no more than I, would've been able to name the principle at stake. Of course, I know absolutely nothing about Alex but I can easily imagine that she would've reminded herself, too, that being strong, now, would spare her from another disillusionment further down the track. As I would. No matter how cute, no matter how feline, how sensual young Tamara happens to be. No matter how mature and more interesting she has undoubtedly become, through her years of foray into the many crowded spaces of Europe.

'Eventually I gave up,' Tamara says. 'I gave up trying to get Alex to change her mind. I agreed to be a good friend instead, like her best bud.'

Tamara doesn't quite grasp that for women like myself, and I suspect Alex, the sexual is also emotional. Emotional and personal. 'Good move, I'm sure. Tamara, how *young* are you?'

'Twenty-eight. A couple of months back.'

Groan.

'That's OK,' she continues good-naturedly. 'I bet you're not old enough to be my mother. Are you?'

‘Who says?’ I ask, making a quick calculation. ‘I could, actually, be your mother. I could’ve had you at eighteen.’ I chuckle remembering the age of my first lesbian romance: at seventeen. That somehow made the eventuality of having a daughter of Tamara’s age a tad more implausible.

‘You could have. But the good news is that I haven’t been adopted,’ she grins a Cheshire cat grin. ‘I’ve already got a biological mother. I’m not looking for a second one. The one I have, I love her dearly.’ She fiddles with her sunglasses, sliding them a couple of inches to the right and then to the left on the smooth tabletop. ‘She’s fifty-one, my mother. Her name is Laurel. She’s a lesbian too. And she’s not you. Better still, she doesn’t look at all like you.’ Green, almond-shaped eyes make direct contact with mine, holding them a second too long. A slow heat creeps upwards from my neck to my cheeks. Is young Tamara coming on to me? Breathe Emilie. You don’t want to go there. Not at all.

Is this my cue to say, Jeez, thank god for that? Oddly enough, I’m enjoying this. I might not, after all, be as anti-social as I thought I had become over the years. The usual tedium of standard, unimaginative conversation-starter questions and answers about one’s age, one’s general history, one’s work, one’s choice of suburb, where to live and buy, the countries one has visited, and Let’s exchange e-addresses, why don’t we, have been subtly bypassed here. As with Roberta.

I am enjoying Tamara’s easy personality laced, as it is, with a serious approach to things that matter, and her openness to the world at large. An openness to the world, to people that I don’t have. That I’ve never had. I *am* enjoying this young person’s company. I might even be flattered if indeed she was coming on to me. And I suddenly need to take her back to an earlier segment of this conversation. I’m curious as to why she had approached me at The Triangle and so I pop the question.

‘Now, you might not like the answer,’ she warns.

‘Hey, I’m a big girl. Shoot,’ I say, sloshing what remains of now warm Perrier inside the tall glass I still hold in my hand. The bubbles have long gone in the thirty plus degree heat.

‘Well, I had noticed you earlier when Alex and I went back to sit down, you know, after a couple of dances. Like neither one of us is really into the techno, pseudo rave beat. Anyway, for some reason, there weren’t that many people at the bar just at that moment and I happened to look across. I noticed you. I mean, you’ve seen the place, it’s not that big, right?’

‘And why did you come over?’

‘I can’t say exactly what it was about you.’ Soft green eyes roam my face. ‘But something in the way you were sitting there like, totally disconnected from the people who had begun crowding around your stool ... I don’t know really.’ She returns her attention to her sunglasses. ‘But something in your manner, in your style, reminded me of Alex. Of Alex, like when we first met. When I chatted her up because she had been looking, well, pretty much like you did that night at The Triangle. You know, like some five years earlier.’

‘Ah.’

‘It’s OK, isn’t it?’

‘Of course it’s OK. She seems like a nice person.’

‘Nice, I don’t know,’ she says with a chuckle. ‘And I don’t think she’d appreciate the compliment but lovable, yes. Totally lovable.’

‘I’m sure she is. And then, when you actually got me to say something back to you, that night, that wasn’t monosyllabic, you said I sounded a bit like her.’

‘You did. You do. It’s this French thing. The *half*-French thing, I mean. It’s like I can hear a soft French accent underlying the American sort of overtone in her voice. There’s a

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little one, too, when you talk. It's not like, as obvious as hers or anything but it's there all the same.'

I could reply, Like I hear and almost feel that sexy BBC accent in yours, but I can't say anything so direct to her, not at this stage. Probably not ever.

Tamara twirls her empty cup on its saucer. Porcelain scrapes softly against porcelain. She looks up. I grin back trying to bring Alex back to mind but I can only summon tufts of shiny wet hair and dark eyes.

Four (Jill's story)

'Mr Mason!' the Magistrate's voice rings sharply. 'Mrs Mason over here, your *wife*, is clearly bruised. Are you saying you did not inflict these bruises upon her person? Or are you suggesting you did not inflict them upon her under the circumstances she has described for us?'

Jill Mason stares ahead but her left hand dips down, blind, searching for the bag she knows is at her feet. I reach for the bag myself and hand it to her.

'It's OK, Jill. It'll be all right,' I whisper to take the bite away from her husband's outburst.

She quickly peers inside her bag and retrieves a little packet of tissues and drops the bag at her feet.

'She ... I ... she just wants to get back at me! *Useless*,' he spits, as if venom.

'Frankly, Mr Mason,' begins the magistrate rather slowly, 'at this stage of the proceedings, the thought that Mrs Mason might want to seek retribution against you would not surprise me. She has, I suspect, due cause to do so. But this is not a criminal court, Mr Mason. No one has to prove you guilty beyond any shadow of a doubt. The purpose of this hearing is solely to determine whether the complainant needs the Court's help to gain a little space in which to breathe and heal. So the question is, should this Court grant Mrs Mason the space in which to heal and think? I say this Court must. This court will grant Mrs Mason the Protection Order she seeks.'

Mike Mason, viewed from the back, seems subdued. The Police Prosecutor's torso is still open to Mike Mason's shoulder and forearm but he's no longer restraining him. At forty-nine years of age, Mike Mason strikes me as a puny, mean, off-centre weasel of a man, only a wife and mother

could love, if anyone could. He is, too, in total avoidance of his responsibility.

The magistrate is scribbling something on the papers in front of him. *'Mr Mason, the Court needs to hear where your consent lies in regards to the Order I'm about to have established. Mr Mason, I urge you to reach deep within your conscience. Do you understand, Mr Mason, why an Order will be drawn up, an Order that has the sole purpose of protecting your wife from you, from your erratic behaviour?'*

Mike Mason remains quiet. For all intents and purposes he has denied blame for his wife's battering. He reminds me of some students I've had over the years, high school age students, boys mostly, who always began their defensive argument by, It wasn't me. It's not my fault. She started it or he or it ... There was always someone or something there to be blamed for their own lack of judgement and other inadequacies. Jill Mason shakes her head in rapid, tiny movements. Her hair brushes against the collar of her blouse. She presses the tissue against her left eye.

'Mike Mason,' says the magistrate, 'the Court can and will establish an Order against you without your consent. It only needs to be recorded as such.'

Mike Mason nods and shrugs testily. 'Whatever!'

'Mr Mason, do I take it this means we have consent without admission?'

'I guess that's what you have. I won't say I did any of the things she said. Not as she said them. But look, I don't have time for that. Can't take any more time off work. I'm a busy man. You write up what you want. Just don't ask me to consent to any of it.'

So, the bastard's not going to admit that when his quota goes unmet, he bashes his wife.

'That'll be fine, Mr Mason,' replies the magistrate icily.

‘Hey, aren’t you glad I called and got you out of the house?’

‘I guess.’ I turn to look back at Tamara. She’s reading a plaque nailed to one of these century old strangulating fig trees anchored deep into the earth by thick grey tubular roots. She flicks her attention back to me.

‘What’d you mean, “you guess?” Isn’t it great out here?’

I’m teasing her. It *is* nice being out here on a late Sunday afternoon. Cool, too, under the shade of the grand old trees of the Mount Coot-tha Botanic Gardens. The dappled light dances on the track that meanders through rain forest specimen trees. Orchids and ferns dangle from trunks and branches in colourful sprays of colour. It’s rained last night, another one of the tropical downpours that follow hot and muggy daytime hours. The soil smells damp and musty. It’s peaceful here. Quiet, too, this time of day. Tourists, lovers, families and screaming, roving children have already come and gone.

I had planned on working on the IVF script I’ve been fiddling with for a while now, like Penelope, not so much weaving by day and undoing by night, but more like writing one day and deleting great chunks the next. But the phone had rung. Tamara was thinking a walk on the south bank of the Brisbane river would do us both a lot of good. I didn’t really try to argue the contrary.

‘I know, you said you’d rather be in that little den of yours, typing away but this is healthier. It’s a lot better for you. You do need your dose of natural light and your dose of walking. And the cool shade of the forest canopy up there.’ She indicates the wide reaching limbs. ‘Branches high above

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our heads, that's a lot healthier than sitting in an air conditioned room.'

'Yes, *mother*. Are you done?'

'Don't you *mother* me, Emilie Anderson.' Tamara wags a finger close to my chest, grinning. 'I know your type.'

'My type?' I question, brow furrowed. 'Ah, you mean the *Alex* type?'

'Actually, yes, I do. You really need a shoehorn to extricate that woman from her house nowadays. I mean on weekend afternoons. She only comes out to play after sundown. She used to be a lot more outgoing and social. I mean *a lot* more,' Tamara opens her eyes wide for emphasis. 'But she says she's bored.'

'Because she stays home too much?'

'Oh, no. On her own, at home, she's like a pig in mud. She works out downstairs, she always has some home project on the boil, you know, like planting, lopping trees, paving around the pool or something else. Thinking, too. Ah, she likes to read and she likes to think. And write. But she's into novels not plays. Basically, with Alex, anything goes as long as she has her time alone and not too much marking, as in schoolwork, and not too much talking. She's finding both less and less stimulating.'

Tamara has found a little rock that she kicks gently ahead of her as she walks. 'It's when she goes out like to large BBQ dos, and afternoon parties, or on the scene at night, that she's bored. It's like she'd rather stay home and tinker away.' Tamara doesn't seem happy with her friend's partial seclusion. 'She should really have stayed in Paris,' she adds as an afterthought. 'That's the city for her.'

'Why didn't she? When was she there last?'

'She went back there like a year after I left. Got fed up with everything that was happening here, or not happening, and she took off.'

'Wish I could do that.'

‘You probably can.’ Tamara stops kicking her rock and lays a hand on my sleeve. ‘Just take travel leave, as she did.’

‘How long did she stay?’ I ask, half a step ahead of her.

‘About a year, a bit more maybe.’

‘Long leave. Don’t think my bank manager would approve even half of it.’

Tamara’s now level with me. ‘Don’t ask him.’

‘It’s a her.’

‘Don’t ask her, then. Just do it.’

‘Spoken like a true young person, Tamara.’ Companionably now, we walk shoulder against shoulder on the narrow path that rounds the bend. She huffs softly.

‘Well, hell, you don’t even have a pet to worry about.’

‘No pet, but a lot of bills. And a job I care about.’ Though if Graeme decided to retire, I’d like the job even more. Why doesn’t he retire, pass the baton on to someone else? God knows he’s old enough. Must be well past sixty by now.

‘I know what you need,’ Tamara says cryptically, slowing me down again, with a hand light on my arm. And again I feel the soft heat of a blush. And hold in my breath. Oh, no please, no sex talk. ‘You need to read that poem of Ronsard’s,’ she says, crinkling up her nose in a cheeky smile, ‘in French, of course, though I didn’t. Not in French.’

I breathe out slowly. ‘Ronsard, as in the one who died in the late 1500s?’

‘If you say so. It’s like I’m not much into dates but that sounds like the same guy.’ She sees my surprise that she would even have heard of this particular long, very long dead poet. ‘No hocus-pocus,’ she explains, still grinning. ‘Had to be familiar with the range of *The Carpe Diem* and, you know, the *tempus fugit* themes for my English exam, like whenever *that* was.’ She rolls her eyes to suggest how long ago *that* might have been. I guess, to her, it would have felt like a long time ago. After all, in those days of Tamara’s end of high

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school exams, the Information Highway was a mere concept for the layperson not yet a daily communication tool.

‘So, are we talking about a rosebud freshly burst open in the morning, already wilting by evening time?’

‘We are. Glad to see that you, at least, know the theory behind the business of making the most of each day, of making each day count.’

‘Of making each day a satisfying little pocket of ... of ... of,’ I’ve lost my train of thought. ‘Whatever. As you say,’ I add, kicking a pebble of my own with the toe of my boot, ‘I’m good on theories.’

‘So you’re familiar with the theory that sex is a great way to lower one’s blood pressure?’ Her statement catches me off-guard. I look at her, startled. She’s smiling broadly, obviously pleased with herself. My sudden discomfort must be showing on my face. ‘Sex,’ she starts again, having guessed correctly that it’s that brash and turgid three letter word, void of feelings, that’s caused my cheeks to colour again. ‘The theory’s that a good session of ... love making,’ she’s adjusting her words to suit my sensibility, ‘is as good for the body as any aerobic session.’

‘Whoever said that must’ve been thinking about heterosexual sex,’ I counter flatly, intentionally using her word. ‘Lesbian sex, as I know it, is a much calmer affair.’

‘Is it now?’ she says eyebrows raised, pretending a sudden interest in the matter. ‘Tell me, Emilie, how do *you* like to come?’

‘Tamara. Really!’ I exclaim too sharply.

‘What?’

‘I don’t feel comfortable discussing that with you. I mean, not with anyone.’ I sound like a prude. I am a prude when it comes to talking about orgasms and personal sexual quirks. Even with Roberta, I felt prudish and yet I relished the often unabashed ease with which *she* would talk about her own sexual desires and her understanding of mine. But at

least, Roberta and I had each been a part of the slow seduction of the other. We had spent countless words and sleepless nights, separately, conjuring up ways in which to either suppress our longing to salvage her bigger picture or bring about a future together, without causing pain to Julia, her partner of eight years.

‘OK, sorry. Just fooling around.’

‘Just to make me feel awkward?’ I turn to her still flushed, but she remains focused on the row of trees ahead.

‘Just to stir a little. *Nice* awkward, Emilie,’ she says emphatically. ‘Not embarrassing or humiliating awkward. Just to see that cute, awkward look on your face.’

‘Cute. Oh, please! I think I’m past the age of being cute.’

‘All right, endearing then.’ Tamara’s hand is back on my sleeve. ‘Hey, I like the way you’re like, so together. Like, so in control of everything.’ She turns me around to face her. ‘And yet, a tiny little word like *sex* can make you miss a beat.’ She moves imperceptibly closer to me. Just as imperceptibly I move back until I cannot move any further. The unyielding presence of a tree presses against my back. Tamara’s face is blurry. Green eyes dissolve into green mist. Her breath flutters on my nose. Cool lips. Firm lips on my own. A tentative nibble. The velvet caress of her tongue. My heart beats too fast. A heat that’s no longer that of a blush rises from my sex. My lips open a little, only a little, but they open to allow her tongue to feel my own. A soft breath. The deep ache of arousal.

The cloth of her T-shirt moves lightly against the cloth of my own shirt. Her lips close on the tip of my tongue. A kiss in the shape of a rosebud. An electrified rosebud. I tighten my sex to free myself from the pull of desire that has so suddenly settled deep inside me. I pull away from the stirring heat in my belly. I pull away from her. I open my eyes, breathless.

‘Emilie,’ she whispers, almost against my cheek. I’m not ready to talk. I swallow hard. My voice is not ready. I know it’d croak if I spoke now. I shut my eyes again, against the ache that is too slow to recede. Finally I exhale slowly, a self-conscious smile on my lips.

‘Woh!’ I say, not yet trusting my voice to carry anything longer than a monosyllable.

Tamara’s face is slightly off centre, still blurry, on the left of my face, as if she might be studying the thick bark scales that I feel embossed against my back. That trunk has kept me there, steady, in place for her. It kept me from inching away from the first flutter of her breath on my cheek, from the petal-light touch of her lips, from the light brush of her nipples against me. From the searing desire of my loins. My heartbeat’s finally slowing down. I can move. I need to move. I need to say something. I swallow. I need to breathe. Her body is still almost touching mine. Almost. And again a sudden wave of desire makes me wince. Breathe in, breathe down, I urge myself. Gently I push on her shoulder to give myself more space, more breathing space. She lets me by unaware, I think, of the sudden energy the brush of her tongue against mine had unleashed.

‘Emilie, I want to have ... ’ she begins, her naturally husky voice almost hoarse, ‘I’d like to make love with you.’ Her hand had found mine as I moved past her and she holds it in between both of hers. It feels safe. Her hands are warm but dry. Firm, like the rest of her. The same contained intensity radiates from her hand as it does from all of her. I can’t think.

‘You think you might want to have sex with me,’ I state flatly, unflinching at the word. I’m still dazed. And yet, I think I should keep the impact of that unexpected rush of adrenaline to myself. At least for now. She smiles that broad, easy smile of hers.

White teeth flash hungrily. 'I take it that means yes?' She nods emphatically, her eyes into mine.

And I sigh. 'No, it doesn't mean yes. But yes ... I am very ...' Oh, Jeez, just say it, for crying out loud. 'Yes, very aroused. Very much so,' I add, biting my lower lip, as I pull my eyes away from hers. 'But let's drop it all the same, shall we?'

'But why?' she asks, visibly baffled.

I could say, You *know* why. Your friend Alex would've already discussed *that* very point with you, many times since your return. You said so yourself. She'd been very patient about it. Instead, I try a simple explanation of my own, 'It's about the difference between theory and practice, Tamara. I seldom practise what I theorise about.' I step around her. She lets go of my hand. 'Come. Walk with me,' I urge softly, tugging the loose hem of her T-shirt to invite her to follow while I quickly try to analyse what's just happened. Not so much what has happened, more to the point, its intensity, the intense spike of desire. 'Tam, come,' I repeat softly. 'Let's wind our way up to the lookout point. Let's talk this out.'

Six

The air is still around me. Free of clouds, even the sky is motionless. I don't spend as much time in my garden as I used to. Not as much as I should. It's just that lately I've been feeling oddly claustrophobic and bored reclining on a deck-chair, reading. Reading or thinking. Reading and thinking with no one to bounce ideas off. Thoughts and ideas. No one's thoughts and ideas being bounced off me. Hemmed in, is how I feel.

And so, I what I usually do is retreat to my den. I interact with my computer. I give in to my new obsession. Used to be bullets; tiny little rolls of fake chocolate and fake liquorice, that made me reach hand to packet, hand to mouth in an ugly little display of compulsive gluttony. Horrible little things they are, bullets, but once the packet was open, I didn't stop until I had disposed of the evidence. All of it. But I've ditched the bullets. I'm now into yoghurt-coated almonds. Compared to the fake-everything bullets, the marble-size, cream balls have got to be way out there in terms of healthy energisers. After all, they're not available from petrol stations or cinemas' candy bars.

And while I pop little balls two at a time inside my mouth, I work on the pretend script that I keep altering, or when I'm modelling with object modifiers and primitives a 3D image of a sailboat deck. These are safe moments for me. Safe in terms of distancing myself from cumbersome thoughts. Blurring filters, blurred unrelated thoughts. Fiddling with layer opacity and the boleaning of objects, such as the deck light I'm currently working on, are sure-fire masks that fit tightly over the mumbled discourse that's looped itself somewhere else inside my mind. A discourse that makes me feel righteous and mature on the one hand, and old on the other. And totally obsessive about my new-found yoghurt and

almond balls. Should I crunch right through them or suck them until all the yoghurt coating's melted in my mouth? Perhaps not quite as riveting a dilemma as Hamlet's but ... a dilemma all the same.

Stranded for now on the back verandah, facing the stillness of the garden, I feel as if I am in quarantine. I'm avoiding my thoughts. I don't want to go through the process of thinking of addressing issues, any issue. I'm a passive resister. And yet, thoughts keep on interrupting my reading. Like children who want attention, they hang around and tug at my consciousness. I shoo them away. They curl up at the edge of the space that still separates them from me. Momentarily. Too soon, again like children unable to occupy themselves, on their own, they creep back. They push again through my concentration on words, on thoughts written by someone else. By a stranger I'll never meet. And they're jealous of that attention I give to some strange woman's thoughts. And so, they won't truly move away, not until they've been attended to.

What I particularly don't want to think about, as if ignoring them will make what's been opened up go away, are the mixed feelings I've been feeling for the past few days. Since that walk in the Botanic Gardens with my young friend. Since *that* kiss and the ensuing conversation with her at the lookout point while we watched Brisbane settle into dusk, one little flickering light at a time.

No surprises there. Tamara, like many women her age, has this here and now, hedonistic view of the world. The bottom line is simple. Basically healthy but unattainable for someone such as I have become.

You have an itch, you scratch.

'A kiss is a kiss,' Tamara had said. 'But any *woh* kind of kiss,' she had added, pausing, waiting for my eyes to meet hers, 'is worth ... *at least* another one. You know, like to

check it out. Why waste the buzz? I don't get it,' she had added, shaking her head slowly.

Cute and simple. But if *I* have an itch and I scratch it, I know it's likely to get infected. Remorse, regrets, fear of *it* being too short-lived, fear of *it* having been a mistake, my mistake. Fear of a swift rejection by the other, a changed mind from either of us, a one-night stand that tastes stale the next morning and cheapens a brief moment of intimacy. I'd rather waste the buzz. Tamara's view is so much freer, and possibly saner, than mine. You're attracted to a woman, you let her know.

'What's there to lose?' she had asked, brow furrowed. 'If she's attracted to you, too, great. Even better. End of conversation. Where's the nearest sleeping bag, bunk, back of car or, hey if there's one available, it's like where's the nearest bed? Nothing wrong with that, Emilie. It's all about being, you know, in tune. No one gets hurt. I mean, if she's on her own, as in not attached to anyone.'

'Isn't that a little promiscuously simplistic?'

'Well,' she had begun, glancing at me sideways, perhaps finding me obtuse. 'It's not as if *that* happens every day. It's not like this happens with any woman who walks past, you know. We're not talking about Venus flytraps here.' Green eyes narrowed with conviction held my own.

'But don't you need to know *something* about the woman, first?' I had asked at the risk of sounding old. Even older than I am.

'Yeah, I do. Like I know something about you. A lot of things about you. Things that you're so busy not looking at you think nobody else sees them.'

I had swallowed hard at that. There was a ring of accuracy in her comment. But I didn't hand her the plate on which to dissect me alive. Instead, I steered the conversation tangentially.

I used to be just as keen on ‘the moment’, when I was her age. Weren’t we all? Actually no, I’m fooling myself here. I was *never* that light-hearted about sex, or anything else for that matter. I seem to have been born with my own acute sense of ‘what is correct, what is right.’ Hence *The Gnomes*’ appearance as soon as I feel guilty. Vulnerable, too, because of an eggshell ego. My first taste of lesbian love is, I’m sure, the only spontaneous thing I have ever allowed myself. Have never looked back on that one. Never regretted it. But I never wanted sex as such, not as a placebo, not even in my early twenties. It was the expression of love through sex I was after, already back then. That or . . . abstinence. The difference being that already in those heady days, sex had a way of masquerading as love, if only for a few months at a time.

‘You do need to trust. I mean, like not me personally, but in general before—’

‘Before I, like Alex, decide that what’s out there is both too complicated and too empty?’

She had nodded, eyes now roaming the horizon.

From where I stand at this point in time, sex is sex, as in pure sexual gratification. And love, well, love is what remains after the bonfire of lust is at the ember stage of combustion. No grey areas here. Neat, isn’t it?

So, having sex is the mindless scratching of the itch while making love to satisfy that lustful itch is only a euphemism for having sex. Right! So, it’s love that remains, if there’s still a strong connection, after lust has been consumed. Right? Well done, Emilie, I congratulate myself wryly, totally aware of the tight and constrictive circle I’ve just wound around myself.

Back to Tamara. She’s decided that I need to lighten up. She’s right, I do need to lighten up. She’s decided, too, that I not only need to re-read the Ronsard poem but also the better known *Gather Ye Rosebuds*. She also wants me to stick

one of them on my computer as a daily reminder, and more difficult, she's urging me to enact its message. I think she's embarked on a Saving Emilie From Herself mission. That's the kind of thing young women can do; they've got energy, and they've got time on their hands. And now that she has activated my memory of the French classic some lines come back to me. *Marâtre nature, puis qu' une telle fleur ne dure que du matin jusqu'au soir.* A cruel mother is Nature to allow such a beautiful flower to live only from dawn to dusk. Is this a sobering thought or is it merely a depressing one?

'Do that before you get any more introverted, like too set in your ways,' she had said, as we made our way back down to the car parked at the base of the hill.

So, she's decided to take an active interest in my salvation. Do I want to be saved? Do I want to become anyone's mission? I mean, yes, what better guide than lovely, healthy, intelligent Tamara, if I want to taste a belated semblance of carefree promiscuity? She did turn me on in a totally and unexpected way that afternoon. No doubt about that, but *how* was she able to do that? Why did I experience such a strong reaction to her whom I hardly know?

When Roberta kissed me, for the first time, well yes, it was strong and jolting, and searing too, but she and I had been slowly, one imperceptible moment at a time, over a period of months, making our way towards the unavoidable, irrepressible kiss scene. Until it could no longer be either ignored or postponed. But I don't feel that way about Tamara. As much as I enjoy her company, her uncomplicated approach to many things and her openness to a world that had stopped fascinating me some time ago, I don't need to establish anything emotional, certainly not sexual, with her. In a different manner, praline and caramel swirl ice cream, laced with extra butterscotch is, for me, a real turn on, too. And yet, I don't indulge in that anymore. Now that I think of it, why don't I?

Might it have been the residue of that pent-up desire for Roberta that flared up as Tamara's lips, as her tongue, met mine? Most likely. It's not that I've been harbouring or repressing any sexual feelings towards her. Have I? Why haven't I?

A family of kookaburras is laughing in a nearby tree. I don't want to know what about. I narrow my eyes against the light to better discern their shape in the general direction of the leafy jacaranda to my left, but I only see light streaming through patches of green. Pale green under the direct sunlight. And the birds cackle some more. A manic sort of laugh, really.

Instead of lying there, navel gazing, on a deckchair, I tell myself I should grab the secateurs and, at least, begin cutting back the most obvious branches and stems in desperate need of pruning.

The thing is, it's not as if abstinence or celibacy appeals to me in the least. It doesn't. No, not in the least. It's the fear of not knowing whether it will end, ever, that is frightening to me. How does one know for sure that momentary abstinence is not going to turn into long-term or, dare I say it, permanent celibacy, in the same way as being temporarily jobless can turn into long-term or permanent unemployment?

It's not as if I am totally self-contained and stabilised in my oneness, in my aloneness, because I'm definitely not. I wasn't content with that state even before I fell in love with Roberta. I wasn't content with that state before that either, which is why I had said, Why not? to Solange's lust for 'feel-good', adrenaline-charged moments and her impossible grey eyes. In the early stages of *that* relationship I had thought that if almost by contact alone, I could absorb some of her lightness of temperament, that would perhaps make me a 'lighter person' to be with. It hadn't worked out that way. For many reasons.

Before Solange, there had been a couple of years of solitude, three to be precise, precipitated by Trish's decision to bail out of our relationship like the true sailor that she was, and still is. Though it was not from our relationship, as such, that she needed to escape.

Inside the house, the phone rings, once twice and again. The answering machine will take the call on the sixth ring. Trish needed to bail out totally, completely, from the equation that enshrines sex equals love, love equals wellbeing, a wellbeing derived from an affair *à deux*.

Rejecting the analogy of the two flexible stems that are made to twist around each other to fuse, over time, into one single stem, Trish had reached the point where she needed to work on herself, by herself. And one day over breakfast, she said so.

'Em,' she had begun, 'I need to get to know myself better.'

We had just risen from making love. The late morning light was clear and warm on my back. The garden, with its tall trees and furry shrubs, was resplendent in a palette of green splashed with yellow, crimson, white and burgundy pink. I was feeling fit and still in love with my partner.

'More about what turns you on? We can go back for further exploring after this,' I had added smugly, gesturing towards our breakfast plates.

'No, Em,' she had said softly. 'It's not about that at all.' The uncharacteristic tightness in her voice alerted me that this was the beginning of a serious conversation. 'I need to know who I really am,' she said again. 'As I am, here, you know, fully formed, at the peak of my career, in this long-term relationship with you. I need to pare down to peer inside of me. I need to be on my own.'

Soon after this conversation, she left my house with only a couple of long tote bags and a box of kitchen utensils. She turned the under deck area of her thirty-eight foot sailboat

into a small studio. In her day job by then, she used to look after other people's money and make it grow for them. But she's always been an artist. Oddly enough for an artist at sea, she doesn't do seascapes. Trish now goes to sleep when the sun does and she wakes as its first rays filter through the thin little curtain she's hung inside the fore hatch.

A butterfly flutters near my right foot. A simple butterfly of the brown, white and orange dot variety. It almost touches the top of my big toe. I hold my breath, waiting for it to land. It hovers. Its wispy antennae twitch. Wide wings flutter rhythmically with contained efficiency. Just enough slow flapping of wings to keep it airborne. No wasted energy. And it moves slightly to the right of my foot. A quick succession of wing flutters and the brown butterfly with polka dotted wings flaps away. I watch it for as long as I can, till it disappears against the dense background of a vast hanging fern dangling at the edge of the roofline. It's my cue to move, to shake a leg. Lying here, passively, has made me restless.

From the railing, where they lay abandoned, I grab the secateurs from where they had been silently beckoning me. With the other hand, I reach for the baseball cap hung from a wrought iron nail hammered into the nearest support beam and I stride towards the nearest tree.

Trish retired early, as in ten years earlier than early. She stopped feeding her superannuation fund. Instead, she collected what was already hers, just to afford that peculiar lengthy introspection. She sails and she sails and she sails some more. And she paints.

The shrub closest to the verandah railing is a large poinsettia. Its huge layered, star-shaped crimson flowers hang heavily, dark brown now, at the end of each bowed branch. Early to bloom, early to wither and wilt. Where to cut? A couple of feet below the dead flower, or closer to the base of each branch. Ah, let's bring it down to a more manageable size. Trish drops anchor and sleeps at sea. That works for her.

She looks great, taut, tanned and terrific, just as the expression says. She doesn't say much about her inner life. I don't know whether her introspection is taking her anywhere.

I hold the first, thin stem-like branch close to its middle while with the other hand release the secateur's jaws. They snap open. Trish should be due for a visit soon. When she's in town, we catch up with each other. She luxuriates under very hot shower jets and she spreads her lean and wiry body as far and as wide as she can in the large bed, in my spare room, her only port of call when in Brisbane.

The secateurs are pleasantly heavy in my hand, I position the curved blades a couple of feet from the base of the branch and snap the jaws back together. We sail together too, Trish and I. No problems there, we still make a pretty good team, she as the skipper, me as her first mate. The blades bite into the soft hollow stems. Milky drops ooze from under the steel. Half of the branch falls at my feet. Trish's boat is rigged so that she can sail it on her own when she feels the call of the open sea. Solar panels give her all the battery power she needs. She could go around the world in that little yacht of hers. I just hope she won't. I just hope she doesn't start making that her pet project. Trish, who is visibly dealing with her little devils even if, I assume, she has yet to sublimate them, is a little short of compassion when it comes to my own introspection, when it comes to my pre-menopausal wimpishness, as she calls my coyness at letting go and taking risks. But I'm sure the little kicks she, figuratively but regularly, applies to my backside are good for me. Somehow.

Poinsettias in full bloom are so beautiful: large, deep carmine red, languid stars poised on the tip of thin curved stems, an explosion of red. Fireworks blossom. But the moment of blinding glory for this particular shrub in my garden is long past. Dull and rusty stars from a dead planet. Resigned, they dip to the ground, in readiness for the secateur's teeth.

Sailing being only a passing interest for me, and meditation a topic I haven't yet managed to explore, Trish doesn't think that emulating her or joining an ashram, be it in Ireland or in Tibet, is the way for me to go. But she still urges me to find my way.

'Find your way your own way,' she says, in lieu of specific, practical advice.

I'll have to make sure she and Tamara don't meet at my place. I don't think Trish would consider having sex with a twenty-eight year old a reasonable way to make any sort of personal headway.

'Get yourself a life, Em, a different one,' she still urged last time she was in town. 'Break away from that middle class rut. "Is this right, why-is-this-right? Am I right? How to make sure?" That burns up too much energy, girl, and it takes you absolutely nowhere.'

On the one hand, she thinks I should just buy myself an open ticket, say to South America, and live the life in a pair of huarachas and the light cotton cloth of the Indios. Not as atonement for my sins but more as a way of getting back to what is important to me. As a way to ditch what isn't. Slash and burn. On the other hand, though the vein is similar, she now thinks I need to get involved, a lot more involved with the world around me. Last time she stopped over and spent a few days here, she gave me a lecture on introversion.

'Introversion is fine,' she had said, 'It's fine if the focus is progressive. If ground gets covered. If personal progress is made.' Some have a personal trainer, I have Trish as my personal guru. Who would've thought that she and I, once sex crazed for each other and impatient with life, would ever end up in this peculiar type of relationship, huh? She says that I'm stagnating. That over the last couple of years, I've become too enmeshed with the looking-glass view of *my* world. She says that I need to step back.

‘You’re a photographer, Em. Screw on your wide-angle. Move back from whatever you’re looking at. Or, if you want to keep on doing that macro photography you’re so fond of, at least turn the thing, the object around. Look at it from another angle. From many different angles.’ And she had added, ‘Let *it* talk to you.’

Put simply she’s telling me to ease up, look up, look around, and listen. Easy- breezy. In fact, I sense a tiny little rhythm lurking just below those words. Easy-breezy. Wary of the neighbours and what they could possibly make out of what I am about to do, I look around the garden. Total privacy as expected but it never hurts to check, particularly when I know I’m about to do something a bit loopy. I mean, singing out loud in my garden is loopy. Doing a little jig around a shrub, secateurs in hand, that is *even more* loopy.

Feet apart, loose on the knees, I reach for a branch and get a little hip swaying momentum going. *Look up*, Trish says. ‘Look up to the skah-yy,’ I sing out in a tone only a notch louder than a whisper. Shuffle, shuffle. A heel. A toe. And a combo. I set the secateurs’ blades around the thin branch.

Ease up, she says. ‘Girl, you gotta ea-se up on the gas. Ea-se up on the angst.’ The tone doesn’t rise, but the pitch does. It always does, which is why I never sing, not even under the shower. Shuffle those feet, one hip roll, shuffle, shuffle. Yeah. Gee, how long’s it been since I went out to a disco *and* danced? Dance as opposed to discreetly move on my bar stool?

The night I met Tamara and Alex at The Triangle, I didn’t dance. I can’t remember Solange and I dancing in public. Certainly not past the early dating nights and I can’t remember having danced since. I actually miss not dancing anymore. Used to jump to my feet and straight into the fastest tempo of the fast segment and keep going, spinning and strutting and rocking and swaying the arms and the shoulders and the hips.

In those days I could keep going forever, particularly when I sensed I had a bit of an audience. How old is this memory? What, two or three years old? Only? A sigh slips past my lips. Another branch falls at my feet, on top of the first.

‘Lo-ok a-round, it ain’t sooo bad that it’s gonna bah-ite,’ I adlib further, veins already straining against my neck. I hear my voice. What a hoot! Here I am, actually singing, like a lunatic, but singing all the same. A quick self-conscious look around. All is quiet in the garden. Not even a kookaburra’s laugh. The trees don’t seem to mind my momentary lapse of reason.

Sway, shimmy. Move them hips. Yeah, yeah. Limber up the thighs, free up the knees. Imagine a little rhythm. White pearls bead on the edge of the cut. And another branch falls at my feet and lies there, loose-limbed, head to toe across the ones already lying on the lawn.

Listen to yourself, says Trish. ‘Liii-sten to the words that she whiiii-spers in the niiiight,’ I sing. ‘Liii-sten to yooour heart ‘fore it gi-ves up on you. Yeah, yeah.’ Shuffle and sashay to the other side of the shrub. Loose on the knees. Trish and I used to dance a lot. Madly. It was all about letting go. Release, and yes, letting go of the weeklong frustrations. Therapeutic. Aerobic. Liberating. Foreplay. Trish and I would collapse into a heap at the base of the sound system. We’d make love.

The thing is that, at some stage, during my relationship with her, or maybe just after she left, something must’ve happened to my own outlook on life. No, not on life. Just on myself. Bite, snap. Bite, snap. Faded red stars, long and knobbly green-beige stems heap at the base of the large shrub.

A personality twitch of sorts is what must have happened. Somewhere along the line, I lost my own sense of adventure. Nine stems down. I lost, too, myself as my own best friend. And, when Trish left, I not only felt empty and sad in a house

that felt equally empty and sad, I felt lonely. Twelve, thirteen branches down. Emotionally alone for the first time in my life. Months and months of that feeling clung to me like a sour body odour, until I connected with Solange. The poinsettia now looks more like a bundle of thick sticks tied at the base and pointing upwards than a shrub. But that's OK, it needed that. We both needed that. I bend down to assemble all the severed limbs into a manageable heap.

Solange. My *soleil*. When I met her, I fell in love with her grey eyes and that wide, sensual mouth of hers. Later, I learnt to appreciate a lot more of her. Not enough though. Not the essential core of her. I just didn't get the part that makes her so reckless. By my standards. And she took off. She had an affair with Gretta. Never met Gretta.

Gretta is younger than I am. Quite a lot younger, that much I know. And again, that loneliness came back to sleep with me, inside of me. I kneel down to lift the branches into a bear hug and lift them against my chest, aware too late of the sticky white sap already sticking to my shirtsleeve and fingertips. Then I fell in love with Roberta.

Solange had hit the nail on the head when she volunteered that the type of woman best suited to me would be one who'd know *primarily* how to act her age. Of course, I didn't agree with the accent she put on *primarily*. And still don't. Loose branches dangle unhappily from my arms. They strain against others and dislodge themselves. To the rubbish bin with these, I'll come back for the strays.

At first, I had balked at her remark but, *in essence*, I knew she was right. Yes, I do like the thought of a woman who has created herself a life in which she is comfortable, one through which she can act out, not only her sexuality, but her age as well. Like Roberta.

My arms still wound around the bundle of branches, keen to keep it together, I stand by the bin contemplating its closed lid. That's a job for a third hand that I don't have.

It's a job for a lover that I don't have. I'd like to call out, just loud enough to be heard, Hey, Darling? Could you give me a hand? I blink and swallow hard by the closed bin, a big bundle of cut poinsettia stems, like a child unhappy to be held, struggling to escape from my undesired hug. Breathe. Breathe in and deep.

If Tamara's point of view on the matter of sexual gratification doesn't surprise me, my own response to her touch, to her kiss does. In between the retaining wall and the rubbish bin, one side of the bundle pressed against the wall to replace the hand I need to have free, I reach for the heavy lid. I knew I enjoyed her company. I knew too, that I found her very attractive. A couple of branches take advantage of the situation. The lid flops open. I drop the cuttings inside. Some choose to lie across. I push them in with my two hands. Tamara. Almost on contact, that surge of intense arousal. But, no, I hadn't been harbouring or repressing any sexual feelings towards her. Why not? Why on earth not? Shouldn't I have?

The branches bend in the middle and grudgingly slide to the bottom of the container. There. Now, let's go back for the others.

Intellectually I know Tamara's not the kind of woman I have in mind as my next partner and so I'm not prepared to act out the raw sex thing with her. That is totally true. And yet, at another level, at the level of the here and now, that afternoon at the Botanic Gardens, I wanted to pull her against me. I wanted to feel her lips and her tongue more fully against mine. I so wanted to hold her head in my hands. I wanted to surrender to the searing ache. I wanted her to bring on more shock waves of desire. Five, six stems left to pick up. Four more over there. The last ones. I wanted to feel her skin, to run my hand across her back, to press her hips firmly against mine. I could've made love with her, right there and then. Me, Emilie Anderson. Me, if I had allowed

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myself to. Me, as dusk settled over us in the Mount Coot-tha gardens. Who would've thought?

Back to the bin. This time the stems go in quickly. No fuss, no mess, because I push them in ends first. Yes, I need a woman who is into stability. A stability that is spiced with a zest of fun. And while I'm drawing up my wish list, I might as well add, though I hate to admit it, a woman who is all of the above and charismatic to boot.

When I get back inside the house, I'm going to blow the dust off that very special CD that used to leave us panting, Trish and me, damp hair clinging to our neck, and totally exhilarated. I'm going to slide it in and pump up the volume. I need to know that my body still remembers the mad twirling dervish spins it used to weave in and out of a Hynde-Jagger self-styled impro.

Index finger on Play. *Emilie, are you home?* says the little tin voice that is Merre's as played back by the answering machine. *Look, I'm not sure what to do here. Can you give me a ring?* I frown. The disembodied voice continues, *Look, it's Solange. She's just called us to see if ... Well, she wants to know if we want to go camping with her.* Ah ah! And so, where's the problem? *Thing is, she'd like you to come along too.* Ah. So, why isn't Solange calling me then? *Look, give us a ring when you get home. Ta.*

Oh, my! To call on us for some fun, Solange must be having 'feel-good-feelings' withdrawals. Camping? Yes, why not? We do have some pleasant camping memories the four of us, but the last time we went anywhere with a tent would've been well over a year ago. Right. What do I want to do about this? I punch Merre's number. One ring, two, three, four rin –

‘Hello. Merredyth speaking,’ says Merre, who always answers her home phone as if she expected a colleague on the other end.

‘You’re off duty, Merre, Re-lax. Your school pals are already in bed with or without the proverbial good book.’

‘Hey, Emilie. Yeah, true for them, but the boss might still be buzzing. I don’t think he sleeps much. There’s always something urgent he thinks that I absolutely need to know last thing before going to bed. Anyway, got my message about Sol?’

‘Got it. Tell me more. What’s she up to? I mean, she didn’t sound down or anything?’

‘Relax, girl. When’s the last time Sunshine-Solange was on a low, huh? Bet you can’t remember.’

‘Oh, she’s as much a softie as the rest of us, the difference is that she doesn’t spend time mulling it over. So ... what did she want?’

‘Well, that’s the thing,’ Merredyth’s voice hesitates. ‘She’d like us to go camping together.’

‘Yeah, got that. Like in the good old days.’

‘I guess. She said she’d like you to come too.’

‘Yes, I understood that, too. And? But?’

‘But, she also wants to bring her ... her, well, whoever she’s with now. You know, her new woman.’

‘Ah. I thought she might’ve gotten back with Gretta after ... after she and I failed to patch things up.’

‘Mmm ... I didn’t ask. Didn’t want to pry.’

‘Look, it’s cool, either way. I mean, the Gretta business, if it’s still on, is getting a little dated for me. We’re talking like last July, what, five months ago. And if it’s someone else ... Aren’t you a little bit curious, though?’

‘Hell, yes, I’m curious as always, you know me. But what about you?’

‘I did wonder at the time what Gretta might look like, what it was about her that made Solange hop in the sack, in

her sack, right there and then but, as I said, it's old hat now. But hey, did you think to ask her why it's taken her so long, like months, to get back in touch with you. I mean, particularly with you and Joan?'

'No, you know me. All talk, no guts. You're always so reasonable Emilie, wanting to know all sorts of reasonable things. Good on you. Keeps you saner. Anyway, there was the mention of next weekend. We're free if you are.'

Next weekend. Tamara's cat eyes and slow cheeky smile drift in and settle over the wall phone. Only for a moment. Only for the time it takes for a heart, mine, to miss a beat because my experience in dealing with women does not extend to women like Tamara. Not anymore. Maybe I could invite her to join us. She could meet everyone, or more to the point, everyone could meet her in one fell swoop.

'Let's do it. Let's take off on Saturday. It's as good an excuse as any to get into some outdoor fun. We don't even go four-wheel driving much any more, do we?'

'True, we haven't since we've gone back to work. Never mind, we'll play in the sand, hey? Not as rugged as the place behind Esk and a lot messier to clean afterwards, underbody wash and all ... Sill, precision driving in the soft sand, that'll be fun. Joan's in on it too. So, you call Sol or we do?'

'She's called you to organise, so looks like you're the one who gets to confirm.'

'No problem. I always thought Sol was a little too light-weight for you, you know what I mean, but she's cool.'

'Hey, don't you forget you did the matchmaker's shuffle between us. Remember? You introduced her to me. Or the other way around.'

'Well ... she's a good woman, in a funny sort of way.'

'Settled, then. We can meet her, or them, say at the 1 p.m. barge at Tewanin. Like in the good old days, right?'

'Right. We'll go across together.'

'Sounds good.'

‘Cool. I’ll tell Joan to get the gear ready.’

‘OK. Talk to you mid-week.’

‘Talk to you then.’

Solange’s new woman, hey? New as in *new*? Or new as in *newly* out in the open. Yes, Solange is a lovely woman, a gorgeous one some would say, but for me, a great handful too, which is why our days were already counted, even before her involvement with Gretta. Which is why I took it on the chin, the silence with which she followed through her *égarement*, her sexual escapade. Only weeks later did I become aware of my growing infatuation with Roberta with whom I had already had a few coffee chats at the institute’s cafeteria. All of that, separate, shaken and mixed together already belongs to another period in time. More dated memories.

A sigh pushes past my lips as I turn the lights off in the living room. Flash thoughts of Roberta always make me sigh, even now. We had made a pact on the last afternoon we spent together, the moment of our grand finale. The pact was simple. As simple as it was, and still is, difficult to observe. It was about not giving into any more temptation, about not seeking news of the other. It was about not attempting to reconnect. We left it at that. The open-ended timeline gave us a sense of appropriate penance and it gave a sense of permanence to the promise made.

Once in my den, I turn on the computer even before sitting down at the desk. And Solange comes back to mind. I wonder how her new lover copes not only with her reckless sense of fun but, if she doesn’t speak French herself, with Solange’s linguistic quirk. Though she speaks English quite fluently, it’s as if her mind has to first hear the half-thought in her native language to kick-start the process in English. And so the minute she opens her mouth people know Solange is French.

Tamara might like to come along on our over-night bivouac. I could introduce her to Solange who will introduce

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me to Gretta or to Gretta's replacement who, in turn, would have superseded Gretta almost literally overnight. And so the world turns. I wonder if Tamara's of the mind that, beyond my lack of spontaneity, I also carry a few cobwebs too many? If she does, it might pay to introduce her to the more butch side of my personality, while I prance around in my fave pair of army fatigues and faded sweatshirt. Fun and dyke games in the wild.

Climbing on cars, stretching tarps from tree limb to tree limb, playing with sticks and matches, getting all dirty in pretend camouflage gear is good fun. Ah, and of course doing some major slipping and sliding behind the wheel on powdery white sand. Oh, the joy of getting stuck inside its traitorous thickness, of having to dig out the Jeep with little army shovels. Definitely good fun, though washing up out of a bucket isn't such good fun for me. I'm ready to bet that Solange, at forty-three, would enjoy showing a mature twenty-eight year old how to act as crazy as any manic teen.

On second thought, no. I'll wait till I get around to introducing Tamara *and* Alex together. That will best be done in a more run of the mill context. A dinner at my place.

Alex, our barefoot hostess, has prepared a rather exotic main dish of roasted chicken in a prune and harissa sauce served on a bed of couscous.

‘D’ you ever think of going back to France?’ Kate leans back against Jessie.

I’ve just finished a nutshell run down of the family tribulations that ultimately had brought my parents over to Brisbane, Australia, many, many years ago. Years before I was born.

‘Uh ... I’ve never actually lived in France,’ I explain again, trying not to sound too categorical. ‘I’ve been there, as a tourist, of course but my family *is* from New Caledonia.’

‘And you like it here?’ Jessie asks softly. As far as I can tell, softly is the way Jessie’s voice travels all the time.

Groan. I focus on my hands. Maybe the mistake is mine. Maybe the question simply means, as an Aussie, do you like living in Brisbane, but I don’t think it does.

When I glance up Alex is looking at me, one eyebrow raised, a silent chuckle on her lips. She shrugs, discreetly spreading her hands in a gesture that suggests, Sorry, girl, par for the course. I give her a little self-conscious nod and return my attention to Jessie and Kate whom I’m meeting for the first time tonight.

Kate is an ex Phys. Ed. teacher who, though she has reinvented herself as a uni lecturer, has maintained her powerful shoulders and the wide smile that compensate for her partner’s thin and quiet presence. Together, they are the living proof that opposites do attract.

‘I *do* like living in Brisbane, yes. Don’t you?’

So far, though, it’s been an easy conversation over dinner with Tamara, Alex and these two women who are Alex’s best friends.

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‘I like it here. This is home,’ Jessie says softly.

Like it is mine.

‘Don’t you ever think that maybe you could live in Noumea? To stay closer to your roots?’

‘Why would I want to live in Noumea? I don’t have any relatives there any more. Not a single memory of my own. I lost my grandparents a few years ago. Anyway, my roots have always been right here in Brisbane,’ I explain again.

I feel like telling Kate and Jessie that I am not a jetsetter like their friend Alex. That I am not French like she is. But I can see that the fact that my mother is French resonates at a different level from the fact that my father is a real Aussie bloke. And that my cultural references are the same as theirs. My father stayed with the mining industry till he retired. Now while my mother plays bridge, he goes to the races and has a pot with the bookies before he goes home.

I could say though that if I missed anything, about what I know of the French or the Caledonian ways, it would be the freedom to express myself in the straightforward manner of the Europeans. By that, I mean in a manner usually considered brusque, or confrontationalist, or simply arrogant by most Brisbanites. That vibrancy is still alive and well in my mother. I believe it must truly be in the blood. But in my blood, it has become a bit diluted. But only a bit, my father says.

In my view, Europeans who are relentlessly surrounded by so many, challenged by an incessant onslaught of views, of contradictions and choices, know how to participate in often heated conversations without feeling threatened by the mounting tone of voice and gesticulations which are only meant as a vehicle for personal conviction. And the bottom line might well be that, on the whole, they’re just not as concerned by the opinion others might have of them. How totally liberating that must feel.

‘What I do miss’ I say, preferring to keep things simple for now, ‘is the Paris Seine. And the *quais* like, you know, *Quai Messagerie* and *Quai aux fleurs*—’

‘Alex knows these places well. Don’t you, Alex?’ Tamara cuts in, bringing her friend back into the conversation. I’ve been watching Alex on and off during dinner, enjoying her total, almost stereotypical *Europeanness* from a distance, that quick energy, the precipitated flow of words accompanied by a whole alphabet of non verbals. And yet, as attentive as she’s been to our needs ever since our arrival I suspect that, occasionally, she wanders out of the conversation. Her body’s still tense, her face still trained towards the centre of the conversation but her eyes stop jumping from face to face, her long fingers no longer fiddle with whatever they happen to find within reach. They, too, find peace in a momentary disconnection.

Alex, the perfect hostess, in a setting that reminds me of the café where Roberta and I used to meet for lunch in New Farm, a little place decorated with African memorabilia. This living room radiates the same kind of mood though much more intensely. Here, there’s nothing I recognise as African. It’s more an eclectic array of unusual objets d’art which, one guesses, haven’t been bought from a boutique in Paddington. These look like genuine items, purchased in situ, probably far away from the tourist bazaars.

A most exotic leather-tooled coffee table and thick rugs speak of desert and sand dune countries. Brass, silver and copper glint dully amongst lit candles. Rustic sconces cast their glow on patches of white wall. Plants, large plants, in Klein blue ceramic pots guard each of the corners while a selection of colourful paintings and large, uneven, weavings hang snugly against the walls. Makes my own anything-goes-anywhere interior rather bland by comparison.

‘Oh yes,’ Alex begins, leaning forward. ‘I know these streets alongside the Seine. I am particularly fond of the walk

that leads to the Henri IV—’ She stops abruptly, straightening up against the sofa backrest. ‘Yes,’ she starts again but differently, ‘the area you are talking about is ... well, it is what makes Paris ... Paris.’ She rearranges the folds of the loose grey silk shirt she’s wearing over black, baggy, trousers. Though she’s still comfortably seated in a loose-limbed manner, her face is intense. Her eyes dark and focused. ‘But, what I miss, too, are the really old brasseries. The 1850 and 1940 classics. The ones that have fed the starved, literary Who’s Who of the times as they drank their coffee, or their *ballon d’rouge* and bit into the cheapest fare on the menu.’ Between thumb and index fingers, she plucks a green grape from the fruit platter that sits on the embossed coffee table and lifts a glass of white wine to her lips. ‘Which were your favourite hang out places last time you were there?’ In her accented voice, she’s directing the question to me.

‘Ah, that’s a difficult one to answer—’

‘There you go, you see?’ Kate cuts in, addressing Jessie, her partner, ‘that’s what makes the difference between a big city and our Brisbane.’ Looking at the rest of us, she adds, ‘I mean, gosh, how many favourite brasseries can you possibly have in the Greater Brisbane area? If you’ve got two or three, you’re doing well.’

Jessie rebukes her, ‘That’s because Brisbane’s only coming of age now. You know what I mean. You can’t go knocking it all the time.’

‘I know. How can I forget?’ Kate replies flatly. ‘Most of the brasseries, wine bars and coffee shops sprouted like mushrooms only after the 1988 World Expo, remember? Each looking like a little clone of the other. And they weren’t called brasseries then. Even that word’s been copied from elsewhere,’ Kate adds before returning her attention to me. ‘Which is why I’ve been trying to get her, Jessie here, to move to Sydney. I’ve been at her for the past three years—’

‘Oh, well yes, sure. It’d be lovely,’ Jessie answers back in her usual hushed tone. ‘But, how do people live there? I mean, my goodness, the cost of living!’ Turning to Alex, she adds, ‘I’d be keener on the idea, if I thought we could maintain the lifestyle we’ve got here. But the smallest flats, you know, in a pleasant area cost more than our house will ever be worth. And the traffic jams and—’

‘Well, that’s true,’ agrees Kate. With her hand, she reaches to tuck a loose strand of blond hair behind her lover’s ear. ‘But,’ she adds, smiling in my direction, ‘I play the lotto every week. Real people win this thing, so ... my chances are as good as anyone’s, right?’

‘Right,’ says Tamara. ‘I should get into that, too, but I always forget to fill in a coupon. I wouldn’t move to Sydney, though, even if I scored big bucks.’ Tamara’s dark hair sways around her cheekbones as she shakes her head.

‘Thatta girl, you tell’ em,’ Jessie cheers quietly from the sideline.

‘Anyway, Emilie ...’ Alex is, once again, looking directly at me, ‘back to the Parisian brasseries.’ Her hand flashes in the air. A heavy gold ring encircles her middle finger.

‘Ah, yes, well,’ I begin, almost salivating at the thought, ‘if I had the choice, I’d book us a table at the Suffren, a stone’s throw from the Eiffel Tower. Tomorrow, say 7.30?’

‘I wish.’ Tamara exclaims as if she means it. She’s sitting diagonally across from me, on the sofa near Alex while the other two guests, absent-mindedly, rock side by side on a handsome pair of Bentwood rockers. Her green eyes narrow as she continues, ‘That’s knowing that we’d have to get there by Metro. If not we’d all have to leave home some forty minutes earlier, just hoping for a good parking spot. Probably ending up parking over a pedestrian crossing.’ With a little grin in my direction, ‘And end up with the car towed away.’ Tamara is also very familiar with Paris.

‘When were you there, Alex?’

‘Oh, I’m not sure anymore, maybe some eighteen months ago. I decided to stop counting,’ Alex replies distractedly. ‘And you?’ Like a rugby player on the run, she’s quick to pass the ball to someone else.

‘Oh, gee, like some five years ago already, maybe a bit more. I stayed only a couple of months.’ I was visiting my relatives. I was wishing I’d fall in love. I was wishing I lived there. ‘Did you work while you were there?’

‘No ... not in Paris.’ Again that wistful flutter on her brow. ‘It’s in Nice that I ended up spending most of my time. Just tried my hand at a little real estate work. Part-time, just to focus on ... on something else that wasn’t ... just me.’ A cryptic answer that I feel Alex doesn’t wish to unravel further.

Kate jumps in, ‘Alex couldn’t stay away from us forever, though she did try. Was touch and go for a while, wasn’t it, Jessie?’ Kate beams fondly at her friend who returns her smile a little too quickly perhaps.

‘Oh, I’m envious. Living in Paris as a tourist, that’d really be a buzz, I mean, to bypass the Parisian tedium of having to catch a Metro at seven thirty every morning.’ I’m vaguely aware that as I speak, what I say is somehow a reaction to Alex’s animated intensity. I have to stop directing my conversation almost exclusively to her. ‘A tourist with money and time on her hands, that’s what I’d love to be, like next month, if I could,’ I explain lightly, looking around the living room to invite, perhaps belatedly, the three other women into the conversation. I lean back against the backrest to ease out of my own intensity. I will my eyebrows to unknot themselves. I will myself to breathe deeply, gently.

‘You can. Do what I did,’ Alex rejoins. ‘Take some time off work. Take a few months at a time. Extend your leave until you’ve had enough and want to come home.’ The quiet firmness of her tone makes the whole crazy idea sound almost manageable. ‘The trip there and back is so long, so

expensive, and now that we know all about deep vein thrombosis, it just makes it worse than when we didn't. Might as well make those tedious twenty-six hours count.'

'I wish I could. So, what was the highlight of your stay, then?'

'She managed to fall in love with a very attractive lawyer,' Kate cuts in, obviously pleased with her comment. Deep brown eyes glint with gentle humour. 'That's our Alex for you. Let her out of your sight for a moment and she comes back with a broken heart.' Tamara draws in her bottom lip and lets her eyes wander away from us.

'Kate! I wonder about you.' Alex gets up half way to playfully tap her friend's thigh. 'Can you keep *any* secret at all? I mean, really!' she adds, I suspect, possibly thankful for the diversion. Time for someone else to start on a tangential topic of conversation.

'No, she can't, not even one. And she's too old to change,' Jessie says with the pretend seriousness of a younger lover. She seems somewhat older than Tamara but considerably younger than Kate who appears closer to my own age. These two remind me of Merredyth and Joan. Always play-arguing with each other.

'Oh, look ... I've already had a conversation about age with Emilie, here.' Tamara picks up the ball and moves the conversation tangentially. 'Don't you two get started, now.'

Alex has resumed her relaxed position on the sofa but something in the way she now sits further back suggests that she's again momentarily positioned herself on the sideline of our conversation. Kate wants to know why Tamara and I ended up discussing the topic of age with each other. Groan. She thought that maybe I had a younger lover in my life. Or perhaps a much older one.

'Neither. I'm on my own.'

'Oh, that can be fixed—'

'Kate, don't you go meddling now,' reprimands Jessie.

I wave my hands around and smile to indicate no harm done.

‘What happened is that I asked her why women like herself,’ Tamara explains, accentuating her English accent, ‘and *Madahme* Alexahndrah over here, don’t seem the least bit interested in younger women. *Any* younger women.’

‘And?’ Kate directs to me.

‘And I told her that for the most part, younger women weren’t reliable and that, as far as I could see, they had far too much fun with life. Wouldn’t be able to keep up.’ I stop, having said enough but to make them smile, I add, ‘I do *enjoy* my fix of daily heavy-duty stress. At least four times a day. So, I can’t possibly understand what one can do with any one who is as light and free as a gust of wind.’ I answer lightly, trying not to let myself be drawn again by Alex’s now quiet presence. ‘Anyway, young women live in a world where anything can happen, anytime.’

‘The only way to go, you know,’ Tamara says. ‘That’s what it’s about ... being tuned into what’s happening, in the here and now.’ She looks at me sideways. ‘Do whatever, just *be*.’

‘Easy said, oh young person,’ Alex counters, crossing an ankle over one knee. Her bare foot comes in to view. ‘The thing is that women like us,’ she includes me and Kate with a flash of her hand, ‘we find too many things somewhat tiresome. Tiresome because lacking in meaningful rewards. Either the lack is genuine ... ’ she spreads her hands again in a French mannerism, ‘or it simply feels that way. Either way, we, being not only clever but mature ... ’ she adds with a small, self-deprecating smile, ‘we have a compulsion to reason out everything and in every possible rational detail.’ I watch her hands as she twirls the thick band of carved gold that encircles her middle finger. ‘That’s all got to be done, you see, young Tam, before *we* can even think about jumping ever so slowly and carefully ... into anything.’ She nods at

me, a wry smile now on her lips. 'Isn't it so, Emilie?' Her short hair bristles with flashes of silver-grey streaks.

'Uh, yes, I guess,' I mumble, caught off guard. I had been more focused on the woman herself than on her words. From this woman radiates a sort of passionate conviction, even when talking about the most mundane of topics like middle age cold feet.

Tamara rolls her eyes. 'You guys do all that thinking just so that you can feel dreadfully bad and guilty when things don't go according to plan. And then, you can tell yourselves, I knew it, I just knew it.'

Though I'm not *au fait* with the games Alex and Tamara used to play, I'd say Tamara is having a go at her.

'Precisely. And, as penance,' Alex uncrosses her legs, 'or until we feel better, we like to sit in front of a big blank wall and replay the 'mistake', time and time again. Then, one day, the damn memory of it has become so thin, it does not matter anymore.' With the flat of one hand, she smoothes the thin cloth of her trousers.

'Yes, that's pretty much what I told her,' I add, wondering how much of our conversations Tamara has already confided to Alex.

'Talking about a *bad* way of wasting time. Sad even.' Tamara's categorical. She looks at Kate. 'You go on that way too, do you?'

'Pretty much, yes, but I might be a little less prone to self-punishment than these two.'

'How about going back outside for coffee, shall we? Tam, Emilie, why don't you lead the way,' Alex directs, without waiting for anyone's answer.

A beautiful night to be outside. I would've liked to have dinner, here, in the coolness of the night, a few feet above the garden and the pool, but the hostess was adamant, the table out here wouldn't have accommodated the five of us comfortably.

Tamara follows quietly behind me. I'm aware that we're alone for the first time this evening, and for the first time, too, since our walk in the Mount Coot-tha gardens. A gentle heat rises to my neck. Thankful for the dim glow of candles, I plop myself on the same low, cane chair I had occupied earlier, one of the three that squarely face the garden.

I feel more than see Tamara's momentary indecision. My breath is still, like a feather held afloat by two opposing air swirls. She comes to stand behind my chair. From inside the house I hear Alex talk about a film she's seen recently. I train my ear on her strong and modulated voice. The feel of Tamara's hands flat on my collarbone makes me jump though I had expected her touch.

'You're too highly strung, Emilie Anderson. When's the last time you used that flash jacuzzi of yours?'

'Not that long ago.'

Her hands press more firmly on my shoulders. I feel her move closer behind me. I feel the kiss she deposits softly on the top of my head before walking back inside the house. Breathe, Emilie, I order myself. Breathe!

The clanking of cups and saucers announces someone else's presence at the edge of the deck.

'Need a hand?' I ask, turning sideways. Kate's carrying a tray laden with the makings for our after-dinner coffee.

'Can you just grab that box of mints? I'm about to lose it. Ta,' she says, as I reach for the dark box of English mints.

The garden is a secluded one. Tall trees and shrubs would make it difficult for prying eyes to catch more than glimmers of light in between the interwoven limbs and leaves. The moon bobs on the mint-clear body of water beyond the deck. The classical guitar strains of the *Concerto Por Aranjuez* filter from inside the living room. Yes! Finally some classical music. Just what's needed in such a peaceful nightscape.

'Tam's a real cutie, isn't she?'

Oh my, what does Kate know that I don't want to talk about? 'That's true,' I reply non-committally.

Alex's voice mingled with Tamara's precedes them to the deck, followed by Jessie's. Phew. Thank god for that.

'So, what were you saying about your workload these days?' Jessie asks Tamara, apparently continuing the conversation they had started inside.

Candlelight is the only light in this garden, but candlelight, everywhere in this house, means an amazing amount of lit wicks sprouting from an assorted array of burning devices.

'Busy as a bumblebee. All straights bar one this month.'

'Well, I mean, thank goodness for that,' says Jessie's voice, now settled to my left. 'I mean, lesbians getting violent with each other, with their lover, my goodness, I can't wrap my head around that.' Her soft voice strains under her emotion.

Candles mingle brightly amongst a selection of glass oil lamps of varying styles and shapes while other wicks float in ancient brass and metal oil holders blackened with age, nailed by their long spikes to the rough whiteness of the two side-walls that enclose the deck. For a few seconds, I close my eyes and play at recognising the voices as everyone else follows the momentum of the conversation.

'Ah, it happens. The thing is that there's like, so much more of this violence out there than even *we* get to hear about.' Tamara and her English accent. Throaty, sexy.

'What d' you mean?' Kate's voice.

'Oh look,' Tamara answers quickly, 'it's pretty much like the bloody Mafia Code of Silence. Nobody wants to talk about it.'

'Why's that?' Kate again. 'What could possibly be worse than—'

‘For many women, outing the perpetrator is not an option. And if the perp’s a woman, her lover, right? that outs the victim too. And then, there’s the worry of exposing the gay community as a whole.’

‘What, you think these women out there, the ones in that ... in that situation, they think about the ... the community, such as it is?’

‘Yes, I do. Some do. Some of the lesbians I’ve come across do worry about the power it would ... uh ... hand over to the common variety homophobics once it’s out there that we bash our own. That’s on top of all the other ... alleged “kinky” stuff they already pile on us.’

I say that it would give them more ammunition with which to legitimise the interference they exercise over our right to have children. And licence to keep on pretending that ours can only be dysfunctional family units.

Tiny lights tucked around the pool. Moon sparks. Very romantic. And ‘very romantic’ never fails to make me very nostalgic when I’m on my own, emotionally on my own, as I am at the moment. It makes me long for what I don’t have: a presence by my side that would be unique, that blend of complicity and sensual attraction, the weight of my lover’s hand casually resting on my shoulder. In the candlelit darkness, I blink. I swallow hard to push away the transparent image of Roberta that’s just infiltrated my thoughts, uninvited. I close my eyes.

‘I guess it hurts to admit that we, too,’ Alex’s voice has joined in the conversation, ‘can turn against the one who trusts us.’ I recognise her customary rapid-fire conviction. ‘But I guess there is a sort of unhelpful logic in that silence.’

‘The secret must be well-kept all right ’cause I hadn’t heard anything about this till you mentioned it for the first time, Tamara, whenever that was, when ... well, when we first met.’ Kate again.

‘Numbers supposedly speak for themselves, right?’ Tamara asks rhetorically, as she continues, ‘Well, the problem here is that numbers don’t speak at all.’

‘What d’ you mean?’ Jessie’s whisper.

‘I mean that eighty-two percent of the lesbians who responded to a call for testimonials admitted that they had contacted neither the police nor any other service in place. So, what it means is that the number of lesbian-violence occurrences remains too low to tally.’

I’m not, for now, in the mood to involve myself in that totally foreign topic of woman to woman violence, not just yet. But I am impressed by Tamara’s knowledge. That, too, is sexy. Knowledge with passion, I love. Ah, passionate knowledge. Am I impressed because that knowledge makes her more mature, more responsible in my eyes?

‘Why don’t they use whatever services are in place, then? I mean if the services are there—’ Jessie asks faintly.

‘They’re there, but like in a very het-sexist format. As in, not helpful at all to the stressed-out lesbian who’s in a crisis situation,’ Tamara explains into the night air. ‘And then,’ she continues because we all seem interested by what she has to say, ‘for women who are either active on the scene or a part of a tightly knit little group, the implications of ... of naming the abusive party ... that’s real scary. Some of the more courageous women do become totally ostracised.’

‘Goodness! You don’t mean her friends turn against the victim to protect the guilty one? Do you?’ Kate’s indignation lingers through the air.

The night, this deck under the full moon, is too idyllic to think that at the very moment in some households in Brisbane, Australia, in America and elsewhere, some lesbians are unleashing their violence on their lover whose trust they hold in the palm of their hand.

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‘It’s ... yeah, it’s been known to happen,’ Tamara rejoins. I imagine the emphatic nod of her head. ‘And the other problem is that of denial.’

Tamara is the local expert on same sex violence, though she’d never call herself that. Through her involvement in the Domestic Violence Services, she deals with the gamut of domestic abuse directed at women in general. She’s also explained to me that she has an informal agreement with her co-workers by which they pass on to her the odd case of woman to woman battering that might come their way. And they are more than glad to oblige as none are trained in the specialised help lesbian victims may need, again because of the societal bias. I do want to learn more about the work Tamara does but not just now. Not just tonight.

Tamara had passed on the invitation that if I was free the coming Friday night I’d be more than welcome at Alex’s for a small get-together, any time after seven.

‘There’ll only be another couple besides the three of us. Jessie and Kate, Alex’s best mates. I think she wants to get to know you a bit more,’ Tamara had added with a slow grin.

‘And why would that be?’ I couldn’t help but ask.

‘Why I think that or why she might want to get to know you better?’ Tamara has a way of coming up with questions from an awkward angle.

‘Why ... the latter.’

‘Uh ... probably because of the French connection thing,’ had been her reply but something in her tone made me feel she hadn’t given me the most honest answer she could have.

‘The French thing, hey? What, you think she wants to talk about my mother?’ I had asked playfully. ‘Alex doesn’t come across as an expatriate starved for French and things of France. Any other reason you might think of?’

‘Well ... I did tell her about you. I mean, I told her I wanted to have sex with you.’

My heart had skipped a beat. I’m sure it had. ‘And?’

‘And I told her you weren’t interested.’

‘You told her that, did you?’

‘Yep.’

‘And what did she reply to that?’

‘She said, “Good. That woman has common sense. Bring her around.”’ Then, Tamara had added, ‘I could’ve told her it’s all because you’re scared of ... scared off by, my *relative* youth and so on, but I didn’t.’ Tamara had grinned that mock sheepish grin that crinkles the ridge of her nose.

‘Why not?’

She claimed that Alex would’ve said, partly to tease, that after all is said and done, youth and young women in general are highly over rated. Nothing better than a handsome, mature woman who knows her own mind. Apparently, that’s Alex’s stand on the matter.

‘And the irony of it all,’ Tamara had concluded, ‘is that I agree with her. I mean, on the last point, on the handsome, mature woman thing.’

Eight (Jill's story)

From where I sit slightly offset to her left, I watch Jill Mason as she first drops her eyes to her hands, tense and curved against the courtroom bench, before shutting them slowly. Tightly. Her shoulder rises under a measured intake of breath. Measured, as if she preferred not to breathe too much of the ambient air.

The hope she had clung to, the hope she had had of hearing her husband, publicly, face up to his abusive behaviour, as a pathway she had imagined to their mutual healing, has just crumbled. It has crumbled as quickly as a sandcastle made, not even of sand, but of simple wishful thoughts and prayers.

‘Mr Mason, I will now read to you the content of each of the standard clauses covered by the Protection Order. Each clause will be valid for a period of two years from today. Two years, Mr Mason, during which I strongly urge you to seek *and* undergo treatment.’

Mike Mason remained seated, cockerel straight. The magistrate drives his gaze above the rim of his half-moon glasses and into Mike Mason's eyes.

‘A violent person, Mr Mason,’ states the magistrate, ‘*any* violent person cannot be helped by a passive and enduring partner.’

Jill Mason had expected her husband to own up to the abusive nature of his dealings with her. She had expected that he would because she was sure he was a decent man. A nice man, like the one she used to know. Like one who deep down had to know he had become confused and needed help. Like one who did understand that, after all, life and quotas unmet had confused him. The magistrate returns his attention to the papers in front of him, though I suspect he knows the content of the four standard clauses by heart.

‘Clause number 1: You will have to show good behaviour towards your wife, here present, Mrs Mason.’

But Mike Mason hasn’t come good for his wife. Not then, in front of the magistrate, not before. Not on the day of their wedding anniversary and not now. And tonight, he will be sleeping soundly in his own bed as she struggles to find sleep on the furthest side of the same bed, on the portion of mattress the furthest away from him. I moan softly. Jill Mason turns her head a fraction towards me before returning her full attention to the magistrate. At least he has come good for her. She will at least have that order though I’m not quite clear as to what recourse she might have, should her husband, behind closed doors, choose to disregard clause number one. I’ll have to run that past Tamara.

‘Clause number 2,’ enunciates the magistrate, ‘you will have to respect and not make contact with any of Mrs Mason’s relatives or associates. Clauses number 3 and 4 state that you are not to have any sort of weapon on your person, none in your name. And that any licence for any weapon you may have in your name and on this day will be revoked. Mrs Mason, I ask you now, are there any other clauses that you might wish the Court to consider on your behalf?’

‘Sir ...’

I lean closer to Jill Mason’s ear. ‘Your Worship,’ I whisper and I hold on to my breath. I sense she wants the magistrate to add another clause, a move she had not previously contemplated.

‘I ... Oh yes. I’m sorry. Your Worship ... I’d like to ask you to make sure my ... Please, yes, make it so he stays away from me. From our home. From my work. If ever I get to work again,’ she finishes in an exhausted whisper.

Woa! I exhale forcefully. Awright! *Yes!* Like a pumped up cheerleader, I could jump up and down, hug my heroine and perform a celebratory powwow dance around her. The magistrate nods and scribbles something before gathering

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his papers into a manila folder. All rise as His Worship exits through the side door that will return him to his chamber.

‘You see, Emilie, the problem is that there’s nothing in place that’s specifically for the battered lesbians.’

The Plough Inn with its ornate façade topped with shed dormer windows never fails to remind me of a child’s cake, freshly painted, as it is, in pastel shades of ochre, and inserts of mission-brown red. Multitudinous garlands of roses painted blue-grey crowd mock pillars of vague Greco-Roman inspiration. Quite a sight to behold as we pass it on our way to the riverside esplanade. Built in 1885, it is one of the oldest buildings that remain in Brisbane.

‘Things are changing slowly but DV, in general, has never been up there for priority funding,’ Tamara explains.

She called me some time in the afternoon to suggest we spend the tail end of the day at the South Bank Parklands. We could also grab a little something to eat at one of the outdoor cafes that line the bank. And wouldn’t it be great to sit and goof off while enjoying the breeze that would be blowing from the river. I had agreed though, as a rule, I am not keen at all on populous venues. That little outing, however, would take me out of the house, away from the tropical, sticky humidity that has been prevailing over the city for the past week, so I had agreed to go. Even the air in the garden is still and heavy, laden with the promise of more late afternoon storms.

‘You see, this particular issue doesn’t polarise voters.’ Tamara continues, ‘It’s not like whether AndroGel, Viagra, or whatever brand name they’ve morphed into are going to be added to the Medicare list of refunds. Or whether tampons, feminine hygiene stuff, should be exempt from the GST. Or the pro-gun lobby. Or whether the flow of refugees should be contained. No one stops long enough to seriously think about the DV thing and the ones who do don’t want to go in

to bat for it. And when it comes to gay and lesbian violence ... ' She stops to look at a little boy, a toddler, as he pushes away on his tiny scooter. 'Look,' she says, pointing at the two little pink training wheels at the back of the kick-board. One finger hitched under her backpack strap, left hand tucked inside her jeans pocket, she and I walk side by side. I seem to take longer strides than most of my friends and, if I don't pay attention to my pace, I usually, fairly quickly, find myself walking on my own, quite a ways away from everyone else. But Tamara doesn't seem to have any problem matching my stride.

She turns to look at me straight on. 'I mean, there's a place for everything, I know, but take Alex for example. She had never even considered the problem women face inside their homes mostly because, like you, she kind of thought it was a part of the choices some heterosexual women have made. You know, like you choose to live with a male, well, that comes with a hell of a lot of disadvantages. Mind you ... ' Head cocked sideways, Tamara glances at me and hesitates. ' ... I ... uh ... the weird thing is that I used to think that way too. Oh, long time ago, mind you,' she adds quickly, still only glancing at me. 'That was like before I took off to Europe. I guess I needed to do some serious growing up. But, anyway, Alex, she's like totally concerned with the plight of the Taliban women. I guess most of them would be straight, right? Men are ... mistreating them in so many ways. Like killing them, right? But, I mean, she's never met a Taliban woman in her life. Never been there, probably never will. Yet, right here in Brisbane, there are battered women who could do with her help ... '

'Maybe she thinks Taliban women don't have a choice. The thing is happening in their country. All of them are pawns, you know, victims. All men, there, are the perpetrators. Their religion, even, is manipulated against them. They've got absolutely no recourse from inside their country

and not many are in a position where they could buy themselves a ticket out. And to do what next? Go where? But, look,' I feel compelled to add, 'honest truth is that I know next to nothing when it comes to what goes on either in Brisbane or in Afghanistan.'

It's a beautiful evening out here. The south bank of the river is full of Sunday strollers. From the beach lagoon rises the lingering scent of sunscreens and tanning lotions, mingling with chlorine.

She shrugs. 'I just wish more women like you, feminists at heart, Alex, your friends, hers and mine would try to pool in somehow.'

'Well, as you said, the numbers are invisible.'

She glances at me. 'True. That's because they'd say that violence in relationships is like a private issue,' she explains again. 'And as women, we like to think, too, that we are neither controlling nor manipulative, and that violence is totally a male thing. Wrong, wrong, wrong.'

The breeze from the river is gentle on my face as we move further along the livelier portion of the City Reach. Red and blue beams of reflected lights stretch themselves over the black skin of the river. Golden patches have settled closer to the opposite bank. A greater number of prams than I would have imagined mingle with walkers. It's family time here tonight. Earlier each evening though, the same esplanade is overrun by joggers, either alone, in groups, or urged along by their personal trainers. Rollerbladers, shiny like long, swaying black weeds from all the black protective gear they wear, cyclists, too, come in numbers as soon as their office day is over. The average weekend evenings on the South Bank belong to families and teenagers. The river brings out people from all walks of life, from all ages. Even me ... thanks to Tamara. And I remember that I, too, used to rollerblade so I make a mental note to dig out my skates from wherever they've been gathering garage dust.

‘I guess some homophobes want to believe, too, that violence is a normal part of queer relationships.’ I’m enjoying my companion’s knowledge on that bleak topic.

A big blue City Cat approaches the jetty. Clad in little navy shorts and a white T-shirt, the attendant is ready, rope in hand, to moor the wide, double hull ferry. Tamara slows her pace to watch the manoeuvre. I hang back with her. The huge engines are idling and the propellers churn greyish, muddy water while the passengers board.

‘It’s as you were saying, that night at Alex’s, our silence is not entirely helpful, is it?’ I slow down to look more closely at a clump of Pandanus. Thick tubular roots dangle rigid from the middle of the trunk aiming to anchor themselves on the ground like so many beige and scaly, taut mooring ropes.

‘Well, no, not at all. Unless we confront the silence, just as the straights are finally working out their own stand on the issue, we’ll be lagging behind. In the closet.’

‘A skeleton of our own doing, then?’

‘In part, yes.’

‘I bet many believe that abusive behaviour occurs mostly among the queers who hang out in bars and who are intellectually ... uh ... *uneducated*,’ I offer from lack of a better word while omitting to mention that, until Tamara opened my eyes to the issue, I used to be one of the many who had failed to question the status quo. Why *didn’t* domestic violence stir the feminist streak in me? Too heterosexually sexual, perhaps. OK, so I wear blinkers too.

‘Well, that’d narrow down the problem, wouldn’t it? And nice-professional-middle class-lesbians could turn their back on the thing. Hey, they’d be safe in the knowledge that their *education* would keep them safe.’ Tamara continues, occasionally glancing at the cityscape on the west bank. ‘That’s not the way it works. An unhinged, out of control dyke can pop up behind *any* front door. From Ascot to Inala.’

I'm more than happy to let her go on, quite keen actually to have her enlighten me while we keep walking, while I keep her in the corner of my peripheral vision.

Clumps of modern office blocks stand isolated from each other by the wide patches of sky and space that attest to the relatively low population density of Brisbane. From the south bank where we stand looking at the lights, the city itself looks contained by the white railings of a toboggan-shaped freeway suspended some twenty feet above ground. Another Brisbane trademark. The Alice Street entrance to the freeway makes a second white loop above the first. Further back, white headlights stream steadily.

'I suppose the police assume that all lesbian relationships are based on 'femme and butch stereotypes,' I say, again thinking back to my own misconception. 'And that an abusive dyke's got to be the one with the short hair. 'But then again, they probably think that it doesn't matter anyway because girls can't throw a good punch.'

'Right.'

A quick thought flashes past. She is, indeed, lovely. She is interesting. And I'm relieved to see that I can look at her, appreciate her, her commitment to her work, and the moment we share here on this riverbank, without any further thoughts of lust and arousal. I smile secretly not sure why, but I suspect it has to do with the feeling that something has been overcome. Mind over matter perhaps.

'So, how does a woman in crisis find help?'

'There are many ways in which women can find us but I'd say mostly it's through the emergency telephone service. Twenty-four hours a day. No holidays.'

'OK, so the phone rings. It's 1.00 a.m. A woman's on the line, she needs help. What happens then?'

'The operator's first task is to work out the urgency of the situation. She or he has already asked for her address, and they talk the woman through the strategy. They figure

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out where she can run to and wait for a taxi to pick her up. You know, like at the intersection of such and such street.'

'She's not picked up from home then?'

'Oh no. Too risky for everyone. As I said, we mostly handle male to woman violence, so all our strategies are about not putting ourselves or any peripheral service at risk.'

'OK, so the taxi drops her off ... where? Like at a refuge, a shelter?'

'Again, no. More precautions have to be taken. The addresses of all the shelters are supposed to be secret. The women who stay there are reminded again and again to not, like not ever, tell anyone, not even their friends. That's for the women's on-going security.'

'But surely, over months or years, there's got to be some leaks.' I figured any woman could mention to her best friend or to her mother, or even to that partner of hers during a kiss-and-make-up pillow talk, where she found refuge when all hell broke loose around her? The numbers of likely breaches could conceivably suggest that the safe house secret might not be as secret as workers, like Tamara, would like to have it.

'Look, I hope not,' she said. 'I'd like to think the women understand the need for a sanctuary, a safe place not just for themselves, but also for the women who will follow them there.'

'Right, so how do they actually get there, then?'

'Well, it's a bit like a cloak-and-dagger chain of events. The woman's asked to either take a taxi or walk to street X where she'll be met by a worker who then connects with the woman and drives her to the refuge. Some stay only overnight, others stay the max which allows them a three months' stay.'

'I guess women who can afford it would probably go to a hotel or stay with friends or—'

‘Yes, to a hotel. But it’s mostly no to friends. I mean, most women, richer or poorer, would rather keep *that* to themselves. Remember the code of silence and the airing of dirty linen thing?’

‘Ah, yes. And these remain silent and invisible.’

On the left of the boardwalk towards the Cultural Centre, a rainforest microcosm attracts my attention. The dense foliage, large tree ferns and the plate size leaves of climbers wrapped around thick tree trunks beckon me. As I get closer, the tinkle of a rock pool waterfall brings a smile to my lips. Closer again, I realise that a fish pond has been established beyond and under the elevated decking of the promenade, beyond this scenic extension roughly shaped as a wide W.

‘Isn’t that a lovely little nook?’ I ask, pointing at the apex that shapes the middle of the extended platform.

‘Looks nice and cool in there. Hey, check out the fish. Over that way,’ Tamara exclaims.

A fat fish, yellow and black, moves lazily through the weeds.

‘Ah, there’s another one right down here,’ she calls out, indicating the body of water right below our feet. Sure enough, a grey fish, as plump as the first, is idling amongst the flat rocks, leisurely fanning its little side fins.

The night is dark around us. A short burst of rollerblade thunder reverberates over the suspended boardwalk behind us. The din of voices only a few metres away hasn’t vanished but, offset from the promenade, the lagoon lookout offers an unexpected feeling of seclusion. Green, cool, private.

I move to the apex of the deck and lean over further, looking for more fat fish. Tamara has moved with me. I’m aware of her physicality, of her proximity on my left. Her denimed hip brushes against mine as she leans forward, elbows resting on the flat handrail.

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‘There. Right at the base of that big fern over there.’ She points to our left.

I train my eyes in the direction, peer in between the long weeds but fail to spot the third fish.

‘It’s gone too far inside the weeds,’ she says. ‘Can’t see it anymore.’

I’m distracted by the length of her body almost touching mine, tantalisingly close, from shoulder to thigh. The wedge-shaped platform we are standing on is narrow at its point. Not much room to move. I don’t want to move. Already the slow heat of arousal is creeping upwards from below my navel, uncoiling itself lazily, warm and yet already strangely sharp. I lean forward, now only pretending to be searching the shallow spotlight depth for more fish to justify, to her, the fact that I’m not initiating any move away from Tamara.

Her arm brushes against the leather bag slung on my right shoulder as she moves behind me. I hold my breath hoping she is not moving totally away, bored with the lagoon, ready too soon to lead us back into the throng of people a few metres behind us.

Her right arm reaches for the railing on the other side of me. I’m enclosed in front of her, locked in on the left by the railing that defines the apex and on the right by her arm as her hand lies on the flat, horizontal handrail. Cool lips on the top of my ear. My breath already catches in my throat as if it recognises the moment. The slow warmth that was gently rising inside me only a moment ago now uncoils itself with lightning speed as Tamara’s breath flutters within the whorl of my ear. I catch my breath as the quick caress of her tongue releases a sharp ache in my sex, a dull bite in the area of my solar plexus. I need to breathe. I need to turn around. And yet I stand still, simply focusing on her breath, as her tongue plays havoc with my senses.

Behind me, behind her, the rising thumping of a bass and a microphone voice urging more action on the dance

floor of a river barge. I close my eyes to better focus on the sweet pain of desire. Tamara leans closer against my back to enclose me more tightly though her right hand is still on the railing. Two women casually dressed in jeans and shirts, stopped by the lagoon to look at the fat fish lazily weaving in and out of the weeds, backpacks slung loosely over their shoulders. Is that all there is for the passers-by to see?

‘Emilie,’ she begins huskily, ‘Are you ready?’

‘Ready for what?’ I ask, forcing a breath deep inside my lungs. Disco sounds now boom through the night air.

‘Ready in your head.’ Her cheek touches mine. ‘Ready to have sex.’

I swivel against her to look into her eyes. Green eyes, soft eyes touch mine. I look away.

‘Tamara. No, I’m not ready. I’m not ready to have sex.’ I lie. Her head is superimposed over the large shape of the double-decker steamboat, that is making its way up the river, all aglow with swirling disco lights. No, it’s not a lie. It’s more complicated than that. My body is ready. My head is not. And my heart is not even in the equation. And can’t afford to be.

‘Let’s make love then,’ she replies with that uncomplicated logic of hers. Yes, I think to myself, I could make love. We could go back to my place. I do want her. Her touch has made me hungry for more, for more of these sudden bursts of highly charged electricity. My heartbeat is still manic under my ribs. I do want to see. I do want to touch, to feel more of her. Breathe. Deep and slow.

‘Tamara, we can’t make love.’

‘Why the hell not?’

‘We’re not in love.’

‘OK. Not in love, whatever that square notion might mean, but we’re friends. You do like me, don’t you?’

‘I like you.’ I do like you. I am very fond of you. But I won’t tell you that. Not just yet.

I gently lift her hand from the railing and brush past her. On the boardwalk, a very little girl in pink, skin-tight pedal pushers and a singlet pushes away on her small scooter. The tiny front wheel flickers in various shades of electric blue. Her blond hair is tied in a ponytail that threatens to come undone. Then come several groups of families with adults pushing prams—prams that serve the double purpose of carrying the baby while a soft load of pillows, toys, and other folded items are piled on the canopies. The steamboat paddles on with its noisy cargo of revellers, taking with it its cacophony of music, microphone voices and girls' shrieks.

'Look, Tamara. I'm ... seventeen years older than you.'

'And?'

'Never mind. You're not ... We don't ... ' I want her but I cannot tell her that I'm afraid I might get attached. I could perhaps tell her that I don't want to have sex simply to get 'feel-good-feelings', as Solange, my ex-lover, would say about making love and any other activity that raises her pulse. But again, this is not entirely true at all. 'Look, we don't have any business being together.'

'True, except for the business of being terribly turned on by each other,' she counters, agreeably. She has pushed her hands deep inside her jeans pockets.

'Well ... that doesn't count.'

'Oh, I see.' She stares after the paddle steamer. 'No, that's a lie. I don't see. I don't see why you want to make being so turned on not count.'

I know what she means and one of the things I like about her is that whether she talks about her work or talks about wanting intimate physical contact, she does so in the same calmly passionate way, in a no nonsense manner that is hard to dismiss.

'Emilie, making love or having sex,' she starts again with the voice of a patient parent, 'it's not about will you

bear my children stuff. It's not about will you grow old with me either.'

'I know. I know it's about sexual gratification.'

'Don't make that sound ugly. It's not like it has to be cold and mechanical.' She looks at me, making me hold her gaze. 'You know, you know damn well, it wouldn't be impersonal between us.' I look away. She is right. It wouldn't be impersonal. It would be hot. It would be sensual. It would be a breathless affair. A man with navy, short-legged shorts and thin black socks in leather sandals walks past, and though he has a long braid dangling behind his back he looks singularly unsexy.

'Tell me,' Tamara begins again, 'there's got to be something else that bugs you.'

'You're right, there's that thing about making sex,' I stop and start again, 'about having sex without feeling love,' I stubbornly hold on to my initial argument, 'and there's the fact that ...' I hesitate, aware that I had never had to spell out that thought before. 'Well, it's me. I mean my body. I ... don't feel that comfortable with my body any more. With my *naked* body, OK?' I ask, a defensive, self-conscious edge in my tone.

'Why's that?'

'Oh, Tamara, for crying out loud. Take a guess,' I retort, annoyed at the thought of having to explain more.

'What? Because you're *so much* older than me, as you say?' She's standing, tall and firm in front of me. The narrow hips and flat stomach I have already noticed are discernible even under the thick weave of her shirt.

'Yes! Because of ... the age difference, and because I feel ... grey. Because ... because I don't exercise.' She looks at me frowning. I feel the need to add, 'Well ... a flabby body just isn't that sexy when naked.'

'Oh, so, you're not going to make love anymore. Ever?' she asks, pretending perplexity.

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‘Oh yes, I am.’ But fully dressed, I feel like adding.
‘But with women whose bodies kind of have similar flaws
as mine.’

‘That’s weird, all this negativity,’ she retorts, shaking her
head slowly. ‘Where you say flabby, I say soft.’

‘Soft? As in mushy.’

‘No. Soft as in cuddly soft,’ she replies undeterred.

‘Oh, away with you Tamara,’ is all I can reply to such
sane reasoning. I head off out of the shadows and on to the
boardwalk.

Lying on the inflated mattress, I toss and turn trying to hold on to my sleep a little longer. The humidity and the stifling heat had woken me up. A look at my watch tells me it's almost 6 a.m. An ungodly hour to wake up at the best of times. I don't understand why it's still pitch black inside the tent. Might as well get up, I grumble disgruntled by this early morning rise. Damp thoughts churn slowly around my head. Damp from muggy humidity inside the tent, sluggish thoughts from the slight hung over feeling that constricts my brain, the price to pay for last night's prolonged drinking by the fire. We had all taken turns swapping childhood stories and stoking the fire until our pile of wood had been totally depleted. And that had made me melancholy. And I probably had that unnecessary 'last one for the road', secure in the thought that I didn't have to worry about getting home. Loo. Coffee. Shower. These three simple thoughts flash through the dull ache in my head.

On my hands and knees, already aware of my stiff lower back, the product of a night on too soft a base, I unzip the half-moon tent flap. Inexplicably, a dark green screen blocks the exit. I blink at it uncomprehending.

A second distinctive zip noise, this one from the tent nearby. Muffled shuffling sounds. A couple of half-hearted curses. A laugh. Joan's belly laugh. She doesn't laugh often but when she does, that laugh of hers is so unrestrained, it's downright contagious.

'Hey, Merre,' I hear her say softly, 'come ... come have a look at this.'

About to push through my obstructed panel, I hear Merre-dyth exclaim, 'What the hell! You think she's in there?'

'Well, I'd say.' I can tell Joan's gasping for air. 'Where else would she be this time of the morning?'

Bare feet pad to the other side of my nylon wall. ‘Hey ... Emilie? You in there?’

‘Yeah,’ I call back, made decidedly grumpier by this early morning hilarity. ‘What the hell’s so funny?’

They giggle. ‘I wouldn’t say that anything’s *up*, girl.’ That’s Merre talking. ‘*Down’s* more like it.’

‘Feeling a bit hot in there, are you?’ asks Joan’s voice.

I need to go to the loo. I want my coffee. Black and strong. Almost as desperately, I need a hot shower. A shower to unwrinkle my mind. Jets to soothe the tightness in my lower back. Ah, what? No shower! Absolute beachfront camping spanning some five hundred metres, yes. But no shower. Just a tap, a cold water tap to connect to a hose. Groan. The time has come to push through the heavy green screen like an Eskimo crawls out of an igloo entrance, on all fours.

‘So what’s up with you guys.’ I grumble, in my best attempt at early morning sociability. ‘Fell out of bed in a good mood, or what?’

What I finally recognise as a piece of a tarp creates a green tunnel of sorts over my head, as it keeps on lengthening itself as I inch forward, head first. And on the other side, Merredyth and Joan are splitting their sides with laughter. As I come to the end of my tunnel their bare feet come into view. One hand holding the tarp’s end a couple of inches above my head, I blink into the morning light. A true breath of fresh air flutters across my sweaty face as a cool sea breeze greets me at the outer edge of the heavy green flap.

I extricate myself completely still unsure as to what exactly has happened to my tent during the night. On my behind, I scoot free of the tarp. And a deep laugh builds up in the pit of my stomach as I contemplate, through teary eyes, the cause of the absurd incubating heat that has been rising inside my dome. A huge army tarp has draped itself over my tent like a soggy sheet of filo pastry over an egg.

Threading a couple of ropes through tree branches to stretch the tarp that was to provide shade outside the tents as the early sun rose can be a good idea, particularly if the tarp stretcher gets it right the first time. I obviously hadn't. Still on my bum and slow to process the obvious, I grasp that I should've embarked on that task well before dinner the night before rather than after my last glass of wine.

The strong winds that had picked up during the night had pulled at the knots and the wide army tarp must have come loose sometime after dawn. Joan has tears of laughter sparkling on her cheeks. Another characteristic unzipping sound. Solange crawls out of her own tent aware of a commotion. She uncurls herself and stands tugging at her ear.

'*Eh bien quoi?*' she begins. 'What's with the—' I watch her squint at the dark green mound. 'Your tent under there?' The corners of her mouth curl up and stretch into one of her wide mouth smiles. Teeth flash.

'Under there. Like inside an oven,' I reply flatly.

'Hey, Sol. What's goin' on out there?' Gretta's muffled voice asks. 'Z'it worth it?'

'*C'est comme tu veux*, but, yeah, it's worth a look,' Solange answers. 'Isn't it, Emi?' Grey eyes shine with glee.

I can tell it'll be a fair while before any of them ever lets me live this story down.

And Gretta's sleep tousled, pixie head pokes out of the tent flap. From her position on all fours, she looks first at Solange, then at Merredyth, at Joan, and finally at me, not making any connection.

'*Par là*, that way,' says Solange, pointing to the left, to my tent.

'Oh, my gawd!' exclaims Gretta, with the broad flat vowels of a Queenslander. 'What's the go?'

'Emilie got cold during the night,' says Joan. And that triggers another bout of general amusement.

I get up, shaking my head. Definitely stiff from the night on the inflatable mattress, I take a bow. ‘My shout at the pub tonight for whoever can top that,’ I try good-humouredly, in a lame attempt to deflect the attention.

‘Hard act to follow, Emi,’ Joan chuckles, ‘but the day’s still young. Good idea that, of stopping somewhere on the way home, though.’

‘Cool! We could stop at The Tool-Shed,’ suggests Solange. ‘I mean, we couldn’t really go anywhere else dressed as we are.’

‘I’ll challenge youse to a game,’ quips Gretta, her crunched up, sleepy face suddenly more animated.

The Tool-Shed on Leichardt Street is a bit rough, a bit raw, and totally laid-back. Merre pats me on the shoulder. ‘I think you’ve deserved a good cuppa.’

‘I’ll say. What a way to start the day.’ I shake my head, still disbelieving the obvious. ‘*Too* early, man. *Too* hot.’ Walking behind her, undecided about which way to go, I add, ‘But, hey anything to make my friends laugh.’

My first priority is still the same. First, got to have a pee. Second, since I can’t droop under a hot shower, I need to pop a couple of Nurofen pills with my coffee, like ... now.

‘Anyone making coffee?’ I ask hoping.

‘*J’m’en occupe*. Be right there,’ answers Solange’s voice, back inside her tent. She’s always good value when anything remotely connected to cooking is concerned. Making coffee’s fine, making tasty club sandwiches she can do, but what she excels at is proper gourmet cooking.

Now, cooking has never been my forte. Still isn’t. Even less now that I’m back on my own. I’m perfectly happy with a dinner of Vegemite on hot buttered toasts and a bowl of tomato soup spiked with Tabasco. In spite of my mother’s culinary feats, cooking doesn’t rate, not until I go to a restaurant. And anyway, whatever’s happened to the great mounds

of Spag Bol and the slightly improved-from-the-tin bowls of Chilli Con Carne of our entertaining youth?

As I pass by their tent, I hear Greta reprimand Solange in hushed tones, 'See? Told you last night, you know, to help her hang the thing.' Upward inflexion at the end of the sentence, characteristic of the local accent.

'*Tu la connais pas*. She didn't want a hand. She likes to do things on her own,' Solange answers. 'She usually gets them right the first time, though.'

I smile as I walk away towards the toilet block.

We got here early yesterday afternoon. All went according to plan. Solange had already arrived at the Noosa River ferry point of embarkation and when she saw me pull up, she jumped out of a car that certainly was neither her big Commodore V8, nor the pink combi van she uses for work. Instead, she jumped out of a beat up Suzuki Sierra that seemed to have more rust holes than rivets holding it together. Its original colour looked like it might have once been an uncertain shade of red. A sad little scruffy canopy hung loosely on its harness. That car was way beyond anything Solange might have ever enjoyed restoring.

'*Ça va*, Emi,' she said, bounding towards me, with big puppy-like energy, as per her old habit. She's always had that kind of energy along with a craving for adrenaline-charged activities. *Intrepid*, Roberta had said about her.

Solange had tied her hair in a ponytail that sat low and straight against her nape, only partially hiding her little bluebird tattoo. The top of her head was protected by the No Fear black cap she always wears back to front. She looked good. Fit, as always.

'*Salut*, Sol. All's well?' I said, hugging her tightly.

Impossible grey eyes smile at me fondly. ‘What’s with scruff over there?’ I asked, pointing to the car, but just as Solange turned to face the vehicle, a somewhat matted half-length mop of blondish hair poked through the driver’s side, and a woman of indefinite age jumped on to the rocky path. A rumpled tee shirt and faded jeans tight against her very thin frame.

‘*Bon, écoute, tu vas être gentille, hein?*’ Solange rebuked me. ‘Don’t you start in on her.’

‘No, wait, Sol. I was only talking about the car, not about the—’

Oh my, not a good start.

‘*Viens, Gretta. Over here,*’ Solange ignored me.

Gretta, the infamous Gretta. So, there was no *new* woman, only a newly out in the open woman. But why the mystery, why did it take so long for Sol to unveil her, so to speak, to the three of us? Most of us, who know when we haven’t closed the preceding chapter well, tend to slink around for a while but that was over six or seven months ago. A long time to keep the new one in one’s life hidden from friends, particularly from Joan and Merredyth, of whom she’s always been quite fond.

As she came towards us, I could tell Gretta was young, or at least, young enough to still be called youngish. Yes, Gretta was younger than me. By some ten years, I would’ve said. She trotted towards us and Solange put an arm protectively across the woman’s narrow shoulders as she stopped by her side, in front of me. I could tell she was unsure as to what she should do next. I wasn’t going to help her out, not just yet. I can be so uncharitable some times.

I smiled faintly, almost as an after-thought, as I ran her through a quick scan. An elfin, pinched little face, like a prematurely faded rose. Or maybe like a bud that started wilting before it ever got the chance to open fully.

‘Gretta, this is Emilie. You know, I told you about her.’

I bet you did, I thought to myself, not generously minded at that particular moment. And to me, Solange simply said, '*C'est Gretta,*' possibly because she remembered that she hadn't, at least not at the time, told me anything about Gretta. Not after their first night of love, not even after the first week. Solange had stayed away from me. At the time, I assumed it was because she was flat out making passionate love to Gretta, and couldn't bear to tear herself away. Couldn't bear the thought of having to unravel the series of steps, irremediably set in silence, that had moved us apart a lot more swiftly than I would ever have thought possible only a week earlier. But she had told me about Gretta later because, by then, Solange knew I was no longer raw. And because ultimately she wanted me to know that at one level her initial involvement with Gretta had been intended as an indictment of my own self-centred behaviour.

A disarming smile lit up Gretta's young but wizened little face. 'Hey,' she said.

'Hey,' I said back, still somewhat surprised by this woman's appearance. Her hair seemed unusually coarse, particularly for being blonde. It stuck out at odd angles and her face reminded me of a bush fairy. Not that I had ever seen a bush fairy.

Just at that moment, the Rocksta drove up with Joan at the wheel, and again Solange bounded in the direction of the newly arrived. Her lover, momentarily on her own, looked hesitant as to what to do with herself. I was ready to bet she didn't want to appear too clingy by running after Solange, and yet, I was sure she didn't really want to spend time, right here, on her own with me. Self-consciously, she tugged at the bandanna knotted under her chin. Breathe in, I reminded myself. Be nice to her. She didn't owe me anything. If anyone did. But beyond indulging in a little grudge-bearing over her early involvement with my lover at the time, the fact remains

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that I, myself, really do not enjoy making chit-chat with strangers.

‘Have you already been here before?’ I asked, pointing beyond the barge jetty.

She smiled brightly. The wizened little face again a rosebud. ‘Oh, crikies, yeah.’ She sounded ready to stop there but kept going. ‘Haven’t been here for a spell, though.’ And again that upward inflexion as if she was asking me to confirm for her that that was the case.

‘Hey, girls.’

I turn just in time to get a bear hug from Joan. ‘Glorious day, or what?’ she exclaims, adjusting her sunglasses above her forehead. Brown eyes blinking in the strong sunlight.

‘Glorious day, all right.’

‘Hey, Merre. No hassles getting here?’

‘Nah, just had to go back, you know, ten minutes away from the house. Thought I had left the back door open.’

‘Had you?’

‘Nah.’

And Solange introduced Gretta to the newcomers who smiled and nodded benignly in return. Gretta, once again, tugged at the green bandanna around her neck, dark berry eyes darting from one to the other. Merredyth cast a quick glance in my direction. I winked at her surreptitiously, letting her know all was well on my side of the world. She nodded again and walked towards the Noosa River, only a few metres away.

As the old flat-bottom barge pulled up we lined our vehicles one behind the other, caravanseraï formation, and drove them on the flat bottom barge for the fifteen-minute ride to the other side. A beautiful Saturday it was. Hot sun somewhat tamed by a cool breeze. We watched flocks of pelicans roost like large white fruit on the bare branches of a tree and alight, powerful wings blinding white in the sunshine, as the old barge rumbled closer to their perch on

the Noosa River. I felt good, fit and relaxed as I squinted into the cloudless sky.

We checked in at the Beachview Camp, the stretch of virgin beach, sand dunes and scrub dotted with tent sites amidst a clutter of thin eucalyptus trees and scrubby bushes. We registered under our vehicle licence plate numbers, and for once, I was able to secure the rare permit to light a fire in this place where all cooking, BBQs included, needs to be done on gas appliances.

Jack, the manager, told us it had been raining steadily and regularly during the past few weeks and though kindling wood was dry and abundant, the fire hazard restrictions could be momentarily lifted. The other factor the manager had obviously considered was that, luck being on our side, there were only a handful of tents, each well isolated from the others, scattered through the trees. No hordes of manic rev heads to cohabitate with. What a treat! We then went about the all-important task of choosing our own campsite, one with unrestricted access to the beach, one so close to the shore we'd fall asleep with the soft roar of the sea inside our tents. One, too, protected well enough from the wind that was forecast for Sunday.

Merredyth and Joan found *the* perfect spot, slightly west of the main entrance, sheltered by a fringe of pencil thin trees and the thick under-lip of a long weather-beaten dune. We parked our vehicles right next to each other in the back of the lot that was soon to become the tent area. And we all scattered between the nearby trees to look for dry kindling wood and branches to drag back.

The four of them took much longer than I did and by the time they came back, having had time to set up my little oasis of nylon, I was more than ready to start a fire for our first cup of bush coffee. Solange and Joan opted for a cold tinny instead, joking that they preferred to save their fire time till later that night.

Too excited to nap, after a quick sample and swap of each others' sandwiches, we all opted to go on a reconnaissance drive up the beach. The tide was low and would allow safe driving on packed sand for this first outing in many months. Just enough to whet our appetite for some more adventurous driving the next day, as we'd make our way to Teewah and maybe even as far as Rainbow Beach. We wanted to check, too, for major washouts and other sand movements that constantly change the landscape of this forty-mile beach open to the unrelenting rub of the tides.

The sea often brings in other obstacles, mostly in the shape of driftwood that might need to be shifted by hand if the tide, high on the beach, precludes passing around it. This drive, I thought, was going to be Solange's first test of self-control. And I wondered how Gretta was faring, day in and day out, with Solange's reckless impulses.

As it turned out, all had gone well, and late in the afternoon, sticky with salt spray and exhilarated by the sun and the wind and the incessant crashing of the sea, we all crawled inside our temporary water, and fireproof, nylon homes for a little private time. Tamara followed me inside and curled up inside my thoughts.

'What say we try and aim for the Cherry Venture?'

'Isn't it a bit far from here?'

'We'd need to start off early. Like ...' Merredyth looked in my direction, 'Like at eight. To be packed and gone by nine.'

'Can do,' I said, agreeing to the ultimate weekend sacrifice of getting up early. I'm being reasonable in rationalising that when one is away on an adventure weekend with friends, one can't, or shouldn't expect to lie on her inflatable, too-soft-on-the-back mattress until 10 a.m. Forget about balancing a

book in one hand and a cup of freshly brewed coffee in the other. Or, more to the point, if one really needs to start the day with a slow wake up and a read, one should most realistically wake up with the cackle of the kookaburras. Earplugs away. Oh, the price to pay for the freedom of prancing about in my jungle green camouflage trousers, safari shirt and Doc Martens!

'Et c'est quoi? What's this Cherry thing, Merredyt?' asked Solange, in the manner of the French faced with the challenge of the very English 'th' sound.

Besides, she had never travelled the stretch of sand beyond Teewah.

'Whatta ya mean? Never heard of the Cherry?' Gretta turned around puzzled, and sounding, I've decided, distinctly grassroots Australian. The rough edge of her speech creates a startling contrast with her slight frame and pixie face.

'Never heard of it.' Solange held her ground, unfussed. *'Alors, c'est quoi?'* she asked again from behind Gretta, her hand still caressing her lover's neck.

'It's the bloody greatest load of rusted steel and bolts in the Southern Hemisphere, that's what,' Gretta explained, looking back at Joan, Merredyth and me, on the other side of the campfire.

'It's a shipwreck ... of sorts,' Joan suggested, trying to move the conversation forward.

'Got stuck there in '73. Never been the same since,' Gretta seemed quite knowledgeable on the topic. *'Worst storm in living memory, it was. My father said. Like I was only a little rug-rat then. Twelve, fourteen metre waves. One hundred and fifty kilometre per hour winds. Still blows me away just thinking about it. Would have been like, so awesome.'* The little bush fairy's hair was aglow from the heat that emanates from the fire. There was, after all something about her that made me smile. *'The bloody thing didn't sink. Wouldn't be on the beach if it did,'* Gretta was keen to set the story right.

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‘It was sailing from Briz to the Kiwis, they reckon. A sixteen or seventeen ton cargo ship, you know.’

Someone asked, ‘And so, why is it still on the beach?’

‘They tried to refloat it but the tides weren’t right. Never got pulled back out to sea, so it just stays there. Sad really.’

Actually, the Cherry Venture is quite a cheerful sight, as it lies, comfortably now on its bed of white sand, its long and dark rusty hull and cockpit moth-eaten against the cloudless sky. People have, over the years, left colourful graffiti on its flank, the only immutable object in this ever changing landscape of moving sand and altered shores.

And so, Solange whose intrepid streak had been awoken by the idea of great storms and a shipwrecked, dried out carcass had been most keen to have a look for herself. A beachfront drive to Teewah via Rainbow Beach and a cross-country shortcut over a rocky trail would lead us directly back on to the highway. Back to Brisbane.

To celebrate our consensus on tomorrow’s activities, Solange had opened the last surviving bottle of red. I scratched behind the tents for a couple of logs that, last night, we would’ve considered too small. And the fire, once more stoked, held us all momentarily mesmerised. After a quick debate on whether or not to lower the pressure in our tyres before we took off in the morning, and having agreed to not bother as we’d be driving on packed wet sand most of the way, we succumbed to a post dinner lethargy brought on, mostly, by our first day out in the sun and surf. What a wonderful way to end the day.

Leaning against a boulder rolled by the fire for that purpose, I let my thoughts drift, simply drift. I surrendered to the pull of the flames and the sparks. Embers glowed, lava-bright on the charred skin of fragrant eucalyptus logs. The pale bark curled, crackled and blistered. It spat too, hypnotising me into a sort of wine-and-tiredness-induced altered state.

Tamara would've liked it here. Ah, but there was the matter of the tent. Well, maybe not so much the tent, as such, as there is room in mine for two, but more to the point the matter of the Touch. Ah, yes, if she'd been here, we would've touched. Like we'd be touching right now, if I'd brought her along. Truth be known, this is why I didn't even mention this weekend away. I didn't mention it at all. Not to her. I knew she'd be in on it. Totally into an escape from the city besides, I already know she's a real lover of the outdoors, of the surf, the sand and BBQs.

Of course we would have touched. A segment from a fantasy Roberta had once written for me went like that: *'I imagine sitting round the fire on the beach, orange glows on the faces, behind us only the black of night and the surf roaring, above us the galaxy. You're sitting with my head in your lap, stroking my hair, my face. And everyone's in that dreamy-post-meal-close-to-sleep mood.'*

Roberta and I had never been camping together. We'd only meet for lunch, coffees and more coffees. Later, towards the end, we'd meet for love, too. But we never got away on weekends. Not even once. Not even for dinner. And by now, it's clear that Roberta and I will never go anywhere at all together. I let my mind wander and I let Tamara's face, mellowed by the glow of the fire, drift into my consciousness.

Behind us is the black of night and the roaring surf. Above us are the galaxy and the Southern Cross. I could be sitting, right now, with Tamara's head on my lap, stroking her hair, her face. And everyone would be in that dreamy-post-meal-close-to-sleep-mood. Roberta's fantasy ended on the sand as the rush of my tongue in her ear, she had written, sounded just like the waves crashing. She had imagined the feel of cool sand on her back and the warmth of my body on top, rhythmically moving my sex back and forth across hers. Slow, soft, gentle movements. And so, if Tamara were here, I'd feel her tongue against my ear, as I had when we

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stopped by the fishpond on the South Bank of the Brisbane River. Already, I feel the same tightness in my sex now, as I close my eyes to better remember her lips, the way they had felt then, cool and tantalising, that other time in the Botanic Gardens. And I remember the way my heart had pounded erratically and how I had so much wanted to give in to the rush, to the ache, to bring her to me. Tightly against me. Her tongue, velvet electricity on the edge of my lips. And until sleep came to me, alone in my tent, I regretted not having her there with me. And in the morning I regretted not remembering the dreams I must have had during the night.

A picnic some two hundred metres above sea level, atop one of the Teewah sandy cliffs. What a sight. The white caps jump and dip and break over cobalt blue waves. Washed out by comparison, the wide open sky carries one lone shred of white gossamer. The breeze is again maturing into a wind to remind us we are in a raw, unprotected environment, totally at its mercy.

Seventy-odd colours of sand brought together since the last ice age by the blending of iron oxide and bleached vegetable dyes make the Teewah cliffs a uniquely scenic spot on this coast. One last cool sip of Corona and we hit the sand on our way to Rainbow Beach, on our way to the Cherry Venture.

There's something uncanny about driving on loose dry sand. It feels as sly and slippery as driving on freshly fallen snow. It's the slip-sliding effect that always rattles me. There is no real danger to apprehend, and yet the notion that my vehicle's wheels do not respond to my immediate steering action is unsettling.

The fact is that I bring this odd sensation on to myself by driving in a low torque gear. The loss of control beneath

my wheels is the punishment I impose on myself. As others might flagellate their bodies, lie prostrate, or lock themselves up in cold rooms set at minus ten degree Celsius, I force myself to surrender to momentum.

Surrendering to the willy-nilly movements of the wheels on such a powdery soft surface as our sand, is my chastisement for being the total control freak that I am, at every other moment, of every other day.

Like a blind person in her familiar environment, I need to know where everything is. I need to know what my feelings are. I need to know *where* they are. And in what state of repair they're in. Only so I can reinforce what's about to topple and mend what looks threadbare. One iota out of place and it's a bump. Or a cut. No, I don't need a shrink. The last one I saw repeated what the first one had said. 'Give up control. Learn to trust,' they had both said, separately, on two different continents. 'No, no mood altering drug for you. No pills.'

And to that, Trish now adds that I also learn to give. 'Give more of yourself,' she said last time I saw her.

'What d'you mean *give*?' I had asked. 'As in give what? How? To whom?'

I kind of knew what Trish had been talking about but sometimes it suits me to play dumb. It suits me to play ostrich-head-in-the-sand too. But then again, my honest mistake is that I associate *giving* with being vulnerable. Giving with getting attached. Getting attached with getting hurt. Concepts in tandems to which, for some obscure reason still unknown to me, I have decided to give a wide berth.

A two-degree turn of the steering wheel no longer equates to a two-degree turn of wheels, not right here. Wrong, it does, but momentum over sand, like over loose snow, takes the vehicle on a sideways slide. The manoeuvre intended is no longer accurate by the time it goes down.

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The delayed reaction has, by then, to be hastily rectified, and again. Sloppy. Inefficient.

But again, not unlike being at the helm on a sailboat, really. And the tugging friction of the wide tyres against the soft sand ruts as it travels up to the steering wheel, is comparable to the tug of the wheel inside the palm of my hands as the keel fights each side-on swell. Again and again.

But what would happen on *this* safe stretch of loose sand should I let go? If I surrendered just enough to let the slide of those chunky tyres take me crab-like in a sideways direction? How far would they drag me off course before momentarily snapping me back into a track parallel to the beach? Two feet? Three ... five feet? And so? What big diff would it make, here, now on *this* beach? At this particular moment in time? Don't know but I'm working on it. I'm working on it from the tail position in our little convoy travelling north.

Joan and Merredyth lead the way. Joan gets bored fooling around by the surf. So, as usual, we had agreed that they'd be playing it fast all the way by staying on the packed wet sand stretch of the beach. On a clear run you can reach eighty kilometres an hour only slowed by unexpected and absolutely treacherous pop-up washouts. Already a blur through the haze ahead, they'll get to the Cherry Venture well before us. With Solange at the wheel, the little Suzuki is some four hundred metres ahead of me, its sad little canopy looking as if it's about to come loose.

Even as a child, I was never trusting of my environment. I was for example, never able to give in to what I assume would have been a liberating feeling of riding my bicycle down hill. Feet totally away from the pedals. Hands totally away from the handle bars. My friends could.

And I wonder what my little conundrum with Tamara has to do with the fact that my guts know something that my head doesn't want to consider because my heart is irrelevant to this equation. Why this wonderful charge of arousal trig-

gered by the simplest touch from her? There's a song I'm sure that goes on about 'slip sliding away'. Can't remember what it says about the process, a freeing sensation or a phobic loss of control?

The tide's been coming in steadily. In some places it has already considerably narrowed the width of the beach. The Suzuki ahead doesn't seem to have adjusted its position accordingly. It should have scooted up on dry sand. Water gushes from its tyres in thick upward cords. Solange is driving too fast and too far inside the tide line.

The environment is becoming unstable. The haze is thicker now. Air pockets and softly contoured potholes lurk only inches below the water. She needs to slow down. Washouts, even the deeper ones, are notoriously difficult to spot from a distance because the clean cut of their vertical walls totally blends them into the sandscape. They will damage the suspension of any vehicle that comes crashing over them. I worry too, about the odd fisherperson who might be difficult to see through Solange's sea splattered windscreen. Particularly if she's gasbagging with Gretta. Solange must be back at her favourite game of tipping 'the feel-good-feeling' scale.

Solange likes to sit on top of her roof during thunderstorms and get totally drenched while thunder claps all around her. She likes to ute-surf, standing up on the bed of a pick-up rocketing down a dusty trail, holding on to a rope. She broke her arm once doing just that. Could've broken her back just as easily.

While she and I sailed on our own around the Whitsunday Islands, she discovered a fondness for snorkelling in the late afternoon. Dusk falls early and quickly in winter. Visibility underwater diminishes rapidly, cold currents get colder but she liked the way the sunlight penetrated the water. The approach of dusk is also the local sharks' feeding hour. However, believing that the local Grey Nurses are mostly

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plankton-and-non-flesh-eating sharks, she insisted that she'd be safe. And she was.

'*Du poisson*, they eat fish, correct?' she had asked rhetorically.

'They do, but even a *vegetarian* shark can have a snap at you, if it's startled, or if it's feeling invaded. Same with a Hammerhead. They're around too. Just think about it for a minute, will you? It's not really *that* complicated to follow.'

And two snorkelling near misses, not due to shark attacks but to a crippling cramp one day, and exhaustion on another, confirmed that I could no longer ignore the tension I was feeling as a result of her reckless antics. She was threatening my sense of peace. I was stifling her sense of fun.

By the time we returned home, I realised I had already begun disconnecting from her. I had finally understood that I would never be able to embrace her intrepidity, and match her sense of fun, her lust for life, being, as I was and still am, totally unable to approximate those from within. No even remotely. Ah, yes, *joie de vivre* from within. Finding pleasure in little things, how deliciously simple that should be.

For now, though, Solange risks getting bogged and I must remind myself that she's no longer my problem. Thing is, I should never have thought that she was. And yet, here I am fretting again. And that's because there's danger in the air. Not the kind of danger one might die from but danger enough where one can get seriously bogged—even hurt.

Whether wet or dry, sand is deceptive. It just is. It can yield surprises. And when sand and tide combine, the environment becomes so much more unstable. Breathe, Emilie, I remind myself. Let go. Feel the wind in your hair. Lift your feet off the bicycle pedals. Trust.

Why does mechanic-Gretta drive such a little rust bucket? The only thing Solange had managed to tell me about the woman with whom she had begun that unexpected affair was that she was a mechanic. Immediately, I had

imagined oil under the fingernails and greasy black cuticles. Real mechanics, I suppose, don't wear latex gloves at work. Though I can't see why not, if it works for dentists and brain surgeons.

'Oh', I blurt out in dismay as the thought of latex jumps a track in my mind. Oh my! If ever, if by chance, like there are situations that one can't quite predict, right? What if I were to have sex with Tamara? Would we have to do the safe sex thing? I mean if she's into *having sex*, I guess she must be having sex a lot more often, I mean with a lot more women, than if she were into waiting for a vague feeling of love to materialise. Wouldn't she?

Hold on, when did I ever wait to actually *love* a woman before making love with her? What about the haystack-on-fire stuff? What about hormonal delirium as I call my own familiar but always irrational state of chaotic lust? Haven't I, like every other 'red-blooded' dyke, first hopped in the sack and then, from *inside* the sack, tried to justify why I had jumped in? The only way for me to justify that quite impulsive action was to find personal qualities in that relative stranger. Qualities that somehow gave a semblance of post-humous legitimacy to the act. Sometimes the consummated act got to be legitimised further, albeit quite awkwardly, by the sharing of a few months of my life with that lover, though it often seemed that once the fireworks of sexual discovery were spent, she and I no longer had much of anything meaningful to share.

Woh! So what's the difference, then, between what I've done many times over and what Tamara wants with me? Is it that she's not trying to legitimise her need? Is this where the shoe, *my* shoe, pinches? Is my resistance about knowing that, even if I wanted one, there'd be no tomorrow with her? Could it be about knowing, ahead of time, that no deepening affection would be allowed, let alone expected to develop because, as Alex knows, young women of Tamara's tempera-

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ment are only here for now? Is it that impermanence that bugs me?

Maybe it's all of the above. And now I have to ask myself why these constraints, Tamara's expectations, or lack of, matter to me? I'm not in love with her. I don't feel the constant pull of her on my mind. I don't crave her presence when she's absent. I don't need to look into her eyes. Thoughts of Tamara don't keep me awake at night as thoughts of Roberta had. And that's because I know Tamara's not the woman I need long term. Solange quite rightly had said I needed a woman, of my age I presume, who, unlike herself, would be mature and stable. One who'd take time to think before doing. One who'd *act her age*. But as Tamara herself had said, speaking for herself, wanting to have sex with me was not *sine qua non* to committing me to the bearing of her children. Or getting hitched for the length of a mortgage!

All wet, the rusty red Suzuki is a darker shade of rust. Ahead of it and to its left, I discern the unclear outline of what looks like a fallen tree trunk wedged between a dune and the encroaching water's edge. If it's a tree trunk, it must've been brought in by a previous tide. It is much bigger in diameter than the pencil-thin eucalyptus of the area. And again, the tide must've been so much lower when Joan and Merredyth had passed by, they hadn't realised that whatever it was lying on dry sand would present an obstacle for us, as we took our time behind them. Weirdest things than that have been known to happen. I wonder if Solange has noticed the dark shape. Time to engage the high gear.

I swerve further into the very soft sand to better see the end of the shape hidden from view by Gretta's car. The incoming tide is lapping at a good foot of it. No way of telling the depth of the water at that end. The narrow stretch of shoreline shaped like a bottleneck seems less than ten metres. I hope Solange isn't going to circumvent the obstacle, whatever it is, by going further into the sea. Hope she's not

going to try and drive over it either, she'll only get stuck like a turtle on a rock. Stuck as the tide creeps in. No danger for herself or Gretta, but the car will get flooded. It'll probably have to be written off. Maybe it is why the poor Suzuki's in the shape it's in. Maybe it is Gretta's water toy. Who knows, her other car might be a fully restored British classic.

Now, the Jeep can crawl over quite a few things, provided the chassis has clearance once the front wheels have cleared the obstacle. The old Suzuki running on skinny conventional tyres is considerably lower than the Jeep and, besides, it just won't have the puff and grip needed to breach an obstacle of that shape.

It's a tree. I can clearly see it now. One of these pandanus with a wide root system. The sand must have eroded from underneath it until a strong wind brought it down like a milk tooth that had outlived its purpose.

The Suzuki is now travelling at a reduced speed. That reassures me that Solange is aware of the obstacle ahead. The Suzuki slows down and stops. I slow down behind it and stop too. The door opens on the driver's side and desert boots reach for the wet sand. I watch Solange, long legged, as she comes my way to discuss tactics. We'll have to winch the tree out of the way, just enough to allow passage. Abruptly, as if responding to a silent order, she turns on her heels and gets back inside the car.

What the hell! The Suzuki's on the move again. On full throttle, revs up and crabwise, it runs towards the dune. Oh, shit, shit, shee-it! She's going bush. She's aiming to get around the thick root system by travelling on the lower back of the dune. She hasn't lowered her tyre pressure, neither have I, as we hadn't planned on going into very soft terrain. And I still don't. Only last night around the fire, we had talked about the new *Don't Bust The Dunes* signs, there to remind us of the thriving but delicate ecosystem on the dunes' back.

I anticipate Solange's trajectory with my heart in my mouth. Will she, won't she roll? Actually three things can happen now. Either she takes the dune on a low gradient, just enough to bypass the wide and protruding network of roots and she might make it. The Suzuki's light weight might allow her to just score the surface where the dune is the hardest. Two seconds, three seconds and she could be back on flat sand. The higher the gradient, the greater the risk of rolling because of the vehicle's awkward angle of attack and the old pull of gravity. That could be the most dangerous of the options compounded by the complication of the tide rising. The other possibility is that Solange might want to go for the top of the dune and put in a little play time in virgin sand while she's up there. If so, she's going to get bogged down the second her vehicle cracks the surface of the dune. No way to go forward, no way to go backward. The three of us are in for a lot of digging. How many shovels among us? One of the army fold up variety in the Jeep. One in the Suzuki? I wish Joan and Merredyth had hung around.

The tide's creeping up the length of the lying tree trunk. I need to make a move myself to avoid being cut off. I will not drive my vehicle into the water. But I'm riveted to the spot, disbelieving Solange's manoeuvre.

The little red car's angling slightly towards the dune but from where I've stopped I can't gauge the angle of attack accurately. The dune's not a very big one. It towers over the rusty red car but by dune standards it's not a monster. Dunes around here, unlike desert dunes, are shaped like softly curved big slabs of soft sand. This is, after all, not the Paris-Dakar terrain. I shouldn't feel so anxious.

Up goes the Suzuki. From where I stand, she's jumped onto the dune like a tick onto a cat's back. Up she goes like a wound up toy. Shit. Shit, she's going for the top. Going, going ... and ahhh—shit! *Merde alors! Fallait bien qu' ça arrive!* What did she bloody well expect?

Embedded to the floorboards in sand, *the Suzuki ain't gonna go nowhere in a hurry, that's for sure*. Maybe I should just cruise on by and let them work that one out by themselves. No, no can do, but I'd better make a move and big-foot it over that bloody tree while I still can without getting the Jeep immersed beyond half-tyre.

The Jeep's parked just up from the fallen tree where the bottleneck of beach fans out again. No need to try to find a trail from which to winch up the Suzuki. I don't have a winch. And the dune's too soft to try a rescue by climbing on its back to reach its lip and drag Gretta's car upward in a makeshift sort of way. It's just the wrong terrain for a gung-ho intervention. I easily imagine both vehicles stranded like two scarabs buried to the abdomen. A big one and a little one, side by side. In any case, the Suzuki would probably fall apart, right there and then, under the strain of the snatch.

Cap reversed on her head, Solange is already scooping sand away on the passenger side. Gretta, on all fours, has freed the back wheels. Her bush fairy hair is spangled with sand crystals.

I've dug out the line from the front wheel to the back on the driver's side. We need to move quickly and finish the two parallel tracks that extend from behind the front wheels to some five metres beyond the tailgate. Not enough distance to require a reverse hill start. Gretta'll just have to keep the car on the tracks and let it roll back on to the beach.

But by the time we finish carving out those tracks in the thick, soft sand, the tide will have reached the base of the dune. What remains of the beach will be under water and the rusty red Suzuki will get flooded whether or not it clears the fallen tree.

One shovel and one blue bucket is all we have to free a rusty red four-wheel drive buried up to the floorboards in white, powder-soft sand. Two hand-spans deep into the dune. If only I had my camera. This would certainly be the moment to screw on the wide angle.

Unable to restrain myself any further, I call out to Solange, 'I mean, *really!* Solange, *tu sais qu' t' es chiante?*' Indeed, I wonder whether anyone, besides me, had ever told that woman she was a mega pain in the ass.

'Ah, c' est pas grâve. I mean, nothing's broken, right?'

'C' est pas faute d' avoir essayé! Not from lack of trying,' I retort, pissed off.

Unexpectedly, a different thought breaks through. I need to focus on the humorous aspect of this situation. I should try to simply rejoice in the fact that no one's come to grief. Like a cat eyeing an unsuspecting mouse, I watch Solange as she steps forward before sliding back. As she comes level with me, I pounce on her. Only with the element of surprise on my side could I ever momentarily outdo her when we got into our play fighting in bed.

'Mais qu' est-ce que tu fous?' she asks as she used to, with pretended gruffness.

And in lieu of an answer, I topple her over into the sand and straddle her hips. But before I can secure her wrists, lithely, she slithers from under me and avoiding my thrashing legs she flips me over on my back. Half sitting up, I kick and buck but a flying leap lands her on top of me and we roll and roll into the thickness of the dune, churning the sand as we go. And we thrash around making the grunting sounds of children at play.

Eyes shut tight, trying to protect my face against the spray of sand we both kick up, I bury it against her gritty T-shirt and hold on. But I have to laugh. And because I'm laughing too hard to hold on, I have to let go. Bubbles of laughter rise. A quick thought for Gretta who, higher up

on the dune, might be shaking her head thinking I've gone totally troppo. Gasping for air, I glance up-dune.

The rusty red car's embedded to the floorboards. A little blue bucket is another splash of colour on the soft cream of the dune. Solange and I are panting side by side and yes, Gretta is standing up there, shovel dangling from one hand, looking quite bemused by it all.

My sides hurt. A zillion grains of sand are inside or clinging to every unprotected orifice. Solange chuckles. I look at her through scratchy eyelids. She sits up and before I can roll away, she's once again squatting squarely on my hips, one desert boot against each of my wrists. I squint at her. She peers into my face. Her grey eyes sparkle in amusement.

'*Non, mais! Ça va pas la tête?* Crazy, crazy woman. Look what you've done. Got sand everywhere now,' she exclaims in mock indignation, patting her T-shirt. A fine spray of sand settles on my chest. The sensual line of her mouth is stretched into that wide-mouth grin of hers. Through gritty tears, I squint at her. She shakes her bandanna free of sand.

'*Dans les yeux*, right? Sand everywhere, yes? In your eyes, in your nose—'

'In my ears too. In my mouth too. Even in my bloody—'

Swishing the bandanna over my face, as she would a feather duster, she leans closer to my face interrupting my litany.

'*C'est bien fait*. Bad, *bad* girl, Emilie.' She apparently thinks I deserve every grain of sand that's sticking on to me. And with each new utterance the bandanna goes swish, swish over my eyes and nose. 'Fancy carrying on that way?' Swish, swish, goes the bandanna. It tickles my nose. I struggle to throw her off, but she's solidly anchored on my hips. And I'm not trying hard enough to dislodge my wrists still trapped between the soft sand and her boots.

I'm actually having fun. That silly frolic takes us back to the long gone days when I enjoyed Solange's physical strength

and her sunny sense of self. ‘What would your students say, *hein?* If they saw you like that, the creepy little jerks who bug you with their, “You gay, Miss.” Huh? What would *they* think now about their ever so calm and so cool Ms A?’ Swish again. Swish over my eyes. ‘Look at that. Sand everywhere.’ And the more she carries on, the more I laugh. I laugh until my sides hurt some more.

‘Sol ... Get up ... will you! Can’t breathe.’

‘So, who’s been a very naughty girl, huh?’

‘Oh, look who’s talking?’ I say between gasps. ‘Who’s the bloody crazy woman who got herself stuck on that bloomin’ dune?’ With the gritty heel of my freed hand, I wipe the tears that crawl down the sides of my face like moist little caterpillars. ‘Huh? You callin’ me crazy and remindin’ me of those bloody dick-head kids? I’ll show you—’

‘Hello, girls.’

Both our heads snap to, up-dune. Gretta too turns to face the voice shaking her bush-fairy hair.

‘Aren’t you two a little too old to play in a sand pit?’

Joan is standing a few metres up on the dune’s thick lip.

‘Hey, Joan! Am I glad to see you!’

‘*Comment t’es arrivée là?*’ Solange has jumped up. ‘How’d you get up there?’ She brushes her hands off on her sandy jeans and pushes herself up.

I sit up, leaning on my elbows. ‘First things first,’ I interrupt. ‘D’you still have a couple of cold ones in your Eski?’

‘Yeah, should be a couple left over from lunch.’

‘Second thing, Joan, *please* tell me you’ve got a shovel somewhere in your car.’

‘Must be your lucky day, Emi. Should stop and buy a lotto ticket on your way home. It’s a yes to the beers and it’s yes to the shovel. Which do you want first?’

A moment earlier, I would’ve said the shovel, definitely the shovel. But now that rescue’s arrived, now that I know there’s another shovel with which to excavate the car a little

faster, all I can think about is that nice cold beer that's sitting at the bottom of Joan's Eski. The tracks will now have to extend beyond the front wheels to allow the uphill snatch.

'*Et Merredyt*, where is she?' Solange asks.

'Just 'round the corner. Having a wee. She starts fretting after a while,' Joan explains. 'We had stopped after a few ks, waiting for you guys to catch up and well, when you didn't show she started pacing by the water, looking out for you. You know how she gets. Then, I thought we'd better drive back and make sure you were alright.'

'What a woman Merredyth is. Tell her I love her. And you too,' I add, blowing a kiss to Joan. As I turn back to the Suzuki, I catch irrepressible Solange pointing at her chest, a playful smile on her face. 'No, not you, Solange Delorme. *You* just keep on digging.' I snap back, repressing a smile.

As it turned out, Merredyth and Joan had backtracked until they had found the Jeep. Casting an eye around, they noticed the fallen tree trunk and how the beach was, by then, well and truly cut off. In the absence of any half-submerged Suzuki, they figured we must be higher up, away from the beach and so they backtracked again to find the trail that would get them above the beach, in the general vicinity of the fallen tree. They had deflated their tyres and kept their fingers crossed hoping they wouldn't get bogged down in one of the many sandpits that settle around bends, just where they are the most obstructionist. Low revs are deadly over deep sand. They did well getting stuck only once.

Some ninety minutes later two upward tracks are lined with branches and all manner of transportable, biodegradable matter. Merredyth is back behind the wheel to winch the Suzuki out of its soft sand cocoon while, from the lip of the dune and well away from the snatch line, we watch Joan direct the manoeuvre.

The red Suzuki digs in before reluctantly letting itself be dragged over some twenty metres, registering its protest by

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carving a deep churned sand gash of a wake. Lo and behold, the red Suzuki doesn't fall apart.

'That's one busted dune,' says Gretta matter-of-factly. But again, 'Don't let the rusty bits fool you,' she had said, when worriedly, I had enquired about the chances of getting her car up in one piece. 'It's a solid little battler. All the essential bits are treated, bolted and reinforced. Everything that can be suped up's been suped.'

'May not look like much,' Solange agreed, '*c'est vrai*, but it's a real bionic car, that little thing.' She knows about these things. And I suspect the fact that Gretta is a mechanic had acted as some sort of powerful aphrodisiac for her, way back whenever that had been. Beyond the obvious, Gretta's answer confirms that bonnet and doors are not essential bits in a car and that she probably doesn't have a reconditioned anything in her garage. But, hey, when one's the proud owner of a rugged bionic prototype, what use does one have for a poncy British classic?

Two messages. I press Play. 'Message', says the digital voice. *Emilie, Alex here. Just calling to suggest a film and or dinner. Dinner maybe after the film? This coming Saturday night if you're free. More to the point, if you feel like it. Take care.* '6.03 pee em. End of message,' says the digital voice that lives somewhere inside the answering machine. A woman after my own heart, Alex is, one who gets to the point quickly.

'If you feel like it', I like that. Going out with people, it's not only a matter of being free, is it? Being free is one thing. *Feeling* like it is decidedly a different proposition again. Would it be devastating to find out that when a friend says, Sorry, I'm busy that night, but some time later in the month

will be just fine, she really means that she doesn't feel like seeing you that soon?

Never mind, do I feel like seeing Alex, then? *Yes.* A definite yes. A quick look at my diary by the phone confirms that I am, indeed, free next Saturday. Free, in a sense. Free, but not unbusy.

After all, I do have a script to move forward. I have a digital wooden boat deck that needs custom texture and modified shadows. I, initially, had intended this image for Roberta. Roberta my keen sailor. Even if I had finished it before she made her decision to stay with Julia, what could she have done with my image? I mean, it's not as if I had expected her to take it home, home to Julia and say, 'Look at what Emilie's made for me.'

'Emilie who?' Julia would've asked. Roberta might have kept the picture at her surgery, on a wall somewhere. Hung on an innocuous patch of wall. Not on a patch of wall in her office. Too intimate. Julia would've wanted to know all about this new frame in her lover's office.

As it is, I still want to finish that image of an old weather-beaten sailboat deck. I want to finish it and give it to Trish, the other mad sailor I know. This mad sailor is still a part of my life. It will look good in her little living space below deck. I need to think of the dimensions of that image though. Don't want to make it too large. A miniature might suit better. Great way to spend a Saturday night if you ask me. But a little voice, sitting by the phone, tells me I'm still too young to sit at home on a Saturday night, next Saturday night. It's telling me that I need to expand my circle of friends. It's reminding me that going to the movies is another good way to blank out. A much more socially accepted way to blank out time than working on my computer. Anything, the little voice adds, is better than doing whatever, alone. I suspect that the little voice that gives me such advice belongs to my mother. My mother always tells me that I need to socialise

more, and that being busy but on my own is not what makes for a rich life.

‘Two people talk, Emilie,’ my mother says. ‘They talk to each other after they’ve seen a film. They talk about the film. They interact. They socialise.’

My mother isn’t happy when I tell her I interact with my computer. ‘Cobwebs, Emilie,’ she warns. ‘Beware of the cobwebs.’ And the little voice reminds me that Alex is a good person with whom to interact and with whom to socialise. A good person with whom to go to the movies, too. Tamara’s also a good person with whom to interact but my mother doesn’t know about Tamara. Mind you, she doesn’t know about Alex either. I’ll tell her about Alex but I couldn’t tell her about Tamara and *not* tell her the effect Tamara’s physicality has on me. I can tell a lot of things to my mother and she’d probably be OK with that. It’s just that I draw the line at discussing *intimate* sexual confidences with her. I don’t think I’ll tell many people about Tamara.

I know for a fact that Alex is a good person with whom to go out. We’ve already done it three times. Dinner and movie, movie and dinner. Movie and coffee. It’s just that I’m getting lazier and lazier. It’s all a bit of an effort really. I don’t mind feeling lazy at all, but the little voice that my mother’s projecting by the phone does mind. Last time Alex and I did the movie thing, we didn’t have much to say about it. Actually, we did have a lot to say but it didn’t seem that way at the time, because what each of us said was pretty much in agreement with what the other had just raised.

‘Wasn’t he just great in that role?’

‘Oh, he was. I would say that should get him a nomination for the Oscar for the best male lead.’

We had discussed the actor’s performance a little longer, then Alex had mentioned that she hadn’t liked seeing him naked.

‘And I am not talking about the full frontal shots either. I mean, they kind of *all* look the same, don’t they? But the three quarter shots of him, you know, of his narrow back and weird waist and–’

‘Yes, I know exactly what you mean. For such a skinny man, he’s got a rather peculiar type of build. Narrow shoulders and–’

‘And rolls. How can you be that skinny and have rolls at the same time?’

‘Maybe it was just loose skin. You know, to go with his saggy belly.’

‘Maybe. I mean, it was necessary to have him naked in that scene but still, not a pretty sight.’

Then we agreed that the scene in which a priest lives out his hitherto repressed sexual desire for a now dead woman is about necrophilia. And, though it later transpired that the priest hadn’t actually touched the dead body, that what we had just seen was his fantasy about making love with that woman when she was alive and so on, we had found the whole business all too confronting.

Then we had talked about religion and again, though she’s Jewish and I’m Catholic we still had in common the fact that neither of us has ever practised our mother’s religion. Not since our mothers had given us the right to choose. Faced with the right to choose, we had chosen indifference. Though our mothers hadn’t given us the right to choose our sexuality, it turns out that we both feel we’ve chosen ours, regardless.

Anyway, back to the idea, back to the feeling of going out next Saturday night. The thing is that I know once I’ll have showered, thrown on a clean shirt, a different pair of jeans and pulled on my favourite pair of RMs, I’ll feel different. I’ll feel ready to meet Alex. I’ll be looking forward to another evening with her.

I’ll confirm that tomorrow. *Why tomorrow*, asks the little voice that I hoped had gone away. *Why not now?* Don’t want

to appear too keen. But I'm not. I'm not too keen, am I? No, I'm not. OK, I'm not but she might think I am. Why should she? Do I think she's too keen because she's ... No, *she's* not too keen she's ... friendly. And why can't I be friendly back and confirm now? But what if ...

Single voice dialogues often go on inside my head. Always I worry about what people will think of me. I worry about what they might make of what I might have said. I worry about what I didn't say that, perhaps, I should have said.

'Message', says the digital voice. *Hey, girl. Howwaya! How 'bout I drop in on the 18th for a couple of days, hey? Zat OK with you? Yes, Trish is coming in for some R&R. It's antifouling time. Brett from the marina'll give me a ride in. I'll spend the last night on the north side of Coochie just for you. Just to dangle a few crab pots, so don't worry about dinner. Should be able to bring you your favourite treat. Uh, hey, yeah, don't forget to leave the key you know where. Hey, Em, big hug. See you soon.*

Sitting at my computer I click on the desktop D&D shortcut. Drew and Dora. The name of my protagonists. Two lesbians who amongst other self-imposed relational challenges are trying to have a child through IVF. In the last scene written, they learn that their application for treatment has been refused. I reach into the bowl and pop two yoghurt-coated almonds into my mouth. Chipmunk like, I suck on the round balls while considering the next logical argument that I could type. But I'm pretty sure my nose isn't twitching.

Queensland state laws discriminate against women without male partners, be they straight or gay, and Dora's argument is that the rights of single parents and lesbian couples aren't protected. Her partner Drew's stance is that

there needs to be treatment made available at all public hospitals. Drew believes that it's the basic human right of all women to retain control over their reproductive needs. Drew would be the child's biological mother. I'm not sure, really why that theme's inspired me as I'm not at all, never was, interested in having children. I don't even enjoy other people's children, not even my friends'. Not even children on loan for an evening of babysitting. Doing what one can to enlighten children, teenagers, in a classroom environment is vastly different from nurturing and conditioning them. Or as a better alternative, nurturing them free of conditioning.

Mainstream politicians and a fair chunk of our society here, in Queensland, think that IVF and donor programmes shouldn't be funded for women who aren't intending to bring up their children with both parents. I can't accept that mainstream can't accept that Drew and Dora should qualify as 'both parents'. I guess my little script is about denouncing homophobia within this heterosexist context.

Now, if Drew and Dora can stop ageing and hold out for a few more years they'll be able to have Dora's favourite little niece cloned. But again, there's no telling how long it's going to take biological researchers and leading cloning experts to push through existing obstacles. The cloning process, as it is at the present stage of development, seems to create random errors in the expression of individual genes. And gene alteration is likely to prove fatal soon after birth. Gene alteration apparently builds in devastating anomalies. Be that as it may, cloning humans doesn't seem *unattainable*. Only cloning healthy ones is. For now. Time, money and talent will prevail in the fullness of time. Sooner or later there will be little clones of little people just like Drew's fave little niece. But already well on the other side of thirty, Drew feels she doesn't have that much time to wait. She thinks life's not fair at all. She knows that other women, women selected differently, have already had their genetically altered, or should one say

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enhanced, babies through the something-plasmic method, and yet she won't even be given the chance to get a standard variety, run of the mill, flaws 'n' all baby of her own. See, she's not even asking for a Designer Baby.

What triggered an interest in pursuing the topic of IVF in my hobby-writing was hearing social justice campaigner Reverend John Baker say he, too, was sympathetic to the Prime Minister's stand on the closing of the IVF programme to single women and lesbian women. On camera, I heard him add something like, 'I know that gay people and single mums often can be as good and much better parents than people who are in a heterosexual, orthodox marriage. It's not a question of their fitness or their care.' And he carried on with his makeshift arguments about how unfair life would be, from the start, for the children of lesbian mothers. His concern, he said, straight-faced, was about implications, social and emotional, in regards to taxpayers subsidising IVF treatments in situations where fathers were never anticipated.

Anyway, on with the script. A quick crunch on the almonds now that the yoghurt's melted away. Yes. Yummm. I do love that almond taste.

Dora: *It's not Parliament's role to push the nuclear family down our throat till we gag.*

Drew: *It's not but, hey, the Human Rights Committee's already appealed to all Parliamentary parties. They've asked to admit the clear evidence that children raised by ... by dykes and single women are generally not disadvantaged. So, it might still happen. Our child wouldn't be disadvantaged, right?*

Dora: *Course not. Gosh, she or he would enjoy a secure and loving environment as much as the next child. Better than an average next child. Why not? Why wouldn't we love and support our child as much or much better than the hets next door? I mean, everyone knows how easy it is for most straight women to get pregnant, you know, the 'married ones'.* (Angrily, she draws inverted commas in the air.) *It's*

almost as easy ... no, wait, it's easier for them than catching a cold!

Drew: The other thing is that they just don't think that we can possibly have extended families. Like my mother, she'd absolutely love to have a grand child –

Dora: I reckon mine would too, I mean she'd love it if she had a little one to play with when she visits. And than there's that other extended family, you know, the one we choose. I mean, really! How many aunties would our little one have, huh? You tell me.

Drew: Don't ask me, I'm on your side.

Dora: Just have to see how clucky everyone becomes when someone, you know, like Liz gets a new puppy. Every time she takes it with her, every one wants to pat it, play with it. Even dogsit. And we all say like how much we'd like to have one of our own.

Drew: And then, of course, we all realise that a pup doesn't stay a pup. And even a pup has to be walked twice a day. Even if you just want to flop on the sofa after work.

Dora: And it gets sick.

Drew: And it makes going away on holidays difficult and most people are just happy dog sitting. Borrow the dog for a weekend.

Dora: But the point is that a baby, our baby, would get a lot of love.

Drew: Ah, yes but 'Yeeiiiiks,' I hear them say, 'love, yes, but only from women'. But there'd be the two granddads.

Dora: And my brother.

Drew: And your brother.

Feeling defeated by the lack of sparkle in that dialogue, I lean back into the chair.

'And now what?' I ask the silent screen. 'How far am I going to drag out this stilted skit on IVF in Oz, huh? It's not even funny.'

Select All. Delete.

Eleven

‘What’s this about?’ I asked, pointing to what I could see, even without my glasses, was an internet print-out on Alex’s coffee table. Its heading had caught my attention. *Stop The Taliban War Against Women.*

‘It’s a petition. Why don’t you have a read while I finish a couple of things over there,’ she had suggested, pointing at the open plan kitchen that linked the living room to the dining area. ‘I’m not as organised as I would have liked to be. Got stuck with a phone call I could not ...’ She looked at me and shrugged the matter away. ‘You know what it’s like.’

I nodded that I understood. There are *some* phone calls that just can’t be shortened. They’re the type of phone calls I don’t enjoy much. When my ear begins to heat up against the ear-piece I know I’ve been at it too long for *my* comfort zone, not just my ear’s. Women’s voices, young women’s voices were singing in the background when I came in. One tune in particular sounded familiar. One that I must have heard on the radio.

‘Can I give you a hand?’ I had asked, before sitting down near a rather imposing Xanadu plant wedged on a stand between sofa and window.

‘No. No, please. Just make yourself comfortable in here,’ Alex had been quick to reply. There was a sense of immediacy in her tone. It sounded as if, hidden behind what’s often simply a polite reply, her answer was a sincere wish to *not* have me, possibly anyone, in her kitchen. ‘I won’t be long,’ she had added more softly.

She might be like this other woman I know, Martha, who feels she can’t get anything done in her kitchen if even one of us is hanging around. Some women need total concentration when they cook. I don’t. What I cook doesn’t require a lot of concentration. I make sure to keep things simple enough

to allow me time to hug, talk and drink. Before dinner gets served.

Only a handful of candles were alight in the living-dining area, but a half dozen scattered antique brass and glass-paste lamps cast a warm light. A light quite different from that of the other night when a myriad candle wicks had glowed from every conceivable nook, on every conceivable surface. These had created a much more intimate, an almost mystic mood. The little glass lamps cleverly scattered around for maximum effect tonight cast a cleaner, less ambiguous light.

The aromatic smells that wafted from the kitchen reminded me of Solange's cooking. These fragrances told me that Alex had gone to some length to prepare whatever it was she had chosen to serve for dinner. I wish she hadn't. How do you reciprocate with women like Solange and, I suspect, Alex, who create a little gourmet's haven every time they entertain? How to reciprocate in kind when you're not at all a creator of little gourmet havens yourself? Not fair. That's playing dirty.

Yesterday Alex had called, asking if I'd mind having dinner at her place as opposed to going to the movies, as had been her initial suggestion. No, not a problem I had replied. I had found her house very lovely and welcoming the one other time I'd been there, the time I had met her friends, Kate and Jessie. I hadn't even thought of asking why the change of plan. I hadn't even asked if there'd be other guests. I had simply agreed to be on her doorstep close to 7.30.

On the way there I had caught myself wondering whether Tamara would be there too, and I had assumed she would be. I hadn't seen her since the evening of our South Bank Parlads promenade but we had had a couple of phone conversations mostly about work, hers and mine. Tamara hadn't asked where I had been that weekend I went camping. It's entirely possible that she hadn't realised I had been out of town. I mean, if she hadn't called to try to find me, she

couldn't have known. Not unless she was psychic. I didn't think Tamara was psychic. And so, she wouldn't have known about the sexual fantasy I had had about her either. Thank goodness for that. I much prefer keeping that to myself. Now, if I hadn't taken a lazy shortcut just as I got ready to head off camping, if I had changed the batteries that, according to the display, needed to be replaced instead of turning off the answering machine altogether, I'd know whether Tamara had called or not.

The fantasy, that night by the campfire, had been totally about her. It had been so vivid that I had actually *felt* it. I mean, I had actually felt Tamara's body move under mine. Warm in the glow of the fire, I had closed my eyes to better feel the illusion of her body blending into mine on the cool sand of the beach. In reality, I was only leaning my back against a rather uncomfortable rock, a couple of metres away from the campfire and my friends.

Because of that fantasy, I hadn't initiated an opportunity to catch up with her. I hadn't suggested we could meet. I hadn't suggested a face to face. Because of that fantasy, I've become weary of what I fear might already be an almost familiar arousal. I don't welcome the intrusion of *that* arousal. Not when she's near me. Particularly not when she's miles away from me. Miles away, and totally oblivious to the memory I have of her breath fluttering against my ear.

When Tamara, herself, didn't suggest an outing, I was relieved. I think I was relieved. I think I was but I'm not sure. The one thing I know for sure is that I feel silly for being such a coward. And because I am such a coward, I deprived myself of Tamara's company.

Thing is, I'm not yet ready to lift both feet off the bicycle pedals. I'm not yet ready to have sex with no tomorrow in mind. I'm not yet ready to put brackets around the expectation I have that sooner, or possibly later, I'll come across that elusive woman who knows how to act her age. That woman

will know how to act her age without being either frumpy or staid. I thought I had found that woman in Roberta. I had, but Roberta already had a partner, one she obviously loved a lot. Too much to leave.

So, at Alex's I had sat on the emerald green velvet sofa near the very large plant and I had read the bold font on the petition, wishing I'd brought along my reading glasses. The words I could decipher through the blur reminded me that the plight of the Taliban women was ongoing. It reminded me that I, too, had been interested in the plight of these women. In the same way I had been mobilised, momentarily mobilised, by the plight of the women in Sarajevo. Like, at an earlier time, I had been momentarily mobilised by the plight of the Egyptian women along with many of my friends. We had even picketed the Egyptian Consulate. We had read how their males used other women to excise them. The men who should've been there to protect them, like the fathers or the brother, or the uncle, had them excised or infibulated, for their own peace of mind and for another male's pleasure. What we had found even more shocking, at the time, was that the mothers themselves colluded with the men. They tricked their daughters into opening their legs to the edge of a dull and rusty razor blade and –

'Emilie? What would you like to drink to go along with this?' Alex asked bringing a fruit platter into the living room. 'Fruit juice, spirits, champagne, wine–'

'Wine's fine.'

She slid the platter onto the coffee table. 'Name your colour.'

'White, if you happen to have something in the fridge, if not–'

'I do happen to have.' She smiled. 'Any preference?'

I had stood up, unclear as to why I had. Possibly to help her with the platter though she hadn't looked like needing any help. 'No preference in terms of *château* or *domaine*, but

I'd prefer something quite dry.' She looked at me squarely, a question in the raising of her eyebrows. The horizontal rotation of her hand indicated she needed more information. French non verbals. So I added, 'Verdehlo or Chenin blanc. Or any blend of, if you have.'

She smiled again and dropped her hand to her side. 'I have. One Tatachilla coming right up.'

'Good one, it's one of my favourites.'

'And what is another one? Another one of your favourites, Emilie?' Again she looked at me squarely and from where I was still standing I thought another little smile glinted in the corner of her eyes.

The thing is that, though I enjoy a good wine, I'm not a connoisseur and I don't ever try to remember wine labels. Vineyard trivia and punch lines at the end of jokes too often leave me nonplussed. 'Uh, anything as dry as Vinho Verde will do,' I replied, purposefully vague. Alex's eyebrows were raised again. She wanted more. 'Or a ... uh ... a Bridgewater Mill—'

'Don't say it. Let me guess. A Sauvignon Blanc?'

'Yes, that one.'

It was indeed one of my favourite white wines but I didn't want to encourage that conversation further. In an attempt to steer her away from the topic of wines, before having to own up to a very limited knowledge of oenology, jokingly, remembering my earlier thought about Tamara I had asked, 'Now, you're not psychic are you?' Pretending to cower, I added, 'Oh my, I've been found out.' Oh, the things one does when one wants to appear relaxed and unfussed.

Good-humouredly, she pointed a finger at me in mock threat. 'You didn't think you could hide forever, did you?' That made me smile.

She settled briefly on the armrest at the other end of the emerald green sofa. 'No, I do not think I'm a psychic,' she said, perhaps somewhat wistfully. 'It is just that I happen to

like that one too, along with Tulloch's Verdelho and a few others mostly from—hey, never mind that.' She stood up again and, with a bare foot, pushed the pouffe closest to the sofa out of the way. 'Anyway, two out of three ain't bad,' she concluded, playfully again. 'Tatachilla, I have. Bridgewater Mill, I have. Vino Verde I don't.'

'Tatachilla will do just fine.'

'Coming right up.'

With Alex back in the kitchen, the air around the sofa felt oddly flat. A flatness that hadn't been there before. I sighed, though not knowing why and returned to the petition. The petition took me back to a sobering reality.

Clip the wings of a bird to keep it singing, to keep it hopping close to you. Cut out your daughter's genitalia and she'll bring you a son-in-law who'll be good for you in your old age. She won't know sexual pleasure but the pain she will know will keep her safe and in her place.

Skimming over the bold text of that petition was good for me. It reminded me what I obviously had forgotten. I had forgotten that excisions on a large scale were still ongoing. Still ongoing some twenty years after I had first become aware of them. Women aren't good at toppling over their aggressors, their tormentors, be they many or one. If only we all had Artemis's power to change any offending male into a stag. Wonder Woman and Spider Woman were the only women I could think of, as I waited for Alex to return from the kitchen, the only women who could do that systematically. They knew how to dispatch punishment at the personal, one on one, level. They and Lucrecia Borgia could disengage from their tormentors. But Lucrecia's motives were not always laudable. Wonder Woman's and Spider Woman's were. Ah, and Stephanie Plum, kickass wench par excellence.

From the kitchen came the satisfying pop of a cork followed by the tinkling of ice cubes against metal. Breathe,

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I reminded myself. Breathe. Deep and slow. Thoughts of women in a helpless context always get me down. When I'm down I get anxious. I stop breathing. I don't really stop breathing but it feels like I do. I shallow breathe until my lungs signal they need more from me. They need air. More air.

I scanned the living room and it was pretty much as I had remembered it. The wide room with large windows was full of unusual objects. Ancient brass containers covered pots from which luxuriant plants spread their leaves. A richly carved chest, pushed against a corner, shone dully from under the inimitable patina of very old wood. Pouffes embroidered simply and the rough weave of the woollen wall hangings suggested to me desert tent dwellings and nomads clothed in shades of indigo. But, please, not the kind of nomads who'd have their baby girls excised. A very atypical décor for Brisbane.

The gist of the petition was a reminder that the *Times* had compared the Taliban's treatment of their women to that of the Jews in pre-holocaust Poland. And they now wanted to impose a yellow piece of cloth to be worn by the Hindus in Afghanistan. The petition went on denouncing, in clear and unemotional language, the imposition of the burqua, the heavy full-length cloth complete with mesh, to cover the women's eyes.

The long tail of Alex's electric blue silk shirt worn over white jeans created an interesting, if unbalanced effect, in contrast to its much shorter, waistcoat-styled front. I had watched as she had leaned forward to slide the silver tray on which she had set two glasses, still chilled, and the bottle of wine inside a silver ice bucket, on the coffee table. This time I had stayed seated.

The stem of one glass between the tips of three fingers, she had placed it delicately in front of me. The wide, carved ring that encircles her middle finger, once again, caught my

attention but I decided not to ask her about it. I suspect too many people did.

She raised the other glass, sipped and pressed her lips together making a little sucking sound, that amused smile back in her eyes. 'I hope there's enough pucker power for you in this glass. Cheers.' She lifted her glass in my direction.

'*Santé*. I'm sure it'll be just fine.' I took a little sip and yes, it was nice and tart with a touch of ... of ... what was it again? Herbaceousness? 'Chilled to perfection,' is all I ventured in terms of feedback.

'Now, if you'll excuse me for a couple more minutes ...' From the fruit platter, she picked up a cut stem that carried half a dozen green grapes and she was up again, the tail of her silk shirt shimmering softly behind her. I leaned back against the backrest and reminded myself to breathe again.

I remembered that the Taliban men, The Seekers of Knowledge, had imposed the heavy black burqua on their women almost as soon as they took power in 1996. Soon after they had imposed the burqua, the men decreed that all windows through which women might be seen had to be screened against the outside eye. Then had come the banning of all women from any work. From all work. Women were banned from all professions. From the most menial of work to professions for which some Taliban women already had doctorate degrees. All women were excluded from all paid positions. Without exception.

From the kitchen came a quick succession of cutting and chopping sounds. I could see her, back turned, head bent, intent on her task.

Fear of death at the hand of zealots kept the women cowering and in check. These women had learnt to fear death at the hand of their husbands. They knew to fear death at the hands of their brothers, fathers, uncles and neighbours, too. Before death came beatings, but not always so. Sometimes

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death came on its own. As sudden as a curved blade sliding in between two ribs.

Fear, real fear, the type of fear that nightmares are made of, keep the women submissive. We awake from the real fear of our occasional nightmares. These women, the petition reminded me, cannot wake up from their nightmare. They *are* awake and their nightmare is the daily, the endless reality in which their lives are lived.

Submission allows some to survive. Submission allows other to die a painful death. A slow death that comes after hunger and illness get the best of them. Unable to work, women have to rely on their men to subsist. The ones who do not have a male willing to feed them, like the zoo keeper feeds his animals, have to take to the street and beg. The ones who have to take to the street and beg become ill. They starve. They die.

Alex eventually emerged from the kitchen and we talked a little more about the Taliban in general.

‘The thing is that these people are violent. Full stop. Not just against the women. Their jails are full of men who will lose hand or foot as punishment for a thieving offence. They get whip lashed by the militia if they trim their beard. And the amputations and the whippings and everything else is in the name of religion.’

‘Religion, as hijacked by them. A bit like in Saudi Arabia?’

‘Yes, but there seems to be a softening of sorts happening over there. And, well, they simply don’t treat their women in the same way.’ Alex’s long fingers move through the air to punctuate her words. ‘The thing is that the Muslim religion as it is contained in the Koran, unadulterated by fanatic interpretations, is actually quite a gentle and accommodating one.’

'I assume the Saudis still throw their homosexuals off cliffs outside Riyadh as they used to, say, back in the eighties,' I wondered out loud.

'Ah, well, it would seem that after many councils involving many of their clerics, the Taliban have come up with their own version of—'

Just as I was preparing something to say in reply, Alex's heavy gold ring connected with the rim of her wineglass. There was a sharp crack. The glass toppled on its side, spewing its content on the leather-topped coffee table. Alex looked at it, frowning, blinking in disbelief.

'Ah, merde alors!' she finally exclaimed sharply, as she bounded towards the kitchen area. 'Oh, look, I'm sorry,' she had turned back to me, 'Hate it when I do that.'

'Hey ... it's OK,' I answered with a little smile. So, Alex gets flustered when her hands get in the way of her words. Cute. Cute, because when she's flustered, she visibly stops bristling. Her movements slow down. Her speech slows down. It's as if she needs to slow everything right down to take herself through a total synapse check. She needs to identify the origin of the fault before giving herself the All Clear. I had seen her as flustered as that only once before.

Again, she had been talking as animatedly as per her habit but that time we were walking back from the Village Twin Cinemas to the car. She had tripped on the uneven surface of the footpath. She would have done a belly flop if it hadn't been for my own hand that, thinking for itself, had shot out to grab the back of her jacket. She had looked at me, then, with the same puzzled little girl's expression though she obviously had understood the mechanics involved.

'I gather it's happened before?' I enquired, as she patted the tablecloth with paper towels.

'Uh ... yes. It has been known to happen ... when I wave my hands around too much. Too close to long-stemmed glasses.'

She looked at me for the first time since the spill and I noticed that same spooked little girl expression in the tentative arch of her brow.

‘That’s when I get excited ... you know, about the conversation.’ She shook her head, as if to say, I can’t believe this. ‘Most embarrassing when it happens, like a couple of weeks ago, in a restaurant. Red wine that time.’

‘Well, no real harm done.’

She bunched up the soggy paper and left in on the far corner of the table while we resumed our conversation.

‘No ... no harm,’ she said softly. Her tone lacked conviction.

‘Hey, Alex, before the ... well, the glass thing, I was about to say that I didn’t really need to know what the Taliban did with their queer population but, yes, of course I do want to know—’

‘Knowing is the easy part,’ Alex replied cryptically but I think I know what she had meant. ‘From the information available on the subject, it would seem that during the month they round up the unfortunate homosexuals, and then they place them in front of a rock wall. And then they use a tank to demolish the wall.’ Alex was back in the saddle. She refilled her glass to the halfway mark and set it away from her right hand. Wine bottle in hand, she looked at me. I shook my head.

‘No thanks. Not just yet.’

‘Anyway, the finesse is that they, the clerics, wait however long to allow Allah to render judgement. When they clear the rubble, who ever is still alive, when unearthed, is exonerated.’

‘What? Till the next round up, the following month?’

Fingertips above her temple brushing against the silver-white bristle of hair, Alex snorted softly, ‘Yes, from what I understand, it’s kind of like that.’

While still on the topic of the Afghan militiamen we talked a little about the destruction of the gigantic, fifteen-thousand-year old rock idols. Gigantic figures of Buddha. The disfigurement of the fifty-five metre tall desert statues embedded in the rock face had been ordered to ‘protect the visual purity’ of the desert-dwelling women. They had used explosives. Another reason given to the Associated Press was that the Koran forbids religious depiction. But the Muslim religion is not an iconic religion, not any more than Judaism, and neither one nor the other calls for the destruction of images belonging to other faiths.

‘Women who do not have a male able or willing to care for them,’ Alex had confirmed, ‘eventually become ill. Hospitals are apparently full of dying, emaciated women of all ages. Most relief workers have left the country as all their efforts are hindered by the militiamen. It is genocide we are talking about, for heaven’s sake,’ Alex had concluded, eyes fiercely expressive under her furrowed brow. *Farouchement* is the French adverb that comes to my mind when I remember the passionate way in which she had talked about the circumstances in Afghanistan. And then she had added, ‘These guys are mad, as in dangerously mad. As in way out of control mad. Give them time and they will ... Never mind.’ She had shrugged her shoulders not in the Gallic shrug of disinterest but as one shrugs off a cloying presentiment.

Over dinner, across the wavering lights of the candles, we continued talking about topics that would’ve made most of the women I know shriek with horror. Not so much because of the subject itself but shriek at having such content brought up at the dinner table. Or simply brought up. Isn’t the purpose of any get together to unwind and be happy? ‘Why get us all depressed with all this? Come on, Emilie. Ease up,’ I had heard many a time. ‘Has anyone come across a new restaurant lately? Anything worth investigating?’

And the more I listened to Alex, the more obvious became the serious grasp she has on the topics that interest her. Topics of feminist interest seem to be her favourite. And I can't remember by what detour she introduced the topic of female genital mutilation, FGM. So much pain, in such great numbers. Numbers in the millions lie behind these three innocuous letters.

'One hundred and thirty million women around the world have experienced FGM,' she had said in her voice, modulated with American over tones.

'I think it touches some two million girls a year, doesn't it?' I had thrown in, taking an educated guess.

'It does.' A quick smile had flitted across her lips in recognition of my statistical estimate.

I've come to decide that Alex smiles a lot. But her smiles don't linger. They don't linger on her lips. Her smiles are closed-lips. When she smiles, the smile lingers in her eyes. In a way, I guess she smiles like she talks, quickly. Like she moves her hands, in quick flashes of gold and silver. One could easily forget the frequency of those quick smiles and remember only the frowns of concentration when she talks, when she listens. Those frowns of concentration darken her eyes, making her look intense. Too intense perhaps. Green, I think her eyes are. Dark green. Not at all like Tamara's. Dark eyes, spiky dark hair, both made more striking by short strokes of almost pure white streaks. Almost pure white in the glow of candle light across which we talked until late that night.

'How can any one fathom such numbers, such pain,' Alex had said, emphasising the amplitude of the problem with her customary wide but brisk movements of her hands. I noticed how throughout dinner she had been very careful to keep her glass out of harm's way.

Back in 1994 I had attended a presentation led by a French speaker, a doctor with *Médecins Sans Frontières*. She

had shown footage taken undercover and smuggled out of Ethiopia, one of the main offenders in those days and still, I believe, to this day. The speaker had given the estimation of twenty four million women mutilated that year. And in spite of the government having published policies opposing these actions. So, the doctor had smuggled out footage of excisions, and footage of infibulations in progress. Instead of stitches, long cactus-like needles had been used as sutures.

I couldn't look at those images. I had quickly found the viewing too confronting. Besides, the cries of pain that had bounced and splintered against the walls of the dark viewing room, these screams of utter pain, these screams of utter panic had been enough to tell us of the torture filmed. We didn't need, those of us whose safe cocoon in the dark theatre had been fractured, we didn't need to seek confirmation in the black and white images projected on the screen.

Throughout my conversation with Alex, though I could hold my own, I felt she had an encyclopaedic sort of knowledge, a knowledge vastly different from my rather superficial one. Like I had the *Time* magazine depth of information, whereas she had thorough, researched and specific, current information. And I remembered how Tamara had said that Alex was a hard one to move out of her house before sunset, on any weekend. I certainly could relate to that myself. And I thought that maybe it was after work and on the weekend afternoons that she found the time to research, absorb and process that kind of information. Either that or she must be insomniac. My excuse for not keeping abreast of the world around me is that I don't have enough free time in which to indulge. I realise that may well be a lame excuse. An excuse more than a reason.

Later on, we talked a little about ourselves but only once I was on my way home, did it strike me that both of us had managed to avoid the topic of our private lives. We had *avoided* talking about our private selves. On the drive home

I had pondered the reason why neither one of us had touched on what most single women begin with, namely asking and hearing what had gone wrong in the other's last relationship that it should be defunct. Was it because both of us are private people? Was it because she, like me, found little value in exchanging stories of separation? Stories of separation add up to more and more as we get older, as separations tally up. Or maybe she, too, feels that whatever has happened in her life, at that level, is not of relevance to anyone else. At least not at that stage of early friendship. I must admit, though, to being a little curious as to what happened in Paris, a couple of years ago now, when Alex got entangled with that rather cute lawyer who, Tamara had indicated, was already entrenched in a long term relationship with a woman called Sophie. I remember that name, but I can't remember the lawyer's name. One day Alex and I might swap stories. I'll tell her about Roberta who had a long-term partner called Julia and she'll tell me about that lawyer who had a long-term partner called Sophie.

Later again, while we had a second cup of coffee on the deck that overlooks the garden and the moonlit, blue-mint swimming pool, Alex had asked me about the script I had told her about last time we had spent some time together. So, for her, I summarised the latest additions I had made, self-consciously stressing all along that scriptwriting was only a hobby, not an activity that would ever lead to publication.

While on the topic of homespun literature I had asked her about the novel she had been trying to have published since her return from Europe. Last time, she had taken me through the saga of first, trying to find a publisher, then of trying to find an agent, both in vain. Each of her attempts had been answered with form letters from publishers who stated that, as they received a phenomenal number of manuscripts every month, they weren't able to give her manuscript further consideration. They wished her well. From that it had been

easy for Alex to suspect that not only had her manuscript not made it, it might not even have been read at all.

My own view on that situation, though I know very little about it, is that Publication House readers are likely to be part-time, volunteer readers. Mind you, whether a volunteer reader or paid reader, there's a limit as to how many selected chapters of how many manuscripts one can possibly get to read in the three months of standard turn over period Alex had referred to. Anyway, agents had replied similar things to Alex. They, too, were overworked, they had said. 'Over-booked,' I had suggested as a little pun. Alex had smiled at that. But, watching her talk animatedly about all this was a sort of fascinating experience. By the time I left her house, I felt tired. Tired and exhilarated by the conversation. Exhilarated by her.

'But the rejections could also be genuine,' she had said, dark eyebrows knotted over dark eyes. 'Could be because of my plot. It is a fairly linear plot, you see.' Dark eyes focused somewhere to the left of my ear. 'I don't seem able to think in terms of a whole, I mean a *round* whole,' she had explained with her hands.

'What kind of things do you write about?' I had asked, aware I had almost decided not to ask. Too personal perhaps.

'Oh, nothing much really,' she had answered, perhaps a little self-consciously. 'Morgan, my main character is a woman in search of self. Aren't we all?' she had added, with one of those quick smiles that lingers in the crinkles around her eyes. 'I mean there is no suspense, as such. It's not a thriller.' She had paused to toy with her empty cup. 'Morgan, I'm afraid, doesn't experience an epiphany, though I'm sure she'd love one.' Her eyes had met mine for a quick smile. 'But for most women in search of self there is no epiphany. Only a quiet understanding of what is. So, I don't write about anything overly exciting or dramatic.'

‘Life can be dramatic,’ I couldn’t help but say.

‘Of course life can be exciting *and* dramatic. But Morgan does not lead a dramatic life. In fact she has had a good life. Some would say a sheltered kind of life, in terms of work and health. Certainly in terms of love. She feels that the portion of excitement, attributed to her life by the powers that be, is already depleted. The type of stuff I write might have appealed more in the eighties. But again ... ’ Her voice had trailed off. She had fidgeted with the heavy gold ring she wears on her middle finger. And I felt it was time for me to go home.

Once up and ready to get my bag and say goodnight, Alex had asked, ‘Emilie, do you know what bugs Tam?’

‘Tamara?’ I felt myself blush.

‘Yes, Tam.’

‘Uh ... no, I didn’t know she was bugged.’ That came out nicely enough but Alex’s eyebrows were raised again. ‘Why is she? Bugged, I mean?’

‘It bugs her that you don’t call her Tam,’ Alex said, looking straight through me. I blushed again intent, as I was, to keep quiet my irrational reaction to *her* ex lover.

‘Well, next time I see her,’ I started trying to swallow, ‘I’ll have to explain that I’m just not that big on nicknames. She’ll understand that, won’t she?’ Alex had spread her hands in front of her in the European non verbal ‘who knows’ or as we tend to say here, ‘who’d know.’ I should’ve left my explanation at that but I heard my voice add, ‘Like I don’t really like being called Em or Emi, except perhaps by ... you know ... a lover.’

‘I guess you will have to tell her that then.’ I was about to acquiesce when as an after-thought Alex had added, ‘She calls you Emilie, as I do. Do I conclude she is not your lover, yet?’

A hot wind blew on my face. It’s the ‘yet’ that had done it. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Lover, as in the one you love, or as in the one with whom you make love.’

Or have sex with?

‘Uh ... no ... Of course not.’ Relief. I could actually give Alex a truthful answer. I do not love Tamara. She and I will not be making love. Alex hadn’t mentioned anything about having sex. With Tamara. With anyone. Only I had had that thought.

Twelve

Woh! Woh! Wowwh! Breathe. Deep and slow. What now? What d'you mean, What now? If you can't backspace you gotta process, Emilie. You can't *backspace*. It's done. Can't be undone. OK then, time to process.

Yes, I really need to understand this. It's around 5 p.m. She comes around unexpectedly. I open the door, she comes in. We're not even at the hugging stage of our friendship. So I just smile at her and say, 'Hey.' She answers, 'Hi, Emilie. Hope I am not disturbing you.' She's not disturbing me but I'm flustered. I'm flustered having her here. Unexpectedly here at the door. Silly thoughts run around my head like, is the house tidy enough? Like, is the bathroom tidy enough? Like, am *I* tidy enough?

I mean, there I was in my den, minding my own business, not expecting anyone. And here she is. But I don't tell her that I'm flustered by her unexpected visit. Instead I say, 'Hey, not a problem. I'm happy to see you.' Because *I am* happy to see her.

So we move into the living room, she drops her bag on an armchair and I ask, 'What can I get you?'

'Coffee is fine,' she answers.

I make two. She starts telling me about the day at work. She asks me how mine had gone. 'Not bad,' I answer, 'but you know, these days it's getting hard to tell because anything can happen, at any time. Some situations,' I explain further, 'that seem well enough managed on the spot, well, some have a way of back-firing in rather odd and unforeseen ways'. She answers that she knows what I mean. 'I have that in my work too,' she says. So, here we are in the kitchen where she's followed me, with me making coffee and she's just leaning against the counter. And we talk like two old friends. Cool. So far, I don't have a problem with that.

We chat some more while the coffee plunger does its thing with the coffee grounds. I ask her what brought her to my neighbourhood and she says that she had some business on *this* side of town, on her way back from somewhere else, not work. And she thought she'd look up my street on the off chance that she might spot the Jeep. 'If you were in, then I thought we might do this, chat for a while. If you were not busy,' she adds.

She had remembered the street but she says she's lousy with numbers. 'Unless I write numbers down, any numbers, I will not remember them,' she explains. She shifts against the kitchen counter behind her and she unravels her thought further. 'I didn't think there would be a lot of red Jeeps visible from the street, and if there happened to be one, like not in a garage, just sitting there, then I'd try my luck.' And I tell her, 'Lucky you, there was one.'

'Lucky me, indeed,' she confirms with a smile.

And I get the cups and saucers. I pour the coffee. I ask her how she likes hers because sometimes people have a type of coffee at home but have another preference when they're out. Like I don't use my cappuccino machine very often. But I often order one of these frothy coffees when I'm out. Never after dinner though. And she says, 'Let's keep it simple. Nice and strong will do.'

'Does that mean black?' I ask, and she nods. 'Cool, that's how I have mine too when I'm home.' I lift a cup and saucer to put in her hand –

It's from that moment on that I can't figure out what exactly happened. Well, I do know what happened, I mean I was there. What I can't place is *how* it happened. It's not that it happened quickly at all. Because it didn't happen quickly. It happened quite slowly, in fact. Quite slowly, I'm sure of that. I think I'm sure of that.

The cup full of coffee kind of wobbled on the saucer and she reached out for it to steady it. I guess that would've been

her intention. But—next thing I know—my breath catches in my throat like a valve's just closed up. I'm totally aroused. I can't even open my eyes. I don't even know my eyes are closed, shut closed. Not until I try to open them. Her lips are on my lips. Her tongue is warm. Her tongue is firm against my own. I'm aware of one of her hands against the small of my back. The other is against my cheek. I'm aware her hips are not pressing against mine. No, not pressing at all. Just *there* against mine. Sex against sex, but we're totally dressed. Jeans and all. I think the kitchen counter is actually propping me up. I don't know what's happened to the cup and saucer. I don't know what's happened to the cup of coffee I had been holding towards her only a few seconds ago. Seconds or minutes? That's the kind of thing I can't work out.

I cannot comprehend the waves of desire that has just flooded through me. Her mouth is just so soft, so deliciously soft. So deliciously tantalising. I mean, this is crazy. I was not even thinking about her. I was right here, right at home, minding my own business. She comes around. I make us some coffee. Next thing I know I'm holding on to her because it feels just so crazy, so hot. I know is that I'm totally turned on, totally humming and the ache of desire that's rippling upward from below my navel is just so strong I can't open my eyes. Like I can't open my eyes into strong sunlight. The difference is the sunlight is out there somewhere. The blinding, searing ache is inside me, throbbing from inside my clitoris and reaching so far beyond it that my heart's pounding against my ribs.

I need to move back, I need to see. I need to think. I need all that but I don't want her to stop kissing me. I don't want her to stop holding me. But she senses me shift in her embrace and she lets her tongue play forward, more forward on my lips. And then she slides her mouth to the underside of my lip, to my neck below my ear. Her breath flutters and teases the whorl of my ear.

I breathe in. I breathe in, but the ache in my groin presses me more tightly against her. I reach for her face. With my two hands, I reach for her face to bring her mouth back against mine. Hungry. I can't explain that hunger.

I'm only aware of her tongue. I'm aware, too, of her sex behind the knobbly seams of her jeans. I'm very much aware of my clit too, throbbing against the knobbly seams of *my* jeans. I can't open my eyes. And behind my closed eyes I imagine an apple. Not an apple. No, not really an apple. More like a crunchy, fresh-white, juicy bite. No, not an apple. A mango. The beautiful flesh of a deliciously ripe mango. The soft texture, the light flavour and the sweetness of its juice. Oh, the voluptuous business of burrowing inside the firm flesh of that most sensual of fruits.

And her lips move away from mine to hover, to flutter. I'm aware of my kiss-swollen lips. They, too, throb when released from the pressure of her own. Even with my eyes closed, I sense her lips. And I feel them, and I feel the tip of her tongue at the corner of my mouth. Less overpoweringly sensual now.

Her mouth is in a gentle mood, now. A gently teasing mood. It has feasted. It can be playful now that the urgent craving's been sated. I open my eyes. I finally open my eyes. So close to her, I discern only the splash of white hair near her right temple.

Hands flat against her shoulders, I push her back gently. She is warm. She feels tightly wound under my hands. I don't want her to go away. I just want to look at her. I need to know the colour of her eyes. Her eyes are always dark at night, even across candlelight. But I know they're not brown. I just know they're not. The low late afternoon sun is still shining in through the kitchen window. Must be why that streak of short bristling hair is more white than grey.

'Alex,' I whisper, hoarsely. Her face, her eyes are hidden against my cheek. 'Let me look at you.' I touch the top of

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the bristles. Softly. Soft. Soft bristles, not spiky at all. Soft and thick, salt and pepper except for the clump above her temple.

‘Mmm ... Emilie, I— ’

‘What colour are your eyes?’

‘My eyes?’ Her words are muffled.

Again I push gently against her shoulders to make her look up.

‘Hey, what colour? What shade of green?’

Slowly, reluctantly it seems, she pulls away and straightens up. She isn’t much taller than I am. I would’ve said she was. Her sex is still resting against mine. Mine’s still pulsating. Pulsing with a heartbeat of its own. Warm against the seam of my jeans. But her face is far enough removed now and I can see her eyes. Her eyes are soft. Soft and not intense. For once her eyes are just green. Dark green, soft green.

‘Ah. I can see them, now. I knew they weren’t brown at all,’ I say softly, bringing her back closer against me.

She inhales deeply. I feel her intake of breath. As her shoulders rise, as the air travels downward towards her stomach, I feel her stomach move under her belt. She exhales slowly. ‘My passport says they’re hazel.’

‘Your passport’s correct. Hazel they are.’ Then, I remember something. ‘Should we have that coffee now?’ I ask, feeling more assured now that my heartbeat’s beginning to settle. Now that the heat in my loins is manageable.

She sighs. Again, she leans forward. But not for a kiss. She wraps her arms around me and she hugs me. She doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t whisper anything, she just hugs me. And she unwraps her arms. And she inhales deeply like I do. I have to breathe in deeply when I’ve been shallow breathing for too long. I breathe in deeply when my lungs tell me they need more. I need more. I need more air. I need more of her. And in my head I begin to panic. Why the panic? Alex’s kiss is not going to make me pregnant.

‘Emilie, it’s OK,’ she says. ‘Yes, let’s have that coffee, shall we?’ She runs her fingers through the silver-white bristle.

Why does she say, It’s OK? I haven’t said anything. I haven’t moved much at all. I’m still standing there. Just let out of her hug. I breathe. I smile. I run a hand through my own hair to push it back. I let my hand return to her shoulder. I let my hand move slowly across the skin of her collarbone. I can see the hollow in the space between her neck and the open collar of her shirt. Luminous jonquil yellow is the colour of that shirt. Bright, striking colours suit her. They suit her skin tone. A matt, tanned skin. She has closed her eyes. Her collarbone rises and falls. My hand drops lightly to the curve of her breast, down to her stomach. And my hand stops there. It has to stop there because of the thickness of her belt. The thickness of her belt doesn’t allow my hand to travel beyond. And I breathe in. It’s good that she should have worn a belt today. A thick, saddle stitched, leather belt.

She opens her eyes. Her pupils shrink away as I drop my hand to my side. My eyes touch hers. ‘Good idea that ... let’s have that coffee.’

She looks at me, eyebrows knotted now as when intent in conversation. She shakes her head slowly and straightens her shoulders. Now she is a little taller than I am.

‘Yes. Coffee. I need to sit down. Can we have it–’

‘We’ll have it outside. Let me introduce you to my garden.’

I had come out of a long soak in the jacuzzi just in time to pick up the ringing phone before the answering machine kicked in. Wonderfully warm from the experience and snug in a terry-cloth robe, I was glad to find Merredyth at the

other end. I needed to talk to someone about the day's main event at work.

'And what did you do, then?' Merredyth asked.

'I just stared blankly at the screen. Then, I tried to get a handle on who might have sent it. And I tried to imagine *him* or *her* feeling my initial surprise, then the blinking shock and then the disgust I was feeling for them at that very specific moment. Too bad I don't believe in Voodoo. If I did, I tell you what, someone would be having the worst bellyache of their life. Not very charitable, I know—'

'Ah, for god's sake, stop feeling guilty about everything, will you?'

'Yeah, well, the thing is that if that intrusion had been something concrete, you know, slimy and kinky and sick, I would've flushed *that* down the toilet and would probably have thrown a couple of big pots of boiling water right after it. Just to make sure it was all gone. It's really how I felt about the message once I had stopped blinking at it, like, you know, as if vocalising each sound, pulse rate on red alert. Well, on pink alert,' I add to inject a little humour inside my own head. Merredyth is silent at the other end. I just take it for granted that she's still there.

'By the time Mary came in and asked me what was wrong, I had already deleted *and* trashed the bloody thing, you know, so I just told her about it and she sighed. And she patted me on the shoulder and said not to worry. She said she'd look into a *way to flush the damn thing further into cyberspace* for me. *Beyond the point of no return*, she said. That was sweet of her but I think once an E is deleted and trashed, that's it. Gone!'

'Is this the Mary who's in the office with you? The one you came out to? Wouldn't have spread the news around, would she?'

'Yes, that same one, but oh no, she's kept our conversation quiet. We're friends now. Well,' I add as an afterthought,

‘from what she’d told him about me, before our chat, her husband, too, had apparently agreed that I was probably gay, you know, the pillow talk stuff, but that’s OK. I mean, he’s not the one sending me nasty mail, right?’ I chuckled at the thought almost wishing the nasty mail had been from Jim.

‘I still can’t believe you came out to her. *To a colleague.* I remember how you came back from that sailing trip of yours, all pumped up. Ready to bite the bullet.’ She chuckles into the phone. ‘You said you needed to force yourself to do something à la Solange. Reckless. Not sure how you managed to convince yourself any of that would be good for you but you were adamant.’

‘And it turned out well. Liberating in a ... way. The cosmos did provide. And *I* now realise the value of having a friend at work. Of course that’s something well-adjusted people like you have known all along, right?’

‘Right. It’s called friendship, Emilie. Can be called networking, too. Depends what you do with it.’

‘So, Mary-my-mate, she hosed me down some more about the e-mail thing and made us a cup of good coffee. She was really, really sweet about it. Made me feel better. But the bottom line is that I really don’t like myself much when I’m such a wimp.’

‘Oh, Emi, don’t be so harsh on yourself. Gawd, I would’ve *died* on the spot. I mean if it had been me, I can just imagine. I reckon this is really a putrid thing, Emilie. Wait till I tell Joan.’

Anderson your a freek. We all know your a lezzo with a cunt on fire. Spelling mistakes aside, I truly hope that the hand that had typed that e-mail didn’t belong to any student of mine. The address that, of course, got trashed at the same time as the text was one of those code-named ones @ hotmail.com that hadn’t, at the time, given me any clue as to the sender’s identity. Had the message been meant for my eyes only or had it already ricocheted to every I-o-FuK mailbox?

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Had it been intended as a bit of a sorry joke or was it the first step of a systematic harassment/scare campaign?

Merredyth is not, strictly speaking, a teacher anymore. She, too, has been promoted out of the vast pool of little Indians, as I call Teacherdom, and into a HODship where the air is admittedly more rarefied.

As Head of Department of Social Justice, she only teaches two classes a day. The rest of the time equity issues are her main focus. However, she still works in a high school environment. She still works with and for youngsters and, like any other gay teacher I know, she regularly spends time setting up smoke screens. As I do, though I'm no longer a high school teacher. Old habits die hard. But then again, I'd love to think that, as I'm now working with older students, the risk of adults mistaking lesbianism with paedophilia is further removed. Parents, clergy and education bureaucrats are prone to that confusion of intent when it comes to the question of homosexual teachers. And so, I'm fully aware that in the existing homophobic climate, my sexuality, whether it be admitted, or inferred by others, could cost me my job.

The Institute of Further Knowledge, where I've been Head of the Communications Department for a few years already, is a private institute. No union to bat, however sluggish, on my side. I, like everyone else who works there, like everyone I hire, has a contract. A contract with a limited life span. The life span of some contracts can be counted in weeks. Most are written up for the duration of a school year or a part thereof, counted in monthly slices. Others like mine are tacitly renewed year after year. Until the day they are not. Because of poor performance or, more likely in my case, the dreaded homophobic clause.

If I ever were to become a casualty of that clause, I could hire a lawyer, should I find one ready to battle on my behalf for what's still considered, here, a dodgy issue. I could press charges for unlawful dismissal. But win or lose, I lose my

job. I mean, I don't think I'd like to hang around anymore. Not the best pre-early retirement option for a woman past the mid-forties mark. But then again, maybe I *would* hang around. Maybe I'd plant a little rainbow flag on my desk. And stick Everyone Loves A Dyke on my back bumper.

Anyway, for now, once the moment's passed I get angry. I get past the feeling sick moment. Angry enough to sharpen my fangs once I'm back in the privacy of my own home when I think of these grown-up kids, bloody hell, they'd have to be grown up, wouldn't they, by the time they turn eighteen! It *really* pisses me off when they carry on in such an irresponsible manner, and besides, the honest truth is that I find it scary. Scary because I know that such 'pranks' go beyond my personal incident with Liam, whenever that was, and today's e-mail. I find it all a bit ultra-rightish. That's why it's scary. But maybe I need to breathe in and, chill as Tamara would say. Maybe some of the young adults we deal with at I-o-FuK are freaky but inoffensive losers.

The thing is, I do understand all about the merits of outing oneself. I understand that as a closet gay I contribute little or nothing to the 'advancement of lesbian and gay human rights.' It can be argued, too, that I stand to benefit from gains won by those who have had the courage to be out and fight for visibility. That might be truer if I lived in Sydney, though I doubt it.

And so went the gist of my conversation with Merredyth who had called to see what I had been up to since our camping weekend. 'Not much, really,' I had said. I was not ready, not yet ready to volunteer information of any of my sensual meanders with Tamara and Alex. I had mentioned Tamara to my friends, and Alex too, but only in passing, only in terms of their help the night my car had been towed away. Even *I* find the whole thing totally ... weird. I mean, intellectually weird. Weird to me.

It's all water under the bridge now, but I'm sure that my unprocessed feelings for Roberta and the lingering remains of the sexual tension of those days are creating the confusion that's overtaken me since I met Tamara and Alex. Tamara's lips made me dizzy. Alex's lips made me dizzy. And yet, regardless of the dizziness that these two very different women have engendered only a few days apart, I'm not in love with either. I'm not losing any sleep over thoughts of either. My thoughts don't lift and drift towards either. No, that's a lie. My thoughts do drift to Alex. And to Tamara, too. Oh, groan. I need to drop this in the too-hard-basket for now.

I should be totally motivated, invested even, in pursuing Alex's lead. Her opening. Why had she pushed decorum aside and upset the status quo by kissing me in the kitchen? That woman, I've been telling myself ever since that afternoon, was put on my path for a reason. No other woman I've ever met has been such a perfect match. In theory, anyway. *And* she's not involved with any one. She's as free as I am. *And* she doesn't seem to be into an at-risk lifestyle. So, why am I playing dead? Why haven't I called her? Why aren't I invoking the movie-come-dinner to move further into what she has begun?

Things were simple whenever it was I had first talked to Merredyth and Joan about Alex and Tamara. I hadn't, yet, had my sense sensation with Tamara. And I certainly had not been anticipating that Alex would ever, well, that she and I would *ever*, find ourselves locked in a totally passionate embrace in the middle of my kitchen. And all because a cup full of freshly brewed coffee had wobbled on its saucer as I had handed it to her. How do I begin to explain that to my friends? I can't because I'd feel like the person who starts explaining something that's happened on the way to somewhere, only to get bogged down in so many, necessary but

convoluted, details that she eventually gives up and says, ‘Oh, you should’ve been there. I just can’t tell it as I *saw* it.’

Fact is, I didn’t even *see* it. I didn’t see it coming and I didn’t see much of anything. Full stop. Couldn’t even open my eyes, shut so tightly to contain the electric searing that had all but short-circuited the rest of me. Almost all the rest of me. Anyway, Merredyth wanted to know too, if I had heard from Solange and I told her that I hadn’t. She confirmed what I’d been thinking: that Solange would never change.

‘Too old for that,’ I had replied. ‘Too happy with the way she is, too. And hey, why shouldn’t she be? She’s a much happier woman than I am.’

And then she had asked me about Graeme, my boss. She was happy to hear that I hadn’t seen him much at all and she asked about my students. ‘How are they coming along? Regretting high school kids by now, are you?’ she had asked, knowing darn well that I wouldn’t chose to go back to being a high school teacher, a little Indian in a huge pond, for all the tea in China. And then, because I was still unsettled, angry and unsettled, I had told her about the lezzo e-mail.

‘Either way, the point is that I’d love to be out. Out and out there. I mean, wouldn’t it be great if I could just waltz in at work tomorrow and tell everyone, not Mary because she already knows, but the students, the parents, Graeme, “Yes, I’m a lesbian. But, you’ve known me for years, see how much like you I am? See how my sexuality, just like yours, I presume, is disassociated from my professionalism? No fifteen-year old girl has ever bounced on my lap. No *Lolita*, no *American Beauty* fantasies. Too young. I’m into women, you see, not *girls*. Boring, ain’t it?”

‘Yeah, well, if you find a way to say that *and* keep your job, you’d better bottle the recipe and patent it. There’d be a lot of demand for it here. Talking about demand, I bet Joan would want to try it herself. She’s been really keen to come out, too. Every year on her birthday, she kind of says

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something like, “OK, to hell with it, I’m old enough to do it. Surely, I’ve proved to them all that I can more than justify my salary.””

‘Yes, I know. She’s told me she’s been waiting for someone to bring up the topic, you know, like over lunch. I would’ve thought that by now the topic—’

‘I’ve managed to hold her back on that one, for now at least.’

‘Well, she probably could come out, you know. She’s got tenure.’

‘Yes, but one never knows. Tenure can be revoked.’

‘Right. So, the bottom line is that we’re all phobic of homophobia. Anyway,’ I said to move the conversation along, ‘about this morning. I mean, if there’s one thing I believe in, it’s auto-determination. And it’s the fear of losing *that* particular right that’s making me so livid.’

‘I can imagine. Revealing, or forcing details about a person’s sex life without their agreement, well, I mean, if that’s not an intrusion, I ask you what is.’ Merredyth’s voice went up an octave. ‘Joan read me something from an American Gay magazine, a couple of months ago I think it was, and I just couldn’t wrap my head around it. You tell me. It said something like merely saying that someone’s gay is no more an invasion of privacy than saying they’re American, left-handed or straight. I mean, how can they say that?’

‘Well, I don’t know, maybe that’s true in New York. But again, not for all, surely. I’m sure things aren’t that simple in mainstream America. Not even in Sydney either, except perhaps on the night of Mardi Gras,’ I add facetiously.

‘So where’s left then, besides Lapland?’ Merredyth asked, somewhat indignant. ‘So, anyway, listen, the article went on to say that straights ‘out’ themselves with loaded references such as ‘married’ or ‘father of two’, or whatever.’ She paused and I imagined her looking at her fingers as she does when she gathers her thoughts around a meaning-

ful pathway to something on her mind. ‘The point of their argument was that no one would suggest that *that* constitutes unreasonable intrusion of these people’s privacy.’

‘Oh, right. So, was the bottom line that we’re wrong in saying that being made to reveal *our* sexuality within the context of a generally homophobic society constitutes no more an invasion of our privacy than when someone says that so and so is *married*? Oh, please!’ I was getting agitated by all this gay militant diatribe. And besides my ear was beginning to heat up against the ear-piece. I needed to wind up the conversation. It was all a bit too much at the end of my own Hate The Dyke day.

‘I guess what they’re saying is that, if we really believe there’s nothing wrong with being gay, it can’t be wrong to mention a person’s homosexuality, be it theirs or ours.’

‘Yes. Great. Wonderfully simplistic.’

‘Yeah, we can always dream on,’ she had agreed wryly. ‘Till then I say, remain invisible, Emi. None of that’s anyone else’s business.’

‘Well, as I said, as far as I’m concerned, it’s going to be life as usual. But it really shits me. Out of principle. Anyway, look, give Joan a big hug, I’ll call you guys later. Next week some time and we’ll organise a dinner. OK?’

‘Yeah, sure. You could come over here for a change, you know. We always end up at your place. Let’s entertain you for a change and bring a friend, hey? Just to even up the numbers,’ she had added lightly, catching me off guard as I was about to hang up. ‘Don’t be shy.’

‘Yes ... sounds good, Merre. I’ll see what I can do ... I mean about the friend bit,’ I had answered, jokingly. ‘Maybe a beautiful stranger will knock on my front door between now and then. She’ll ask to use the phone, I’ll let her in because she’s sexy and looks honest enough. And before I know it, Merre, that stranger will have me waltzing around the kitchen.’

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After I'd hung up, I flopped on the sofa and closed my eyes. The moment with Alex, that handsome and sexy woman, the moment of delirium with her in my kitchen played itself back.

Thirteen (Jill's story)

I'm not sure how I feel about this at all, but I guess it's probably a good thing. At the very least I know it won't hurt. Well, it won't hurt *me*. As Tamara, very seriously, said to me, 'Hearing about these things doesn't hurt. It's what these women have felt in their flesh and the pain wedged in their mind, that's what hurts.'

A quick look at my watch-face tells me we have at least half an hour to wait here, in this room, that's if the Magistrate is running to schedule. I glance at Jill Mason. She's sitting quietly to my left but she chose a seat, isolated at the corner of this non-descript Safe Room. She's holding her cup of tea in both hands. The cup is only a thin plastic one but I suspect her tea might be tastier than my coffee.

I noticed she had let the teabag brew quite a long time before she had fished it out by the string. She had neatly wrapped the string around her little plastic spoon and had somehow tied the tea bag to the spoon in the same deft movement. With the string wrapped around the tea bag, she had pressed out the last drops of concentrated taste by tightening the string against the spoon. Initially, I had thought she had forgotten the tea bag was still immersed in the cup. As immersed as she had been in her own thoughts. But I noticed that she gave the string an occasional tug to jiggle the teabag. No brewing or tugging to add even a skerrick of flavour to my washed-out coffee. As weak as sock juice, my grandfather used to say.

Jill Mason had been standing on the steps of the Brisbane Courts by the time I reached her. I had made a quick exit from the institute pretending an appointment with an eye specialist. Everyone knows that one has to accept any appointment time given by a specialist's secretary.

So last week, with only one week's notice, I had given myself an appointment with an eye specialist on Wednesday, the twenty-ninth at 3.30 p.m., half an hour before Jill Mason was due to appear in front of a magistrate to secure a Protection Order. And we had met on the steps of the courthouse. After our first meeting in the back room of a coffee shop I had stopped regretting the fact that Jill Mason, my first intervention, was not a dyke.

Tamara had warned me that the first woman to whom I might be of help wouldn't, in any likelihood, be a lesbian. Battered lesbians, she had explained again, were extremely reticent in coming forward with their grievance. They had good reasons not to trust the system. But, Jill Mason, I had decided was a very proud, a very hurt, and very distressed woman. And *any woman in distress is a sister in distress*.

That thought might have made a good bumper sticker back in the eighties. But again, even back then, I never came across any real evidence that the much-talked about feminist sisterhood truly existed. I did read articles about it in newspapers but we all know to be wary of what there is to read in the press. Gee, you can never be too careful.

When I had first come across the notion of sisterhood in an issue of Spare Rib, my first thought had been, *Well, 'bout time*. And I had wanted to sit on the curb of downtown Queen Street and keep watch for the Sisterhood, as some camp out in the desert to keep watch for UFOs.

As time moved on, as women around me kept on conducting their business in the same old bitchy, nastily competitive, sort of way, I had reached the unrewarding conclusion that the Sisterhood, in flesh and blood, must have been as mythical as the unicorn had to have been further back in time. Or maybe it happened elsewhere in other lands. But I'm older now and I do like to believe in nice things, so I tell myself that if I haven't, yet, observed signs of *that* activity,

here where I live, it's obviously because I still don't know where to watch, how to watch.

And so, Jill Mason and I had met on the front steps of the courthouse. From there, I had manoeuvred her directly to the Safe Room, the sanctuary so arranged that the victims of domestic violence did not risk being accosted either by their aggressor, or any other male representing the abusive party's interest. And now, we sit and wait for her name to be called. We're waiting for the piped voice that will announce 'The matter of Mason and Mason in Court number 3.'

I glance at her again. She has finished sipping her tea. She smiles quickly. Maybe she only smiles quickly because she fears that smiling more broadly might crack her slowly healing lip. 'I should've known better,' she had said back in the coffee shop, on the day we met. 'When he slapped me only a few days before the day we were due to get married. The first time. We'd been engaged for two years and three months before that, you see. He'd always been nice. A kind man. My mother was very pleased, you know, relieved to know I was marrying such a good catch.'

Whilst Tamara and I had already finished our cups of coffee, Jill Mason had only looked into her cup of tea that day back at the coffee shop. She hadn't drunk any. As I had watched her, it had occurred to me that maybe the crack in her lip and the swollen tissue around it might make it too painful to drink, and that maybe Jill Mason had prior knowledge of the pain that comes from even the slightest pressure against a badly busted lip. Maybe, too, the swollen tissue made it impossible to drink without dribbling liquid from the side of her mouth. I had felt the need to breathe in. Slowly and deeply. I looked at Tamara's expression, a study of concern but un-shocked support. Quite the professional.

'He had come home from work,' Jill Mason adds, pressing her knees even more tightly together. To me, she looked as if she was wishing the corner of the Safe Room

would do a slow morph of sorts and rearrange itself over her and the chair that supported her. ‘His boss had told him production was slipping again and Mikie was expected to fix the problem. And when I said dinner would be a little late, he slapped me hard enough to twist my neck. I should’ve known better already back then. Ten years ago on the nineteenth it was.’

It seemed to me that with each of her ‘I should’ve known better,’ statements Jill Mason was blaming herself for what she would refer to, later, as her lack of common sense.

‘And then five months pregnant with our little baby boy, he pushed me so hard I fell down the steps to the garage. Only seven steps there were. But I miscarried. I lost our baby. I should’ve held on to him ... you know ... tighter, to the baby. At the hospital, you see, they told me it was a baby boy.’

I glance again at Jill Mason as she sits head bent, knees primly pressed tightly together, low-heeled shoes flat on the carpeted floor of the Safe Room. Just to make sure she’s as comfortable as she can be under the circumstances, I ask her if there’s anything at all I can do, either with her or for her. And her reply is negative. Polite but negative. She says that she just wants to sit quietly and make sure she gets all her facts right.

‘I remember what happened all right. But it’s dates I can’t remember. The judge might ask and I won’t know. I might get it wrong. So I’m trying to get them back, the dates.’

I gently remind her that it is only to a magistrate she’ll be addressing those memories she was trying to put in the right order. I reminded her of what we had already talked about: that this procedure was considered somewhat informal, that unlike the testimony a victim is asked to give in a criminal court case, here today, the matter being considered a civil one, the magistrate wouldn’t ask her to clarify any obscure points such as times and dates.

Tamara had already transcribed the relevant information in the History and in the Latest Incident sections of the Application for a Protection Order. The magistrate would have all the past details he needed in front of him and therefore he might not actually wish to hear much at all from Jill Mason.

Fourtzen

Tamara had rolled up unexpectedly. I don't think these women know how uncomfortable it makes me to have unexpected visitors roll up to my front door and knock. I really hate being caught unprepared. Always have to be prepared. Prepared means that the house is perfectly tidy. Particularly the bathroom, the loo and kitchen areas. The garden has to be well-tended. The verandah has to be clean of leaves.

I have to feel presentable in my clothes. No, *more* than presentable. I actually need to feel oh, I hate that word, *attractive* in my clothes. My hair, though at the moment in desperate need of a cut and almost as equally thirsty for a Brasilia tint, has to sit as *I* like it to sit. Hey, if I can't control even my own lifeless hair and it is particularly lifeless at the moment, what the hell *can* I control? So, OK, when all's in place, the doorbell can ring. I'm not a hermit, after all. Only a tad antisocial.

The thing is, when I don't expect any visitors, I walk around barefoot, in my old jeans and favourite crumpled flannelette shirt, and with my hair in its own version of a bad hair day. On weekends, unless I have to go out, I let it droop and dip, flick up, curl and coil, all to its little heart's content. Or I simply wear it loosely tied in a short ponytail of sorts.

And when the doorbell rings unexpectedly, the other thought that streaks through my mind is that I haven't wiped the bathroom console since last weekend. That's when I really freak out. As happened at the time of Alex's visit last week. And again, today, the doorbell had rung unexpectedly. I had briefly toyed with the idea of not answering it, though my mother has warned me against the evil of solitude and anti-social behaviour, ever since I attended kindie. And so, I know what an unhealthy, anti-social behaviour it is, that of not opening the door to the sound of a ringing bell.

‘Emilie, my darling,’ my mother would say, ‘your little friends, they’ll come around, they’ll try and do things with you, for you even, but only for so long. If you ignore them, they’ll just give up, won’t they, and go away. They *will* leave you alone. *Et lá, tu vois tu s’ras vraiment toute seule.*’

And, when I was younger, the tone in my mother’s voice as she’d reached the words ‘*truly on your own*’ was enough to drive the fear of spinsterhood deep inside my heart as I’d visualise an old woman in a rocking chair, already long dead, covered in silky cobwebs. A dusty photo album on her lap, her right gnarled hand still cupped around a computer mouse, while skeletal mice twitched their noses and scurried about in vain, still trying to ferret out more than the mere scent of yoghurt and almond balls. And to think that I could *still* bring that upon myself, anytime I choose to ignore the doorbell!

So I battled against my instinctive reaction and opened the door. There was Tamara on my doorstep, with a big grin on her face.

‘Hey, what a surprise.’ I know I had said that pleasantly. I know I’m quite good at doing that. At not letting my feelings betray me. Teaching, twenty-odd years of teaching have taught me that. ‘Hey, what a surprise,’ is what I had said to Alex as she had stood right where Tamara was.

Anyway, Tamara and I got to talking on the verandah when, apropos of nothing, she had reached for my right hand. She had looked at it, studied my very short nails, turned the hand over and said, ‘I like your hands, Emilie.’

‘Yes, I think you do. You’ve already said that.’

She had commented on my hands at the Botanic Gardens.

‘Well, that shows, I’m reliable in my judgement. Strong hands, long fingers. I like that,’ she had said with a Cheshire cat grin that I had pretended not to see.

Already once, as we had ambled amongst the trees of Mount Coot-Tha, she had reached for my hand.

‘How come you don’t have little cuts, you know, like you must be gardening quite a bit?’

‘Comes and goes, gardening does. Depends on how much spare time I have. Should I ... have little cuts?’

‘No, of course, you shouldn’t. But I’ve noticed that ... women with real gardens, you know, as opposed to balconies and pots, and women who do handy work often have ... little cuts on their fingers.’

I could’ve asked for more of Tamara’s vast and no doubt intimate knowledge of women’s fingers, particularly of those who work with their hands, but I didn’t. Instead I made my query more specific. ‘Does Alex have little cuts on her fingers?’

‘She does. She gardens and she renovates things around her place.’

‘You should buy her some gloves, then.’

‘Perhaps I should, though she should think of buying them for herself.’

‘Well, I suspect it doesn’t really matter any more to her than it does to me whether or not we have little nicks here and there,’ I had suggested dismissively.

Tamara had looked at me frowning, one hand on my shoulder to slow me down. ‘It *should* matter.’ With a sly grin, she added, ‘Particularly if woman-with-nicks-on-fingers wants to make love.’

I had looked at her. Really! The way this girl talks about sex, could just about make me blush. It could, but I’m discovering that I do enjoy her frankness. Her youthful lack of hang-ups in matters of sex, her openness makes me grin. Oh, what I would give for Tamara’s lack of self-consciousness.

‘Well,’ I had said, ‘I can’t speak for Alex, but I’m not planning on making love with any one, any time soon.’

‘Bit of a waste really, with these nice hands of yours,’ she had said as we sat on the slope of Mount Coot-tha, watching Brisbane City settle around into an early dusk.

And in my garden, as she sipped her beer from the bottle, Tamara was back on the topic of Alex. ‘In a funny sort of a way, I’m glad about something. Alex *is* definitely thinking about ... making love,’ Tamara added coolly.

I blinked. ‘Is she, now?’ I thought I had said that out of interest in Tamara’s perspicacity. But, the honest truth was that, well, I wanted to know more about Alex’s romantic interest. Might it be me?

‘Yes, I’m pretty sure she is,’ Tamara answered, uncharacteristically tight on details.

‘Well, good on her.’ The idea of a woman making love always sounds like such a happy and positive thing to do. Flustered, though, I gave up trying to extract more information from Tamara. It was then that I realised that I was intimidated by Alex. And I understood that if during the week I hadn’t picked up the phone, to initiate further contact, it was because I was, still am, a chicken. A cowardly chicken afraid to risk having her tell me, with one of her quick smiles, that a momentary *égarement*, a temporary loss of senses, was all that kiss had been about. I must say that the possibility that Alex, herself, might be waiting for me to make the next move didn’t take root in my mind. Neither did the possibility that she could be feeling awkward or unsettled herself by that temporary *égarement*. I mean surely, tense and bristling, the always in-control Alex was not wilting by the phone waiting for me to tell her that there had been no harm done, that it all had been a hot and wonderful surprise and that we could go on pretending nothing had ever happened in my kitchen, right?

‘But what’s the connection between finger-nicks and making love?’

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Tamara grinned at me. ‘Strange question coming from a lesbian.’

The first thing I remember about her is the way, already on the first night we met at the Triangle, she had made me feel intellectually flat-footed, catching me off guard with her repartees.

‘Healthy hands, cuticles and all, vital for unprotected sex,’ she stated.

Oh my. Safe sex, another of the few sex things I’ve known about for years and have consciously preferred to ignore. A phrase I read somewhere comes to mind - Hakuna matata—Swahili for She’ll be right, mate, a much used colloquialism that suggests that Destiny will take over and fix on our behalf whatever we are helpless at fixing ourselves. A secular equivalent to *God will provide*.

‘Uh ... yeah, sure. But I haven’t really thought much about, you know—’

Of course I know what latex gloves can be used for and I know what a dental dam is. Not that I’ve ever seen one, let alone used one. I could have, I certainly should have, but I haven’t yet.

‘You haven’t? Why not?’ Tamara exclaimed as if I had just admitted to not wrapping my garbage before putting it in the street bin. ‘They found a cure for all the weird wart things going around?’ Looking down at her own hands, she added sarcastically ‘No one’s told *me*.’

She’s absolutely right. I should’ve protected myself not only from Roberta but from *her* Julia who occasionally went out with men to answer another need of hers that Roberta could not meet. And I should have protected Roberta from myself. But I had simply assumed that Solange had remained loyal to our lovemaking until Gretta.

‘No. No cure. None that I know of.’ I needed to move the conversation along. ‘I guess I’ve been trusting of the universe.’ Tamara was still frowning as if she was lip-reading

unfamiliar lips. 'Well, I've taken calculated guesses,' I added more firmly.

'We're not talking about holding back ejaculation as an alternative method of birth control,' she finally said tightly. 'A *calculated* risk? I don't know how ... grown women, intelligent women, and with-it women like you and Alex ... I mean it's not as if you're not informed or anything.' She paused on that statement and lifted the bottle of beer to her lips. And I waited, curious to hear what she would say next. 'A cut anywhere in the hands, a graze, a bitten cuticle, you slip on a glove. Not really complicated,' she added looking at me sternly, like a progressive mother of old talking to her daughter about the need to wear an IUD. 'Or afterwards, as in *soon* after, a nice soak in a mixture of bleach, water and soap. *Even* if the level of incidence happens to be very low among lesbians,' she added for good measure.

'You know a lot, don't you?' I asked, peeved at having deserved that lecture from my young friend.

'Oh, I know a lot of other facts too,' she grinned good-humouredly. 'Like did you know that our eyes are always the same size from birth, while the ears and the nose never stop growing?'

'No, can't say that I did,' I replied flatly. 'Can't say that I've thought about that at all.' But that would explain the wonderful big, wide eyes babies have. Eyes big enough to contain all the innocence in the world. And it would explain why my ninety-one year old grandfather had been able to grow such very large ears. Even as a child, when he and *Mamy* left Noumea to settle closer to us in Brisbane, I remember having been fascinated by his ears. By the size difference between his ears and mine. I had measured his ear and my ear. Already then, his right ear was three centimetres wider and two centimetres longer than mine. His ears were leathery too. And because of that and because of their size, my *Papy's* ears made me think of a baby elephant's ears. Not those of

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a big, fully grown bull, only those of a baby elephant. And my *Papy* had tufts of hair growing out of his baby elephant's ears. 'That's because I wear my fur on the inside,' he used to say. I didn't have the heart to tell him that elephants did not have fur. I had simply accepted that my *Papy* was all furry inside.

That talk about sex and *our* lassitude, Alex's and mine, was making me feel inadequate. Would I ever know everything worth knowing and correctly do everything that needs doing? Besides, I needed to get Tamara on to another track because I could feel the same delicious attraction I'd already felt towards her uncurl in the pit of my stomach. One difference, I noted, was that on previous occasions it had been her touch that had awakened that ache. Now, it's her words too.

As I listened to her talk about this and that, as I watched her drink her beer and look about and look at me, it is all of her that has begun unsettling me in a very lovely, very private manner. And so, I diverted the conversation to a less volatile, much more familiar topic. I began telling her about my earlier encounter with Liam and his friends and the much more recent incident of the e-mail splattered across my screen.

I assumed she'd have something clever to recommend, like a young person's wisdom to age-old antagonistic, asinine stirring. But she had looked at me again, as if I were a grey alien who needed to have the words 'Spaghetti Bolognese' explained.

I was in the midst of explaining how uneasy the whole thing had made me feel, when the phone had rung. I had gone inside the house to answer it and Tamara had followed me into the living room.

'I really don't understand you women,' she had exclaimed on the way.

I pick up the phone thinking that I might soon get a gutful of the Alex and Emilie comparisons. It's Joan wanting

to know more about how far Mary-my-mate had been able to 'turf *that* piece of cyber crap' further into space. I quickly work out that she's referring to my e-mail incident as had been recounted to her by Merredyth and I give her the abridged low-down on how I'm coping.

'Right. Now, did you hear that Gracey's sheepdog died a couple weeks ago?' asks Joan, reassured that I'm on top of the E thing. Phew. Merredyth wouldn't have let me off the hook so quickly.

'Yeah, I did hear about that poor dog. She'll be real cut up about it.'

'I bet. She's had him for a really long time.'

I glance at Tamara who has picked up one of the *Time* magazines scattered on the coffee table. I was going to do a little catch up reading this afternoon. I'm finding it almost impossible to keep abreast of my weekly subscription.

Covering the mouthpiece with a hand I whisper in her direction, 'Grab a beer. What's left of yours is probably warm by now.'

'You've got company, Emilie?' Joan's voice asks from inside the earpiece.

'Uh, yes, a friend of mine's just dropped in.' Tamara gives me one of these, Is-this-the-best-you-can-do kind of looks. I smile and shrug.

Joan asks, 'Anybody we know?'

Joan knows all my friends. She's assuming the visitor is one of the women with whom, every so often, we socialise over dinner.

'Oh, no.' I answer quickly. There is very little likelihood of any one of these friends popping up unexpectedly. Mind you, the way the doorbell's been ringing lately, anything's possible. Should I excuse myself, on the grounds that I have company and cut this conversation short?

'I'm curious, Emilie. Keeping secrets from me, your mate Joanie?'

Yes, I am. ‘Uh ... you know how it is,’ I chuckle, ‘I wish I had some to keep.’ Too late now, too late to rush this conversation towards a precipitated conclusion.

‘So, who’s that secret person who’s sitting in your living room? Been a bit of a dark horse, lately haven’t you? Merre was just saying, Our Emilie’s being cagey. I’m sure she’s into things that she’s not letting on about. You know how she worries about you and—’

‘Yes, I know. She wants to mother me.’

‘Mother you *and* matchmake for you.’

‘How can I forget! That’s how I ended up with Solange in the first place.’

‘Well, that hasn’t been so bad, has it?’

‘No,’ I smile into the phone. ‘Sol’s fine. Just too bloody stressful for me. I’m not up to high octane, high adrenaline stuff anymore. Mellow’s the only way to glow.’ So much for that brief thought of me rocking my own boat. Nothing ever grows out of mellow. ‘Anyway, Sol might be right for Gretta. I do seriously hope they’re a match. She’s quite lovely Gretta, I mean.’

Gretta, the bush pixie, knows how to trust and surrender. Solange had said so. She had said so the day she had finally explained why she had felt the need to move away from me straight after our return from the Whitsundays. Where I had failed to respect her as a mature woman because of my non-acceptance of that wild streak of hers, Gretta succeeded. Gretta didn’t fret like I did. Gretta apparently understood the notion of cosmic control and the futility of trying to compete with it.

‘Well, she’s a funny little thing herself. But ... so ... have you?’

‘Have I what?’

‘Been keeping things from us, like you know ... women things?’

‘Women things?’ I ask frowning. ‘Women things’ brings to mind things deemed too obscure or too messy to be referred to by their proper name, like menstruation, menopause and other women-only-ailments.

‘Luhv, Emilie! Love! Women! Fun! What’s been happening in your life for the last what, six months? How long’s it been since you and Solange split up?’

‘Yeah, about that long.’ Merredyth is right, I *have* been cagey. I haven’t yet told either one of them about Roberta and it’s far too late now. Initially, and for months, there had been nothing to tell. And then, suddenly, there was. And by then, I had felt it was too late, too complicated to share. Too fraught with out-of-control desire and white-hot lust. With love and fear, too. Lust and desire had been too intense, too personal, to share even with my best friends.

The fear had been about being deemed foolish for having involved myself with a woman who was as good as married. Foolish too, for mourning the loss of what had never been mine to lose. I hadn’t aired any of these fears. They’d been too deep-seated to share. And, I realise that if I don’t disclose more readily, I risk having empty conversations of my own doing with Merredyth and Joan too. It’s just that once the heat of the moment had passed, I didn’t think it necessary to bring them in at the post-mortem phase.

‘Do you really think I’ve been up to something?’ I ask, careful to avoid looking in the direction of the sofa and hoping that, with only my side of the conversation to work with, Tamara can’t really tell what my chat with Joan is all about.

‘Uh, you know me. I don’t think an awful lot about these things, but Merre does.’

‘And she thinks I’ve been up to no good, does she?’

‘She does. But she doesn’t know why you’re not telling us anything. Hurts her feelings a bit.’ Groan. Disclosure’s

never been my forte. Merre should know that by now. I mean, how long have we known each other?

‘Look, Joan, tell her I’m sorry. But hey, she’s giving me credit for more excitement than has come my way, for sure.’ I’m lying and I’m digging myself in further. Merredyth’s gut feeling is totally accurate. My life’s been exceptionally eventful since Solange and I broke up.

I glance at Tamara wondering what she’s making of my elusive answers. She looks up from her magazine, eyebrows raised. Cat green eyes latch on to mine. The corner of her mouth is turned up in a little ironic smile. I look away.

‘I’m just taking things one day at a time. Don’t worry, the minute I’m into something newsworthy, I’ll let you know,’ I add, forcing myself not to glance back at Tamara. Later, I’ll tell Merredyth and Joan about my titillating game with her. And, of course, Merredyth will remind me that I’m too old for games.

Tamara’s not reading *Time* magazine anymore. I can tell she’s looking at me. She’s looking at me and she’s making her eyebrows flutter up and down, green elongated eyes, almost round in mock suggestive lewdness. She’s trying to make me smile. I smile at her. Tamara is very cute. Cute and fun to be with. Fun and, well, yes, got to admit it, fun and very, very sexy. *That* fun and *that* sexy because she’s *that* young. I wonder what Joan and Merredyth would make of her.

Joan is telling me about her parents who have come down from Charters Towers for a week. Merredyth gets along better with them than she does.

‘Mind that doesn’t say much. I used to think I needed to try harder with them, but it’s ...’

As I look at Tamara now, at her body settled length wise on the sofa, a couple of magazines spread over her legs which are crossed at the ankles, she reminds me of Solange. Of a young Solange. Maybe she reminds me of the way Solange might have looked a long time ago. How she might have

looked when she came from the North of France to settle in Australia.

‘But Merre’s really good and she hoses me down when I get upset with them and she ...’

Tamara could most probably pass for her daughter. Except for the colour and shape of her eyes. Solange’s eyes are grey but of a grey that changes with the mood of the sky. Ever changing grey and wide. Tamara’s eyes are cat green, a clear but intense green. And almond-shaped. Their eyes are different and their breasts are too. Tamara’s breasts are fuller than Solange’s who doesn’t need a bra, not even at forty-three. Tamara, I suspect would’ve had to wear one in her late teens. But both have the wide shoulders of a swimmer, the long legs and slim hips of a runner. Their hair is of a similar dark, almost black colour, cut to sit in a casual brushed back style. Yes, they could easily pass for mother and daughter, though of course Solange would’ve had to have baby Tamara at fifteen.

‘Anyway, nothing’s new. You know all about that already. So, who’s your mystery guest?’

Tamara runs a hand through her hair and lets that hand rest between shirt-collar and neck. My heart flip-flops in my chest.

I turn away to face the garden. I turn away to breathe in.

‘Hey Emi ... you’re still there?’ asks the little voice inside the ear-piece. ‘I can’t hear you anymore.’

‘Uh ... yes, I was saying Tamara ... she’s my surprise visitor.’

Tamara is making a silent clapping gesture. I think it’s my reward for having mentioned her name.

A tiny silence at Joan’s end of the line. ‘Ah ... the cute young one who got you a lift with the equally cute—’

‘No, not cute,’ cut in intentionally, my back turned to Tamara.

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‘Ah yes, that’s right. The older one’s *just* a good-looker. Right? Not a cute one.’

‘Right.’

‘Hey, you know how Merre is about matchmaking. The moment you mentioned that other woman, the older one, right, Merre’s eyes lit up. She said that you sounded like *you* had found her ... interesting.’

‘I guess I did.’ There, I’m being cagey again. But I can’t honestly tell them about my double flirtation. Women my age, women like Merredyth and Joan, just don’t get up to such things anymore. If we’re single, we get matchmade into an arrangement that looks likely to offer a longevity potential. Pining for longevity, as opposed to searching for excitement, is what makes up the difference between youth and maturity, isn’t it?

If we mature women make love it’s supposed to be because we feel we’re on the edge of something that won’t take off until we do. Sex is our gateway to companionship. But sex, in this context, has to be reasonable and thoughtful. Lustful but *reasonable*. Tamara is on the sofa looking particularly feline now that she’s returned her attention to the magazine resting on her thigh, and I’m not feeling particularly reasonable.

She looks up again. She smiles but returns her attention to the magazine resting against her thigh.

‘Well, anyway, I’d better let you go. Get to it, girl! Entertain. And, uh ... hey, Emilie, don’t let those dickhead kids get to you, OK?’

‘OK. I won’t. As I said, that’s under control for now. I won’t let anyone get to me. Take care now. Big hug to Merre. Tell her I’ll call mid-week.’

I lean back against the wall. Tamara’s frowning. She’s shifting to a sitting position on the sofa. My heart’s flip-flopping again. There’s something about her that moves me.

I need to be mature about this. I'll sit next to her on the sofa. Though not *right* next to her.

I won't initiate anything. But if she does, if she touches me ... I'll let her. I'll let her guide my next move. Breathe, I remind myself, already feeling my lungs asking for more air. The thought of Tamara touching me is cramping up my breathing before she even gets anywhere near. I'm anticipating the searing rush of sexual arousal. Perhaps like a junkie anticipates that other rush through her veins. And yes, who am I kidding? I like that feeling.

'You know about your kids at school,' Tamara begins, probably unaware of the effect she's having on me, 'It's like I told Alex. You guys carry on almost like Dzs.'

What are deezeds? 'Hold on, girl. What are you on about?' I ask, feeling that somewhere along the conversation I've lost a link.

'You and Alex. The way you both think is like so confusing to me. I don't get it.'

'What about Alex and me?' Tension is building up inside my ribcage. Alex and Tamara were lovers. They're friends. Last time I saw them together, they were visibly comfortable with each other. Have they talked about me? My name must have come up but in what context?

'I mean, look at you, I mean the two of you.' Tamara follows her train of thought.

'And, what are you getting at? What are deezeds, anyway?'

'Dizygotic. You know, as in identical twins.' Her eyebrows are raised as she waits for the bulb to go on in my head. 'As opposed to, you know, monozygotic, non--'

'Uh ... yes, I know what that means but what's the context?'

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‘No context, except that I think about you and Alex almost like that, almost like twins. Like DZs that might have been split up early.’

‘Interesting thought,’ I say already frowning. ‘What d’you mean?’

‘She wonders, like you do, why some students, even ones she doesn’t know, are making gay allusions when they think they can get away with it.’

‘Oh. I didn’t know.’

‘Been going on for a while. The school year after she came back from Paris.’

‘That’s no good. But, hey, what’s with the twin bit?’ I ask, feeling somewhat flattered that Tamara should find me so similar to Alex.

‘OK, so you don’t have the same mother,’ she explains, ‘that’s clear enough but you go about things in the same kind of way.’

Swivelling on her backside to sit cross-legged on the sofa facing me, she explains that Alex and I have followed similar professional paths. We enjoy similar tastes in wines and films. We react similarly to certain situations, such as that gay thing at work and, she adds, anything that is vaguely connected to the emotional. Tamara says we’re even aloof in a similar type of way. ‘Socially lazy,’ she says. She’s categorical about that.

For myself, I prefer to say socially indifferent.

‘And if that wasn’t enough, you drive that red Renegade.’

‘Half of the suburban women around here drive four-wheel drives, nowadays.’

‘Those old Jeeps aren’t *just* four-wheel drives, Emilie. Even a Wrangler would’ve been more discreet because there’s a Wrangler craze out there at the moment. What you drive just doesn’t look like Land Cruisers, you know, huge people movers, or the little Vitaras or Ferozas brigade. Well,

not in the common folk's mind. Not when they know it's *all yours*, as in not your boyfriend's. Not your husband's either. I mean, this isn't Beverly Hills where anything rugged and expensive goes by unnoticed.'

Tamara is unusually animated. It is obvious she feels strongly about something. Is it about Alex and my visibility? Or is it about her belief that Alex and I have so many things in common?

'Ah. And what do the common folk around here make of vehicles like mine then?

'Grunt. Sexy grunt,' she says, puckering her lips and tilting her chin seductively.

'Is that all?' I ask pretending a frown of disappointment. 'Come on, talk dirty to me.'

'Legendary grunt, as in sweat, dust, power to grab and pull,' she says rolling her eyes. She must be alluding to the ability that tyres seem to have to reach and grab anything salient and pull the vehicle as they grab further. Grab and pull, like a big turtle scrambling over a log. 'How *discreet* d'you think *you* are,' she says once more, seriously, 'driving that Jeep of yours, all sexed up with that butch bullbar, super distinctive mags and all the chrome bits?'

'Not discreet. You're right. It's a real boy-magnet,' I concede but in earlier days the Renegade had also attracted Trish. She admitted later, much later, after we had successfully seduced each other, that she had asked everyone at the party, 'Whose Jeep's out front?' Eventually someone had pointed in my direction and, avocado dip in one hand, and crackers in the other, she had waltzed over to introduce herself. But to Tamara, I suggest playfully that maybe the big butch car thing is a projection of my alter ego, Lady Gwenevyr astride her charger, 'Don't we look the part, my car and I?'

'Charger, yeah, absolutely, for the Jeep.' A soft snort accompanies Tamara's chuckle. 'But *Lady* anything. No, honest, I don't think so.'

‘Phew. I’m glad.’

So, Tamara doesn’t understand why I buy myself a boy-toy and then, when someone cries ‘Butch!’ I go into the paranoia bit and hit the gay-phobia button.

‘Should’ve bought yourself one of the little Terios things. Lots of space for a family and a dog. Rugged in a girlie kind of way. Little engine. *That* won’t threaten anyone. Not even if you’re unmarried and never wear skirts.’

Apparently Alex, too, would like to blend a little with the background, sometimes, not always.

‘Then, there’s your accents. Like not at first but when you get talking for a few minutes, one can’t help but notice. Different accents, of course, but surely, you know what I mean. And I bet, like Alex, you get annoyed when people ask you where you’re from and that sort thing. Anyway, my point is that, though you have a different type of look, both of you have a lot in common and together or separately you’re anything but invisible,’ she continues, as I wonder whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing. ‘And you both carry on like Casper, the friendly ghost, who’s just had his little sheet yanked off him.’

Cute little analogy.

‘OK. I get your drift,’ I say, having heard enough and feeling suddenly cooped up. ‘Let’s get back outside, shall we? Let me grab something from the fridge on the way out. Might as well have a bite to eat.’

Tamara follows me into the kitchen. A slow heat rises to my neck. Does she know about Alex and me, here in this kitchen? Would Alex have told her about it? No, she wouldn’t have, not if she’s so much like me. Or me like her. Private. NO ONE ADMITTED BEYOND THIS POINT, is the invisible sign I carry around my neck.

And I’m aware of my blush lingering because I’m bristling in that odd sort of way. I’m turned on. Why am I? I should only be turned on by her touch. She hasn’t touched

me. She's not doing anything particular. She's just going on and on about her ex.

And yet, I'm waiting. I'm wondering when Tamara will come close enough to me to touch me. Will she? I wonder, head inside the fridge for a little coolness, while I pluck a sharp-tasting crumbly cheese from the top shelf and a bag of grapes. Will she surprise me and make my senses reel? What if she's given up? What if she's over that urge of hers to have sex with me? My heart sinks. What? What?

'Hey, can I help you in there?' Tamara calls out from behind me.

'Yeah, just grab those for now. Thanks.' I move to the other side of the kitchen and hand her a wooden platter.

'Green grapes,' she says, 'Alex has always got green grapes in her fridge.'

'And very mature cheddar, I bet.'

'She does. She likes the green grape, dry white wine and cheese combo.'

'Yes, OK. Another confirmation of your DZ theory,' I say, showing her the wedge of cheese. 'Jeez, dizygotic twins split up at birth, hey? What else?' I ask, rolling my eyes to the ceiling. 'Hey, I bet you she's too French, still, to be a keen supporter of our national icon, right? The one and only. The mighty jar of Vegemite. True?'

'True.'

'So there. Don't you forget, you clever thing, in spite of it all I'm not Alex. My name is Emilie and I'm a Vegemite addict and a yoghurt ball addict,' I say as if addressing an AA audience.

'I know you're not Alex. You're Emilie. I've been paying attention, you know.'

Shaking my head slowly, while a little smile lingers on my lips, I peel the wrapper off the red waxy crust of the cheese and place it to the side of the platter.

‘Hey, Alex sent me packing about that theory of mine, about the visibility thing. She’s not very good at listening to what she doesn’t want to hear. At least you listened,’ Tamara adds though I had thought this conversation over. ‘Should I cut that in small bits?’ She’s holding up the heavy bunch of round green grapes by the stem.

‘You can. Scissors in the top drawer over there. So, what does she say about your DZ theory?’

‘She doesn’t say anything. I haven’t tried it on her. No way. As I said, patience on topics that don’t suit her, that’s not what she’s about.’

I smile picturing Alex, dark eyes glowering, white flash glinting, hands alternating, quick and animated. And a chorus line of long stem wineglasses crashing on white linen as she directs the flow of words with her expressive fingers. An adamant European in full flight.

‘Anything else you can use to tell us apart?’

‘Oh, yes, you’re not as intense, thank god.’ Tamara pushes the drawer back in with her hip. ‘And hey, you’re into technology, she’s not. You don’t speak Spanish, do you?’ I shake my head. ‘See? She does.’

‘But I can say “Hakuna matata”.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning She’ll be right, as in, everything will be OK. Swahili.’

‘Well, there you have it. It’s as I was saying, two different women after all,’ Tamara concludes on a high note.

I turn to look at her, unable to read a meaning behind her tone. Intent on her task, she’s snipping the bunch of green grapes in smaller clusters. Tiny clusters of three or four grapes still allowed to cling to their stem are piling near her right hand. She puts the scissors down and, as she looks around, our eyes meet. My heart flip-flops. She smiles. Can she tell each time my heart makes a flip-flop? Is it possible that today, I see her as she is for the first time? I react to her

as to a *total* woman whereas, her age alone had so far made her a non-player in my eyes? Answers have been very slow in coming forward lately.

I could take the couple of steps that separate me from her. I could take her hand. I could turn her away from the counter to face me. I could. Instead I'm standing here thinking about her mouth. Instead of thinking about it, I could already be feeling that mouth. Why don't I move towards her? I can't move towards her because, because Because ... what if she's no longer attracted to me, as in sexually attracted? My goodness, what if she should say, No, look ... Emilie, I'm sorry.

Instead of taking the couple of steps that separate me from her, cowardly, I ask what makes her think that Alex might have a romantic interest in mind. That's none of my business, of course, I know that, but all right, I'm not perfect. I'm a flawed coward who also happens to be a curious coward. Or am I simply a coward who happens to be curious?

After all, the type of hot and almost delirious moment Alex and I have shared, right near where Tamara is now standing, doesn't usually happen in isolation. So, where does that leave me, both as the acceptor of and the fully participating participant in that kiss? When my semantics get too convoluted, I know there's confusion in my brain.

Could Tamara know for sure whether I might be Alex's romantic interest? Would Alex have discussed that with her, or is that too private, too, for a premature disclosure?

I am attracted to Alex, to her charismatic personality, and most certainly to her conversation. And yet, I haven't followed up on that kiss. I haven't opened a dialogue with her. I haven't tried to figure out what I feel for her or about her. And right at this moment, whatever Alex may or may not have in mind is considerably further removed than Tamara and my instinctive attraction to her. To her body. To her physicality.

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‘How did you enjoy yourself that evening at her place?’ Tamara asks not answering my question. She’s piling the little bunches of grapes on the platter near the cheese wedge. ‘Got a knife for the cheese?’

‘Top drawer again. Had a great time. I really enjoyed her conversation. A real change from the usual around the dinner tables that *I* know.’ I could certainly swear to that on the nearest bible though there isn’t one in my house. All right then, on my catholic grandfather’s prayer book.

‘Ah, well, that’s Alex for you. Since she’s come back from her affair with Adrienne, she spends too much time on her own, introverting. Thinking about whatever and reading.’

‘Beer for you? Who’s Adrienne?’

‘Yes, thanks. Adrienne’s that lawyer-lover she was involved with in Paris.’

So that’s the name I was after. ‘But how long ago was that?’

‘Over two years ago. Far too much time for her to still be on her own.’

‘Isn’t introspecting any good?’ I ask, head inside the fridge. One, two bottles, cold, really cold, against my palms.

‘In small doses, yes. And Alex has always been into, uh ... introspecting sessions. It’s actually after one of these sessions that she decided to send me that Dear Jane letter, you know, to tell me she wouldn’t meet me in Paris for Christmas. Anyway, lately she’s been indulging in megadoses of ... well ... of that, being on her own and all.’

And, no doubt, her detachment is partly what I find so attractive in her. ‘So what makes you feel Alex is ... on the move?’

Bottle opener needed. I need to go on the other side of Tamara to get into the top drawer myself. What if I just stood behind her, my two beers in one hand? What if I encircled her from behind? I switch the bottles to my left hand. An awkward fit.

‘Shouldn’t your question be,’ Tamara grinned as one privy to restricted information, ‘*who* do I think might be Alex’s new fancy?’

The caps’ tiny curled up teeth bite into my fingers, maybe because they think my plan’s not such that crash hot.

‘Uh ... yes, maybe. But I’ll stick to my original question ... for now.’

I pass behind Tamara. She turns away from the counter and follows my move to the other side of her. ‘Actually what made me tweak,’ she continues, ‘is what I found in her fridge a couple weeks ago. I spend a lot of time there. I mean, not in the fridge. At her place. It’s cool.’

I need to breathe. ‘And ... what did you find in her fridge that was such a revelation?’

‘Ah, funny *you* should ask.’ A blush inches along my neck like a furry centipede but I don’t have the foggiest as to why. Pshhhht! goes one beer as I curl up its cap.

‘Never mind,’ Tamara follows her own thought. ‘I spotted some leftover snapper congealed in a rather exotic sauce. A dish, I happen to know for a fact, that comes from the Caribbean,’ she says, as if that explained everything. I let out a silent sigh of relief.

The beer cap rolls in a semicircle on the counter top and falls on its side near Tamara. She covers it with her hand. Her hand remains still, tantalisingly close to mine. Mine’s still holding the bottle opener but it is, for some reason, also resting on the counter. Shouldn’t it already be up against the second cap ready to curl it off, as cleanly as the first? More questions for the questions-no answer game.

‘Caribbean snapper, hey?’ I ask, just to hear my voice. Just to test my voice.

‘Caribbean snapper, as in baked with pieces of almonds and ginger root.’

‘Oh, that. You mean what she served when I had dinner at her place?’ My voice sounds fine and my brain hasn’t short-circuited yet.

‘Yes, I mean *that* big sucker of a fish.’

I so wish I were brazen. More brazen than I have ever been. Less phobic. More able to weave, like a fish among the seaweed, in and out of all these small conundrums that constrict my breathing. I should be able to admit to myself that I am attracted to Alex, that yes, I’d like it very much if something more came out of *her* spontaneous display of affection. And I’d like to be able to say clearly too, that here, right now, I am very attracted, aroused, even by Tamara. So what, Emilie, why can’t you admit that? Is this too unclear for you? Complicated? Too messy, perhaps? Well, bite my bum. I wish I could enunciate that clearly, without flinching, first to myself. And then, to either Tamara or to Alex, depending who should ask first. And that’s remembering full well that Tamara only wants to have sex. That’s it. I’ve decided. In my next life I absolutely need to be reborn as an in-your-face-sassy-brassy-hardass momma.

‘Well, it was delicious,’ I finally answer. ‘But why was it a revelation to find it in the fridge?’

Psssst! goes the second beer cap. But this one doesn’t get to roll anywhere. It remains trapped under my own hand.

‘Alex doesn’t cook.’

‘What d’you mean she doesn’t cook?’ I look up, genuinely surprised. ‘She does, I saw her. I even heard her,’ I add, remembering the fast chopping sounds that had come from her open plan kitchen.

My mother has a theory as to why I worry so much about what to think of myself. She has the same theory to explain my worry in regards to what people may or may not think of me. My mother’s theory is that I don’t have enough *real* worries. She figures that if I had been married, if I had a husband and children to worry about, I wouldn’t have time to

check my own pulse each time some thing pops up, or fails to pop up.

‘OK, she cooks but only when she wants to impress. She obviously wanted to impress you. That’s the revelation.’

‘It worked. I was impressed.’

‘Impressed by what?’ Tamara’s tone is neutral. ‘By the snapper or by the woman who prepared the snapper?’

‘Both.’

Maman’s theory is that if I hadn’t had such an easy time of making things happen my way or no way, I’d have many other *real* things to worry about besides myself. *And* she’d already be a grandmother. She’s probably right but that argument of hers doesn’t make family life sound like such a crash hot alternative to my own solitary arrangement. Not that I have any regrets whatsoever.

I’ve been toying, though, with the idea that maybe I could get into some voluntary community work and perhaps be of use to others, unfortunate enough to have *real* and concrete heavy worries.

‘Well, there you have it. Anyway, she was impressed by you, too, and you didn’t even have to cook her anything.’

Why aren’t we outside yet? Is this kitchen to become the hot spot of this house? I don’t want to hear any more about Alex. There’s got to be something weird in the way Tamara keeps on going back to the topic of Alex-this, Alex-that.

‘I’m glad that she’s not really a whiz-bang gourmet. My previous lover was. Too difficult keeping up.’ Oops. Was that a slip?

‘Ah, but Alex knows how to put great dinners together.’ Tamara is adamant about that. ‘She can cook some really unusual, splendid dishes, but she seldom does anymore. When she entertains, particularly like lately, she usually does it ... what’s the French thing that means something like hospitable but simple?’

‘*A la bonne franquette*, is it?’

‘That’s the one. If you ask me, I think that’s just a different way of saying, *I can’t be bothered. That’ll have to do.* Anyway, you know what I was saying about Alex being like, thinking about sex?’

‘Yes. I mean no. But yes, you’ve already mentioned that.’

‘Well, can *you* put two and two together?’ Tamara, eyebrows aflutter, is looking very much like the cat who has swallowed the pet mouse. I could simply ask, And how do you feel about that, then? But I don’t. Instead I opt for a quick throwaway retort.

‘I might be able to but there’s no guarantee my answer will be correct. I’ve always been lousy at maths.’

I’d like her to come over to me now. I’d like her to wrap her arms around me, to pull me in against her and whisper something like, Hey, look I don’t know about Alex, right? But for now ... you and me ... let’s have sex. I look up and catch her still looking at me with that Cheshire cat grin of hers.

‘Oh, get on with it,’ I reply, swatting her with a tea towel. ‘Here, grab that platter and go squat a deckchair, I’ll be right there.’

I watch her exit carrying the platter and, out of frustration, I bang my forehead twice against the freezer door. Time for a slow, sibilant sigh. Wearily, I pick up the two beers from where they’ve made little puddles on the counter and make my way to the verandah. Tamara has set the platter between our two lounge chairs. And she’s stretched out, ankles crossed.

‘Have you heard the latest about the length of one’s index?’ she asks.

‘Don’t think so.’

‘Apparently males, right? They have, well, most have, an index finger that’s shorter than, uh ... their ring finger.’

‘Wouldn’t have a clue.’ I flop on the second deckchair.

‘No, hold on. The thing’s that like, according to something I read in a dyke mag, there might be a correlation between the length of one’s index finger and one’s sexuality.’

Not another sexuality index? Groan. I bring one bottle to my lips.

‘No,’ Tamara starts again, ‘not between sexuality as such, but sexual orientation.’

‘Groan.’

‘No, look it’s serious. Has to do with exposure to male hormone.’

‘Exposure to male hormone from where. In utero?’ Is this something Drew and Dora need to consider should they ever make it to an IVF programme?

‘Well, yes. And so, some kind of queer study seems to show that we, lesbians, are more likely than heterosexual women to have this shorter index trait.’ She holds out her hand to me. I give her the second bottle of beer. ‘No. I mean, thanks,’ she says, ‘but it’s your hand I want. Let me have a look at that index of yours.’

I release the bottle to her. She uncurls my hand that, though it’s no longer holding the bottle, has kept its shape. Not quite rigor mortis, my heart is definitely ticking. Much too fast. She takes my hand by the fingers and lays it flat, palm against hers. The dry warmth of her hand is pleasant against my own. She tilts both of our hands sandwiched together towards her for a better view of my fingers, flat against hers. And the movement brings me in closer to her shoulder.

‘Hey, woman,’ she says playfully, her mouth very close to my cheek, ‘I’m taller than you and yet, look your fingers are longer than mine by what, half a centimetre?’ She peers at me. I shrug. ‘And ... well, well, well! What have we got here?’ she exclaims, ‘Look at that!’

Sure enough my index finger is a couple of millimetres shorter than my so-called ring finger. And so is hers.

I tell her that this is an interesting little piece of trivia I'll absolutely have to share with my mother. *Maman* was a lot happier with my sexual orientation when the Gay gene got the spotlight on *Sixty Minutes*. And now, well, if she can also blame my idiosyncratic deviation on an overdose of in utero testosterone, she might take it easier on herself. She might stop blaming herself for whatever she thinks she must have done wrong during my puberty, but I doubt it. Might there be an ounce of possibility in what *Maman* says, though? Could it just be possible that I turned out a dyke because *something* had gone wrong during my puberty? Scary thought, really. Nah ... not possible. By then, I already had had a series of crushes on most of my teachers though not on any of my girl friends. None that I remember. Ah ... and none so huge as the one I had on Mrs Baker-mother-of-three, my Maths teacher two years running.

In those days, I hated Maths passionately. And I loved Mrs Baker passionately. Whattagirl! At thirteen years of age, I must've done a lot of things with passion. Anyway, as a post-puberty thing, I ended up with a calculator permanently in my back pocket and an inexhaustible weakness for women good not with numbers, but with words.

Strangely, my mother becomes very agitated when I tell her that I feel I made the choice, freely, to lead a gay lifestyle. I would've thought she would find solace in the notion that it was a choice not a pre-destined thing over which I had no control. Or some need bred out of a dark trauma. But *Maman* abhors the L word. When she does talk about me to some of her acquaintances, on those occasions she refers to me as her gay daughter but no one has ever heard my mother say that she had a lesbian daughter.

I am enjoying Tamara's presence. I suspect she could talk underwater with only little encouragement, but there's a fun subtext in the way she goes about it. The afternoon is

truly drawing to a close. The calendar is clear about that. The official arrival of autumn was over three weeks ago.

Comfortably settled on the deckchair, the wooden platter set in between us, the still cool beer leaning against my thigh, I ask the question I'd been meaning to ask a lot earlier.

'Tamara, how did you get involved with the domestic violence thing? I mean, why that particular area of social work?'

'Ah, well. That's a bit of a personal question, you know.'

I cock my head. 'How's that?' The horrible thought that Tamara herself might have been a victim zips through my mind. 'You don't mean it's happened to you, do you?'

'No, not to me.' She looks ahead in the direction of the poinsettia that still looks like a bundle of beige and green sticks. 'It's my mother who's the survivor, not me.' Tamara's English accent is more detectable in some words than others. And the word 'mother' which my ears pick up as 'moh-thuh' is one of them. 'In fact I've been close, emotionally close, to three victims of violence, of home violence. Two in *my* family. One died because of it. Different kinds of violence, mind you, but one type of abuse or another ...' Tamara's voice drifts into silence. Unfinished thoughts on unfinished business. 'But like in my mother's case, I don't think I'd ever hang around as long as she has. Not after the first signs.'

'Your father?'

'Oh, no. Not my father,' she says quickly, keeping her eyes averted. Fah-thuh, is another such word that Tamara pronounces in such an English manner. Maybe because they were amongst the first ones she learnt as a baby. The many years spent in Australia, albeit in Melbourne, have undoubtedly diluted what I suspect would've been a most genteel, a most gracious accent, if left totally unadulterated. Like I imagine her mother's to be.

‘They had already separated by then.’ Hammering each word in an odd way, she adds, ‘For an entirely *different* reason.’ I understand that Tamara is not going to say more about her father. Why is it every time there is a mention of her father, it feels as if she were moving gingerly across a patch of ice she would have preferred to avoid altogether?

Quickly she returns the conversation to her mother. ‘Mother is a very gentle person. In fact she was far too gentle at the time.’

‘You want to tell me about it?’

‘I *can* tell you about it, about what happened to *Mother*, about her experience, yes. But *want* is not the right word. It’s not a pleasant story at all.’ She picks a couple of grapes from the platter. I spread a wedge of cheese on a water cracker. ‘It all began when I was about eighteen. Mother was going out with Melissa.’

‘With Melissa?’

‘Remember? I told you my mother was a dyke too. Forgot, didn’t you?’

I nod. I had forgotten that detail about Tamara’s mother, though of all the gay friends and gay acquaintances I’ve had over the years, I can’t think of a single one who actually had a gay mother.

‘Is that because you don’t think about me?’ she asks, sounding uncharacteristically like a little girl in need of a big hug. ‘I mean, because you don’t think of me, you’ve forgotten that.’

I shake my head. ‘No, Tamara, it’s not because I don’t think of you.’

I thought she’d go on asking, And do you? Do you think about me, sometimes? If she had, I would’ve said, Yes, I do. But she didn’t ask. Her gaze is once again fixed towards the tree line that borders the garden.

‘Mother’s a lovely person. When I was born, my parents lived on a schooner. Two tall masts and miles of sailcloth and

the magical, hand-carved, figurehead of a mermaid. Later, I used to inch on my bum all the way to her wild, wind-swept wooden hair and spent hours there, just keeping a lookout. We lived on it. But we were anchored most of the time, till I was seven. Home for Black Night was in Cornwall but the weather there was all wrong for us so we hardly ever spent any time there. Anyway, because of ... Jamie, my mother thought I needed to ... to move on. To stabilise and socialise. Stabilise and socialise, it's really how she explained it to me at the time.

'You see, I had been very happy on that huge boat. But the time had come for me to think about ... *other* things. Like I needed to play with other children, move on from basic childhood interaction. Jamie had been my only playmate, that's until—' Tamara skids to a halt. Ice cracks under her feet. Looking past the side of my face, eyebrows uncharacteristically furrowed, she says softly, 'You don't want to ask about Jamie, *please*. Not now.'

I *had been* about to ask about Jamie. Boy? Girl? How old? Now I want to ask, Why *not* ask about Jamie? but I don't.

'So, Mother, she thought it was time for me to strike roots elsewhere. A different type of fresh air.' Tamara continues as if her aside had already dissipated in the air between us. 'She was afraid I'd wake up one morning feeling already boat-bound, you know, like pot-bound?'

I nod that I understand her mother's concerns but I'm trying to imagine a seven year old Tamara, her little body brown as a berry, no doubt, playing naked amongst coils of rope, on a sun beaten, great wooden deck. Black hair shiny in the breeze. Green eyes made greener by the caramel glow of her skin. Her mother in the pilothouse, her father at the sails. Who else helped out with the rigging on such a big boat? I want to ask, but not just now. That can wait.

‘So anyway, later, I mean, like years later, Mother and I came here from London. Father stayed behind. Somewhere in the years in between mother had decided that she also needed to, like, not stay bound or bogged down on Black Night nor stay with my father. She was already in her mid-thirties. She never got to be a baby dyke, my mother.’ A tinge of regret has crept into Tamara’s voice. Maybe she would’ve liked to imagine her mother, very young and beautiful, already a dyke magnet. But if that had been the case, Tamara might never have been born.

‘Unlike you,’ I say to tease her.

‘Not like when I was seventeen or twenty, no. But I’m twenty-eight now.’

‘Oh, yes,’ I say, humouring her - definitely too old to be called baby anything stance. No need to remind her that to my forty-six years of age, the tight skin of her face, of her cheeks, of her neck, make her very young indeed, no matter how old and wise she might feel.

‘Anyway, some ten years ago, when we lived in Melbourne, she fell in love with this Melissa. Melissa worked *for The Melbourne Age*. She was a reporter.’

‘What type of news did she cover? I mean could she pick and choose or—’

‘Well, I’m not sure. I wasn’t very interested in Melissa myself like, you know, I didn’t spend much time talking to her. But I think she covered mostly the political stuff. Anyway, in those days, Mother and I still lived together. I had just started uni and Melissa lived on her own. Now, what happened is that slowly, like they had been together for close to two years when the crisis happened but, over that period of time, Melissa had become resentful of something or other, or so I thought. Later, from what Mother said, Melissa had become *totally* unhinged. Something about the pressures at *The Age*, something about not getting the right space for her articles, fewer bylines, too much cut and slash editing from

higher up, internal politics ... whatever.’ Lips tight, Tamara pauses. I spread a nugget of Philly cheese on a cracker and hand it to her. She takes it with a smile but the smile doesn’t linger.

‘Now, as I said, I didn’t see that much of the woman. Mother would go to her place for privacy, or they’d go away on weekends, and I had my own life, I mean, my own friends, and I was quite independent really. So, anyway, the way Mum explained it later, Melissa had been questioning her sexuality for a while. Like in her forties right, she decides that she’s not sure whether she’s gay or not. And while she was figuring all that out, Mother stood by putting up with Melissa’s increasing mood swings.’

‘Why did she?’

‘Ah. My lovely mother always does what she can to, like, postpone the end. She doesn’t like to face ... failure. And she’s gentle and she’s patient. She wanted this thing with Melissa to be great again. Like it had been for most of the two years they’d been together. Like, Melissa had been attentive and loving and ... she had made Mother happy, though I’m not sure what that means.’

I hadn’t previously noticed the unusually high number of ‘like’ utterances Tamara had packed in any one of her explanations. She sounds like, so cool, as my students would say. This trendy young people’s speech characteristic is quite incongruous against the backdrop of that ever so English BBC accent of hers. Tamara, a young woman of contrasts. Perhaps.

‘So, the fact that Melissa was struggling with her own sexuality—’

‘Yeah, Mother understood that. *That*, she could deal with intelligently, one way or another. Anyway, she had become very attached to Melissa. So, in the mean time, part of the figuring out that Melissa did was to, like, screw some young bloke from work. Some kid straight out of ... of, like,

reporter school. Anyway,' Tamara continues, looking at me with a small smile, 'I'm not going to give you the blow by blow, pun not intended. I'll skip the small moments like when Melissa ripped the phone out of the wall, or when she slammed the front door so violently that the stained glass panel broke and so on—'

'Did you know about that violence, then?'

'You kidding? If I had ... No, you see Mother pretended all these ... things had been accidents. Things that she had done herself, like she told me that somehow the vacuum cleaner cord had gotten tangled with that of the phone and somehow it got ripped off the wall. Or a very strong gust of wind had slammed the front door shut and so on, shattering the lead-light panel. I mean, now, of course, you know, with hindsight, *of course*, I should've paid a lot more attention to what she was *not* saying but ... I just wasn't there for her that way. Not at that time.

'Anyway, one day, Mum came home earlier than planned. And she noticed her garage door was closed. She always left it open when the car wasn't in. So that day, she comes home. She sees the garage door closed and she assumes Melissa's squatted the garage for her own car. What a cheek, Mother thinks. She gets out of her car. Tries to open the garage door. Can't because it's locked. She goes off to the side to look through little windows and yep, Melissa's car's in there. Better yet, Melissa's car is hooked up to a hose. The hose is taped to the exhaust pipe. But from where she is Mother also sees that there's no one inside the car.

'You imagine her panic as she runs into the house calling out for Melissa. She finds her, a blubbering mess cowering inside the shower recess. The shower's not even on. And Mother feels totally responsible for Melissa's pain.'

'Did they stay together after that?'

'Oh, yes, they did. After that weird happening, it was back to honeymoon closeness. Once again, Melissa was

totally attentive. Then, one night, Mother's asleep, like it's 3 a.m. A loud bang on the front door. It's Melissa. She wants to talk. She's drunk but like, down, too, so Mother lets her in. See, somehow my very grounded, hippie and gentle mother figures that Melissa's mess has got to be a result of something *she's* done wrong. So she has to make it up to Melissa. I mean, if I'd been hanging around the house a bit more, I would've seen more of that, I'd have talked to Mother. But, I often came home like, just for a change of clothes. She was happy just knowing that I was all right but I never asked her much about herself. I mean she looked OK." Tamara shrugs. 'Tired, sometimes. She'd say she wasn't sleeping well but the house was the same, she looked the same, so I'd hug her, tell her I loved her and to take care and off I'd go back to my own thing.'

Tamara curls up on the deckchair bringing her knees up to her chin. She glances at me but returns her attention to the empty space ahead, to the trees directly in her line of vision.

'Oh, before I tell you about that night, you know, like when she heard the banging on the front door and all, thing is one day Mother had a black eye. Well, not *black* as such, but you know how bruises get all purple and yellow? And five stitches across her eyebrow. She said she had tripped on the footpath like, on her way to the corner shop. Her head had hit the pavement or something like that. End of story.'

'But that's not what had happened.'

'No, that's not at all what had happened.' Tamara inhales deeply. 'Much later Mother said that, while she had planned on spending the night at Melissa's, she had gotten there later than she had intended. When she did get there and went to Melissa's bedroom, the lights were off. She thought that Melissa was already asleep, so Mother didn't turn on the light. Next thing she knows, crack! A zillion stars! She faints. When she wakes up, Melissa is fussing over her with a tea towel splattered with blood.'

‘What had happened?’ I am feeling a little queasy at the thought of Tamara’s mother, the gentle woman I imagine, with her daughter’s high cheek bones and green eyes, at the hand of this lunatic.

‘Melissa had hit her with one of those thick like, heavy crystal ashtrays. Something about that size.’ Tamara gestures with her hands some seven inches apart.

‘But why?’

‘Well, that’s it, isn’t it?’ she snaps, glaring through me, not at me. ‘These people don’t give reasons. They don’t *have any* to give.’ She pauses, looks at me and frowns. ‘They just let their anger build up. Like inside a ... a pressure cooker. It just builds up. And it erupts. They choose not to see it that way, but reality is that they *choose* to express their frustration, their resentment in that particular way. Giving in to violence, like giving in to anything, is a choice. It’s an *active* decision, for fuck’s sake.’

‘So, what did your mother do?’

‘Well, that’s the thing that really bugs me when I think back on those days. She did nothing.’

‘I guess, if she was into feeling responsible—’ I reach across and tap Tamara lightly on her forearm. She turns to face me. Eyes full of hurt. ‘Be back in a tick. I’ll get us some water.’

She nods. I get up and walk around the back of the chair she’s on. Instinctively, my hand settles on the top of her head. Her hand lifts up and covers mine, holding it there, on top of her head, a moment longer. My heart’s pounding again. I feel tenderness. I feel something that’s no longer purely sexual. Tamara removes her hand. I remove mine from the top of her head. She doesn’t move. Her gaze is still trained on the trees. On the trees or on the hill beyond.

Time to turn on some lights inside the house. I find it depresses me to walk into a dark house. Maybe it’s because

of the feeling I get that the house is sad or abandoned, hollow when it remains dark after sundown.

Tamara nurses the glass of water on her lap. ‘Anyway, Mother, she accepted all these things. I mean, to this day, though intellectually I understand the process, I just can’t accept that Mother, *my mother*, let herself be at risk because she was feeling, for some weird reason, responsible for this other woman’s twisted confusion about what’s what.’

‘And I suppose when Melissa was over her fit, she’d apologise. She’d find ways to make it up to your—’

‘Well, yes. See, that’s part of the pattern with these people,’ Tamara explains, ‘I found out later about the dynamics of what we call The Cycle, you know, the cycle that’s in motion. Love, hope and fear.’

‘Love as in sexual love?’

‘Yes, and ... no. It’s more like love for the partner. Like choosing to focus on his or her good points, like remembering what had made you fall in love with them in the first place. Then there’s the hope that things will change—’

‘As in, It hasn’t always been like that so, there’s got to be a way to salvage something?’

‘Something like that. Every time, almost without exception, the survivors I come across, they all feel directly responsible for their aggressor’s violence. Like, if *they* were a better partner or a better lover, or a better wife, gentler, more accommodating, sexier even, then there wouldn’t be a problem.’

‘And fear, you said, that other part of the cycle?’

‘Ah, well, in Melissa’s case, for Mum, it was the fear she would eventually kill herself. That she would suicide.’

‘Woh! Your poor mother.’

‘Oh, yes, my poor mother all right. I’m still angry with myself, you know. I really should’ve been there for her.’

‘You were doing what every eighteen-year old needs to do, find your own life.’

‘Yes, but not every eighteen year old has a mother who risks *not* waking up because her fucked up, manic lover might have the urge to kill her *before* killing herself.’

Heavy. Heavy because, yes, totally possible. What can I reply to that? Nothing. I should just sip my beer. I try to imagine what being caught up in such a vicious cycle could possibly feel like. I can’t.

‘Anyway, back to that night of the banging on the front door.’ The beer bottle once again cradled in between her thighs Tamara resumes her story, eyes once more focused on the tree line. ‘So, Mum wraps herself in a robe and goes down to open the front door. Melissa lunges at her and king hits her, you know, like smack across the face.

‘Now, Melissa is smaller than Mother who’s a bit taller than me. And she’s a strong woman, my mother. Lithe kind of strong, slim and fit, what with years on the boat and all, even now. And yet, she didn’t fight back. So Melissa tears into her. All Mum did was try to throw Melissa off. She should’ve decked the bitch.’ Tamara reaches for the bottle of beer and takes a big swig.

‘So, how did that end?’

‘Oh, well, this particular episode took a while before ending. Melissa comes out of her ... rage. She fusses over Mum. She cries. She apologises. And so they talk a little but that part’s a bit blurry for Mother—’

‘What did she say, I mean, what could she possibly have said to your poor mum. Or your mum to her?’

‘Ah, well, you see Melissa was the silent type. She drank a lot more than she talked. Anyway, that night, the weird thing is that she wanted to make love with my mother right there. She was like, crying and begging Mother to make love to her.’

Even I am finding this story too ... sick not to be affected. I can imagine, I think I can, the panic, the confusion, the

desperate feelings that would've prevailed, thick and sticky, inside that kitchen that night.

'Mother said that Melissa was carrying on as if making love, right there, right at that moment, was going to solve everything. Cancel everything. Wind the clock back.'

'Well, it would've been a lot simpler if Melissa had booked herself a few sessions with a shrink. I mean, really.'

'Ah, spoken like a sane person,' Tamara agrees, lifting the bottle to her lips.

'Anyway, there's some kind of truce. Mother makes coffee. Melissa's back to the Jekyll side of herself, right? So, Mum goes for a hot shower to clean off her scratches and—'

'I'm sure she'd have needed some time to herself too, jeez—'

'That too. But would you believe, like the Freddy dude that just won't die, bloody Melissa crashes her fist through the glass pane—'

'The shower door?'

'Yeah, the shower door.'

'Mother thinks that Melissa had hit the bottle, you know, downstairs after her coffee. Like to top up what she had already drunk before coming over. So she got herself worked up again. And she comes crashing fist first through the shower door. And in and around, she rubs her wrist *against* the bits of glass that are still th—'

'But it's shattered, I mean, the pane.'

'Shattered all right. It was one of the old, colonial glass screens. Real glass with sandblasted designs on it? And Melissa's blood dripping all over it. So, you can imagine my mother. Naked and wet and Melissa topples headfirst into the shower recess. One wrist sliced open, spurting more blood all over the place. And still she abuses Mother with words like ... with words that had nothing to do with my mother, like calling her a ... uh ... a fucking slut and a fucking mole and the whole thing must've been so—'

‘Oh, jeez, Tam,’ I can’t help but cry out, totally horrified by the picture I’ve formed around Tamara’s words. ‘But your mum hadn’t done a thing!’

‘No, she hadn’t. But, you know, looking back, it sounds to me as if Melissa had made like a transfer and like she had made Mum responsible for her ... for that ... confusion—No, not a friggin’ *confusion*. For the madness she had let build up inside her own friggin’ head.’

‘What about her, then, I mean, did she pass out or—’

‘Not even. Apparently she went white, like immediately. Then, looking blankly at the blood pumping out of her wrist, she said something like, “There! I’ve finally done it.” It was still squirting everywhere. So Mum grabbed a towel. By then, Melissa had fallen to her knees but she jerked the towel away and blood gushed again, you know, over the tiles and Mum. Blood everywhere. But she could still walk. I mean, for fuck’s sake, right?’

‘Yes ... as you say. Oh, Tam. That’s one ugly scene. Shee-it.’

‘There’s more.’

I look at Tamara expecting her to verbalise her next thought but instead, lips tight, she runs an index finger over the dark green stripe that runs on the cushion, almost parallel to her jeans. And I watch her as she lets the reel of events inside her mind catch up with her words. ‘Melissa’s just quietly on her knees,’ she begins, ‘so Mum tries again to wrap a smaller hand towel around the wrist and Melissa lets her do it. And she just stays there, white as death, on her knees amongst that slippery, smeared horrible mess on the bathroom tiles and glass bits. And all along Mother’s like thinking Melissa’s going to die.’ Tamara stops almost breathless and blinks. She lets out a big sigh but keeps her eyes on the tree line in front of her though they are only silhouettes against the evening sky.

‘So Mum grabs some clothes. She wants to drive Melissa to the hospital herself. Melissa struggles, groggy but lucid. She stumbles out of the house and gets into her own car. And Mother lets her. She figured that she didn’t want Melissa to struggle again, you know, thinking that it’d make her blood spurt again and ... Well, Melissa drives off with the towel sticking to her wrist.’ Tamara’s jaw muscles are bunched.

‘And Mum?’

‘*Mum?*’ Tamara repeats after me, smiling a faint smile, her first smile since she began that sickening story. ‘She worked it out that Melissa was heading towards the hospital. It wasn’t far, like only a couple of Ks. So she just trailed her and hung around until she saw her walk through the emergency doors. Next day, very early, before I was off to uni, Mother phoned me. She told me, vaguely, what had happened. She told me not to come by the house. That the removalists would be over that same day. She was packing herself off to her sister’s, in New South Wales. She asked if she could spend a couple of days with me, like at Josie’s, you know, my lover. Of course she could. She did. We pampered the hell out of her. Like I didn’t go to lectures. Stayed home with her. Josie tried to impress her with her Japanese cooking and so on. It was great being able to do at least that *little* bit for her. She stayed with us for a week or so and then, she took off to Auntie Kay’s. The rest is history.’ Tamara lets go of the tree line and leans back against the deckchair.

‘So, where’s your mum now?’

‘Somewhere behind Lismore. Safe and sound in a magic A frame chalet tucked in the hills in the middle of nowhere.’

‘Is she with a—’

‘Still a lesbian? Body and soul,’ Tamara chuckles. ‘I’m sure she’s a gorgeous one too, a gorgeous dyke. I mean, we still don’t talk much about sexuality. She’s still my mother after all. And sex is sex. But Lita seems to think so, I mean, that Mother’s gorgeous. They’ve been together for quite some

years now. Six, maybe. They grow their own vegetables, sell them at the markets. They make music. They make love. And, hey, they even sail.'

'They sail?' It seems such an incongruous combination to live in the hills, grow your own vegetables and yet have a sailboat. I associate sailing with middle-class, urban indulgence.

'They sure do. It's like they bought an old local hybrid of a sailboat. The darn thing still floats. It's a far cry from Black Night but then again Mother's life is also, like a far cry from what it was in those days, too.'

'Wow, Tam, I'm happy.' I exclaim, touching her arm. 'No, happy's wrong. I meant I'm so relieved to know your mother's fine after all that.' I need to expel air through rounded lips. I look at the side her face. 'I've never come across, *never even heard* of anything remotely—'

She breaks in. '*Tam*, is it?'

I look at her blankly. Then I realise I've called her Tam for the first time since she had asked me to, the first night we had met. "Tam for my friends," she had said to me. I blush. Because of my automatic aversion for nicknames, I only use them when they pop up spontaneously to imply a closeness, an endearment of sorts. I remember how Alex had mentioned in passing that my distancing, this type of formality around a name, had been bugging Tamara. She shakes her head. Her dark hair follows the movement. Her eyes touch mine. I feel that familiar heat rise over my cheeks. I turn sideways to fiddle with the side of the deckchair frame.

'But, you know, to this day,' Tamara starts again, much to my relief, 'you know when we talk about it, like because of my work and so on, Mother still says that she's forgiven Melissa. She's forgiven her for the physical pain, the emotional abuse, and the emotional blackmail. She's forgiven her for the whole friggin' nightmare. She still maintains that it was all beyond Melissa's control. Really!' Tamara has not

forgiven Melissa. Invisible rings of anger ripples all around her.

‘I guess it’s probably true at the moment of the fits, but surely during the days that follow the first incident, the second incident even, when you look at the bruises you’ve put on *that* face, on the face of the one who trusted you, surely you’d want to seek help.’

‘You’d think so. But the thing is that, every day, I come across victims who say the same thing my mother says. I mean, yes, on the spot they’re, like, angry and frightened. But ironically enough, it’s only when they’re angry and frightened that these survivors make the most sense. It’s only then, really, that they’re lucid about the real danger, lucid about their abusive partner. But then, they settle down again. It’s like milk getting too hot in a pan and spilling over. Soon as the heat’s off ... they don’t even want to press charges. They don’t want to humiliate *the other* by trying to obtain a Protection Order against them. They don’t want to *upset* them, right? They just feel that anything they do will make things worse and that, too, will be their fault. They’d much rather have their partner back to how he or she was before the violence, than ditch them. And once again they get stuck into the hope part of the cycle. I guess women mostly tend to be like that. They find it difficult to walk away from someone in distress. Someone they *perceive* is in distress.’

‘Better the devil you know, too. Perhaps.’

‘Something like that or deeper but I don’t get it. I mean, I do in a way. But then I don’t, not really.’

The night sky is settling beyond the tree line. Dusk has come and gone while Tamara was telling her tale. One hand on Tamara’s forearm, I suggest, ‘Hey, what about I shout you dinner?’ There are times when Australian colloquialisms creep up in my speech, and I’m always surprised when that happens. It’s just that I seldom use them. To shout, to invite. To treat someone to something. Even as a child I had

thought that it sounded strange saying to someone I wanted to be nice to, that I'd *shout* a coke *at them*. Or an ice cream. Before I learnt to use that idiom correctly, shouting, I kept on thinking, isn't a nice thing to do to a friend and how on earth do you *shout* anyone a drink or a treat? Later on, I figured out the expression probably referred to the *order* that had to be shouted across a noisy and crowded room, in pubs, in the old days. Who'd know?

Tamara's looking at me quizzically.

'There's really not much in the fridge. Going out will do us good, you know. It'll help break the spell.' That's all true but besides, I'm truly frazzled by the account of her mother's ordeal. 'What do you say, hey?' I ask, tugging at her sleeve from my position on the deckchair.

She swings her legs to the right and sits facing me. She runs a hand backwards through her hair and she looks at me, a little frown between her eyebrows. I smile unable to think of what I need to say next. Her boots are flat on the decking. Her knees touch the edge of my mattress. Her hands are now flat on her lap. Her back is straight as if she's about to stand up.

She wants to go. After all she's been here quite a long time. Three or four hours already. Maybe the memories awakened have unsettled her. She needs to be alone. I understand that need, and yet a sinking feeling's already begun to invade my belly. I'd like her to stay longer. I'd like her to hang around here till later into the night.

She pushes herself off the chair. I breathe in to hide my disappointment. She steps over to the right-hand side of my deck chair and holds out her hand to help pull me up. I give her my hand. She tugs a little and we are face to face. Body against body. And in the pit of my belly, the sharp pang of arousal cancels any sinking feeling that had been waiting to settle in for the night.

Gone the sinking feeling. Gone for now. Eyes open, I reach for her face. I reach for her lips. I reach for her. And she's there. Her body strong and firm. Full length against mine. I feel her guide me slowly half a step back against the wall. The hard flatness of the wall is firmly against my back.

Hungrily now Tamara presses herself against me. Against me, wedged between the hard surface of the wall and the firmness of her young body. Like she had me pressed against a tree, that century old tree, that afternoon, the afternoon she kissed me in the Botanic Gardens. I want her. I desire her. I do, very much so. What the hell, I'm not accountable to anyone but myself. I *can* have sex. Sex, for one night, if that's what I really want. And yes, having sex with Tamara's exactly what I want. Most of all. Right now.

'Emilie? Where's your bedroom?' She whispers hoarsely against my cheek. 'Your bedroom, Em. Take me there.'

I'm breathless. I hear her. I want to answer her. But my senses are on overload.

'Emi, please,' she says again, her mouth sliding over mine, igniting sparks as it goes.

Her tongue unleashes swirls and rips of desire. I want to answer her. I want to tell her, Yes, let's make love. But more than that I want to keep her in my mouth. I want to keep her against me, until that initial hunger, that gluttony, that greed for her, for her mouth, for her hips pressed against mine, I want to keep her against me until that greed subsides. Until it subsides into smouldering embers to be fanned back to fire in the privacy of my bedroom.

'So Emilie,' she said, letting her hand and thumb move sensually over my breasts, 'What turns you on the most, like what part of the body, you know, like when you look at a woman? Like besides the usual, you know, hands, eyes, smile and all that that everyone always says are their main turn-ons.'

‘Something original?’ I was trying to breathe into the nexus of desire that had travelled to my bedroom, inside me, stoked by the slow moves of her thumb against my nipple. And as I watched Tamara naked in the soft glow of the candles, her pale complexion flushed in the elongated glow of the candle, my latest reason for not breathing freely was my body taut with desire.

I forced a deep breath inside my lungs. ‘Within loose parameters,’ I started again, ‘you know ... uh ... a fair dose of charisma. A little vulnerable something or other’s nice too.’

I reached for her hand and guided it to my solar plexus. With her other hand she brushed her hair back out of her eyes, before gently rubbing down and stroking the area below my sternum. The wavering light of the candle caught her hair closest to the glow, and painted it translucent blue. Like the translucent spray off a black wave. A night wave under the moon light. Shimmery threads against the mass of her black tendrils.

‘I’m not fixated on any colour hair, breast size or whatever,’ I paused, aware I wanted more, a lot more than the warm palm of her hand over my ribs and stomach. ‘Tamara ... I need you ... closer, a lot closer.’

She looked absolutely gorgeous, with her full breasts warm and safe in the candlelight. ‘Come here,’ I urged. She snuggled closer. The width of her naked shoulders, the fine and delicate skin stretched over her collarbone, full breasts, all blend together to lend Tamara a statuesque vulnerability that’s not as apparent when clothed.

She leaned towards me, applying a little more pressure on my chest as she rubbed her hands flat against my skin. ‘Em, talk to me while I look at you. It’s so different that way.’

‘All right then, if ... if you’re asking.’ I breathed in before exhaling slowly. ‘If I ever came across one of ... these things

... in the flesh, so to speak, yes, that could be ... a different kind of turn on, but hey, not in isolation. Not on its own. Not without other things to go with it. Not without charisma and that vulnerable something or other.'

'And what might that one thing be?'

'You won't laugh?'

She shook her head. Her dark hair swayed against her cheekbone, against her jawbone. Fly away hair in shades of moonlit gossamer.

'A neck *à la* Audrey Hepburn. There, I've said it.' I felt a little silly having divulged that totally insignificant piece of information. 'Do you know what I mean you, young person, who probably doesn't know who Audrey is? Was.'

'Now, now,' she admonished playfully. Her hand slid over my belly to rub my hip. As she did, I wished, no ... I regretted not having kept to my resolve to begin an exercise programme. Like five years ago. 'That could pass as an attempt to belittle me, you know. Young, *younger*, doesn't necessarily mean ignorant of classics.'

On and off for the past years, I've been thinking about beginning a serious weight lifting-cycling combo. Forty-five minutes minimum of one, twenty minutes of the other, three times a week. That's been the theory. I know a lot about theories. Theories are cool. They're real easy to manage. They can be made to fit and sit in a couple of tight little sentences. Practice, as in doing, is a messy thing that spreads and goes on and on. That's if I ever get started on one. So far my workout practice has been a one week on and three weeks off lack of commitment. On, for three weeks after the initial full-on, sweaty, pulse-raising experience and that particular stiffness that makes me feel oh, so virtuous. Off, soon after, because of my pretend claims that I don't actually have enough time to really get down and pump away. Pre-menstrual tiredness is another convenient unpleasantness to blame for the next onset of sluggishness.

And in the absence of that modicum of willpower, I bought myself a new wardrobe, one figurative *dress* size larger, to tide me over until I manage to con myself into making my resolve stick. A quick fix, but a totally useless one, when one is lying as I was, completely naked, eyeball to eyeball with Tamara's svelte and firm, youthful nakedness.

'So a neck à la Gwenth Paltrow, then?' she asked. 'She's one woman my age can get hot about.' Her hair tickled my breast as she bent her head closer to my face.

I nodded. 'But in the flesh, I've yet to come across a woman who has that sort of ... of gracile head support. One who's not a Giraffe woman from Africa. Mind you, I've never come across one of those either. Not in the flesh.'

Tamara smiled. She was sitting in something close to the lotus position, one hand loose over her ankles, feet sole to sole and relaxed. I was very much aware of her sex. Desire flowed through my loins and did not ebb much at all.

A wonderful body made of contrasts. As the wicks flickered on the nightstands, as their glow danced sensuously across her face, her collarbone, over the immature creases of her stomach, over the length of her thighs, and the dark patch of springy hair, I knew that if I could draw I would've drawn her. Not on the spot, no, but later. I would've drawn her during a re-enactment of sorts. She would have let me draw her if I had told her of the dance of light across the valleys and planes of her strong and healthy body. If I had known how to, I would have told her about illusions, as well. About illusions of light and illusions of my own making as I delighted in the aesthetics of her naked body. I would have drawn her as she was. At ease inside her body. Her body at ease with itself and with her. Just as she was, watching me.

'Tam,' I whispered, hitching myself higher up on the pillow.

'No, not yet, Emilie,' she said.

Knowing her own craving, she sensed mine. Her eyes touched mine and held them. She looked inside my eyes. Beyond them. Darkened irises reflecting my desire of her. From within them, from a different tightness in her brow, I knew she, too, knew that very special ache.

‘Tam?’ I asked, my hand covering hers still on my belly, ‘What do you really mean when you say you want to have sex?’

‘As opposed to ... what? Making love?’

I nodded.

‘Ah, just as well you’re asking,’ she answered cryptically before turning her face to the wavering glow on the nightstand. ‘Having sex is like, for hot occasions, Em. For me it means accepting that ... burning desire and dealing with it.’

‘Isn’t all desire always burning and mad? Dealing with it, isn’t it what happens during *any* lovemaking?’

‘Not always. Well, not always for me.’ She ran her hand through her hair, back-coming it away from her forehead. ‘Sometimes, you see, I know that I feel a mellow sort of desire. Something that’s almost not there but it is.’ She was talking to the flickering candle. ‘Other times it’s just too strong. It’s about impulses, it’s raw, it’s red hot.’ She returned her gaze back to me. Sliding her hand from under mine she guided it to her lower belly. ‘When I feel that kind of desire ... in there, *that* strong, I know I want to have sex.’

I looked at her still somewhat perplexed by her explanation. ‘You want to have sex more than you want to make love?’

She nodded.

‘Isn’t it all about semantics? All comes down to the same thing, doesn’t it?’ I slid my hand away from her stomach and across to her thigh. ‘Isn’t it more about sex without a tomorrow?’ I persisted.

Tamara shook her head. Dark tendrils once more fell forward.

‘I know that it’s what having sex kind of implies. But ... look, it’s not what *I* mean. Like, when we get around to it, you and me, I’d like us to ... have sex ... I mean in a *not* controlled way,’ she adds. ‘*Having sex*, for me, means letting all my senses take over. No censorship.’ She snuggled closer against me, the soles of her feet still close together. ‘At other times, you see, Em, at more mellow times it’s like I make love with my head. That’s when I decide what I *should* do next. I think about my lover, about ways to please her. I listen to her heartbeat. It’s like my needs are secondary.’

She stopped talking and looked at me round-eyed. ‘Oh Em, I’m sorry. It’s so uncool, the way I’ve just explained. Look,’ she said leaning closer in, ‘it’s not like I mean I don’t want to think about *you* or how I would make you feel. I mean, that’s not it. Not so at all.’ She paused, visibly searching for a clearer pathway into her thoughts. She shook her head. Her shoulders dropped. ‘Don’t know how to explain what I really mean. It’s not like I’ve ever had to explain any of it before, you know. It’s more like no one’s really asked.’

Her naturally husky voice is soft. Her private school accent has become incongruous in a different way now that she is stark naked, now that she is talking sex. There’s something about that soft and husky voice of hers that reminds me of BBC announcers who give us the news in tweed voices. Incongruous and definitely sexy.

‘Tell me more.’

‘When I have sex, as opposed to when I make love, I don’t feel I’m in charge of the chain of events. It’s like being in a lightning storm. I don’t want to tame it. I want to ride it. I want to be selfish.’ She scooted even closer to me, the side of her knee resting against my hip. Her sex, dark pink in the soft glow of the candle, was so close to my hand, I would’ve had only to move a finger to caress it. The iris. Petals of the iris, indeed. ‘I don’t want to think then. I just want to move into oblivion.’

‘Way back when,’ I said, making myself breathe deep again, ‘you said you wanted to have sex with me. You only used the words make love, it seemed, to make me happy.’

‘True, and so?’

‘Well, why?’

‘Why I knew with you I wanted hot sex?’

I remained silent. I wanted her to talk. I wanted to close my eyes and listen to the sensual overtones in her voice. I wanted to feel them behind my eyes, behind a dark screen. And yet, I also wanted to feast my eyes on her and feel the nexus of desire spread further through my limbs. Further, all the way down to my ankles. I wanted to imagine, behind closed eyes, the same desire, the same desire curled up in her lower belly. I wanted to imagine it stretching through her legs like a beam of light searches the dark glistening skin of the sea.

‘I don’t know why I felt that way about you already back then. At the Botanic Gardens, even before I touched you, before I kissed you, I knew that if you ever came around to the idea, it’d be like an impulsive surrender type of sex that I’d want to have with you. Not simply the slow and gentle, more thoughtful type of sex that you might be more used to.’

How does she know what I’m used to? Why not delirium? Why not total abandon? Don’t I look like one who makes love with all five senses and shouts in ecstasy while my fingertips leave pale spasm-trails down the length of my lover’s back? What, me not a likely image of a Valkyrie of love? Shit, girl, I grin to myself, better get some work done on that image of mine.

‘I didn’t understand that, then,’ I said seriously, ‘I mean, the difference you make between making love and having sex.’

‘I know you didn’t.’

C. C. Saint-Clair

‘I assumed you were talking about: have sex and run. A girl’s version of the wham bam, thank you, ma’am.’

‘I know you did.’

‘Why didn’t you explain?’

I wanted to touch her clitoris.

‘The place wasn’t right. The moment wasn’t right. I don’t think you wanted me to talk sex to you. Not then.’

‘And now?’

‘Now, it’s different. I think you’ve come around.’ She reached for my hand and placed it on the inside of her thigh. Close, very close to where my hand wanted to be. So close, I could feel its warmth. My fingers brushed against her short curls. She closed her eyes suddenly and inhaled. Her breasts rose, as she straightened her back. Her smooth ribs expanded and stilled until she let her breath slowly out through half-open lips. She opened her eyes and met mine.

‘Woh,’ she grinned.

Just that. Just woh.

What we were doing was gentle. It was lovely and, according to *my* understanding of things, it was loving. Except for the talking; that I wasn’t used to. Besides the talking, it was a slow and gentle intro to foreplay that looked to be leading into the kind of sex I was kind of used to. It *was* controlled. In control, but only up to a certain point. A type of ready to burst control. Ready to burst like sea polyps on the one spawning night of the year. So I asked, ‘But what we’re doing, here now, all this talking, it doesn’t fit your definition of red-hot, ship in the lightning storm type of sex.’

‘No, but again we’re not having sex yet.’

She leaned close to my face. I thought she was going to kiss me. My sex tightened anticipating the searing heat that had retreated somewhere close by, the *ache* that had retired close by, no longer the impolite child who demands attention while the adults are talking. It was not sulking. It was simply waiting.

‘But then again,’ she grinned, ‘we’re not making love either.’ Her voice no longer had the easy timbre that was hers. She closed her eyes again. Tamara was present, totally present. She was not titillating me out of a sense of her own power. ‘Talk to me. Just look at me,’ she said. Softly, she added, ‘Breathe, you’re not breathing enough.’ I chuckled.

Tamara’s got to be the only person who’s ever noticed that my breath is so shallow at times only a mirror in front of my mouth would prove its existence. Many reasons cause me to shallow-breathe though I’m not asthmatic. Her hand moved on my stomach as it filled with air.

‘Breathe again,’ she said, obviously in control enough for both of us. And I breathed again. I usually do as I’m told provided I’m told nicely. And as I did, the new intake of breath scattered the particles of desire nestled around my clit.

I felt her physicality so strongly she didn’t need to do anything else but be there. Close. Her skin touching mine. The smooth firmness of her thigh against my hip.

The short curls that covered her pubic bone glistened in the candlelight. Why shouldn’t they, when all the rest of her did, one way or another?

I remember the silent tantalising, the beckoning pull of her sex. I resisted that beckoning because I knew the moment would come when she’d give in to whatever had attracted, was still attracting her to me. I needed for that moment to come soon but I also understood the ache of waiting. It seemed to fit this particular situation. This unique moment in time, its quality that would probably never repeat itself. Not that way. Never exactly like that. Not even in memory.

Memory has a way of appropriating the moment entrusted. Surreptitiously, undetected it tampers with it. And it gives us back a glossier, often a happier version of the moment it had been asked to preserve intact. As intact as a saint’s relic under glass.

I had led Tamara to my bedroom, and she had firmly pushed me against the wall visible in the chiaroscuro of the room. I like that habit of hers, that habit of pushing me, ever so gently, against bits of walls to better wedge me between it and her body. Each time, as my back comes in contact with the wall, as her body makes contact with mine, each time that little jolt knocks the breath out of me in the most delicious of ways. Desire ripples and reaches deeper.

As I had led her to the bed, as I lit the candles, as she had undressed, as I had undressed myself prudishly, it had become clear she wasn't going to let me take over. She wasn't going to let me rush things. It became clear, very quickly clear, that she wanted us to hold on to our desire of each other while we got sexually acquainted. Verbally sexually acquainted. Her idea of foreplay, I had thought. Fine, though I'm not much of a talker at the best of times. And so, she had sat facing me, cross-legged and naked. She had sat herself near my hip and all I had wanted to do was get on with the anticipated delirium of making love with her.

But, OK, being made to relax and talk and watch while all of me only wanted to embrace her, while my mouth was craving hers, was a totally new experience. I was aching for the caress of her tongue and I was almost as desperate to touch, to properly touch, to discover her through the act of making love. I was wondering all along, Can one be making love while the other is having sex?

I've made love with varying speed during the past twenty-odd years. Speed, lack of speed. Softly, languidly. Less gently for different circumstances. Different situations. Love-making adjusts itself to different rhythms spawned out of different moods but this holding back, this quiet, this calm feasting of the eyes while white light ripped through my belly, *that* was something new.

With Roberta, all had been different. All had *had* to be different. She was not free. She had very little time in which

to talk, in which to discover once we were ensconced at my place. Very little time, she had in which to make love. So we made love on the run. In this same bed but on the run.

When Roberta and I made love, it was mellow. It was as delicate as the flutter of a heartbeat. According to Tamara's definition, it'd be safe to say that Roberta and I didn't have sex. We clearly made love. Wonderfully. The way we expressed our love had, in fact, little to do with the mad craving we had for an intimate knowledge of each other's body. Nothing to do with the ache, the uncontrollable ache, of desire we'd write each other about. She'd e-mail me her fantasies. I'd leave letters and poems in her pigeonhole. In her pigeonhole at the I-o-FuK, my place of work, that she visited once a week.

The searing hot ache, the manic need that had kept me, and her, awake most nights in our beds separated by kilometres of suburban landscape, transmuted itself, tamed itself, during our private moments of pleasure into a slow and strangely pacifying, focused ecstasy.

Tamara's hand was on my thigh. 'Hey, Emilie. What's the one thing you're not into ... like you don't enjoy when you ... you're made love to?'

'Ah, that's easy,' I answered a little startled. Startled because I had, for two or three seconds, not more, wandered off. How easy it was answering Tamara's questions. Women have often asked me what I *did* like. None, until her, had ever asked me what I didn't enjoy. 'I'm not big on penetration. As in not at all. No matter what with.'

'I know.'

'What d'you mean you know?'

'Never mind, I'm psychic.'

'Oh, no! Don't tell me,' I said sitting upright. 'It's your DZ theory again, isn't it?'

I would've thought that the whiff, the mere perception of a lover's *faux-pas* in alluding to one of her ex's sexual pref-

erences as we were about to make love, even if I had been indulging in a little thought digression myself, that would've normally dried me up as efficiently as a valve turned off. And yet somehow disbelieving, I looked at Tamara's sensual face. I saw her green eyes wide open. I saw as they wondered, as I was, as to the course of my imminent reaction.

And it had started with a little smile. Perhaps a polite little smile. Then a grin. And a chuckle. And a laugh. A strange sound is a belly laugh coming from me who hardly ever laughs. I smile often. I laugh rarely. I never laugh from the belly. Maybe because there usually isn't enough air in my belly to initiate such a laugh.

Tamara pushed me gently back against the pillow. Straddling my hips, as I surrendered to laughter, she ran her hands slowly against my sides. A totally new surrender. The one release I hadn't envisaged.

Her lips against mine, the pressure of her tongue against mine and my desire swelled again as she pressed her hips down to fit closer into mine.

'Emi ... just look up a minute,' I heard her say. She had stopped moving but my heart was beating as erratically as a seaside flag in the wind. She wanted me to open my eyes and look into hers.

I opened my eyes. 'Mm ... '

'Em, we need to talk.'

Groan. 'Tam, I don't want to talk anymore. Please. Come here. Let me—'

'Shhh,' she said to me, as if to a child. 'We will ... Just sit up a minute.'

And all of a sudden, I knew what she wanted to talk about. And I flopped back on the bed, desire momentarily neutralised. 'Oh no! Look, I've never done it like that. I wouldn't know how.'

'I know. Just come back up here. Sit up, please, Emi. I want to hold you while we talk about this. How aroused are you, Em?' she asked searching my face.

'Are you kidding? You want to know how aroused I am? Totally aroused. As in just about bursting.'

'You feeling it in your clit?'

'Yes, I feel it in my clit. Where else would I be feeling it?' I asked impatiently, unnerved at the thought of what she wanted us to do.

'OK. Then it won't make any difference. You won't even notice it.'

'Notice what?' I asked, pretending I didn't yet have the answer.

'The dam, the latex.'

The *damn* latex. I knew it. I just knew it. 'Oh, shit. What, you got one? On you?' I asked rather stupidly.

'No, not on me, no. In my bag.'

'You knew we would end up ... like this? Tonight? Or do you always have one of these things with you?' I always know when I'm not handling things the right way. And this was one such time.

'No, I didn't know we would. I was hoping we might.'

'Oh, jeez. Oh, what the hell. Educate me,' I said resigned, sinking more heavily into the mattress.

'Don't you go anywhere, I'll be right back.' The bed moved as she pushed herself off. I heard her pad down the hallway.

I've always just hoped that neither my soon-to-be-lover nor her most recent ex had been with a man. If only in a fit of pique. Oddly enough, my greatest fear, when it comes to STDs is that the said lover or the ex, closer or further up the line, might've had a sexual encounter with a male, for whatever reason. Though the reason doesn't matter to me, the act does, and the fear of that type of promiscuity has always freaked me out more than the likelihood of contact-

ing a virus through such a stranger's risky behaviour with a needle.

Be that as it may, Roberta and I should have protected ourselves *for* each other and *from* each other's past. She had Julia to protect me from for the reasons that she knew. And she should have protected herself from me, simply because she didn't know anything about me beyond what I had cared to share with her. And I had Solange from whom to protect the two of us, though I hadn't known that at the time.

Solange, it turned out, had strayed with Gretta *before*, not only *after* our sailing trip around the Whitsundays. But again, by the time I connected sexually with Roberta, Solange and I had already made love for the last time some four months prior, on the deck of Lazy Moon. Anyway, why hasn't anyone renamed the damn thing yet? It's not as if only dentists use it. And a *dam*, really! As if anticipating a flooding of –

‘Emi ... look what I've got.’

Tamara was back by the bed. She was showing me two white sachets with blue writing. The size and shape of the packs reminded me of the ones that contain surgical gauze. She placed one on the nightstand near the candleholder. ‘Actually latex isn't the best ... but it'll be fine.’ She grinned. ‘Safe sex, hot sex, right?’

‘I'll have to take your word on that.’

‘Not for long.’

I watched her tear open the other envelope with her teeth and pull out the square of latex. Like a handkerchief, it dangled from her fingers. She waved it in front of my eyes. I plucked it from her fingers.

‘So, now what do we do with the *damn* thing?’ I asked, trying a little pun, trying to sound casually flippant about the whole thing.

‘For now, we do nothing with it. That's for later. I'll show you ... later.’

She had me smiling again. I laid the square of latex on my right, close to the pillow. Tamara covered my body, thighs on either side of my hips, supporting some of her weight on her elbows and knees. She lowered her face to mine. Her mouth, her tongue had me humming again. She dipped her hips on to mine just barely touching my pubic bone, once. Barely touching it. I reached for her. I reached for her lower back. Her hips dipped on to mine again, gently nudging my sex. And again. A gentle tug, a pull that for some weird reason made me think of a horse's gentle and warm muzzle, firmly nuzzling my hand for a lump of sugar. Firm, focused and insistent. She arched her back sucking air through her teeth. Totally ignited, my clitoris burned with that white surge of desire. With the totally indescribable ache of utter desire.

I held on to her frantically searching for her mouth. Her lips hot and open consumed me as I hungrily burrowed inside her hips. Her strong legs held us bound and synchronised. Her hand under my buttocks kept me tight against her. And she brought on more of the searing bursts of lightning-white desire that seared through me with each of her thrusts.

I forced myself to breathe, to breathe, to dissipate at least some particles of that urgent desire. It threatened to burst forth, to overflow. I needed to contain it, to luxuriate in it for a while longer, for as long as I could.

I held on to her like a shipwrecked sailor to a buoy in the middle of the heaving ocean. And we rolled on the bed. And she was on her back. She reached for my face. Dark eyes away from the flickering glow of the candles. Dark eyes, tight and focused inward, almost squinting. Her ribs moved under my hand, slowly, rhythmically. She smiled and she ran her hand firmly through my hair, along my neck, over and under my breasts, along my back, over my buttocks. There her hand lingered.

Briefly again, her eyes settled on mine. And she closed her eyes. She closed her eyes shut tight. She brought my face

to hers. She offered me her breasts. She raised her hips and offered me her sex. Then she reached for the latex.

And she left around midnight.

Young women like Tamara don't need to hang around all night. They're not tired. Sex doesn't make them sleepy, not even tumultuous sex. They're not insecure. They don't need to validate the moment by having a body asleep and snuggled against their back. After sex, they go back where they came from. Back to their independence. I used to be like that too. I didn't try to hold her back. I walked her out to her car.

'Emi ... look ... I'll call you tomorrow night.'

I brushed off that comment with a wave of my hands. But I had only meant to hush her.

'I'm always at my place on Monday nights,' she said, the corners of her mouth turned up in an irrepressible grin.

As opposed to where? I asked myself.

'Tam, no. Let *me* call you.' I would have liked to match her smile.

'Cool,' she said opening her car door. Then she turned to me, as if she had just thought of something. 'Why?'

'Tam, I'll call. But not tomorrow.'

'Why not?'

Good question. But I didn't have a clear answer to give her. Not past midnight. Not on the footpath as she was already half way inside her car. How to explain succinctly that I needed to choose when to initiate further contact with her? And when would depend on how quickly I would learn not to confuse one night of sex with being in love. I didn't want to catch myself waiting by the phone for Tamara to call, not tomorrow. Not ever. I needed to control this. Tamara wouldn't be expecting any less from me, surely. I wasn't going to have her regret her wonderful, youthful abandonment of tonight.

'There's something I need to practise.'

‘Didn’t feel to me like you need any more practice. I mean, not without me.’ She grinned cheekily, one hand brushing back her hair.

‘No, what I need to practise, I’ve never really tried to learn. There’s no time like the present. I’ll start learning now, as soon as you round that corner over there. I’ll call you.’

‘OK. Cool.’

‘One thing for sure Tam ...’ What sure thing did I think I could tell her at that moment, as she was about to disappear into the night? ‘You’re cute. You’re very cute.’

She had rolled her eyes as if to say, Oh god, spare me. I had blown her a kiss. She had smiled and she had turned her car into the night.

Fourtzen

One yoghurt ball. Another yoghurt ball. New page. So ... what other news on the IVF front have made the headlines this week, huh? Oh, it'll date my piece if I refer too specifically to real landmark comments and decisions made in the press. A sigh of irritation fuses through tight lips. *So what?* It's not like I intend publishing or anything. I mean, *really*, Emilie, the things that worry you! Enough already, start typing.

Drew: *And what else could we have expected from our Prime Minister? I mean, really! What he does, every time, is inject his private morality into national issues. All he's doing is sitting there. A scaremonger, he is, isn't he? As if granting IVF to lesbians spelt out doomsday for civilisation as we know it.*

Dora: *It's like he and his cronies live in a vacuum. They haven't cottoned on yet that gay and lesbian families already exist.*

Drew: *It stinks. It's restrictive. It's bloody discriminatory!*

Dora: *Yeah, well ... but don't you see? They can sleep soundly at night. They don't think it's discriminatory at all what they're doing. That's the thing, isn't it? They hide behind Queensland Health's so-called ethics guidelines and ... and ... what the hell. (She sounds defeated, like it's all too much) It's almost voting time again and –*

What Dora's just said is true but where's *my* connection between the national stand, with the PM thing, and the Queensland-based climate, huh? I need to link the two, somehow. Yes. OK, I'll do that later. So, where was I? What could Drew answer back for now? Preferably something clever and biting.

Drew: *Well, they're makin' it bleedin' obvious they're not interested in the lesbian single mother vote.*

Oh ... well, that's one hell of a biting answer that. C'mon, Drew, you gotta do better than that. My hand dips again into the clay bowl now only half full of little cream-coloured balls. That's to help me focus on the crisis taking place in Drew and Dora's kitchen and zero in on the caustic humour I need to inject into this scene. And, by the way, I need to go back and insert a lot more non verbals. Yes, but not now. Let's just plod on rough. One, two little balls. Pop. Pop. They disappear inside my mouth. Suck. Suck. Roll. Tonight, I'm not in a creative mood. Words and thoughts are struggling *not* to come out and play.

Dora: *Hey, maybe we could make a series of bumper stickers that'd say something like: I'm a woman, I'm a lesbian who wants access to IVF. And I'm a voter too. My vote counts double. Hey, Drew? We could dump some on the Gladstone Road strip before it becomes even more defunct and at the gay clinic, too. What you say, huh? Is that a good idea or what?*

Groan, I moan. Does Drew need to ask why Dora's saying that about the assemblage of three shops that makes up the Brisbane 'gay strip'? No, let's keep this thing focused on D & D's most pressing concern.

Drew: *A bit long, the text I mean, like a bit too ... wordy. Like, it does have to fit on bumpers, right? On car bumpers, not trucks'. But yeah, we could work on that idea. But, you know, Dora, what riles me is that single parent families have been existing ... uh they've been around uh—*

Ooops, there we go. Dry up time. This isn't going at all well. Let's try again. Delete the last bit. Right, so she says, *It's as if they're desperate to make the point that children are not like ... Like ... like what? To what could she compare having a child? A luxury item, like a must have, like something frivolous. Two little balls settle on either side of my tongue. Twin peaks poke through my cheeks. What's something that supposedly every woman's dreaming to own? Something*

totally irrelevant. Not quite as expensive as a cruise holiday all expenses paid. Ah, got it. *A pair of Italian shoes*. So, who's saying that? Is it a Drew comment or a Dora type of ... Ah, shit! Blast! I give up. Tonight's not the night.

Now, why do I always pop in these things two at a time? Why not simply one at a time? It'd be more couth, wouldn't it, if I did? I'd end up eating only half as many of these silly little balls. Surely, they can't be all that good for one's health. What have they put in the blooming yoghurt mix anyway, huh?

Fingers poised above the keyboard, I think that if I just keep on typing, sooner or later, I'll get some sort of thought momentum going. Damn, these almonds are good! So one of them says something like, *Of course we know children are not accessories, not a commodity. Just because we feel like having a baby ...* Groan. Can't get a handle on the language for this 'homey' gripe swapping session. Crack and crunch on those almonds. Oh, what the hell. My fingers are back in the almond bowl.

Drew: *Guess he hasn't noticed that values have changed since the fifties and –*

The phone! Let it ring. Don't want to interrupt the flow. What flow? Nothing's bloody flowing. It's all crap. Select. Delete. Blast it into cybercrap. Besides, I've stopped typing, haven't I? The flow that wasn't is interrupted and my heart's beating too fast. Might be Tamara ringing. I'm not picking up the phone. I'm afraid to. I'm not ready for what she might want to say. Let it ring.

Tamara might be calling to see if she can come around. If so, I'd have to find a string of convincing words to the effect that no, she can't. Well, she could but the thing is that I don't want her to come around. Not now. How to be convincing about that when I do, I really do, want her to come around? I do want to see her. Breathe in. Now! It's stopped ringing. The machine's picked it up.

Though almost inaudible, I can hear the distant tweeter of my OGM. I haven't seen Tamara since our last, since our first, sexual encounter. Did we have sex or did we make love? I guess we had sex. It was all about sexual stimulation, delirium and release, wasn't it? That's having sex. Uh ... and what's making love about, then? Making love's much more controlled. Less tumultuous. Who says? Groan again.

I haven't called her yet. I said I would and I will but I haven't felt ready to do that. Mind you, the week's not over yet. It's only Thursday night. I figured I might allow myself until tomorrow. Friday. Five days after the event, it'll be by then. I'll have to call her. I don't think she understood what I was talking about when, on the footpath that night around midnight, I said that there was something I needed to practise. She smiled and waved and drove off, but I don't think she has any idea of what I mean. Not that I do much either.

Now, if it is her on the phone, just now, she might want to just chat. Cool. No. Not cool. Not deep down cool. What if she makes a chatty reference to that most intimate of moments we've shared like, Good workout, wasn't it? What if she's calling to say she's moving back say, to Melbourne or beyond the hills of Lismore, anywhere, to set up a DV unit out there? Well, if she did, then that would cancel my need to practise anything, wouldn't it? Sweet!

Crack and crunch on those almonds. I mean, if Tamara were to go away, say on another one of her backpacking trips to wherever, then *that* would be that. *That* would be a lot easier for me, wouldn't it? I mean, a lot easier than trying to orchestrate a false detachment. Now, if she were to go away, I wouldn't have to pretend I'm relaxed about such things as casual sex when I'm not. To hell with personal growth, right?

I hear this ongoing internal monologue of mine and it tells me the time, indeed, had been ripe for me to involve myself beyond my own personal boundaries and meet

someone like Jill Mason. More for *my* sake than hers. More for my sake than that of any one individual I may be assigned to guide within the framework of Trish's idea - that volunteer work, doing something for others, can go a long way towards injecting *some* reality into my small dramas. Small dramas as the one I've just allowed myself over the possible content of Tamara's message. That's if it was Tamara calling. Do I need to be honest about my motivation for getting involved with the lives of strangers like Jill Mason, just because I'm too self-absorbed?

Question: How much of a difference can I actually make, to anyone, to Jill Mason, from a position comfortably safe on the periphery of *her* real drama? Not sure really but, yes, I do suspect that a closer understanding of how real worries and real pain look and feel can, indeed, go a long way towards putting my own inflated insecurities and false complications into a less warped perspective.

How to tackle the one obstacle that so far has had me procrastinating? I do understand that in my rapport with strangers in some kind of distress, I have to talk to them. I mean, I first have to establish a rapport of sorts. I have to engage in commonplace chitchat. I can't just jump in and immediately help them deal at the practical level of things, not any more than I could with Jill Mason.

Most everyone I know is good at chitchatting. Just about everyone, it seems, can pick up any minute thread in any casual conversation and off they go, as lightly as a kite in the breeze, adding their own bit here and there, and a great ol' time is to be had by all.

I, for one, am desperately envious of anyone who can slide into a conversation about a child's milk teeth, the rising price of postage stamps, someone else's drama with dirty sparkplugs or an anecdote about the weather's predictability, or lack of, without even pausing for thought. Compared to that nimbleness of mind, I'm the stick in the mud. I'm

a graceless plodder when it comes to chitchat. If chitchat were a dance, I'd be executing a lumbering, self-conscious two-step.

Take last night for example. Dinner with a few acquaintances. When I tuned back into the conversation Macey, who hasn't yet mentioned the recent demise of her dog, was saying something about a male friend everyone, except me, seemed to have met. The crux of the light-hearted conversation was about this gay man's breasts and how carefully *he* and his partner were monitoring their growth. Comments about this man's breast development breezed around the table for a few minutes and I took it that they were about someone in the advanced stages of a desired mammary development associated, I had assumed, with a sex change process.

Thinking, perhaps too righteously, that the conversation needed to be lifted by a touch of political correctness, I had suggested something like, 'Shouldn't we refer to this person as *she*, rather than *he*?'

Not everyone had heard my question which was just as well because Macey, after having thoughtfully considered my suggestion for a few seconds replied very seriously, 'No, not really, Emilie. I don't know that we need to call a male *she* simply because, after years of gorging, he's finally reached Pavarotti's generous proportions.'

Anyway, beyond my phobia of socialising chitchat, I have no doubt that a walk on the edge of someone's life, of someone facing a real crisis, be it medical, financial or emotional, might eventually put my penchant for solitary introspection, aka navel-gazing, into a more useful perspective, a thin and transparent perspective. A lightweight preoccupation at best. Intellectually, at least, all this is very clear to me.

Two new yoghurt balls roll around and under my tongue. Having had sex with Tamara isn't going to drag me, this time around, down the pathway of any sort of temporary, semi-

obligatory settledness *à deux*. And when I told Tamara that I wanted to be the one to initiate our first post-sex phone conversation, I meant *that* in order to indicate, if only to myself, my resolve at practising emotional independence from her as my one-night lover.

Of course, she might also have initiated the call to simply say something like, Hey Em ... Uh, look, I really enjoyed last Sunday night. I hope you're cool about that but it's like, you know, like I wouldn't want you to get too ... attached. So, what I'm saying is why don't we let it go at that, hey? Look, I'll give you a ring later. You be good now. And uh ... don't let those students of yours get to you. OK? If Tamara called to say something like that, then, it was best to let the answering machine take that message. Back to the keyboard.

So, where was Drew? Was she, is she ... are they in the kitchen? Is she leaning against a kitchen counter ... or the fridge? She's leaning against the fridge and a magnet falls off. A painted frog magnet. A tiny green tree frog of the type found in North Queensland. Whatever! Can't get stuck into details now. What matters is what she says, not what she does, not the magnet's colour. I'm her voice, so what does she need to say?

Drew: *There are many different forms of family and the concept is evolving, like every day, right?*

Dora: *I guess. Hey, let's just hope it evolves him out of the elections.* (Dora is getting worked up. Attempted pun needs to be made clear by non verbals)

Oh, but I've just deleted the part that was referring to *him*, to the Prime minister. Wake up, Emilie!

Drew: *It's like it all boils down to the two camps, you know. Like some say it's not anyone's absolute right to have a child. It's not like every female needs to have that right guaranteed or anything.*

Needs to have the right or *should* have the right? Oh, groan. I've got too many 'likes' in there. These women

don't talk like that. Well, they could, but so far they haven't. Tamara's the one who sticks *like* all over the place. Trendy newspeak of Generation X.

Dora: *Yeah, yeah. But they insist that it's an absolute child's right to have two parents. Of different sex.*

Oh, hell! Wasn't flowing before, certainly ain't going nowhere now. Can't get into this. Not tonight. I need to listen to the message. I just need to know. Just to know whether or not there's still a reason for me to be practising anything. My fingers twirl two little yoghurt balls around as if they were Chinese acupressure balls.

Can't just run to the phone and hit the Play key. I need to control my breathing. I need to breathe in. Deep and slow. If I'm ever going to practise detachment, it has to start now. And I need to detour via the kitchen to pour myself a tall glass of apple juice. Anything to postpone the moment further. I step on to the deck to see if the first quadrant moon is visible above the tree line. I realise with a sigh that I haven't been back on the deck since Sunday afternoon, the afternoon of Tamara's visit.

One empty green glass beer bottle stands by the right hand side of a deckchair where Tamara's hand had set it down. Another sigh. Breathe in, Emilie. I'm getting impatient with myself. This is exactly what I need to practise. This is precisely *why* I need to practise detachment after sex with someone totally endearing. How not to fret and spin my wheels? How not to spin anything beyond what happened in bed? The thing is that even *I* know that there is nothing I truly need, or even want, from Tamara beyond more of the sensual hunger that she evokes in me. That and ongoing sexual gratification. Desire.

Good sex should simply exist on its own, that's what I've always said. Saying such sensible things comes more naturally to me than activating such thoughts sensibly. Sex, it is true, should not need to be validated beyond the immedi-

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ate enjoyment of the moment. Well, for many more liberated than I, it isn't. I'm the one with the confusion dependency hang-up.

Zero one, say the red digits. Play. *'Message,' says the digital voice, 'Howarya, Em. Not home? Trish. It's Trish who called. Not Tamara. Why not Tamara? OK, not to worry, mate. I should reach the marina by three on Sat'day. Why am I feeling so deflated now that I know the call was not from Tamara? Jeez, I'm weird. Time to have a yarn with the boys out there, well, you know the drill, and then wait around for Brett ... Anyway, I'll be ringing your doorbell 'round six. Deflated, as in an anti-climax. All this adrenaline pumping for nothing. I'll dinghy out in the morning to retrieve the crab pots I've dropped in for your dinner. Shouldn't I be elated that Tamara hasn't yet closed the door on anything, or casualised our romp to death? They should be nice and full. Sleep well. Ta.*

Breathe in. Hold it. Deep. Breathe out. OK, what's glaringly obvious is that I'm not yet ready to initiate *my* call to Tamara. She's free to pick. It's a Choose Your Own Ending Adventure for her. A big and deep sigh bursts through my tight lips. My heart is again beating too fast.

OK. Let's focus on Trish. It's yes to Saturday night with Trish. Great! Her visit's just what the doctor would've ordered if the doctor had known I needed a Trish type of pep-up, an injection of ... logic. Logic and reasoned detachment. Trish will be able to help me with that. Uh ... with Trish here, will I still call Tamara tomorrow night? We'll see. Depends how I feel by then. I'll run the whole thing past Trish first. She does have a fair dose of that old fashion common sense that's never been too evident in me. And Trish is not a starry-eyed romantic. She never was. She's practical and she's pragmatic. Trish is fluster-proof. Even when she decided to step out of her life, out of her life with me, out of her working life, to

embark on her journey of solitude and self-discovery, she did so with barely a ripple. The idea had matured slowly inside her and by the time she had felt the need to voice her intention, her path already lay clear in front of her. Uncluttered by what-ifs.

Dora: (finally picking up the fridge magnet that fell at Drew's feet) *I tell you what, Drew, if it weren't for you, I'd just give up the bloody fight.*

'Hey,' she grins.

'Hey. Come in.' I almost said, Come in, stranger, but I remind myself just in time that if she hasn't been around any earlier, it may well be because I hadn't invited her to drop by. Let alone drop in.

I look at her. She looks at me. And she smiles. I smile on the outside, not knowing what to do with myself on the inside. I mean, look at her, standing in the fading sunlight, tall, straight with an air of quiet assuredness about her. The easy smile I see isn't just on her face. It's not just on her lips. And so she stands there, her wide shoulders unencumbered, certainly not by that diminutive backpack of hers. Only big enough it is, to hold her wallet and keys, a pack of cigarettes if she smoked, a dainty little box of mini tampons when needed. Ah, yes, the little backpack would be big enough to also hold a couple of white and blue sachets. Always in the bag, I suspect, just in case. Like me and my credit card. I simply never leave home without it, no matter where I go. Even when I don't expect to buy anything, not even a Mars bar.

'Can I come in?'

'Uh, sure,' I reply, suddenly aware that I had been blocking the way in. 'Come in, yes. I was just looking at that

little bag of yours.’ I point to it, as it now dangles from the straps loosely wound around her wrist.

‘Hey, why travel heavy when you can travel light?’

‘Spoken like a true backpacker. I haven’t mastered that skill yet.’ That truly is another skill I haven’t mastered, that of travelling light, in both the literal and figurative sense of the word.

I am unable to load into a plane a suitcase that weighs less than twenty-five kilos. That’s besides the six or seven kilos I always manage to secret inside my carry-on luggage. In actual fact, I know that I don’t end up using more than ten or fifteen of these thirty-two kilos’ worth of clothes and shoes. And yet I’ve done that so many times, I just can’t count them any more.

‘You know the way,’ I say as she brushes past me.

Just as I was watching her standing easy in the soft sun light, unencumbered by anything of her own, I saw a fleeting image of her, standing just as she was but, this time encumbered by a number of loads that I recognised as my own. Like my happiness that now wanted to depend on her ongoing acknowledgement of me. Like my worry about whether or not she was still likely to be aroused by me. Like my fear that she simply might be here to pull out altogether. Like how to best deal with my wanting more of her whilst not getting emotionally attached. And there was yet another bundle. That one was about how I should’ve abnegated my attraction to her in favour of that other attraction, almost as strong, for Alex. Wouldn’t Alex, after all, have been more likely to become a partner beyond a lover? Surely Alex would’ve been a better investment of time and purpose. And, too, weighing on Tamara’s shoulders was my will-I-be-alone-in-old-age bundle. And for that fleeting moment I saw Tamara almost stoop under the weight of each of these weighty questions, each attesting to my own inability to absorb, process, and travel light.

And as she moves past me our eyes meet again. I feel myself resisting an urge to touch her. She looks at me again, an undecided little frown on her brow. I finally pat her shoulder and move her on inside. Breathe. Lighten up.

I watch her drop her little backpack on the sofa and move towards the kitchen.

‘Can we go outside?’ she asks. ‘It’s so lovely out there.’

‘Of course. You know the way. What would you like? Coffee? Juice? Beer?’

‘Hey, it’s the start of the weekend. Beer will be great. Ta.’ Beeah, she pronounces in her sensual, deep-throated English accent.

‘You go on out then,’ I suggest, preferring not to have her hover around me in the kitchen while I organise the beers and something to munch on. ‘I’ll be right there.’

And she goes out. And I sigh. No, it’s not a sigh. Well, it’s an exhaled sigh. A sigh of apprehension? Why only one noun for such a subtle thing as a sigh while the Eskimos have some forty words to describe their snow. And the French their butter-based sauces? What do I want from the girl? I mean, it’s been a week since she was last here. Since we *had sex*. I’ve had time to think about it. My head is clearer today than it was yesterday. I need to take it as it comes. I need to take it as it feels. How does it feel, here and now? It feels good and breezy. So I have to keep it good and breezy. So what gets in the way to clutter up my emotions? Is it my heart? No, I don’t even think so. Just me and my insecurities. One cap curls up under the bite of the bottle opener. And the second one.

Tamara is still standing, looking at the tree line ahead. She spent a long time doing that last time she was here. She might like that tree line. That, or else she finds it an easy thing to look at. Green and peaceful. Soothing.

‘Table benches or deckchairs?’ I ask, as she turns to the sound of my footsteps on the decking.

‘Hey, either way. Table for a change. Here, I’ll grab one,’ she says reaching for one of the two beers I’m holding in the one hand, while in the other I balance two little bowls, one of Greek olives stuffed with bits of sun-dried tomatoes, the other of cashews. No grapes today. No cheese. I have intentionally dropped both out of my shopping list. Her fingers brush against mine as I release one bottle. I let her take the little bowl of cashew nuts from my other hand, as it is the one closest to hers.

‘Thanks,’ I say perhaps a little too quickly.

She sets both items on the table. But in slow motion, I watch her turn to me again to reach for the other beer and take the other bowl from my other hand. Then, she reaches for me. My heart lurches.

‘Em, breathe,’ she whispers against my lips.

‘What do you mean, *breathe*. I am breathing,’ I reply taken aback by the strangeness of her remark and definitely not breathing as well as I had been only a minute ago. Her cat green eyes smile into mine. But I close mine. I close them because I don’t want her to see in them, not just yet, not so soon, the desire that’s already uncurling in the pit of my belly.

‘No, you’re not breathing,’ she says already the expert on Emilie. ‘I know. You’re shallow breathing.’

And I remember how during our foreplay last week, she had noticed and remarked on the fact that I wasn’t breathing as deeply as I should. And so I inhale. Deep and slow. And I exhale very slowly too, through rounded lips. And I smile. The first real smile since she’s come in. The first smile since we rose from my bed, last week, after we had made love. Had sex. And Tamara moves closer against me. Hands loosely wrapped around my waist, she gently forces me into a couple of small steps backwards. And my back comes into contact with the firmness of the wall behind me. Her mouth closes over mine. And I wince. Eyes closed, I wince under

the sharp ache, the spike of desire, that rips diagonally from my loins to my heart. Arrow-like. I am still surprised by that pain of arousal that spikes when she presses the length of her body against mine in this particular way of hers.

‘Emi,’ she whispers against my lips, ‘I want you.’

I reach again for her face. I reach for her mouth. As the tip of my tongue brushes over hers, it tells her that I want her, too. My heart beating madly against her shirt tells her, too, how much I want her.

An odd expression that, that of wanting someone. Like I may want something to take to bed with me. A book? A cup of coffee? An object? In any case, it’s not *her* that I want, is it? It’s the sensations, the emotions she awakes in me that I want. What I want is a lot less abstract than ‘her’ as her essence. It’s the full length of her body covering mine. It’s *that* that I want. I want the warmth, the firmness of her mouth moving against mine, soft over mine, blending with mine. It’s her sex and it’s the satin curve of her back that I want under my hand.

And I can’t understand that searing ache that blazes through me, each time desire uncoils further, snakelike, one coil at a time. All I know is that it definitely starts somewhere deep within my lower belly and that it shoots lightning-white to the vicinity of my heart. I don’t mean my heart, metaphorically, as in a love pain, not at all. What I mean is that each spike travels diagonally, always in the same direction and each time it leaves me breathless, wanting more of that breathtaking, addictive pain.

‘Soon,’ I say, reaching for her mouth once more, replying to the pressure of her pelvis against mine.

Now, when I say I don’t understand the ache of utmost desire, I mean that I don’t understand the fireworks *trajec-tory* as each flare bursts through me, though I know each is created by a chemical blend of adrenaline, dopamine. It, and whatever other chemicals, fire every nanosecond sped up

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between brain cells by phenylethylamine. That much I know, and I have felt those ecstatically painful surges many times before. I felt them each time I fell in lust. But I can't say that I'm very familiar with love, love all on its own.

I'm not all that familiar with a love that, I assume, should be felt deeply in one's bones, but that maddening, unreal, ache of lust that I now feel around Tamara, yes, I know that one only too well. My question is: Why is this familiar ache so potent now?

I don't know that it has anything to do with her. I think things have begun being different for me after I separated from Solange. Different things started happening when I met Roberta. For the first time in my life I had to rein in my impulse towards her. She wasn't free to explore. Then, I didn't follow through with my impulse towards Alex because I had already connected with Tamara's sensual physicality. And yes, in a way, I'm still fighting my impulse towards Tamara.

I fight against it because she is too young, too free, too lovely. She's made up of too many things that I cannot afford to fall in love with. Mixed blessing all these impulses, all these stop-starts. Every connection with desire, with sexual desire, with sexual frustration crystallises during the split second it takes for my body to resolve its conflicts with my mind as to the best way to meet the surge. The surge brought on by Tamara.

'Come, Tam,' I say, winded and a-tingle. 'Let's sit here for a while. Here,' I say, handing her one of the bottles of beer. 'I'd like to tell you about this thing I need to practise.'

'OK,' she says, loosening her shoulders.

'Come on, grab a seat.' She moves towards my side of the bench. 'No, Tam. No, please ... over there. Let's sit across from each other. I want to look at you. I need to see your eyes while I tell you about this ... thing I have about ... '

‘Jeez, these bugs of yours would’ve been huge!’ I shouted in delight at the sight of disassembled mud crab parts piled high on a platter. The rest of the world as far as I know simply calls them crabs but we call them bugs and muddies because they dig themselves into the mud of shallow mangroves as well as under the sandy bottom of estuaries.

Trish had only allowed me to open the bottle of Moondah Brook Maritime and to set the table out on the deck. She had as good as locked me out of the kitchen, out of my own kitchen, while she untied and prepared what the sea had brought right inside her crab pot. The thing is, she untied what she originally had to have tied up by herself whilst any one of the four mighty claws now displayed amongst many, many lesser crab legs and sweet headmeat could’ve snipped her toe or, for that matter any finger, in half. That’s when the beasts were alive. That’s when she would’ve brought the mesh basket, locally known as a pot, to the surface. From there, she would’ve had to dislodge the crabs from their entanglement with the mesh of the loose, wide weave of the basket. They would’ve scrambled on her boat deck the minute they felt free.

I assume she didn’t release them in the dinghy itself. I mean, where does one run to safety in a dinghy when one’s cornered by two prehistoric water-creatures snapping their mighty pliers-claws at anything that would come inside their beady-eye range? Near-sighted bugs, they probably see even less well on a sun-beaten boat deck.

‘What a woman you are, Trish. I’m impressed.’ I was impressed.

Though Trish always brings something from the sea when she comes to stay over, and although she’s brought me

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crabs many times before, none had ever come near the size of these two fellows.

‘Tell you what, mate, wasn’t easy but it’s the old Where there’s a will, there’s a way thing. And anyway, I was bigger than both of them put together. Sturdy fellows both of them, hey?’ she asked, seeking confirmation, brown eyes as shiny as polished chestnuts.

Trish was seated across from me, across from the glorious platter of sea fresh seafood. Her shorn hair was slowly growing back but she intended keeping it permanently ‘fuzz short.’ And yes, she would have stood much bigger than the crabs on her deck but, still, across from the glorious platter of fresh seafood, she only looked the five foot two woman that she was.

‘More practical by far for anyone living on a boat,’ she had said earlier.

She used to wear her hair shirt-collar long but in a boyish style of sorts.

‘Well, here’s to you, Mad Crab-Catching Woman you.’ I raised my glass to her and she raised hers to honour her own deed of bravery. It was good having her over. Two or three months had gone by since her last visit. That other time, Trish had needed new sail ropes. This time around, she’s left Dancing Light on blocks at the marina. Her mate, Brett, would see to it that the keel was scraped free of barnacles, sanded and antifouled.

‘Tell you what, when they finally got free of the netting, they weren’t happy lil’ campers at all. Should’ve seen them scrambling around the deck with their claws up at the ready.’ Trish snapped fingers against thumb, in front of her face, as the crabs had brandished their muscle-heavy claws.

She had conquered them. She had tied them up. And as far as I could tell, she not only still had ten digits but also ten toes. If she hadn’t, I would’ve heard about it by now. Trish is not very good with pain. She’s very good at avoiding pain.

She had developed many crafty ways to avoid pain, any sort of pain. And sometimes I can't help but feel that her ongoing search for emotional independence from everything is her most involved ploy, to date, at pain avoidance.

Any food that comes from the sea, I call seafood. Makes sense to me. Well, having just thought that, I realise that's not entirely true. Only the food that comes from the sea wrapped up in a shell, I call seafood. Seaweed is seaweed. Fish are fish. They're not seafood and no matter how fresh they might be, straight off Trish's line, fish still fail to move me in the same way her seafood extravaganzas do.

Anyway, Trish arrived on my doorstep, as planned, shortly after nightfall and had quickly made up her mind to steam the crabs and serve them *nature* seeing as how they were so fresh and, most likely, wonderfully sweet and tasty. And she had wanted to get on with that business all on her own, so keen she was to experience, once again, the width and breadth of a normal sized kitchen. A kitchen of gigantic proportion for one used to a galley only fit for Lilliputians, though cooking in anachronistic pots and pans made in Normal People land. I've always found washing up the most onerous task that can be performed on a sailboat. Opening and closing the seacocks in the middle of the night is another, differently unpleasant, sailing constraint I'm not fond of.

Solange had cooked up a storm on that one week we had spent at sea together on board Lazy Moon. I was the skipper and the washer-upper. She was the first mate and the chef. And though her meals were of floating-gourmet quality, once taste buds and belly satisfied, I hated every second spent with the aftermath of her culinary feats. More water sloshed over me and the floor than inside the pots and pans that just didn't fit in the diminutive galley sink.

So last night, Trish had had ample space in which to steam and tear and crack crab parts to her heart's content and to my ultimate delight. I was astounded by the size of the

claws that protruded from the pile of orange crab parts. The size of the heap itself was astounding. Astounding but not daunting. Seafood, any food harvested in shells, has to be the one dish I adore seeing piled high, served in mounds. It and crispy hot French fries. Ah, yes, and pasta.

‘Hey, I did make a lil’ prayer last night, you know?’ Trish says smiling. A slightly crooked canine tooth always gives her smile an endearing quality. ‘Didn’t wanna ring your bell empty-handed, right? So I was hoping at least two muddies would find their way inside my pot but you never can tell.’

‘You *prayed?*’ That’s news.’

Trish has always been very doubtful of anything she can’t see. And that includes germs, gods, goddesses, and aliens. In fact, most of our domestic arguments at the time were centred around Trish’s notion that germs, like aliens, like religion, were inventions of the masses *for* the masses.

‘How do you even see what you get rid of, you know, as in whether the product does anything?’ she’d ask, ‘if all these germs are invisible? I mean, it’s just like these manic people who think they got *things* on them,’ she’d add at other times. ‘You know, they shake them off, and they scrub their skin close to shreds and you and I know there was nothing there at all in the first place.’

Trish used to be a businesswoman who pretended germ blindness, like I still pretend number dumbness. ‘How can you tell there’s anything there?’ That was her bottom line when she didn’t feel like cleaning the kitchen counter beyond the cursory wiping around. She did concede that there might be *things* that might grow inside the shower recess but she never conceded these things might be germs. Fungus is fungus from the mushroom family, as defined by Trish Taylor, and mushrooms aren’t germs.

‘Awh, look, you know how it is for me. I only pray for things that don’t matter an awful lot. And it’s not really a

prayer, it's more like the voicing out of a wish,' she tried to clarify with a soft snort.

'What, like my crabs don't matter? So, now I know.' I pretended a hurtful expression. 'After all, catching them didn't mean an awful lot to you. I'm hurt, Trish. Real hurt.'

'Just wait a sec, will you? Hey, bringing in these fellows, *that* was important,' she defended herself, tapping on the bright orange shells piled in front of us, 'But not as important as being rich and healthy, or rich and famous. Know whatta mean?'

I reached for one of the claws that was just yearning for a solid hammering before cracking. I fractured it cleanly, revealing a thick muscle of tender white flesh sheathed in transparent dark pink gauze.

'Hummph. Maybe I do, maybe I don't,' I said, feigning a coy return to a more even mood. 'So, just so I'm clear, you pray for two prehistoric-looking behemoth creatures to come and feed inside your pot just so you can bring them to me, but you don't make prayers to be either rich, healthy or famous?'

'Yeah, that's pretty much it. I don't pray for anything else. Crabs for you and a good sea wind for me, that's it. I wish-pray for these little things. Nothing else. The aim is to keep it real simple.'

'Right, OK. That's a relief. Wouldn't want you to go religious on me. Now, come on, girl, dig in.'

'Yeah, sure. Yum-yum time.' She grabbed another claw from the top of the pile and looked around for the cracking tool. 'Nah, look, I don't reckon it could ever come to that, I mean, me turning religious. But you know, sometimes you sit on deck. After every peaceful afternoon comes a peaceful sunset. Then, after dusk comes nighttime with its diamonds and stars, you know, like the whole galaxy's just hanging there above your head. So much natural beauty.' Trish looked

at me, intent on having me acknowledge that I knew what she was talking about. I did know what she was talking about.

She and I had spent many a sunset and many a nighttime, fewer dawns, comfortably tucked into each other on the viewing platform of her deck, lost inside nature's spectacle. We'd sit and watch. Hug and watch. Drink, eat, talk and watch. We'd make love and watch some more. But last night, while gesturing with an orange crab leg in one hand and a crabmeat pusher in the other, she wanted to remind me of the beauty she still sees every day spent at sea.

'And, yeah, you feel a little humble, like not very important at all. And you wonder, I mean *I* wonder,' she looked at me sideways, having just remembered one of my *bête-noires*. She had just remembered how, besides getting her convinced that germs were not a mere capitalist conspiracy, I used to try to wean her away from a lifetime habit of saying 'you' when she simply meant 'I'. And last night I had smiled benignly, waving away that old-fuss pot preoccupation of mine. Why indeed give a damn, right, about such pedantic things as semantics when one is talking about the mysteries of the dark beyond and noisily sucking the sweet meat filaments caught inside the tiniest of hollows? And then, the weirdest thought swooped down on me. Shouldn't my soul begin writhing in agony at the thought of ingesting another creature's flesh? At finding it so delectable? About to blurt out that the time may have come for me to declare myself a vegan, I glanced at Trish, but she seemed lost in thoughts of her own. Left to my own device, I peered at my plate, I peered at my empty wineglass, I reached across to the bottle to fill both of our glasses to the mid-line and had just enough time to shake my head before Trish spoke again. I made myself breathe in as I tuned in to her.

'Yeah,' she said, 'and so I think about the meaning of life and this business, you know, of ... *And on the seventh day, there was light.*'

She cracked at the shell with her teeth and, much to my relief the clear sound it made didn't mutate into the mute cry of soft-shell juvenile crab.

Trish has amazingly strong teeth. I broke one of mine trying to do what she was routinely doing with hers. It cost me an entire week of not smiling and a six hundred-dollar contribution towards my dentist's honeymoon.

Joanne, my dentist, had been on her way to the Azores with the man of her life. A man, younger than herself, who was still unsure as to what he might do with himself. In other words, she was going to keep on paying his way towards some diploma or other, feeling blindly confident that he'd end up being very good at whatever he would choose to apply himself to. That set up, I remember, had at the time, made me inordinately sad on my dentist's behalf though she didn't seem sad at all. But there's only so much sadness one can feel when one's mouth is not only numb but distended by rigid instruments that make swallowing a clumsy and futile pursuit.

Trish doesn't know my dentist. She has her own whom I've never met. And when I realised I was thinking of my dentist I realised I had, again, disconnected from Trish's monologue on a shooting star. She was explaining how various readings, in their various bits and pieces, collected over the years, clustered in her head when she was alone on deck, facing the open sea.

'And bits and pieces of stuff I read about the Big Bang theory come back to me,' she was saying. 'And what I remember of my reading the *Origin of Species*, like that was a real long time ago, right, and all the Goddess-based stuff, you know, like ancient religions and Palaeolithic worships and so on. It all kind of plays on my mind as I watch the sea and the sky and yes, there's got to be something out there. So, one day, I might just come up with something that works for me, for me alone.'

‘Good. So you’re not getting any closer to any form of organised religion?’

‘Nah. Don’t want ‘organised’ anything. I was organised-out, you know, before I decided to give it all up.’

Trish had been a bank manager in that other life of hers. In the other life she had had to get rid of in order to take up her new life. This new life on board her *Dancing Light* has freed her from the constraints most of us buckle under but make do with because we feel we have to make do with them.

‘I know, you explained. But you might take a bit of this and leave out bits of that ... ’

She had resigned from the bank and from me. She had moved out of my place with only a few clothes and a boxful of kitchen utensils. She had taken her oil paints too, and her easel. Trish has always liked to paint. That’s her hobby. I do the Drew and Dora thing, I occasionally do the four-wheel drive thing, even more occasionally I do the high-octane thing at the Archerfield speedway but Trish paints at sea, an amazing feat I’ve always thought, while pumped up strains of classical music surge and swell around her. And more recently, some three years ago, she gave in to the pull of the cosmos and took up yoga. “Great on the lymph system,” she said then. “Speeds up the filtering of the body’s dirty dishwater.”

‘Nah,’ she finally replied to my question. ‘I want to stay away from every O word I know. That includes ordination, ordinary, organisation and, yes, orgasm. Them too.’

I glanced at her just as she made a clear eye contact with me. And the crab shell I was struggling to break splintered and jabbed into my thumb. I winced. Maybe I needed to think more seriously about becoming a vegan. That, and a cave-dwelling hermit.

‘Serves you right,’ Trish said, grinning, as I sucked the fleshy part of my thumb. ‘Yes *that* O word’s gone too. Orgasms by the wayside!’ she exclaimed expansively.

Dismayed, I sucked the ball of my thumb. I had just remembered what Tamara had said about the importance of having fingers free of cuts and nicks. I blushed and blinked. I blinked and swallowed and sipped my wine, forcing my attention back to Trish who had returned her attention to her own piece of shell.

So all things considered, the yoga thing is a relatively new addition to her lifestyle, and I probably shouldn’t refer to it as a hobby. Yoga is not, for people like Trish, a hobby at all; it’s become a pathway to inner evenness. And besides practising a faster access to her pathway or is it to a larger pathway, or *more* pathways, she also practises at letting go altogether. And her latest thing seems to be that she’s now obviously decided to forgo any further Os.

‘Oh, come on. Gimme a break!’ I exclaimed disbelieving. ‘A little O has never hurt anyone, surely. Not even one’s ability to self-contain.’

‘Uh, yeah, all right,’ Trish conceded with a chuckle, ‘I won’t say no to an occasional little O, as you say, but my point is that since we last spoke, I’ve reached another conclusion—’

‘Awh, don’t tell me.’

I know Trish is redefining the boundaries of what self-containment means to her but I can’t quite grasp how anyone can live without anyone special in her life.

Trish must be getting good at letting go, though, because she left this house that was also her home, some five years ago already. It worries me that she should be so practised at letting go of everything, of letting go of people. Of women, not just of me. Back then, as she had begun her move away she was saying that, in letting go of me, she was letting go

of sex. That she was going to try to become a non-sexual being.

I honestly didn't think her thing about giving up sex would work. I certainly didn't think it would work for as long as it has. Now that it's worked for that long, I'm afraid it might work for her forever. And that makes me sad, though I'm not sure why. Maybe it makes me sad because I haven't learnt to let go of anything myself. Letting go suggests losing something or losing *out* on something. I'm not sure which. But I do know that, at sea, when one lets go, one drifts. And drowns.

And as I listened to Trish explain the pathways by which sex has apparently become totally redundant, I think of Tamara and how we made love yesterday evening. How we had made love and how we had talked afterwards. And it makes me sad knowing that, if Trish is successful in her efforts, she won't ever find herself in such a magical time-locked moment as that one I've shared with Tamara. Since our after-sex talk, as it turns out, I feel somewhat more relaxed about my sexual and totally orgasmic involvement with Tamara.

'Order, organisation *and* orgasms. Any O, as in organised, officiated, orchestrated,' Trish reeled off, 'ordered for *or* by *or* with anyone else, nah, that's out.'

She caught me frowning at her and she smiled a naughty little girl smile. A smile with a crooked little tooth. 'Some Os are still OK, I guess, as long as they're ... uh ... of the solo type.'

'Ah, well,' I pretended a sigh of relief, 'that's news.'

Trish used to go in an awkward loop at the mere mention of the word *masturbate* and its derivatives. Her aversion to the word was so strong it even made her curdle at the word "Masterbrain", as in the name of a game, simply because she had decided the latter sounded somewhat too similar to the former.

So, to tease her, I added, 'You are talking about *mas-turbation*, here, aren't you?' She blushed a little, focussing her attention on the tubular challenge presented by the long and thin crab leg she had just picked up, but eventually she looked up and met my eyes.

'You are, aren't you?' I asked again.

'Yeah.' She rubbed her wrist against her scalp and screwed up her eyebrows at me. 'You just get that imagination of yours back in check, girl.' She leaned back on her chair and eventually allowed a tiny, self-conscious grin to peak on her lips. 'Yeah ... well, there's a time and a place for everything, right? That's what you used to say.'

'Oh, absolutely,' I grinned back.

The thing about cracking crab shells at the dinner table is that it's a rather messy business with bits of shell flying everywhere, fingers becoming sticky, almost too sticky to handle a wineglass. The water in the finger bowl needs to be changed in spite of the lemon wedge that had sunk at the bottom. All ten fingers are involved. There are many bits to suck. There are others to spit out. It's an all-engrossing occupation. And there's the banging and the cracking and the occasional spray of seawater as a seal gets broken. Bits of empty shell pile up and up. Anyway Trish is adamant, *mas-turbation* can stay now that she's obviously given it a go and has reassured herself that it is a properly self-contained type of activity. But even *mas-turbation*, she fears, *could* get in the way of clear thinking.

'Right. Well, I guess you've had ample time to think this through. But you can always change your mind and get yourself a good woman to cuddle up with—'

'Nah ... won't change my mind on that. Hey, Emi,' she called softly. I looked up from the shell that was giving me a hard time. 'C'mon, give yourself a little credit,' she said, tapping me on the hand with her claw cracker. 'Wouldn't have bailed out of *our* relationship, would I now, not unless I felt I

needed to do something really important. And really important, to me, is this business of learning how to be self-reliant full stop. You know, not depending on anyone's presence or approval to feel good about myself. Or sexual gratification for that matter. It's hard yakka getting there though.'

Hard yakka. Hard work. I bet it's hard work. Self-reliance has always seemed such hard work that I'd never even considered attempting even a fraction of what she had already accomplished, though I feel the time is nearing for me to have a go. But not at sexual self-reliance. Not at physical self-reliance either. I can do both without too much drama. Just at emotional self-reliance.

'Sexual self-reliance? Like a snail? Like those hermaphrodite snails are sexually self-reliant?' I asked to tease.

'Forget the sex bit for a while, will you?' Trish wants to keep this conversation on a serious plane. 'Learning how to be self-reliant isn't hard work, that's the easy part. Anyone with a little common sense and determination, you know, to break the patterns, our affective MO and all that, anyone can become physically and emotionally self-reliant. Even you.'

Not sure I liked the way she raised her eyebrows at me as she said that but I let her go on.

'It's the coming to terms with an ever-shrinking outer-world that's a bit scary. See, I'm not into the *exterior* of anything anymore. I'm either on the edge of the inside moving closer in or I don't want to be there at all.'

I remember how she used to worry about getting sick in spite of her robust constitution. Maybe that's why she used to worry so much. Having been healthy all of her life she was afraid of the unknown. To her the unknown is what is brought on by a body that just stops responding the way it always had.

She used to be afraid that one day, her body wouldn't want to get out of bed anymore, that at night, it wouldn't want to go to sleep. That it would develop a preference for

pills and liquids over solids. And her worst fear of all was that one day, her body would be so tired that it'd go out of its way to have others look after it.

That had been Trish's ongoing phobia for as long as I'd known her. And last night, as I had watched her talk so animatedly about her search, I wondered how she was perceiving the eventuality, now that she had learnt so much more about herself, that a severe bout of illness might make her dependent on the outside world in the most intrusive of manners. I asked her about that.

'I'd have to reverse the process, wouldn't I? Don't know if I could, I mean, inside myself, you know, being helpless and stuck and ... just to think of it ...' She shivered. 'The idea that maybe, one day, my body will need total strangers to make it do things ... I mean it's too scary to even talk about.'

Trish shut her eyes very briefly on that thought. Or maybe she shut her eyes *against* that thought. To keep it from entering any further, any deeper inside her soul. It was an unwanted guest she didn't want to have at our table.

'And the weather at sea, too. That's another exterior I can neither avoid nor control. I mean, you can't just keep it out or surrender to it, can you? Not when you're on a sailboat in the middle of a storm.'

She was right. The whole notion of being a sailor, oddly enough, is about fighting. Fighting the elements, fighting them with all of one's strength, knowledge and determination.

'So yeah, these two things that I might never be able to either control or bypass, I guess I'm stuck with worrying about. For now. So yoga's good for that too, you know, the deep breathing, the stretching ... Keeps me focused in the present and ... it helps turn off the fight or flight button.'

As I watched her I noticed her swallow hard. She picked up her glass and raised it to eye level in a silent toast to the incipient defeat of these fears.

As she raised her eyes to mine, her chestnut-brown eyes were shinier than usual. I knew a tightness had formed at the base of her throat. And for all her bravado and independence from the world as I know it, she was still only a slight and vulnerable woman in deep search of self. I reached across the tablecloth and took her hand in mine.

Some people wear their contrariety as an angry badge. Trish wears hers as a little girl carries around a teddy bear that needs to be mended.

‘It all comes down to controlling the inside, what’s inside of you. I mean inside of me. But, you know, *you* and your breathing thing, Emi, that’s because you’re not controlling much of anything of what’s inside of you.’

‘Hey, take it easy, will you. Give me a little credit. I do control ... some.’

‘Oh, true. Actually, you control plenty. Too much. You want to handle everything. If you can’t control everything, you put yourself into a spin. So yeah, control’s not the right word to use with you. Unless you talk about you having to control how much you need to control, if you know what I mean.’

‘Yes, yes, we’ve been there before. I need to let go of that *visceral* need to control everything ... I know that. But I only control so that no little bit of escaped whatever can rear up and bite me on the bum. OK,’ I conceded, ‘I need to surrender ... some. Maybe. But, don’t you think ‘surrender’ has such a helpless connotation? It’s like being passive and waiting to be done to.’

‘Ah, spoken like the Emilie I know and love. *Waiting to be done to*, listen to yourself, will you? What are you afraid of? What, a horde of little cannibal people ready to poke their knives and forks into you?’

I looked at her a little startled. I had never told her about ‘The Gnomes’, the pet name I’ve given to my chronic state of anxiety, and yet the image she had just brought up was

actually quite like 'The Gnomes' except for the cannibal thing. But that, too, could change any time.

'I know you're right,' I sighed, leaning back on my chair, taking time away from the crab bits and pieces, taking time to sip on my wine. 'It's true that my need to control is totally fear driven. It's like I'm afraid to lose the plot, that something will become unravelled and start to fall apart if I don't remain vigilant about knowing, *controlling*, for lack of a better way to deal.'

The diminishing pile of edible crab parts was commensurate with the overflowing pile of debris. I knew the moment was approaching when I'd have to tell Trish about Tamara. About Tamara and Alex. About sex and lust and about after-sex glow and about after-sex talk within the Tamara-Emilie context. And also about my decision to find an avenue into some kind of programme that'd allow me to help someone feel better, more comfortable, within *their* own circumstances. What I find difficult to do for myself, I might be able to do for someone else.

Happy for that junction in the conversation to happen later than sooner, I self-consciously postponed the moment by talking about the obscure pleasure of eating crab in a restaurant. I don't even pick up a chicken drumstick with my fingers, not in a restaurant I don't. And I peel my prawns with a fork in one hand, a knife in the other. Patiently, tidily, I remove each ring of scale from the curved body until the prawn meat is totally exposed.

Trish was back on the personal aspect of things. 'You know, Emi, now that I think of it, I'd say that a lack of self-discipline is at the base of your weakness.'

Just what I needed to have confirmed. 'You may well be right. That and ... ' The time had come to reveal that other weakness.

'Ah, and so what's another weakness of yours, then?' she asked with mock curiosity, her frown of concentration

directed at retrieving a morsel of crab meat from a long and narrow tubular shell casing. ‘Any new weakness that I don’t know about? You’re not into sweets now, are you? I mean, nothing beyond those horrible little brown bullets of yours?’

‘No, I’m still not into sweets. Not into take-aways. Not into junk food. And I’m well past the bullet phase too. What do you know about little yoghurt and almond balls, Trish?’ I was hoping she might break into an ode to the yoghurt balls à la Shelley that might spare me or at least postpone the disclosure I’m really not that keen to make.

‘Nothing at all but the yoghurt word makes it sound like a marginal improvement. So, before you manage to totally drown the fish and get me side-tracked, Em,’ she grinned, obviously pleased with her use of the French expression I had taught her so many years earlier. *Noyer le poisson*, to drown the fish. Not an easy thing to do, contriving the most creative of ways to avoid saying what has to be said, all the while hoping the thing will just ... drown out of sight ... out of thought. ‘Why don’t you get on with that new weakness of yours?’

OK. I’ve been found out. Time to dive in. ‘That’s the thing. Nothing *new*. Same old, same old. Just more of my usual bundle of insecurities.’

‘As in the fear of getting old on your own?’ she asked.

‘Umm. That’s a big one. Hate that one. Just thinking about it depresses me.’

‘Well, there you go. Goes to show how much you need to pull back. You need to give yourself thinking time.’

But I don’t like thinking on my own any more than I have to. ‘Yes, well, we’ve already covered that, you and me. I can’t pull the plug like you have. I don’t want to.’

‘You don’t have to pull the plug. What you need is to realign yourself on things that matter and ditch the rest.’

‘Not getting old alone is a thing that matters to me.’

‘Matters to me, too.’

‘Does it?’ I am dubious. ‘Then how come you’ve given up on sex?’

‘Oh, Em, that’s primitive thinking. Where’s the bloody correlation? You do know better than that,’ Trish exclaimed, as I knew she would.

‘Do I?’

For some obscure reason a part of me had decided to have the rest of me play dumb. Maybe if I played dumb now, I wouldn’t be expected to make much sense later when I’d be explaining about Tamara.

‘You do. You know that *not* to be lonely, all you need is companionship. You do know that, don’t you?’

‘Yes, I do know that,’ I admitted grudgingly.

‘So, what’s your problem? If you’re fretting about old age companionship, don’t. When you turn sixty, we pool our money together. We buy ourselves a bigger boat. I’ll even let you bring your laptop onboard and whatever generator, dish or satellite you might need for your ‘net connection. By then a phone line won’t even be needed at all. Just bring onboard whatever it’ll take to keep you sane while I meditate and carry on with my yoga.’

‘Yes, I know we can do that ... later. But for *now*, companionship includes making love—’

‘Right. I know that’s still very important to you. Wish you’d outgrow that phase though.’

‘I know you do. But I’m *not* trying to outgrow it. Anyway, on that topic, Trish, there’s something I want to tell you but ... you’re making this difficult.’

‘How so?’

‘Well, what you’ve just said ... and because I know you’ll dismiss me. I know you’ll tell me I should take up yoga instead—’

‘As you should. Come on, Em,’ she cajoled, ‘tell me anyway. What’s up on the heart side of your world? That’s what it’s about, isn’t it, something to do with your heart?’

I nodded and introduced Trish to the abstract notion of Alex and to the concrete notion of Tamara. I told her how the three of us had met, as luck would have it, on a night my car had been towed away but I focused on Alex first.

By the way Trish was looking at me while I was trying to describe Alex-the-person and all about Alex to her, I could tell that she was ready for the news that Alex and I had become an item, as the colloquial expression goes.

An item. How weird, we used to say to each other, how can two of anything become one. And why 'item' as in *object*? Which one of the two had to get lost to end up with only one where two had previously existed? The thing is, neither Trish nor I ever submitted to the common notion that, to be happy in a relationship, the 'two' need to morph into one. Which one, or which half of each? we used to ask in wonder at the idiosyncrasies of just popular values.

'OK, Em. Stop beating around the bush. You made love, right?' she asked dryly. 'Say again, when did you meet?'

'About a month ago.'

'A month ago,' she repeated with a deadpan expression. 'Why didn't you tell me over the phone?' She looked hurt. I had been about to answer her when she continued, 'A month and then what ... it's already forever?'

I knew why Trish's mindworks had misled her. *If* Tamara hadn't been in the picture at all, Alex and I would certainly have made love already. I'm sure, too, that in between love bouts, we'd already be flat out establishing all sorts of personal boundaries, just to make sure each was clearly compartmentalised independently of any coital glow.

I'm sure both of us would've been keen to make sure that desire, lust, discovery and a sexual immersion didn't, later, unduly perturb the order and the personal freedom we have, long ago, organised as part of our separate lives' priorities and end up blotting our new landscape.

‘Right, so you haven’t made love with this too-good-to-be-true person. Just as well, you know. Last thing you bloody need is oblivion into somebody else’s nucleus. So, what’s the catch? I know you’re up to something, I mean, like in your heart. I knew the moment you opened the door and said hello. Now, if it’s not about this Alex person, then, what’s making you feel ... like all droopy and sick inside?’

I blinked and The Gnomes stirred. What did she know about how droopy I was feeling inside, huh? Am I not the Mistress of Disguised Turmoil?

‘Hold on, let me ask differently. Why the controlled but despondent little state you’re in?’

I frowned at her tempted, as I was, to go on playing dumb and ask, Like how? What state you talking about? But I opted not to push my luck.

‘When you get like that, Em, I know it’s not a work problem. I know it’s not anything *that* reasonable. The one thing you can’t handle well is that heart of yours. So, what other woman have you wrapped yourself into a knot about?’

I breathed in. It was bite-the-bullet time. *Rien n’va plus* at the Roulette table. *Les jeux sont faits*. The chips are down.

‘I told you I had met *two* women, right? Alex and Tamara.’

‘I’ve been listening. But I ... Oh, no. Please, Em, tell me you’re not involved with the young one. Are you?’

I nodded.

‘Oh, heavens preserve! You really do need to grow up.’

And I explained the attraction though Trish remained uncompromisingly closed as a clam as I had walked her through The Kiss at the Botanic Garden. And The Kiss at the South Bank Parklands. And by the time I told her Tamara and I had finally made love, she was about to howl at the moon, as I knew she would be. So I let her howl. When she was all howled out, she looked at me with her serious face.

C. C. Saint-Clair

‘Em, tell me, have you followed anything I’ve been talking about lately?’

‘When?’

‘Now, here, tonight and during the last what, five years?’

‘I listened to most of what you’ve been saying for the past years. And tonight, yes, I listened mostly to the parts that concerned you. Why?’

‘But you haven’t been listening to what I’ve been saying *about you?*’

‘Well, I’ve been hearing you say what I already know myself, you know, in there,’ I tapped the side of my head.

‘And?’

‘And what?’

‘And how further are you going to entrenching yourself in this totally unhealthy—no, can’t even call it a relationship, can I? Oh, look,’ she continued, almost in a despondent state herself, ‘Don’t take me wrong here. Of course I can understand why a young one like this Tamara would be attracted *to you*. That’s not where I see the problem. But really, either young Tamara wants a surrogate mother for reasons best known to her or, *that young*, she’s not likely to be interested in a relationship. Even if she was, I’m sure her idea of a relationship and yours might be a bit ... different. Look,’ she added, dropping both hands flat on the tabletop with a big sigh, ‘I just think you should know better, that’s all.’

‘Relax, I do know better. But that doesn’t—’

‘Of course, if you were the freewheeling type, that’d be cool. But Emilie, you’re not the freewheeling type at all. You’ve never been the freewheeling type. You’re the worrywart type. Everything the other might or *might not* say or do becomes so important to you. Too important. It swallows you up. You’ve been defining yourself around the response, or lack of response, you get from the other. I mean, that young

one, if she's half as ... interesting as you say, she'll have you ...'

I could suggest the word 'humming,' but I know it's not the kind of word Trish is looking for.

'You'll end up scattering yourself, your energies, your anxiety all over the place. Hey, we've been through a lot, you and me. We're mates. I can tell you these things, right?'

'Uh, yes. I guess.' I already know she is right. I am already *scattered* all over the place.

'What'd you mean, "I guess?"'

'No, I don't guess, I know. You're right. I'm already in knots about this and it hasn't really begun yet. We only made love twice and—'

'Twice?'

'Yesterday.'

'What, twice yesterday or twice including yesterday?' she asked almost playfully, almost in spite of herself.

'Including yesterday.'

'So what's your plan?'

'My plan?' I asked blinking before I remembered that I did have a plan. My plan is the personal work I've assigned myself since I last saw Tamara and all of today while waiting for Trish. Trying not to think of Tamara too often is an important strategy in my plan. It's just that I haven't had time to come up with anything else. 'All right, just listen. You go on about how I need to involve myself with the world out there and how, maybe as an offshoot, I've become too introspective during the past couple of years and how I need to become ... more emotionally something or other—'

'Self-reliant.'

'Right. Self-reliant. So, what if I tried to remedy *one* of these ... shortcomings ... I mean, what if I found a way to be cool about this thing with Tam ... with Tamara.'

'Cool about love? You?'

'Yes, me, cool. I didn't say I was. Just said what if.'

‘OK, what’s your angle?’

‘My angle?’ I already knew the whole project would sound simplistic. ‘Well, it’s simple, isn’t it? All I have to do is learn to have sex.’

‘Scuse me?’ Trish’s eyes rounded in genuine surprise.

‘I need to learn to *have sex*.’

‘Yeah, that’s what I thought you said. But meaning what exactly?’

‘Having sex, as opposed to making love. Oh hell ... ’ I said blushing, frustration mounting. The memory of Tamara’s convoluted explanation in regards to the merits of having sex versus those of making love was confusing the different argument I had intended presenting to Trish: that of practising making love with no sequel in mind. With no tomorrows, no films, no coffees, no walks in the Botanic Gardens. Focusing instead on the real eventuality of no further contact as a short-term outcome. So I started again.

‘What I mean is screwing around without pushing the ... the envelope, without any expectations *beyond* sex. To indulge simply because having sex feels good, particularly ... with Tamara. Trish, I don’t owe anything to anyone. I’m footloose, you see. I’m supposed to be carefree too.’

I tossed the shell I had been fiddling with on the pile of debris. I felt flushed. Roberta had called me footloose and carefree. My being footloose and carefree had frightened her. Irritation was mounting. I could feel it tighten my insides and my face but I knew damn well it was only with myself I was growing impatient.

‘What I mean, Trish, is that through my involvement with Tamara I could make myself learn to disassociate sexual pleasure, healthy sensual pleasure and ... and ... well disassociate that from ... ’

‘From what?’ Trish ran her hand over the stubble on her head. Raking her fingers through her dark brown hair has always been the signal that she is getting annoyed. The same

gesture over a shaved head doesn't look as dramatic, but the message it conveys is the same. 'If you can't even say *it*, Em, if you can't articulate the bloody thing, it's doubtful you'll be able to do whatever it is you're on about.'

'I know.'

I did know and that was why I was irritated. I could see that I was lacking the clarity of thought that I needed to carry out my intention. I was waffling. 'I didn't say I was quite there, did I? All I said was that I'd be *trying* to achieve that through my involvement with Tamara,' I clarified too sharply.

For the first time since she had arrived I felt the need to inhale deeply. Breathe. I knew Trish was right.

'I'd like to be able to do that. I'd like to get to that spot. I think it'd be a good way for me to practise a little emotional independence,' I reiterated more gently, but I was still waffling. 'OK, let's try again. I want to learn to disassociate sex and making love from ...' I looked at Trish feeling somewhat deflated. She wasn't going to help me out, that much was clear. I could tell by the way she was looking at me, by the way she was remaining quiet, by the still focus of her brown eyes. She was waiting for me to either dig myself in or claw my way out.

Objectively, I didn't know myself which I'd end up doing most convincingly. She was right. If I didn't know how to express in one or two clear sentences what I had in mind to achieve, how on earth was I going to make it happen? Affirmations need to precede realisations. Any fool knows that, right? Even the youngest of children know how to formulate a wish upon a twinkling star. Or on a falling star.

I began again keeping a twinkling star tightly focused in my mind's eye.

'Trish, look, it's simple really. At the ripe old age of forty-six and a half, I want to learn how to have sex ...' Trish rolled her eyes in despair. 'I mean, how to have sex and let

go. You see, I still want to have sex, lovely, *wonderful*, exhilarating, *lustful* sex with another woman.' Had I added the long string of superfluous adjectives to bait Trish? Not nice. Bad girl, Emilie. 'So, letting go for me will mean not focusing much ... by ... not focusing *anything* on her, on Tamara. I could learn to retain my own emotional autonomy without curling up inside prematurely and systematically saying no to ... to temptation. There. I said it. Clear enough?' I asked, proud of myself.

'Clear? Uh, yeah, clear. You want pleasurable mechanics, no emotional involvement. Cool. But, my question's still the same. *How are you* going to do that?'

'By taking up yoga?' I asked, to inject a little humour into the conversation, to put a faint smile on Trish's lips.

And so we had gone on and on, Trish and I, around and across, over even, the situation of my being in love, no, not *being in love*, that expression's already too tying. It's too binding for someone like me. Love.

Love has expectation. For the situation, evolving out of my attraction to Tamara, to be positive, it has to remain devoid of any heart-anything-muddle that spins me into unnecessary expectations. Expectations are what make one like me vulnerable to emotional muddle. I need to indulge and I need to not merge. And not get muddled.

'OK, look. I hear you,' Trish had finally said. 'Hey, who am I to say that you can't make that work in your favour? More power to you, that's all. My bet is that you're only going to ... no, sorry.' Her hands flash up. 'I don't mean that. What I do mean, though, is that I'm afraid you're going to establish a learning curve on a hard... on too hard a topic. Know what I mean? Especially if young Tamara is as ... as endearing as you say. Even now, after what, one week? You're already feeling crumpled. What's going to snap into place, for you, like between now and *next* week?'

Good question but it was then that I suggested that, instead of being defeatist on my behalf, if I brought out another bottle of Moondah Brook, Trish might want to tell me more about her own pursuit and *her* way of working towards her goals. I had hoped she'd have an insight *beyond* the clearing of my chakras through yoga. *Besides*, no matter how many Salutations to the Sun I might do, I'd never get a Yoga butt.

I thought, too, that later on that night, or at any rate before she went back on board Dancing Light, I'd run past her my readiness to get involved with the community through voluntary work of one sort or another. That, I knew, would put a proper and firm smile back on her lips. *That* would make her smile that crooked-little-tooth smile of hers. And I did. And it did. That's how I got to meet Jill Mason.

Trish had considered my plan to talk further into the night and then she nodded. As we both got up to clear the table, she stood up and came to stand in front to me. We reached for each other simultaneously.

Trish is the shortest woman I've ever loved. She's only five two and I used to tease her by saying that our hugging was never a fair thing as I, inevitably, ended up hugging more of her than she ever could of me. Her staple response to that was that centimetre for centimetre she knew how to concentrate more hugging power than I ever could. So we did what we still do best together, Trish and I. We had hugged from the heart. We had hugged in friendship.

Sixtzen (Jill's story)

So Jill sits in her corner, her hands flat on the navy blue of her skirt. The white button, the one closest to her neck on her white blouse, is buttoned tight. White and navy blue. The colours of formality. White for nurses. Blue for the police. Navy blue and white, the colour of uniforms for airline pilots and the colour of the uniform of women going to court. Of some women. Of the ones who pray that others who have authority will bestow justice upon them.

I've seen more women dressed in white blouses and navy blue suits since I've entered the foyer of this courthouse building than anywhere else in the past years. Men, here, wear brown or grey suits with white shirts. Regardless of the exact colour of their shirts or suits, most men wear straightforward, no-nonsense, navy blue ties. I wonder if judges and magistrates yearn for a little more colour in their courtroom. My own black linen jacket and slacks combination is not likely to enliven anyone's room. But again my fuschia-pink shirt might be too bright. Maybe I should've worn a white shirt too, or a grey one. Maybe a courtroom isn't meant to be a place where bright and cheerful colours come together and clash in a happy display. Maybe I should button the first button too. Just to look the part by Jill Mason's side.

When I had told Tamara of Trish's idea, she had smiled. She had hugged me saying that Trish, whom she still hasn't meet, had had a great idea. And I had hugged Trish when, in answer to my question, she had come up with the idea that since the 'new person' in my life was into the DV business, I might find a way to make myself useful in that area.

'She's absolutely right.' Tamara had said, 'We already have Alex concerned about the Taliban Women's plight or the African child-slavery routes that, like, touch more girls, you know, with unpaid domestic work and prostitution. And

with the Indian and Chinese who abort their female foetuses, and all that. It's all good and well, but there's very little you guys can do to alleviate any of these problems.' Tamara had sat up on the deckchair. 'Now, getting involved, even if only at the local DV scene, that'll make a real difference to one real woman. I mean, like, to a woman you get to meet. And you see the pain in her eyes and all. I think that's really what keeps me focused in that particular area of social work, the pain in their eyes.'

I had told Trish about Alex's knowledge of worldwide women's issues and how conversations with her energise me as well as make me feel guilty of my lethargy. Guilty for my apathy, for my laziness at getting involved beyond the occasional book or the occasional articles in *Time* magazine. And Trish had reacted in a manner similar to Tamara's.

'Why throw your energies about far and wide, Em?' Trish had asked. 'If you want to get involved, why don't you concern yourself with what's happening in Brisbane, right here, under your nose?'

That had come at the end of our crab night, the conversation had, by then, returned to Tamara. And to the work, I had explained to Trish, she was doing at the local DV Services. And so I had imagined myself in the heroic situation of responding to a woman's frantic phone call on the Help Line. And there I'd be driving in the middle of the night, with a couple of co-workers, to an unknown address in the far side of town. We'd front up to the house from where screams and the slamming of doors could be heard a block down. We'd arrive to rescue the woman who would have locked herself in the garage to make her call. So we'd arrive in time to whisk her out of her own home while the unsuspecting violent party was taking a leak somewhere else in the house. And so, we would bundle the woman into my vehicle and drive her at break-neck speed to a safe house while we'd try our best to reassure her that all would be well.

Lady Gwenevyr and her Charger to the rescue of the damsels in distress, me, who had never known any kind of physical pain greater than menstrual pain and cyclic bouts of migraines—and no emotional pain greater than, as a young child, having found my little black cat dead in the gutter. That and the more recent pain that had descended upon me as a result of having lost Roberta, though Roberta had never been mine to keep in the first place.

Tamara had quickly burst that romantic rescue bubble. As she had explained, one problem in terms of my voluntary help was that the Services didn't work with volunteers. Neither did the refuges. Situations were known to erupt, in often unpredictable ways, in such highly charged situations as matrimonial disharmony, and child custody. The common feeling amongst the co-ordinators, such as Tamara and her Queensland colleagues, was that untrained volunteers shouldn't be used in potentially volatile situations. If one was going to risk being insulted, hurt, or assaulted, possibly with serious consequences, one should at least be on the Queensland Health payroll. And trained to be vigilant and proactive.

'Remember, here in Brisbane,' Tamara had explained, 'workers don't intervene directly. All our strategies, at the Services, have evolved around non-endangering of the staff. No one, in any capacity, is likely to get caught in a crossfire between victim and offender.'

Tamara had reminded me that for many women, there were places far more dangerous than deserted alleyways and badly lit parking lots. Many were at risk in the sanctuary of their own home. That was because the man most likely to torment a woman wasn't necessarily the dreaded stranger who leaps out from a nearby bush. And I had thought, Just like the man who abuses his daughter, or the brother his sister. These males don't jump up from behind a bush either.

'Anyway,' Tamara had said, 'back to you.'

I had already noticed that when Tamara talked about her work she was totally focused. She doesn't smile much. She doesn't get side-tracked. I noticed, too, that she kept her hands flat on her thighs. That's when she wasn't either reclining on the deckchair or sitting up as she was at the time.

'If you really want to get involved,' she had said, 'it's like the only way I can see to get you in. You need to get involved within the framework of our Court Support programme. And even in that area,' she had added, 'the number of volunteers we have at the moment is about to come under consideration.'

And so, I had been surprised to discover that, even if one wanted to get involved locally, one's enthusiasm was quickly curbed by restrictions and limitations.

'Well, you've got to understand that the courtroom business can also be very explosive. It's a closed court, it's a civil court, but the approach to security is so very different from that in places that handle criminal cases. In fact, it's like so different, there isn't any security system in place. And that's so seriously wrong. It's only a matter of time before something, like, you know, the Port Arthur thing happens in there. I mean, like a hostage situation with a nightmare ending. You see, that's also where the Family Courts are.'

That evening, the evening that had followed Trish's return to her boat, Tamara had gone on explaining, though I didn't need to hear it, that some offenders, in family court issues where matters of child custody and maintenance are often on the agenda, had killed their partners in full view of witnesses. Others, she added, had more considerately turned a weapon against themselves in the privacy of the toilet block.

I had looked at her. She was serious and she did move on to explain that such acts in Brisbane were statistically less frequent than shark attacks on the beaches of New South

Wales, which in turn were much less frequent than air traffic accidents anywhere.

Tamara had scooted a little more to the edge of her lounge chair, bringing her knees closer to me. She lay her hand on my thigh. My heart didn't lurch. Instead an electric-white flare had zipped, as it often seemed to, diagonally from my groin to an area behind my heart. I leaned my head back and breathed in. She smiled with her green-cat eyes.

'Hey,' she had said finally, 'I wouldn't want you to be at risk when you go there. You know what? Hey, tell you what! On your first intervention as a Court Support volunteer, I'll come and pick you up from the courts. We'll hang around downtown and celebrate. My shout. Deal?' she had asked, all infused with her own enthusiasm.

'Absolutely. Deal!'

I had slid her hand a little higher up my thigh, closer to my hipbone. As it happened her thumb found its place right against my crotch, right against the thick seam of my jeans. She let it settle there against the thick cloth but she breathed in. And she held on to her breath. Tamara and I would be making love soon. Very soon.

But before that, we had agreed that, in spite of the anti-volunteer state of things I, as an untrained volunteer social worker, should still get involved in that assisting role. Tamara said that I could help by just being around. I could be of help to some of the victims as they went to the Brisbane Courts, for a hearing in front of a magistrate, in front of their abusive partner, to get their Protection Order. Once in the Safe Room, I could make cups of tea or coffee for the complainant. I could bring her glasses of water while she fretted and waited for her name to be called. I could explain the court procedure to her, I could reassure her that all would be well, if she looked flustered by the formality of it all. I could explain the process that she might face during the hearing and brief her on the type of questions the magistrate might

ask her, knowing that he might not ask her anything. I could also help her in formulating some of her answers in a way that perhaps might be clearer to a third party. She and I could also run through some survival strategies to keep her steady in her testimony, should her abuser become imperceptibly intimidating, in a manner that only she might recognise as such.

Two days later, Tamara had arranged a first get-acquainted introductory meeting between Jill Mason and myself. And I had met Jill Mason in the backroom of a little neighbourhood coffee shop that she had nominated for the occasion.

By the time I managed to find a parking place, Tamara and the woman, whom I knew to be the victim, were already chatting over their drinks. Chatting. Oh, I had thought, dismayed as I made my way through to the backroom, I had forgotten about chatting as a necessary step towards establishing a rapport. I was already tensing up at the mere thought of the struggle of coming up with acceptable rejoinders and breezy connectors. Tamara had looked up, seen me, and had added something to the woman seated across from her. Jill Mason turned to look in my direction.

Seventeen

On the Monday after Trish left, I finally decided to make the one important phone call that I had managed to postpone thus far. Having postponed it for over a week, I was clearly feeling guilty about my procrastination. So, early in the afternoon to stack the odds in favour of *not* finding her at home I had finally called Alex from my mobile phone, from the parking lot of the institute, away from walls that may well have ears. I had punched her number planning to leave a message suggesting we should meet soon, anywhere, and touch base.

The moment I heard her say, ‘Hullo,’ my brain sputtered and choked. It became unresponsive. It crashed. The one thing that did flash and strobe behind my eyes was, Disconnect! Disconnect! Oddly though, seeing as my entire brain felt like it had seized, I knew that I shouldn’t disconnect that call. I became aware of the distant sound of the traffic. On her second *hullo?* more inquisitive than the first, visualising the dark frown settling over her dark eyes, I managed to voice that it was me, Emilie, calling.

Her tone had been light when she said something like, ‘Oh, Emilie, long time no hear from you.’ That unusual rejoinder, her intentional play with the idiom, slowed me down again, but we eventually got into a little conversational rhythm, a rhythm of sorts. That was until, unexpectedly, she threw in, ‘You have been seeing a bit of young Tam, lately, haven’t you?’

What little rhythm developed while we had exchanged warm-up platitudes about the pleasantness of the seasonal weather and a little something about work, hers and mine, and another little something regarding the state of repair of either of our cars, whatever little momentum we had had

going ended far more abruptly than a CD on the last note of the last track.

‘Tam? Uh ... I ... Yes ... not really.’ My voice was losing tone. A car that had just entered the parking lot rolled past me. A midnight blue Toyota. ‘I mean, not more than before. I mean, since we met ...’ Thoughts slid and skittled inside my head. Breathe. Inhale, I urged myself. ‘I mean ...’

On the third ‘I mean’ my brain finally turned over again and kicked in, freeing me to break into the purpose of my call. ‘Yes, I’ve been seeing a bit of her too, yes ... lately.’ I struggled to inject a little breeze into my words.

‘As luck would have it.’

And that cryptic answer from her, not at all one of the few retorts I had scrambled to prepare for, made me stumble. What did she mean by, As luck would have it? Luck is so open to interpretation. Had it been good luck or bad luck that had put Tamara across my path? Had Alex regretted having helped me out that night my car had been towed away, the night we met?

If I had felt in control of my voice, of my thoughts and words, I would’ve asked her to clarify. Instead, I let another odd silence filter through the line. The midnight-blue Toyota slid quietly into a parking slot. It stood still. I could see Alex’s frown as she listened to the silence of my comeback. I could see her as clearly as if she were standing in front of me. I saw her in her loose daffodil-yellow shirt.

‘Emilie?’ I heard her call through the earpiece.

‘Uh, yes. Sorry ... I was just thinking. About Tamara, yes. As I said, I haven’t seen her more but yes, I’ve been seeing her ... differently. I mean in a different way. Uh, look, Alex—’

‘Emilie, you’re struggling with something here,’ I heard her say.

Oh, groan. A perceptive woman!

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‘I know you can speak English quite fluently,’ she said, a chuckle underlying her words. ‘I’ve heard you do it, time and time again.’

Oh, great. She’s having me on.

‘Look, let me help you,’ she offered, once again serious. ‘I think you’re searching for a creative way in which to tell me that the two of you have finally got it on, you and Tam, yes?’

‘Uh, yes ... Yes, I am. Uh ... I was.’

A car door slammed. An alarm coughed twice. I glanced in the direction of the midnight-blue car. A tall woman dressed in a business suit was walking towards me, towards the entrance of the building, one hand holding a briefcase, the other dropping her keys in the dark handbag that dangled from her shoulder.

‘Ah well. That’s fine,’ Alex said flatly.

I was unprepared for such a short, such a simple, cool utterance. When the woman came level to me she slowed down as if she was going to stop and talk to me. I averted my eyes. I was struggling for a way to tell Alex of my deep-seated wish that she and I could still keep in touch.

The woman hesitated. She smiled. I looked at her blankly, the phone tight against my ear. I wanted to add a little something else, a little something that Alex would perceive as positive and clever. The woman walked up the steps and went through the sliding doors of the entrance. I breathed out.

Unable to come up with a clever little rejoinder, I breached the silence with something like, ‘Well, I would’ve liked to talk to you about this ... uh ... sooner but, hey, you sound like you know all about it anyway.’

I had asked Tamara not to mention us to Alex. I had told her that I’d prefer to be the one to tell her about it. Tamara had blinked and raised her eyebrows in a silent Why?

Tamara had suggested that it really was up to her to tell Alex.

‘Oh my, oh my! Uh ... yes, Alex,’ Tamara had been playful. ‘Yes, Alex, Emilie and I, we’ve made love and, yes, it *still* feels good. Like each time is better than good,’ she had added with that Cheshire cat grin of hers. More seriously she had suggested that she was overdue for *a little* coming-into-her-own chat with Alex. She thought that she really should have spoken to her about us earlier. Tamara had gone on to explain that she hadn’t wanted to tell Alex that we had ‘screwed’ around (her words), not until we had screwed around at least a couple of times. It seemed that her hesitation had something to do with not confirming Alex’s impression that, no matter what she said, Tamara was still a tad flighty.

‘Beyond that,’ she had added casually, ‘it’s not like it’s going to matter much to her either way.’

‘Except that she might actually be relieved to get you off her back, you know, how you press her to get out and ... mingle.’

‘Hey, it’s not like I plan on getting *off* her back at all. The fact that you and I are together only ... ’

The You-and-I-are-together thing had filled me with an unreasonable surge of contentment, a momentary peace of mind. I had remained quiet.

Tamara looked at me again, a little frown settling on her brow. ‘Oh, I know,’ she had finally exclaimed. ‘You feel funny about it because of that fish thing, the snapper I told you about? Like how I thought Alex had a thing for you because she had cooked up a feast?’

I nodded.

Tamara continued, ‘Well, thing is she never said anything about it. Like not one word. I thought I could put two and two together at the time, but the thing is I can’t be right every time,’ Tamara had added with a shrug of her shoulders.

‘Besides, it would’ve been weird for you, if I had been right, like having both of us breathing down your neck, and all.’

I nodded slowly. It had, indeed, felt a little weird but I wouldn’t have said that ‘breathing down my neck’ was how it had felt when Alex and I lost ourselves in that one all-engulfing kiss.

I felt Tamara had been waiting for me to say something witty or simply funny or simply cute but, already then, I hadn’t known what to say. I could only spin around my head the understanding that Alex, being as private a person as I am, hadn’t shared with Tamara the reason that had compelled her to ring my doorbell that particular afternoon.

It seemed obvious, too, that she hadn’t talked to Tamara about that wonderful and strange time-slide she and I shared in the kitchen. Ringing one’s doorbell is one thing. Getting lost in a head-spinning kiss, is another. And I certainly didn’t wish to betray her silence, her privacy, in any way. So I had remained quiet, aware that, at the time Tamara had told me about that insight of hers that had come with the discovery of the exotic fish remains, I could’ve done a little more myself to suggest to her that she may possibly have been right. That, perhaps, Alex might’ve had a thing for me.

In an attempt at total honesty, I might’ve been compelled to add that *I* could easily have developed a thing for Alex if I hadn’t first developed a thing for her, Tamara. The point is that I could’ve done something to give her a tad more insight. Tamara, then, may have wanted to consider Alex’s budding interest in me before pursuing ... before pushing forward, unaware. I could’ve given her just a keyhole’s worth of insight but, deliberately, I hadn’t.

And so, while Tamara was expecting me to say something simply witty, simply funny or simply cute, I had simply sighed. I had sighed to exhale stale thoughts on matters that couldn’t be re-routed. I inhaled to push fresh air deep inside my lungs, as I moved away from Tamara to begin a

search through a many-layered CD rack. I was searching for a specific sound, a sound that would disconnect us from our thoughts. Something like the voice of a counter tenor. Something soothing and disturbingly uplifting like Vivaldi's *Stabat Mater*. Where was the blooming thing?

Too many CDs piled precariously high in different piles all around the sound system. Every stacking slot already taken by hundreds of earlier purchases. As much as the idea is anathema to me, the time might have come to organise the mess following an alphabetical type of logic. A major task: something to do during the next holidays. Or on lonely, long and rainy nights, not that there are too many long and rainy nights here, in this part of the continent.

I felt Tamara's presence behind me. She reached around me to lay her hands flat against my stomach. Pulling me back, right back against her, she asked lightly, 'Em ... you don't know any more about this, do you? Like about when I said that Alex had or ... might have a thing for you?'

I couldn't lie to her. 'Yes, I do. Not much, but yes, I do have more ... reliable info. That's why I'd like to be the one to tell her about us.'

And, maybe to verify that I wasn't joking, Tamara turned me around so as to look straight into my eyes, her hands still loose against my lower back. I had to meet her gaze. She frowned again. Then she dropped her eyes and ran a hand through her hair to back-comb it.

'Oh, shit,' she said quietly. 'I was just, like, guessing when I saw the snapper in her fridge. It's not like I really knew or anything. I didn't even give it a second thought. Not after I mentioned it to you. It was, like, gone and I-' She tucked a hand in the back pocket of her jeans and took a couple of steps backwards. Tamara was wrestling with the concept of loyalty. Which part applied to the case in point, to Alex and her, and which didn't? I let her be. 'Uh ... but then again,' she remembered, 'Alex knew that I was trying to

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get you ... to ... you know, to like, have sex. Already back then.'

And as I stood in the parking lot of the institute, mobile phone against my ear, Alex was saying, 'I only know something's finally happened between the two of you because I know Tam.'

I could've asked, *And what do you mean by that?* She could've answered something biting like, *Easy, Tam's lovely but she'll go after anyone who's a bit attractive, a bit intelligent.* Or she could've said, *Tam has a thing for mature women, so you fit the bill.* Or Alex might simply have said something more neutral attesting to the fact that Tamara hadn't been around her as much these last couple of weeks. Or it was only *absence* she had taken as a sign that something breathless must be happening in her ex-lover's life. Alex could've said these words or any combination thereof.

I simply replied, 'You know her as well as she knows you,' not expecting that Alex would understand what I was referring to.

'*Better* than she knows me. I'm much more observant than she is.'

I didn't think it was the moment to alert Alex to Tamara's amazing deductive powers. I even doubted there'd ever be a time when I'd be mentioning the snapper-in-the-fridge to her.

'Observant but not patient. Well, I wouldn't know ... ' I added awkwardly, aware that what I had just said was only hearsay. 'That's just according to Tam—to Tamara.'

'True, I'm not. She is absolutely right about that. I am not patient.'

I listened to her, my mind racing to come up with a simple, easy access answer and Alex surprised me by adding, 'I am not a patient observer. In fact, I am not a patient anything.' She could've said she was not patient *at* anything, and yet

she chose, yet again, to cast her thought through an unusual, an awkward arrangement of words. As if to tease the ear. My ear. My mind.

‘That is why I am not a birdwatcher,’ she said.

I smiled at that. I like the unpredictability of her firm clear and precise sentence patterns. I find it fun and linguistically liberating. And, as the plastic of the phone was beginning to heat up my ear, I also wondered whether Alex might be trying to explain her presence on my doorstep that other day. She’s not patient, that much she had just said. *Not a patient anything*, which she passed off as the reason she was not a *birdwatcher*. In saying that, ever so casually, had she used that popular colloquialism just to tell me she was not a woman *watcher*? That she was far too impatient by nature to have merely waited for some sign from above, or from me, to see, to notice, or consider the possibility of her attraction to me? Her intention in coming to my house that other crazy day may have been a deliberate attempt to rush things, an action to provoke a reaction. Any reaction.

Mobile phone tight against my ear, I felt totally muddled. How to tell this woman I didn’t know very well how much I appreciated her? How to tell her something deep and meaningful without sounding silly? Without belittling either Tamara or the choice I’ve made to involve myself with her?

‘Look, Emilie,’ Alex began, again in charge of the conversation I had initiated but was not handling well, ‘Tamara is ... Well, Tam is gorgeous.’ She paused.

I held on to my breath.

‘She was already gorgeous when we were together. She was cute and fun to be with and she had an ... an honest disposition.’ Alex paused but I knew by her intonation that she had more to say. ‘I was really cut up when she left. But, I thought the best thing for both of us, at the time, was to cut her loose and let her be. I wanted her to *feel* free while she

... while she was exploring Europe. A year, the year that she had planned to stay away, is a long time.'

Indeed, I thought, a year can be a very long time.

'She has matured a lot during her time away. Three years on her own, out there, doing the backpacking thing.' She paused again. 'Look, my point is that ... she's still ... how should I say ... Well, she *is* cute. And she still has that honest and sunny disposition. I am very fond of Tam. I enjoy watching her grow up and mature but ... ' Alex sighed into the phone. 'Our time is up.'

Our time is up. I blinked on her words though I realised she hadn't intended any double entendre. *Our* time, hers and mine, was up, too, but before it had even begun. An atrophied bud. Early frost.

'Our time was up some four years ago,' she continued. 'It was up when I drove her to the airport with that big tote bag of hers, and the pair of Trailblazers I had just bought her already on her feet.'

I think Alex chuckled at the memory. Or maybe it was a snort that I heard. It might have been a snort of derision.

'So, anyway, what I'm trying to say to you, Emilie, is that you could do worse if it is your karma to get involved with someone younger. Much younger.'

Again, I sensed that Alex's pause did not signify she had reached the end of her thoughts. And with a sigh she added, 'Anyway, everything is fair in affairs of sex and war.'

Again, I noticed she hadn't said '*en amour comme à la guerre*' as is commonly said in French. She hadn't said in *matters of love*.

'She's probably all you say she is but she's still so young,' I answered flatly because that was all that came to my mind.

'You can't have it both ways, Emilie. *You* should know that. You can't have that youthful funkiness from an older woman. From her, from an older woman, you would have expected or wished for something else.'

My heart lurched. There was a crackle on the line. I strained to catch all of Alex's words. Was she suggesting that I would've gotten that *something else* if I had chosen to connect with her? Longevity, as in a mature understanding of love? Of the kind of love that grows and seeps deep into one's bones? I didn't ask.

So Alex continued, 'It just depends what you are more ... receptive to, at any one particular moment. You know, the old strawberries versus peaches dilemma? Which is the nicer fruit?'

'Alex, I do like you.'

That was the very least I could say. I would have liked to say more, much more. I would have liked to acknowledge my attraction to her. I would've liked to ... but all the great thoughts that flooded through my brain later on that afternoon were, at the time I had needed them the most ... these thoughts had been as cowardly as I had been. They just hadn't been there for me, not when I had needed them most.

'I like you, too, Emilie,' Alex had answered firmly. 'And that is good. Look,' she added ever so much more in control than I was, 'I do very much enjoy our after-movie conversations and so on. Besides, as things stand at the moment, I don't have a surplus of friends who, uh, get into the kind of stuff I like. Maybe you know what I mean.'

I knew what she meant. 'It's a bit like that for me, too.'

'I used to have a wonderful friend up to a couple years ago. Selene was her name. But while I wasn't watching, while I was in France, she ... she spirited herself away with her new woman and went bush. To avoid further disappointments, I suspect. Her reasoning was that if one ensconces oneself, out of sight, with everything one needs to hibernate, one is less likely to—Uh, never mind, that's another story. Anyway, Selene now lives somewhere near Emerald. She attends all the local camel races. Hard to imagine. It's just about the desert out there, right? And well, we just don't see much of

each other anymore. And on the phone, it's just not the same at all. The phone does not really work for me. Not for the deep and meaningful conversations. Not when I need non verbals to clue me in.' I sensed a smile in her voice when she said, 'In fact, this conversation we're having at the moment, Emilie, is one of the longest I have cared to have in a long time, as in sight unseen, *au téléphone*. So ... yes, there you have it. No reasons to drop out of sight, right?'

'Right.'

Was she suggesting we could step away from a movie-coffee acquaintanceship and slide into a proper friendship of sorts?

'Anyway, we could also swap stories.'

'About?'

'Tell you what. How about you give me the low-down on Roberta and you and—'

'Hey, what do you know about me and Roberta?'

'Just that, just the name. Tam mentioned that whatever had happened with this woman had been your most ... fresh ... heartache. And Tam would have mentioned—'

'Adrienne? That sexy lawyer-lover of yours in Paris? Uh ... I mean, that's what Tamara said about her.'

'Well, there you go. And what else did Tam think she could afford to say on the matter?'

'Nothing, just that. And that you've been far too much on your own ever since you came back from ... since your return from that. From Adrienne. From Paris.'

'That's Tam for you. Talks too much.'

'Maybe.' I visualised Tamara as she had stood on my doorstep, bright and at ease with herself. Unencumbered. And I had to add, 'But, obviously, she also knows when to stop talking and be discreet. She obviously hasn't revealed an awful lot to eith—'

'True.'

‘Hey, Alex,’ I said, suddenly breathing more freely, thinking more freely, ‘Has she ever told you what she thinks of us? Of you and me?’

‘As in ... ’

‘As in how similar we are?’

‘Uh ... no. I don’t recall she said anything in particular. I know she thinks you and I have a lot in common as the expression goes but I don’t–’

‘She thinks you and I carry on like DZs.’

‘As in dizygotics?’

‘As in.’

Alex was quiet but only for a second, then her laugh travelled through to the earpiece. Surprised, I moved the receiver away from my ear to look at it, to peer into it. I smiled.

‘ ... can see why she wouldn’t have told *me* any of that,’ Alex was saying, ‘I would have made short shrift of her.’

‘That’s pretty much what she said you would’ve done.’

Very soon after, while on the edge of an easy note, one of us had engaged the other in the conversational wind-down procedure and then, with a sigh, I had punched the off button and slipped the mobile back in my pocket. Going up the steps towards the sliding door, I noticed the tall woman in the business suit. She and I stood briefly on either side of the sliding door waiting for the sensor to register our presence. She had dark hair and a narrow face. As the doors finally slid open, she smiled a tentative smile. I politely smiled back and crossed the lobby towards the lift.

Eighteen (Jill's story)

Tamara had stood up as I neared the table. 'Jill, this is Emilie Anderson. Emilie, Jill Mason.'

I had hesitated unsure whether to shake Jill Mason's hand as most Brisbane women do not handshake in greeting. But because I do, I did. Jill Mason met my outstretched hand with a firm grip of her own. I liked that initial contact. Nothing worse in terms of first introductions than a damp and limp hand. I sat on a vacant seat on Jill Mason's right, leaving Tamara across from the two of us.

'Emilie, is it?'

I nodded before replying, 'Glad to meet you.'

Fleetingly, I considered adding, as people do at funerals, 'Though I wish it were under different circumstances, but I didn't add that. I did, however, pull my eyes away from Jill Mason's swollen and very busted lip.'

Tamara looked at me with a quiet little smile that I wasn't yet acquainted with.

'Emilie, I was just saying a little something about you to Jill, you know, the usual background stuff.'

I looked at her blankly.

Jill Mason swivelled on her chair to face me more squarely. And again I found it difficult to force my eyes away from her lip so I let them float quickly over the other greenish and purple bruise that ran from her left eye to cover her cheekbone.

'Oh, and,' Tamara added as an afterthought, 'I've also told her a little about your work at the institute. So now, it's time to talk shop, if it's OK with you.'

'Sure, that's what we're here for,' I replied with a quiet little smile of my own. Tamara would know how to interpret.

Oh, how sweet of her, is what I thought. By giving Jill Mason my basic info herself, Tamara had spared me the

process of getting acquainted through chitchat. Alex and I, Tamara has decided, just don't have *that* ease with strangers. She's totally right. Alex and I are socially flawed. We should be made to spend our summer holidays in a remedial program for socially-challenged-older-dykes, should there be more of us out there, until we graduated with a diploma in Basic Sociability and the Art of Making Small Talk.

'Now, I have to tell you, Jill, this is my first ... my very first go at being a Court Support—'

'Oh yes, Tamara said that.' Jill Mason looked at me thoughtfully. She had soulful blue eyes. Soulful eyes should probably be brown and large and maybe a little misty. But hers are not so large. In fact they droop on the outside corners. They droop into a web of greenish-purple wrinkles. All the same, just as clearly as they are blue, her eyes are soulful. Her natural hair colour might be closer to grey than blonde but most of her hair is blonde. It's just that the roots around her temples look more silvery than blonde.

'It's very kind of you to give up some of your time—'

'Oh not at all,' I broke in, not wishing for Jill Mason to construe my motivation as serious altruism and I didn't want her to feel like a charity case. 'I just hope I can be of some help to you when the time comes.'

'You'll do just fine.'

Jill Mason's eyes were steady. Her entire persona was steady. I imagined a wreck of a woman with a teary voice, kneading a handkerchief. But Jill Mason's overall demeanour didn't suggest an outright helplessness. Nothing about her suggested that her mission in life had been to be her husband's punching bag. Jill Mason didn't wear the cloak of a victim about her. She was a survivor, maybe even a survivor with an attitude.

Only the swollen crack on her bottom lip and the purplish marbled shadow that originated from the corner of her left eye marked her as a woman on the receiving end of

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something very nasty, but not necessarily her husband's fist. Maybe it is that Jill Mason is well practised at concealing her pain, I had thought at the time.

Now, as we wait to go before the Magistrate, I know she hides her pain where she thinks no one will be likely to find it. *Behind* her eyes. In Jill Mason's case I decided that her soulful blue irises reflect the pain she has stored and stacked high behind them, over too many years.

Back in that coffee shop, Tamara had quickly brought me *au fait* as to what she had already explained to Jill Mason in terms of the little role I could play on her behalf. I nodded and took that as my cue to insert myself in the conversation.

So before moving on to the topic of her testimony, I had explained a little about the hearing procedure in the Magistrate's Court. 'And so, the Police Prosecutor will be there too, but in this particular instance, he's not likely to do much more than confirm your presence, and the offender's, inside the courtroom.'

'My husband, his name's Mikie,' Jill Mason broke in visibly agitated, 'Mikie Mason.'

I glanced at Tamara. She simply blinked one beat longer than usual, the almost imperceptible sign for me to move on.

'Mikie Mason, uh ... OK. So ... after the Magistrate has read your application for a Protection Order and a summary of the events that you've already given to Tamara, he will tell the perp ... he will tell *Mike* what he expects *Mike* to do. Or more to the point what *not* to do from there on.' I found it difficult to refer to a grown man who had left such ghastly marks on his wife's face by a diminutive name that conjured, for me, the image of a tousled haired, loveable little boy. *Mikie* stuck in my throat like the fuzz on a badly boiled okra.

‘The Protection Order will have four standard clauses, Jill. Each can be granted up to a two-year period. But the magistrate might ask you if you wish to have another clause added, like that your husband should not be allowed to come within ... such and such a distance of your home, or your place of employment. You might want to consider what you’ll answer to that if the moment comes.’ I paused on that thought, fearing Jill Mason might be reeling from too much information given too quickly.

‘Oh, I’m sure it’s best if Mikie stays home,’ she answered quickly, with a slow shake of her head. ‘You see, he doesn’t have family to go to. They’re all up North. He wouldn’t have anywhere to go. And what with his papers and his clothes, you know. He needs all that nicely organised. He works hard, Mikie does. It’s not easy for him, you know. Quotas and more quotas to meet. And besides,’ Jill Mason added with a pale smile, ‘there’s no way we can afford to pay a second rent, you know, if he moved out and all.’ She glanced at Tamara before returning her attention to me, ‘See, it’s not so much him I want to get rid of. I love my husband, I do. I just want him to ... Oh my god, *what* do I want him to do?’ Jill Mason asked out loud, visibly agitated, possibly by colliding inner thoughts.

I turned to Tamara for direction but she had remained quiet. She had simply cocked her head slightly, allowing only her eyes to give me a quick smile.

‘He needs to see,’ Jill Mason started again, a deep frown of concentration tightening her brow, ‘that what ... what he’s been ... doing, you know, to me ... ’

She stopped again, both fists clenched on the tabletop near the cup still full of the tea she had ordered but didn’t drink. Her lips had let a deep emptying sigh through. A sigh she might have wished would expel *all* of the nasty, choking business. She rubbed and pinched her brow. She seemed to

be struggling to contain all the hopes she had riding on her Protection Order.

‘I just want the magistrate, you know, through that piece of paper, with that order ... I know the magistrate isn’t going to tell Mikie anything personal. Wish he could, though ... ’ She shifted on her seat and let a hand flit to the bruised side of her face. ‘You see, that Order from the courts will show him, really show him that what he’s been doing ... is ... well, it’s wrong. He has to stop. He’ll be so ashamed, you know, owning up to his behaviour. In public. I mean, to a magistrate. And you said a policeman will be there, too? That’ll be terrible punishment for him. He’s really a quiet person, you know. Keeps things to himself and all.’

And Jill Mason at the time of that first meeting in the back of a coffee shop had not considered, not even for a minute that *Mikie*, once in front of the Magistrate, would deny any wrongdoing. She had never envisaged that the man who had been violently cruel to her for so many years would deny having committed *any* act of violence on her person. She had never stopped to consider that Mike Mason might dare lie in front of the Magistrate and the Police Prosecutor. But again, she had never envisaged that her husband had it in him to commit *any* act of abuse, and certainly not the ultimate one that would rob her of the meagre consolation of hearing him admit to his doings, an apology, the only compensation she was seeking.

In the back room of the coffee shop, Jill Mason had stopped talking and she slumped in her chair. The recounting of her husband’s actions had brought on the change. Her chest caved inward as if in anticipation of more blows. As her fists unclenched, I would have liked to reach out to her. I thought that maybe I could pat her on the shoulder. But I didn’t. Unlike Tamara, I don’t feel comfortable showing any kind of physical closeness to strangers. Such displays,

however small, don't come naturally to me. Weird but on the rare occasions when I wish to make my concern less abstract by being more physically demonstrative, I fear my gesture might, if not offend, at the very least, intrude on the other person's space. I'm totally aware that this isn't quite a rational thought.

Here's another subject that should be made compulsory as a component of any decent BA in Basic Sociability: Sympathetic Touching. A crash course in that should be made so-o-o-o compulsory, as some of my students might say, adding the modifier to every adjective. Sympathetic Touching. That has got a nice ring to it as long as it doesn't get confused with Televangelical Touching.

That afternoon, I didn't feel I knew Jill Mason well enough to touch her, albeit in sympathy, but Tamara had slowly reached across the tabletop and patted Jill Mason on the hand. Her loose fist had uncurled further as it lay on the tabletop. Tamara covered it briefly with her hand.

'This is a very difficult thing, what you're doing, Jill,' Tamara said, head cocked, looking through her lashes, to catch Jill Mason's lowered gaze. 'But it's a necessary thing. It's a strong and very positive thing for you to do.'

A smile fluttered on Jill Mason's bruised lips though she blinked and swallowed hard. She nodded too. She understood that taking this first step against her husband's abusive behaviour was a *strong* thing to do. My private thought was that having *stayed* by her husband's side all these years was the *strongest* thing anyone should have had to endure. But maybe it was strong for the wrong reasons.

Tamara had leaned back in her seat. All three of us remained quiet. That silence compounded in me the feeling of inadequacy that had spiked in the pit of my stomach. I felt as if it was I who, by not having played my part thoroughly, had allowed, as we say in French, an angel to pass over our table, an almost deathly silence to hover. I had not known

how to reach for the ball quickly enough after Tamara's last throw, her show of empathy.

Soon though, Jill Mason looked at Tamara and then back at me in a manner that suggested she was ready to absorb more information in regards to the proceedings that *she thought* would allow her the beginning of a healing process.

Back at the coffee shop, I had gone on with a smile I wanted to be encouraging. 'The hearing's a closed court hearing,' I reminded her. 'Now, Jill, you do realise that the Protection Order's only a civil document. There won't be any lawyers. You'll be talking to a magistrate, not a judge. The man ... uh ... Mike won't be charged with any criminal offence. There won't be a jail sentence—'

Jill straightened up on her chair, alarmed. 'Oh my! Oh no, no. That's just fine. I wouldn't want Mikie to go to jail. Oh no.' Then, as if that outburst had exhausted her, she slumped again, eyes tight and rubbing her brow. 'I just want him to mend his ways. I just want him to stop hurting me,' she had added, directing her words to the dark amber liquid in her cup.

Tamara's expression was non-committal, except for a quick rise of an eyebrow I knew to be for my benefit. She was acknowledging that this was the type of battered wife textbook-behaviour she had tried to tell me about, the very concept she knew I was finding very difficult to grasp. How could these women, victims and survivors, not be resentful? Even Tamara's own mother hadn't been resentful.

'Jill, the main standard clause,' I made myself explain as Tamara had briefed me to do until all main points had been covered at least once, 'will state that your husband will need to show good ... good behaviour towards you. That means that he must not resort to violence. Not any more.' Jill Mason nodded to the liquid in her cup, her hand fleeting again to the corner of her mouth.

‘It’s what did it,’ she volunteered unexpectedly, feeling her bruised cheekbone, ‘you know, this last one. I should’ve done something a lot earlier, I know. Everyone’s been telling me. I know why I didn’t, of course I do, but it doesn’t seem to make sense. Well ... not anymore it doesn’t. Now, I’m almost forty-four, you see. All I want is to be left alone. I’ve been married ten years to him ... to ... Mikie,’ Jill Mason added, as if to find comfort in hearing herself pronounce the affectionate version of her husband’s name in the same breath as voicing the many years that had united them. ‘Ten years. On our anniversary, that’s when he did that. On our anniversary.’ Jill Mason turned to face me more squarely. She wanted me to notice the left side of her face, her lip. Her badge of courage. And though I winced again, I had to show her I could at least look.

Two blue-red knots of traumatised blood. One in between the corner of her eye and her cheekbone, the other, almost identical in colour and shape, at the corner of her lip. Both small and circular dark nodes. Beyond each, a duller shade, a ring of purple. The in-between gaps had faded a sick shade of garish yellow-green of varying intensity and patches of mottled reds and blues. It would have taken tremendous courage, I thought, to hang around that sort of pain for so long. An obscure sort of courage. The type of courage one’s not aware of possessing until the moment comes. A survivor’s courage.

When I had first laid eyes on Jill Mason, my eyes had wanted to settle on her wound, on her split lip. They did and I winced. Her wound was still too fresh a wound though the uneven discoloration closer to her left eye and to the corner of her mouth suggested the healing process had begun. Like an over ripe fruit, I imagine, that lip would have been purple and swollen a few days ago. And split deeply. ‘Ten days ago it was, he did that. He had promised to take me out for a special dinner. Never got around to that. Five years of ...

of some sort of hell,' she had continued, talking neither to Tamara nor to me. 'Before that there had been years of ... of accidents. Accidents, that's what I used to tell my friends.'

Jill Mason is a very clumsy woman, her friends would have thought. She keeps running into doors and things.

'I think the neighbours would've heard, you know, sometimes, but they're all very quiet. Discreet. They don't meddle.'

Ah, yes, I had thought, imagining the finger of neighbourly indifference pointed at me. We don't meddle much anymore in our suburbs, not if the disturbance is not too disturbing. I am a discreet neighbour myself and I have very quiet neighbours too. I like quiet neighbours. I like to imagine that my quiet neighbours enjoy watching TV, or reading, in companionable silence. And that they go to sleep only after they've wished each other a good night, though the good night kiss can be optional.

'Little things, they were ... my accidents compared to what happened later,' Jill Mason had gone on explaining. 'Compared to what happened on the day of our anniversary. Only ten days ago, it was.'

She stopped talking. Tamara and I watched her slump in her chair, once more. Visibly defeated. Not so much by her physical pain, no, I didn't think so, but more by the crushing weight of accumulated dark and jaggedly serrated moments.

'But I always forgave him,' she bumbled. Her nose began to run. Jill Mason reached inside her bag to retrieve a small packet of tissues. She pressed the tissue against her left eye, the bruised one. And blew her nose.

'It's difficult, when you're married. It's difficult to say, OK, either you piss off or I'm leaving you.' She paused, holding the wadded tissue under her nose. 'I left a few times, you know. It's not as if I just sat there. I left because it was terrible being beaten and so ... painful but I came back each

time.’ She stopped to self-consciously tuck her used tissue under the wrist of her blouse. ‘I came back partly because I didn’t have my own money anymore. But I came back too, mostly, because I still loved him.’ Jill Mason glanced at Tamara. ‘I used to have my own money. That’s the thing, isn’t it? One day I had money, and I was relatively independent, the next day I didn’t. He only wanted to have one account, he said. Easier to manage at the end of the financial year and less fees to pay, he’d say. All the money from when I used to work, all that I had was switched over to his account. Then, I gave up trying to keep any employment. It’s not like you have a toothache one day and you tell the boss you’re not coming in, but you know you’ll be fine the next day. Bruises just don’t disappear over night. One week, two weeks, they take before I can, you know, hide what remains with ... well with make-up.’

Self-consciously, Jill Mason touched the bruised side of her face. Only make-up applied with a trowel would hide the marbled purple and red spread and the greenish discoloration. Only a talented FX artist might be able to do something with Jill Mason’s lip but not without altering its basic shape beyond recognition.

‘But then, after I left him the second time, after I came back, he took my chequebook and my credit card away from me. After that, I came back because I thought of his pain. I was thinking, surely he was in pain for what he was doing.’ Jill Mason rubbed her forehead and pressed her fingertips down the right side of her face. ‘He used to be such a good man. And I just don’t understand what’s happened. And each time I came back, he was so grateful, so sorry, so sweet. I was so proud of myself for having come back, you know, to try to help him.’ Eyes closed, she sighed. ‘All in all, you see, leaving him, going back to my mother’s would have been easier, in one sense. But I didn’t want to take a shortcut out of my marriage. You know, for the better and for worse bit. I

believed in that. Still do ... but now it's ... And, anyway, my mother doesn't know ... about Mike. I'll never tell her.'

And so on. Mr Mason obviously knew that Mrs Mason was seeking a Court Order against him. Mike Mason was still living under the same roof as Jill Mason. The magistrate could order Mike Mason out of the house, but not unless Jill Mason requested that extra clause to be added to the Protection Order. If she didn't, he might simply order Mr Mason not to touch Mrs Mason in any way that might be construed as inappropriate.

I can tell Mrs Mason is the kind of wife who'd prefer to have her husband in his own house, in his own things, perhaps even in his own bed by her side. Provided he didn't hit her any more. Mrs Mason doesn't want to be hit anymore. And Mrs Mason still loves her husband.

When I told Tamara of my wish to get involved as a Court Support person, she warned me. 'Wonderful. This is good, Em. But, don't you go holding your breath hoping to help a dyke.'

'Why not?'

'Because within this particular context, they're about as rare as hens' teeth in coming forward.' I had frowned. 'Well, you know, that's because of all the hurdles we've already talked about. Actually, this year, I've only come across ... wait while I think back. Well, only like four. No, five.'

And now, weeks later, I look at Jill Mason, still quiet in her corner of the Safe Room, immaculately dressed in her navy blue and white outfit. And I imagine her kitchen, her cupboards, her closets and pantries, all equally immaculate. Mike Mason's T-shirts and socks, too. His shirts immaculate and pressed on their hangers. All meticulously in order. So, why did Mrs Mason end up in a life that's so messy, so run on adrenaline and pain? Why did she end up in a life that is so jagged?

Jill Mason is lost in her own thoughts. While I think of Tamara, and all that I think about Tamara is seeped in a gut level desire to love her and to make love to her, does Jill Mason think of her husband, Mikie Mason? And is all she thinks about him seeped in something akin to controlled panic? Controlled terror? No, surely not. Surely a woman who's terrorised *runs* away in terror, from terror. Surely, when the ratchet is so tightened that fear morphs into a deep-seated terror, the woman must just flee. She does, doesn't she? And then I remember Laurel, Tamara's mother. She hadn't run away from it, not at first, she hadn't. And not for a long time.

While Jill Mason is quietly oblivious of me, I can only shake my head disconcerted by the thought that such lives do exist. They exist in real, beyond the big-screen films I try to avoid watching. I try to avoid films that portray women as victims. Even if per chance they end up being survivors. I think of my very thin, very small set of 'Gnomes' induced worries. And I shake my head and I count my blessings. And I ask the cosmos to whisk Jill Mason out of the cruel groove in which she's been left and forgotten for too long.

Tamara. Tamara and her green cat eyes. Tamara who remains imperturbable when involved with women who come to her and the other workers, like toddlers unsteady on their feet, uncertain as to what the next step will bring. Needing to be stabilised and made to feel safe before they topple. Tamara will be waiting for me when Jill Mason's hearing is over. We'll meet at the convenient but very public Picasso's, near King George Square, for a drink. There, we will hug almost without touching but our eyes will do the caressing for us. And next, she suggested we could 'cruise and kick-back in the city,' before going back to my place. Later, some time later in the evening, we will probably make love.

Tamara knows that I'm doing my homework. She knows I'm trying to disassociate her, and good sex, from other heart-related emotions and *I* know I'm trying not to get too attached to her. I don't know how she feels being cast in the role of sex object. I don't know because we haven't had time to talk about that. This is all so fresh. So young, I was going to say. Freudian slip. I meant so new. So new.

I did tell Tamara about that deep-seated wish of mine to use her, not so much *her* but our circumstances, to practise emotional independence. I had to talk about that in order to explain to her the coolness I feel I have to project towards her. That projected coolness I intend as my shield. In a liquid form, it would seep through to my bones and immunise my heart against her. Against her, my lover. What she doesn't yet know is how much progress I'm making along that track. Neither do I.

Jill Mason shifts in her corner. This is indeed a very long wait. A glance at my watch confirms we've been here close to forty-five minutes. So Mr Magistrate is running at least fifteen minutes behind schedule. Jill Mason and I had agreed to meet on the front steps, at 2.30 for a 3.00 p.m. call, just to be sure. It now is 3.45.

'Jill,' I call out softly, 'it won't be long now. You might want to go and freshen up.'

Jill Mason looks up startled. Is she startled because I pulled her out of her thoughts or is it my warning, that the moment is nearing, that has startled her? The moment during which she expects Mike Mason will redeem himself. Jill Mason dreads that moment as much as she's looking forward to it. If she dreads it so much, it's not for herself. It's because she thinks her husband will finally acknowledge in public what he's done to her. When he gives his consent for the issuance of the Protection Order, she thinks her husband will acknowledge publicly, and for the first time ever, that

when his quotas falter he loses the plot. That when his quotas falter, he bashes his wife because when his quotas falter, he forgets that his wife is his *wife*. She thinks he will admit to the Magistrate that, at such times, he forgets his wife is made of flesh that bruises, of bones that break and has a heart that bleeds though she still loves him. And so, Jill Mason dreads this moment because she knows this will be a very difficult moment for her husband. Her husband is a very private man, she said. A good man who will be finding all this very painful. She said so herself.

‘Yes,’ Jill Mason finally answers. She answers yes but she remains on her chair unmoving, head bent. ‘Yes, I should. It won’t be long now.’ And still she remains on her chair. I stand up and I move over to her. I squat down in front of her and search her face for her eyes. Her left eye is crying. Her left eye is her sad eye. I’ve noticed it cries a lot more often than her right eye. I tap her discreetly on her jacket sleeve. ‘Jill, you go and freshen up now. I’ll stay here in case they call us in. OK?’

She nods. I said ‘us’ to make her feel she’s not totally alone in this. She will not be alone inside the room. She will not be alone with only the Police Prosecutor seated at the same long table, to separate her from Mike Mason.

Head down, half-moon glasses perched precariously on the tip of his nose, His Worship seems to be attentively reading the content of what Tamara has written at Jill Mason’s request, on her application for the Protection Order. Every so often he makes little movements with his head, little wobbles that suggest to me that he’s come across some segment or other in the deposition that reads as familiar territory.

It’s true that many a battered woman’s testimony probably reads in a similar way to many others. *It* probably happens

somewhere in the house. Probably at night. It probably begins with a flash of anger in his voice, a taunt, and it probably only ends after a series of shoves and punches and kicks. Any combination thereof, most often with bare hands. Unless, of course, the abusive partner moves into even darker violence. I suppose the list of injuries would be fairly standard, too. Bruises and broken bones. Broken teeth, ruptured spleen. Collapsed lungs and miscarriages. Nightmares. Nightmares, eyes wide open.

From where I am seated, slightly offset to Jill Mason's left I can't see much of Mike Mason. Only his ear, pale, his brown hair parted on the left and cut in a straight line across his neck, one inch above his shirt collar. His immaculate pale blue shirt hangs loosely over his narrow shoulders. And I can't help but think that if Jill Mason had *truly* wanted to fight her husband, provided he didn't have a weapon, she could've given him a fair run for his efforts. But again, males have a tautness, an explosive strength that we, as girls, lose around puberty.

The Police Prosecutor is also in blue, in his pale blue shirt and dark blue trousers. He's sitting with his back very straight as he fiddles with the few papers he has spread out of an open manila folder. Of Jill Mason, I see her profile, flat and thin because of my angle of vision. I see mostly the soft curls that hide her ear and the collar of her blouse, stopping just below it in a layered cut. If I shift a little to the left, I see more of her cheek, I can even see the two nodes of curdled blood from which spread the sick, yellow green and blue tinges and their uneven border of purple.

Jill Mason hasn't told me of the events that took place the night of her anniversary. She must have told Tamara, just so that it could be written in the application, in the Most Recent Incident box the magistrate is, at present, pouring through. Out of respect for Jill Mason's privacy though, I haven't asked Tamara to fill me in on these events. And

Tamara, most likely for the same reason, hasn't offered to fill me in.

'Mrs Mason, would you tell the Court why you wish it to issue a Protection Order against your husband, Mr Mason?'

Jill Mason's shoulders rise as she breathes in the stale air of the courtroom. There are no windows in this closed-off room. The air conditioner is turned off. Her hand jumps from her lap to the table to her left cheek.

'Well ... the thing is ... ' she begins in a voice only marginally higher than a whisper.

The magistrate leans forward. 'Mrs Mason, we cannot hear you.'

'Yes. I'm sorry. I'm very ... ' Jill Mason stops while I silently will her to get over her nervousness and tell the magistrate that she wants to secure a Protection Order against Mike Mason because she's at the end of her rope. Her rope is a ten-year and ten-day long rope.

'My husband hits me. He hurts me.'

'Would you be able to elaborate a little more on your comment, Mrs Mason?'

'You want to know how it began?'

I watch as the magistrate wobbles his head. And I pray that this man has a patient and understanding streak in him. 'Mrs Mason, it's up to you to explain why the Court should, in your view, issue you with a Protection Order against your husband, Mr Mason. How it all began might not be the most relevant information you could give this Court.'

'Yes, Your Honour, I understand.'

I bite my tongue against the reflex of leaning forward to remind Jill Mason that the man she's talking to is used to being called 'Your Worship.' Being addressed as 'Your Honour,' is another man's prerogative. It has to do with whatever diploma happens to be framed and hanging on the wall of their chambers. Instead I give Jill Mason a mental push. A push meant to make her needle jump in the groove and talk.

‘Mikie and I’ve been married for ten years. We’ve ... we’ve just had our ten-year anniversary. I didn’t get a present that night, you see. But I got this.’ Jill Mason touches her left cheek with her fingertips.

A sigh escapes from my lips. I hadn’t been aware that I had been holding on to my breath. I must have stopped breathing when Jill Mason began running on a treadmill instead of running with her story. As I sit slightly offset behind her, as I sit aware of the outcome she’s almost taken for granted, so sure it would right her capsizing life, I will her to let her story unravel behind her. Not like a veil, not like a bride’s train, but like a simple roll of toilet paper, inadvertently caught behind something, behind anything that would make it unroll. Unroll and waste. Unroll and unravel until it was no more. Vanish.

‘Mike came home at 6.30. He usually does,’ she starts. The sound of her voice frees my breathing again. ‘I knew he was upset because ... well, he threw his briefcase on the sofa. It bounced back on the floor and he just ... well, he just left it there.’ Jill Mason stops again, possibly still trying to organise her thoughts in a neat chronology.

No matter how much time she might have spent in the Safe Room, organising her thoughts in sequential order, what the magistrate’s asking of her now means she has to be concise. She knew she’d be asked to be concise. But how to be concise when there’s so much she needs to say? Which episode of violence should she find more significant than all others?

Should it be the first one because it was the first one to usher her into her new world as Jill, about to get married to Mr Mike Mason? Or the last one because she wants it to be the last one? Or should it be any one amongst the many in the continuum of the ten-year and ten-day long rope of suffering? Should it be the one incident that resulted in injuries greater than either the first or the last or the middle one?

Question: is a miscarriage an injury? Could having been made to lose a child, and not having had another, be the greatest injury the magistrate could empathise with while, arms folded on his imposing desk, he peers at Jill Mason over the rim of his half moon glasses? Or is he more into wounds, bruises and things that leave visible scars?

I silently urge her on again, Go, Jill Mason, go. Choose any or all of the above. Just go with one. Any one will do! Give him the story with your words. Show him your pain, damn it. He *should* be able to fill in the blanks. Though I suspect, Jill Mason, you do not have many blanks. Every moment will have a pain attached to it and a number. The number of days his imprint on your flesh took to heal and disappear, as if it had never been there, as if you had imagined it. Or a number to rank the pain amongst others along the ten year and ten-day journey to Court Number 3, here, today. Or the number of days lapsed since the last attack, knowing that every day unharmed brings you closer to the inevitable next bout. What was it that's always made the next bout inevitable?

'The moment he threw his briefcase on the sofa, I knew he was ... upset.'

Oh, please, Jill. Not upset. *I'm* upset. This whole thing *upsets* me. But it's different, you know it is. Say angry. Say aggressive. Say in a violent mood.

'That's always how it begins. I can always tell. It's the quotas, the sheets in the briefcase. If something's wrong there, he comes home in an aggressive mood. Violent. Brutal. He grabs me. He used to slap me but then he started hitting and punching me.' Jill Mason stops. Go, girl, go! Don't stop now. Keep going, for heaven's sake.

On the right hand side of the police prosecutor, Mike Mason stirs. The magistrate is visibly waiting for her to go on. Good on him. He might just have the patient and understanding streak we need here.

‘That night, though I was ready to go—’ Jill Mason stalls again and I hold on to my breath again. Unnecessarily. Jill Mason has a story to tell and she’s going to tell it. ‘I’d done my hair the way he likes it best. I had on the best dress I have. He was going to take me out for dinner. He’d said he would.’ Another pause. ‘But he didn’t, did he?’ For the first time since she began talking to the magistrate, the intensity of Jill Mason’s voice is altered. Maybe it’s not the intensity as such but her pace that’s different. She’s talking more slowly now. Perhaps because she recalls the event as it unfolds from behind her eyes, from that place where she’s stacked and stored many other such moments. ‘He grabbed me by the shoulders. He twisted me around. I fought him. I pushed him back. I told him to not even think of it. Please don’t hit ... I begged him to please not hit me. It hurts too much, I told him. But he did. He hit me with his fist. He hit me twice. Once across the eye and then ... here.’ She stops short of touching her lip. ‘His ring. I bought him that ring for his fortieth birthday. His signet ring is ... it’s what left those marks.’ Jill pauses again. She’s pointing to the little flat nodes of purple blood the thin layer of her skin keeps together like a signet-ring size, bad-blood egg yolk.

The magistrate leans more heavily on his forearms. Good man. He is attentive. He seems to care. He wants Jill Mason to go on to the very end of her story.

‘Would it be at this point that you might say Mr Mason stopped hitting you?’ He asks, I suppose to jolt her back into firing on all her cylinders.

On the right hand side of the Police Prosecutor, Mike Mason stirs again. I can tell he’s about to speak out loud. The Police Prosecutor lays a restraining hand more firmly on Mike Mason’s forearm as he leans closer to Mike Mason’s ear and whispers into it.

‘Would I say that’s where ... No, I wouldn’t. He dragged me to the bedroom,’ says Jill Mason. ‘I kicked him. I tried to bite his hand. I stumbled on the carpet. I lost my footing.’

Jill Mason hasn’t noticed any of her husband’s thwarted stirrings beside the Police Prosecutor. She can’t see much of her husband from where she is seated on the left of the Police Prosecutor. And certainly not while she’s intently looking at the magistrate.

‘He punched me in the stomach and dragged me the short distance. He tossed me on the bed.’

Oh my! Oh no. I don’t think I want to hear this. I squirm on my seat, slightly offset behind Jill Mason. I really don’t want to hear how Mike Mason forced himself upon his wife and raped her. The old conjugal rights thing. And, as I hold on to my breath, I remember how Tamara had warned me a few days earlier that it wasn’t the *hearing* about these things that hurt the most.

‘It’s the being there and the *feeling* it that hurts. These women have felt it in their flesh,’ she had said, quite rightly.

Of course. So, if Jill Mason’s been there, if she’s felt it in her flesh, the very least I can do is hear her account of it. The least I can do is get a feel for what this domestic violence thing is about, if only, and thank god, through my ears.

‘He was puffing. He was grunting. I told him to please let me up. My head was ... reeling from the first blows. I felt like throwing up. I told him I did. I told him I had to get up. He put his hand on my mouth, I couldn’t hold in ... I just couldn’t. I threw up against his hand. He shouted at me as he always did ... when ... you know ... if he’s in *that* mood. He always shouts when he’s in that mood. He’s always sorry afterwards. He says he is. I believe him.’

I hold in my breath again and beg the powers that lie within the cosmos, Please, please, let her go on. *Make* her go on past the bit about believing in his remorse. Don’t let her stop here.

‘He always shouts horrible things,’ Jill Mason adds, ‘like how filthy and *useless* I am. And ... and ... He ... he undid his ... belt. His fly.’ Her voice rises. The stale air stands still around her words. ‘He went into me.’ Her voice breaks. My breath fuses out from between my lips. She *has* said it. The magistrate has heard her. Jill Mason has exposed her husband’s callous brutality. Publicly, for the first time! *Yes!*

The magistrate will have heard her. He can’t possibly have misunderstood her words. Hallelujah!

‘He did,’ Jill Mason adds. ‘He did. I know he’s a nice man. I still love him. But, here, today, I’ve got to say that he did that. And, Your Honour, I came here because I want you to ... you need to tell him to stop. He has to stop. He does. Please.’

Silence prevails in the courtroom. She’s done it. I’m so proud of her. Discreetly, I run my hand over the cloth of her jacket. She only turns her head a fraction to acknowledge me and returns her attention to the magistrate who doesn’t seem offended by having been called Your Honour.

‘Your ... Your Worsh—’ an angry voice calls out interrupted by a forceful, ‘Shhhh!’

There’s a commotion on the right hand side of the Police Prosecutor. Mike Mason’s struggling to stand up. The magistrate is peering at him from above his half-moon glasses. Jill Mason is startled. Her head snaps to the right. She leans forward to better see past the Police Prosecutor. I follow the action as if from the wings of a stage. From the back and to the right of it. The Police Prosecutor, half raised from his own seat, has laid a firm restraining hand on Mike Mason’s shoulder who sits down again. But he’s clearly bristling. Bristling like a cockerel on its talons. And then he jumps to his feet again.

‘I won’t consent to this ... this order being made.’ Mike Mason has a thin but angry voice. ‘This didn’t happen the way she says. She’s just being vindictive.’ His thin voice fits his thin shoulders. And his thin neck. And his thinning hair.

As if jabbed by a cattle prod, Jill Mason straightens on her seat. She grips the edge of the table in front of her. She doesn't dare look again in the direction of her husband. Thumbs hooked under the table her fingers are taut and curved like claws against the yellow wood.

We are alone in the empty courtroom, Jill Mason and I. Slowly she reaches for her bag. Slowly she turns around. And she stands still in the empty courtroom, leaning against the table behind her. Her bag drops to the floor with a muted thud and her hands fly to her face. Jill Mason is sobbing great sobs. Accumulated great sobs of pent-up pain and humiliation. All bursting through the dam of self-control and pride behind which she had managed to keep them from overflowing. Bursting forth from behind her eyes. Now, here, in Court Number 3 her carefully constructed dam has cracked. I step the one step to touch her. I touch her jacket sleeve.

'How could he?' she burbles. And I'm hugging her. 'How could he brush me off like that and deny everything like I was off ... off ... my rocker?' The left side of her face is against my neck. And I hold her while more sobs wrack her body.

And she straightens against me. And moves back a fraction. She looks into my eyes. The tears welling in her blue eyes make mine water. I swallow hard.

'You ... don't know ... ' She sniffed noisily.

I shake my head in admission that there is a lot I don't know. I don't know about real pain. I don't know about humiliation. I don't know about fear. I don't know how it feels to feel helpless. I don't know anything about what Jill Mason feels at that particular moment and I pray I never will.

'No one knows. I didn't tell anyone from ... from the Services. I didn't even tell *her*. Tamara doesn't know.'

I hand Jill a tissue. Touchingly self-consciously, she blows her nose. Like a child almost, like a self-conscious child she wipes her eyes with a hand.

‘*Useless* ... he ... shouts at me. He flings his briefcase is the first sign. Then he yells at me. He yells how ... *useless*, how bloody *useless* I am.’ Tears well again in Jill’s eyes, magnifying them before they fall, fat and heavy down her cheek. Even her right eye is crying. I pull out another tissue. I’d like to bunch it up myself and dab her eyes with it. Like a mother for a disconsolate child. But I don’t dare.

‘Mike, he goes to the ... he well, he visits ... He pays for sex. Prostitutes,’ Jill says tremulously. ‘He’d rather ... he’d rather pay for cheap sex in The Valley than come to ... than be with me. Oh, this is so hard to say, Emilie.’

I rub my hand over her shoulders. I wait. I’ll wait here with her until she’s ready to go downstairs to pick up the Protection Order. I’ll wait until she’s ready to tell me what she wants to tell, now that her husband has found a way to break her a little bit more.

‘After I lost our child,’ she begins, her voice a little drier, ‘after he pushed me down the steps that day, six years ago it was. He never came to me after that. Never.’ Jill pauses and dabs her eyes with the soiled tissue. I hand her the clean one I still hold in my hand. She dabs her eyes and blows her nose again. ‘But again,’ she begins more in control, ‘there were moments when I still hoped. When he was nice ... gentle like the man he was when I fell in love with him. He proposed in the middle of a lake, you see. On a row boat, I mean, who’d believe?’

A tiny wet smile flutters almost apologetically on Jill’s lips and disappears. Yes, I can believe that there was a time when Mike Mason would have been in love with his girlfriend. A time when he would have been charming and pleasant. Nice enough for her to marry him. Every one is charming and nice and cute and fun to be with at the begin-

ning. When we're in love. When we want something from the other. When we need to ingratiate ourselves.

'He couldn't row, not even to save himself. But I said yes to him. And after the beatings, he'd make promises. Couldn't keep them, though. Never kept them. Not for long, he didn't.'

I'm aware of the courtroom door being opened. Jill looks over my shoulder with still wet eyes. The door is shut again. Cleaners maybe. We had been told we'd be the last case of the afternoon. Even the Court Recorder is gone too. Jill Mason's eyes glide back to mine.

'That time, six years ago when I lost our child, that's when he started with the shouting. Mike goes to the prostitutes but he won't have sex with me. He shouts how *useless* I am. That I can't ... He shouts that I can't even make him a son. "Every other woman can do at least that much," he yelled at me. "That's the one thing women do well. All women. They have babies. That's why God's invented bloody, *useless* women." That's what he always shouts at me. "And you can't even do that." And so, my husband hasn't touched me in years. He hasn't touched me that way but his meanness got worse. He hadn't touched me as a husband, not until he did ... well, you know, on our anniversary night, our last anniversary night. That was the first time after such a long time. And he had to spoil it, didn't he? He had to do it ... that way. It hurt. Oh, it *hurt*, Emilie. It hurt me, you know, inside. It would, wouldn't it ... I mean after six years. Most of all, though, it hurt here,' she says, hand over heart. 'Still does. "Anniversary! Anniversary."' Jill spits her husband's words between clenched teeth. "'I'll give you what a good husband gives his fucking deserving wife on her anniversary night. Here's your fucking present, you *useless* bitch.'" Jill stops. Spent. It's over. Someone else besides her now knows about the final horror. Me. She falls into my arms again and I hug her close as more sobs leave her limp against me.

5.15 by the City Hall clock. I'm a little early. Above the clock tower and all around, the sky is blue. A deep, unblemished, Queensland-blue sky. The buildings around King George Square cast long blue shadows on the lawns. The air is cooler, now, in the late afternoons. Autumn is slowly preparing for an early winter.

Jill said she wouldn't be sleeping in the conjugal bed tonight. Was I ever relieved to hear her say that! Instead, she'll sleep in the bed in which she slept before she got married. She'll sleep at her mother's until she is ready to face the nighttime hours on her own. If Jill keeps to her original plan, her mother will never know the truth behind her daughter's unexpected stay at her house. Beyond the few days that she'll spend at her mother's, Jill doesn't yet know how she'll manage the new daily routine the magistrate has offered her by writing in the extra clause that will forbid Mike Mason to come anywhere near his house and his wife wherever she may be.

She didn't know how to get to Mike Mason the things he would be needing from home. I reminded her that Tamara and the DV Services would probably be able to help her at that level of things. Yes, she said, but still, she wanted to know how Mike Mason would manage the next few weeks without his clothes neatly pressed and always missing some papers or other from his study. She didn't want to know where he would be staying for the next two years.

'What will two years without him feel like?' she had asked, knowing this was not a question I could even attempt answering.

There's another thing Jill didn't know. At this point in time she didn't know, either, whether her husband would truly leave her alone.

When I left her in the foyer of the Brisbane Courts, Jill was already clutching the Protection Order to her chest. She used to think her husband was a decent man, a nice man. She

thought that, even as his signet ring stamped twin marbled patterns in shades of sick yellow and greenish blues, one near her eye, one at the corner of her lip. And as I had hugged her one last time, she said she just didn't know about *that* anymore. She just didn't.

I think she meant that, though she could forgive her husband his abusive behaviour, she couldn't forgive him his callous dismissal of her. She couldn't forgive him his cowardice. She couldn't forgive him for having shouted words that could not possibly pass for words of contrition.

As I sit on the bench facing the clock tower and the dark bronze lions that flank the main entrance to the City Hall, I need to breathe. I need to breathe now. I need to chase Jill Mason's pain and confusion out of my lungs along with the stale air of Court Number 3.

It's all over for me. It's all over for today. I'll call Trish when I get home. It is with her that I want to discuss this idea of peering into someone else's concrete misery as a means of putting my own lack of pain, my easy life into perspective. For now, though, I need to breathe in the cool, late afternoon air. Yes, I've felt enough violence for a day. For a lifetime. I close my eyes, the better to see my lover's cat green eyes. The clock tower is ushering me towards Picasso's. Tamara, my young lover, my exciting lover, is on her way to meet me.

C. C. Saint-Clair

North And Left From Here (Take II)
C.C. Saint-Clair

In between her sixth and seventh novels, Saint-Clair has released a second edition of her first book. *North and Left from Here (Take II)* is more streamlined than the original. ‘Here’ is Australia, and ‘north and left’ is the Europe of Alex’s childhood, and the magnet for her current restlessness. Saint-Clair’s introduction draws the reader into her story, which poetically describes one woman’s journey and, in doing so, communicates the underlying universal issues.

Excerpt beginning on p. 80:

Flamenco strains rippled energetically around the cabin. I opened my eyes and became aware of the changes in the terrain. The pine trees were more sparsely planted now. Roots and ruts were no longer hard and unyielding under the tyres. Villa Solidea wouldn’t be far now.

Diana turned the volume down. “Alex,” she called out softly, “Alex ... d’you realise that eight days from now I’ll be handing my desk back to Mrs Butterworth?”

I would’ve liked to reply with something light and silly like, Hey, for some kids and teachers, that’s bound to put a stop to a lot of wet dreams, you know, but more than the blush already hot on my cheeks at the thought of my own Diana-driven fantasies, it was the flat tone of her voice that kept me from a casual rejoinder.

The sea was there. My lantern-boat would have already dropped anchor somewhere amongst the flock of glowing lights that, like seagulls bobbing on a swell, had congregated at the furthest point of the sea. I watched Diana, though she kept her eyes fixed beyond the headlights, surprised that she would have been thinking about her departure at the same moment I had. “Yeah, I was just thinking about that too ...

You know, about the end of your contract and all,” I said honestly, but gingerly, too, as if walking on hot coal. “I mean, I thought about that ... earlier. So it’s good, yes? Moving on and all that.”

Though the radio whisper sounds were too low now that we were once again silent, neither of us moved to pump the volume back up. The speedometer needle oscillated between three and five kilometres an hour. The night sky peered through the trees.

“I ... I don’t know,” Diana replied after a while. She swept her hair back away from her forehead. “Uh, yes. Of course, it’s cool. I was just thinking out loud.”

“You keep on doin’ just that, my lil’ Honey-Bun,” I drawled out, jokingly. “You’re my chauffeur for the night. No fallin’ asleep at the wheel. Not even with the excuse that we’re only doing some six kilometres an hour.”

Our silence settled once again inside the cabin but the quality of that silence had been altered.

“Tell you what. Soon as you park this here machine, the race is on. To the sea. Better yet, I’ll race you into the sea.”

Diana kept on peering beyond the headlights, but I could tell she was grinning. “Girl, you’re on! Ah ... and by the way, that’s what I ... like, one of the things ... I like about you.”

“What is? I mean, what’s that one particular ... thing ... you like about me?”

“Well ... I don’t know. It’s not just the one thing, really. I’ve enjoyed our times together, you know. A lot.” She shifted into third gear. “But there’s this duality in you that I find ... interesting. Paradoxes, no doubt, from conflicting previous lives.”

“Previous lives, huh? Well, I wouldn’t know about that.” Gently mocking her contrived choice of word, I ventured, “What I find ... interesting about you is that you do exactly what you need to do to be inside your life, right into the present. You don’t just watch it go by.” Ahead, the Villa

Solidea was glistening under a mantle of fairy lights. “Hey, we’re home,” I said, pointing out the obvious.

Diana turned off the ignition. From the terrace came the sound of a guitar strummed by pensive fingers. She switched off the headlights. I looked towards the beach. The flock of lantern boats had drifted parallel to the coastline. I pushed off the chrome side-step, and before Diana was even out of the cabin, I was tearing towards the surf, propelled by the need to be physical, to thrash around. To breathe. To float on my back. To close my eyes. To focus on the sound of water whooshing against my eardrums, and only on that. I heard the muffled pounding of Diana’s boots on the sand only a few metres back, a couple of strides behind me. She overtook me but the sea already wrapped around our calves brought us down in a great splash.

“Now ... Alex ... ” Diana said, spitting salty water sideways. “As a teacher ... you should know that cheating to get a headstart is not a nice ... thing to do, right?” She slipped under the water, but immediately shot upwards, smoothing her hair away from her forehead.

“Well?” she asked pointedly. The deep open V of Diana’s khaki shirt focused my eyes on her glistening throat. The wet cloth clung to her breasts. The mermaid of my childhood dreams. No, better than that—the adventurer of my adult fantasies.

With her hair flattened by the immersion, my eyes found it easier to focus on the structure of her face, on her high cheekbones, on the wide space between her eyes, on her lips, wet and smiling. And then, I could not not notice her breasts, nipples erect under the cotton weave of her shirt.

Oblivious to my roving eye, Diana asked again, this time with the tone of an admonishing teacher, “So, young lady, what have you got to say for yourself, uh?”

Pitifully aware that I couldn’t just stand mid-waist in the water and gaze at her forever, I attempted a rejoinder. “Well

it's like the old saying ... The one that says, Do as I say, not ... well, you know." Tiptoeing on the soft sandy bottom, I bobbed up and down with the swell. "So, what you gonna do about—"

Diana once again ducked under the surface, pulled me under by the ankles. Thrashing and spluttering, I went down. Our bodies briefly tangled together and I thought of Ann back in the wheat fields of Texas, I thought of how I had desired Ann, too, keeping my desire secret. I remembered how we used to play-wrestle out of sexual tension. In an instant, my secret desire for Diana rippled hot and strong, low in my belly. The moment passed, though, without either one of us having said anything louder than the whisper of the pebbles at the water's edge. Feeling awkwardly inept, I turned my attention to the churned up sand that had crept inside my clothes, inside the crotch of my jeans, against my neck, inside the collar of my shirt.

I unbuttoned my shirt, slipped it off my shoulders and watched it pool between us like a carmine petal of seawater. When it became too waterlogged to float anymore, I wrung it free of water and slapped it over one shoulder.

"Hey," Diana called out softly.

I stopped breathing. Caught in the moonlight, the roundness of her breasts had the sheen and smoothness of caramel. Her nipples were erect under the caress of the breeze. I swallowed to crank-start my breathing. She had unbuttoned her own shirt and it wanted to float away from her.

Toes dug into the shifting sand, I could've touched her from where I was. I could've moved closer, much closer, but I didn't. Instead, I flopped backwards into the sea and squeezed my eyes shut.

In the darkness behind my eyes, skin to skin, Diana was against me, naked, her back against my breasts, her hair draped over a shoulder in a heavy coil, the nape of her neck offered to my lips. Softly, as softly as the breeze, I caressed

her breasts, a nipple. Supple and firm, it rubbed against the palm of my hand. I tasted the salty water trapped inside the whorl of her ear like inside a seashell and Diana made herself heavier inside my embrace.

I cupped her breasts. My hands glided over them. Over one, then the other. The palms of my hands, delighted by their weight, by their plump softness became bolder and moved against her ribs, over her stomach. I felt the soft, yielding hollow of her belly button under the ball of my thumb. My hands glided over more of her.

My heart pounding against her shoulder, her hip curved hard against my splayed fingers, her butt pressed against my thighs, I had to glide lower. My craving for the caress of her curls, for the silken—A deep-throated groan escaped from my lips.

Oh, fuck! Did she hear that? Alarmed, I thrashed into a spluttering upright position only to let myself sag and sink into the swell, clitoris seriously on fire, heart thumping too fast and disoriented by too jarring a break from the heat of my fantasy.

When I did come up for air, Diana was still standing only a couple of metres away from me. “You need to do that more often, you know,” she said.

“Do what?” I grumbled, senses erratic with frustrated desire, senses irritated by my real-time inaction. “What? Float on my back and splutter?”

I was totally unimpressed with myself. Why didn’t I just breach what little distance still separated us and grab her, huh? Why didn’t I just topple her, right there and then, in the warm ebb and flow of the sea? Why couldn’t I just make myself do that, huh, instead of fantasising about touching her, wet and glistening, as she stood only an arm’s reach away from me? What the fuck was wrong with me?

“Yeah, floating on your back, that’s nice, therapeutic and all,” she said wiping her face with two hands, “but I

meant the whole thing. Play in the sea. Get dunked. Float half-naked in the moonlight. You should let yourself go more often. That little child inside you needs to feel free, to come out and play.”

Groan. “Yeah, right.” The fire of desire shifted, daring me to interpret her words as a dare, but what, at the time, I really wanted the most was for that desire to dissipate in the surf. I really needed that just as I needed to go to Diana, to lay my hand on her collarbone and rest my thumb in the hollow at the base of her throat. I needed to be closer to her so that she’d cover my lips with her own. Oh! Is that what it’s about? I asked myself. I can’t make myself take that first step? I just can’t risk the humiliation of a rejection, not even that of a rebuke.

When Diana reached for my hand over the swell, it didn’t dawn on me that she, too, may have been waiting for me to take charge. It didn’t dawn on me because I knew, I just knew that someone like Diana, someone who is so into the moment, someone like her makes things happen. Someone like her doesn’t wait for someone like me to decide whether it is safe for the little snail that I am to cross the highway.

So Diana held out her hand and I took it as she led me back to the sand. I willed my hand not to tighten around hers. It would’ve been so easy for my hand over hers, to tug a little, to bring her closer, to lie her down on the wet sand and make love to her. Stay cool, I admonished myself. It’s just not worth it. She’ll soon be on her way, out of here on a jet plane and you’ll be stuck here, all on your own ... with a broken heart.

Diana let go of my hand. We wriggled back into dripping wet shirts. With hers simply tied in a knot above the navel, she was one of those gorgeous James Bond girls—statuesque, golden—stepping out of the sea.

Somewhat empty, somewhat pleased with myself, I thought of the little lantern boat. My wish for the sexual

tension to remain but me to not yield to it, had just been granted.

After a quick shower, I made my way to the terrace. Ramón was still making love to his guitar, his long and sensitive fingers making the strings vibrate till they gave him all the languor they had to give.

A free-standing crystal candelabra cast gleeful sparks all around but most particularly on the marble-topped table that had been set for two, in a corner facing the sea. In the distance, the smattering of fishing boats was a handful of wicks alight in the depth of night.

“Aquí estan! No les han comido los pescadotes?” asked Ramón jovially, fingers flat across the strings of his guitar.

“Nah, all’s well. We’ve just made it back from the port,” Diana replied behind me. “Not too late for your music, Ramonitó? And Margarita’s tapas?”

“Claró que no. A mi, la musica me tocá siempre.” The music always played him, he said. “Y la Margarita, ya viene. She see you ... on the beach. She bring now the best tapas you ever eat,” he said to me. “You see after first bite.”

And so it came to pass—midnight at Villa Solidea.

The following morning I woke up early and opened the shutters for a view of the sea. First, my heart lurched, then I thought of our colleague, Dan, back at school, and how he had speculated about whether Diana’s tan was an all-body one, and how he had bragged about being the one most likely to find out firsthand. Well, I grinned, maybe I should put all of those horny dudes out of their misery. Maybe I should be the one to confirm that Diana’s tan was, as we say in French, undeniably and totally integral—flawless from head to toe. There she was, splendid in profile, lying on her stomach, face turned to the sea, hair in one gold braid twisted on itself, totally amber, totally golden. Only the soles of her feet, immune to tanning, remained pink.

I had intended to quietly soak in the vista without approaching her but she had become aware of my presence on the terrace. “Morning, young Alex. How was your night?”

“Slept like a baby. This place is so great, Diana. A parcel of paradise, really.”

“Ah yes, indeed.” Leaning on her forearms, she half-raised herself the better to look at me. Her breast, even in profile was full, firm and golden all over. “And you know what?” she continued, “Because I’ve done absolutely nothing to deserve this parcel of paradise, every day I thank the cosmos for that special karma that’s allowing me to access this and all the rest, uh, you know ... through my father. But, between you and me,” she lowered her tone, “Alex, I bet it’s all thanks to the many incarnations that have preceded me to earth, you know, to their spiritual enlightenment and all that.”

I chuckled, recognising the topic of an earlier conversation on my terrace, back in Palma, during which I had, in vain, tried to make her guilty of the crime of enjoying the freedom allowed her by her father’s wealth.

Some time later that morning, I did ultimately get to run my hands along Diana’s finely-muscled back and feel the smoothness of her sun-warmed skin against the palms of my hands. But only because she had asked me to apply some sunscreen to her back.

“Alex! For chrissake, ease up! This is not meant to be a pummelling massage,” she mumbled, face hidden in the crook of her arm.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Benchmarks
C.C. Saint-Clair

Set in the Montmartre district of Paris, the French snow-fields, and the Riviera, *Benchmarks* is a lyrical meditation on female desire focused on an ultimately unattainable release.

“Benchmarks: the wrong circumstances, the right person; how many of us know this situation? I do! I never want to experience these emotions again, but life isn’t something that anyone can ever totally control. C.C. Saint-Clair has the ability to evoke emotions and feelings—powerfully!”

J.M. Wright

“Sensual, evocative prose. The desire that draws Alex and Adrienne to each other is palpable but, so, too, is the brutality and raw injustice that Saint-Clair has fragmented around it.”

Madeleine G. Sorrento

Excerpt begins on p. 6:

Paris, 10 January

Alex,

Last night, *ta première lettre*. It was alone in my mailbox. I can’t keep from answering. But only this once, if you don’t wish to get involved in a correspondence.

I felt you pull away, I understand why; I should do the same but I can’t. How could you move away, just before you left, from our whirlwind of conflicting emotions?

Your bouquet of tulips has exploded in its own fireworks similar to the one I’ve experienced during the last ten days.

I hope you won't find me either over the top or too forward, but I'll be honest and say that our incomplete physical contacts have left me totally unsatisfied and my imagination is, well, all over the place. You, you don't write about things like that and yet you leave me in a strange state of sexual limbo. I don't know if I should be ... euphoric or melancholy. The thing is that even my neighbourhood feels different now.

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

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

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

As it is, I had heard a few little things about you, as told by some who had known you, in different times, in different places. Sometimes Sophie, my Sophie, would show me a letter she'd just received. When she brought Elisabette into our little group of friends, quite a few years ago now, it

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was clear that Eli still held fond memories of you and her in Spain. But of course, she could still give a mean rendition of how you'd dropped her for a younger one. I guess she was young and vulnerable at the time. Nineteen was she? Si jeune. Either that or we're getting old. Well, I am getting old. No, I can say that better; I was getting old until I came across you. Now, as I said, I'm energised.

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

My past, such as it is, my roots and my experiences, have always been my sustenance, my level-headedness. They gave me inner strength when faced with chaos. So I hope that, as in the months ahead, too, they'll come to my rescue. Anyway, the point is that this incomplete feeling in regard to the short time spent with you, already part of my past, only makes me long for more. I kiss you.

Alex, je t'embrasse with infinite tenderness. N'oublies pas trop tôt.

Adrienne

In a flutter of wings, white with light; stick-red claws guiding their landing, seagulls fly in to pick at the crumbs abandoned on bleached roof tiles of the beach bungalow below. The air vibrates, tormented by their graceful, frenetic wings. Facing the sea of the much photographed and filmed Baie des Anges, in Nice, I now see it already alight with the sparkles that will later scatter upwards towards the night sky. I find you on this, the first page of a very thick notebook, wanting to share this moment of beauty with you, my pen as channeler.

Ever since Sophie, and you, Adrienne, accompanied me to the airport for the last leg of my homecoming journey and my eyes lost sight of you around the bend of that dreadful satellite corridor, you have remained by my side.

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

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

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

She was so happy to finally have us acquainted with each other, to introduce me to the woman who had made her happy and secure for the past decade. She had not changed much; she still carried on in that larrikin way of hers and had not lost any of her strongly accented Parisian intonation. I knew she could still keep her audience of friends spellbound when she sang Piaf. And as Piaf, she was still as thin as the tiny resilient birds that carry the same name. I had been happy to read in her letters that she had finally found a comfortable niche within a trusting relationship, she, to whom life had not often been kind. Not until it had brought the two of you together.

With a twinge of guilt as I hugged her, I remembered that more recently I had stopped reading her letters thoroughly. I was happy enough, by quickly skimming her lines, to know

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she was well. What I had retained was that she was happy with you, a woman of sound character called Adrienne, a lawyer specialising in international law, and that Sophie, herself, enjoyed a relative harmony within her own professional framework.

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

And so we met. You, a Parisian *femme d'affaires*; the cut and style of your clothes gave that away at first glance. Friendly, warm; your eyes gave that away as we shook hands. I had no other thoughts except the wish to sit down and fight off the encroaching jetlag with a tumbler of whisky on the rocks and immerse myself in the syncopated start and stop conversations of friends excited to be reunited and eager to reconnect.

Elisabette, Eli as she now wants to be called, was there, too, with Isabelle, her new lover. In fact, the poor things had had to leave the warmth of their bed and each other at dawn to greet me at the Charles de Gaulle airport en provenance de Tokyo. And Eli had arranged to let me have her little flat all to myself for the length of my stay.

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

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

Now that all possible grudges lay buried under the gossamer layer of time, Sophie, Eli and I were exhilarated by the proximity of each other. We were reunited like the

survivors of a shipwreck: happy and relieved the count was right, that everyone had survived the passage of years with only minor emotional wounds, either already healed or well on their way.

You all pressed me for more details of events that I had penned, possibly absent-mindedly, in my letters to Sophie. Humdrum day-to-day stuff: a little on school life and its inherent ‘modern’ problems; usually very little on my private life except the occasional admission to loneliness, on a particularly low day. Sometimes a couple of pages would not have been enough, as I tried to be convincing, or rather was convinced that I had finally found love. So, now, months or years later, through the smoky gauze of *Chez Lipp*, cobwebs and memories were lifted on request, from the pages of my heart, and revived.

And then: “... to chase the monotonous grey of our little Parisian lives,” as you put it, you asked about Australia. So I explained how, some three days earlier, I lay floating on my Lilo, liquefied by the thirty-three-degree post-New Year heat, comfortably living in the Western suburbs of Brisbane. So comfortable, in fact, that one day I had had the sudden urge to break that stifling comfort and had applied for an undetermined leave of absence from work to come back here, back to France. My aim at the time had been simple; I had had a sudden craving to rediscover the little but beautiful country that France is and, at the same time, discover the handful of relatives I had once known, on my father’s side. Him included.

And the moment came when the ticket booked on QANTAS months earlier needed only the final good wishes of one last celebration with my good friends. I was toasted, hugged, farewelled and waved at, till only the deserted corridor tugged at my heels. The final boarding call had forced a hasty conclusion to the last minute advice and recommendations friends always seem to have for the one who

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

Paris, 18 January

Alex,

Te voilà. Well, here you are ... closer to me when I place an empty white sheet of paper in front of me and superimpose on it an image of you. A one-way conversation is better than nothing. A good friend of mine used to say: little pants fit little behinds. I have my own understanding of that line and yes, it fits the occasion.

Yesterday, your letter was waiting for me, amongst many in my mailbox. I spotted your handwriting as I flipped through the bundle. The truth is I was looking for it. I had been waiting for it, you see. Though I desperately wanted to tear it open while waiting for the lift, I couldn't. Sophie was right next to me. She had picked me up from work and was going to spend the night, as she normally does two or three times a week. Many years ago, you see, we agreed that neither one of us really felt absolutely compelled to a life under the same roof ... with anyone. By then, I already had my apartment and she had hers. I loved mine and she loved hers and so we agreed that there was no need to sell or rent off either one of them. There was no real call for us to always be thrown together, all the time and forever. But we do spend at least half of the weeknights together, in one apartment or the other. And of course every minute of the weekends.

I always love having her pad around in my flat, but last night I resented her presence. That scared me. That had never happened before. The urge to tear that envelope open scared me. It was not reasonable. I didn't want to sneak it into the bathroom. I didn't want to read it in a hurry. My distress at

knowing I wouldn't be able to read it, without betraying it, or you, or me, scared me too.

Imagine, if you can, the inexplicable exasperation in which I slapped our breakfast together the next morning. It was only once inside the over-crowded metro compartment that I reached inside my coat pocket. The inside one. Ah yes, you did like my green coat. How appropriate then, to have made it, as opposed to any of my other coats or jackets, the guardian of our secret.

Careful not to poke the old woman jammed against my arm, I tore the envelope with my teeth as discreetly as possible, one hand holding on to the overhead strap while the other extricated your folded letter, my heart lurching in rhythm with the carriage.

Mon dieu, the state I'm in today! Two grey eyes set on the rim of Sophie's large breakfast cup; she asked if you had remembered to leave us your father's phone number in Nice. I nodded that you had, trying hard to focus on the tiny trails of butter that were forming on either side of the blade, as I ran the knife across a piece of toasted baguette. When I did look up, I sensed a painful dawning behind her lowered eyelids. You had forgotten to give it to her, your friend, because your conscious or unconscious priority was that I should have it: I, who quite uncharacteristically, I'm sure she remembers the moment, had blurted out how beautiful you looked in her purple jacket; I, who by two a.m. the following morning, the time of her last phone call to my flat, had not yet returned from my dinner with you. That was on the night she had trusted me to entertain you while she was busy. That was the night that had turned into that 'horrible dawn'. Dawning desire already frustrated. Never able to be replayed. Never able to be played out better.

Alex, I'll never be able to hurt her. She notices my changes in mood though she doesn't prod me for information. Somehow, her silence changes into a burden, you know,

un poids, what might otherwise only be an electrifying infatuation with someone that I simply can't have. You.

Sophie doesn't say anything anymore but after your plane had left, she joked, 'Is it because we've just seen our little Australian friend to her plane that you look that way?'

I should've asked, 'And what way is that?' I didn't because I knew. I should've managed a real smile. I should've peeled my eyes away from the rear bumper on the black Audi that seemed to be pulling us forward as we crawled back towards Paris, caught as we were in yet another traffic jam on the Périphérique. All I felt able to do was slide a side-glance in her direction and mumble something like maybe it was. But very quickly I added, 'It was fun having her here. We all enjoyed the change in routine. Now we'll get back to our normal work-a-day schedule, and it might seem a little tight ... for a while. A little like when we come back from holidays.' It's then that maybe I made another mistake. Though I smiled at her it was one of my everything-will-be-all-right smiles. What did I need to reassure her about?

You know her story, Alex, in the broad lines; you know I'm all she has. She's always been a loner since childhood, a lonely child with a great big burden to drag everywhere. As an adult she's never been able to forgive her mother for not having protected her at the time. The old woman died a couple of years ago and still Sophie could not bring herself to go to the funeral. And of course her brother would have been there too, though well into his sixties by then.

She cried but not when she heard the news. She only cried on the day of the funeral. She didn't go to work on that day. She didn't want me to stay with her either.

Tu vois, Alex, I'll never be able to tell her anything at all about us. What worries me the most is the need for total secrecy, the impossibility of being transparent. The fear that maybe, one day, I might betray the trust she's invested in me, that's really what my panic is about. Because I know

that it's only with me, finally that she's learnt to trust. What scares me, too, is knowing that you come and you go. You're a footloose spirit. And that I'd live each day in constant fear of the first look of indifference I'd see in your eyes, one day. But that's another story.

Time, more time is all we needed but couldn't have. Le temps, normalement, il y en a de trop, but in our case we just didn't have enough of it. How can we test the difference between a new love and an attirance, an infatuation I think it's called, if all we can do is write secretly about it? The only thing I know for sure is that I'd never be able to build another relationship over Sophie's pain and sorrow. That's the only certainty I have to hold on to at the moment.

I have your letter right here, on my desk. I've memorised every word. I try to remember your tone, too, from what I remember of your voice, of your eyes, of your smile.

I kiss you *avec une tendresse infinie*.

Adrienne

The thick ledger-like notebook is cool under the palm of my hand, inseparable companion of the last few days. Waking hours, sleepwalking nights filled and challenged only by thoughts of you, by the ghost of our prematurely amputated love. You, Adrienne, vulnerable and raw on the eve of my departure as some moral scruple plummeted behind the frail chestnut veil of your eyes. You, from whom I have had to wean myself the second I found the other you, the 'you' I had not, until then, seen, not yet sensed. The 'you' not yet unveiled. And then, only seventy-two hours remained.

Seventy-two hours in which to try to deal with our awesome discovery; to let the tenderness of your face invade my heart, to allow the burst of euphoria to course through my belly. Squash it! Flatten it under its weight of guilt and

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lust! But how? Not a minute on our own to acknowledge and contain the wave of desire that washed over us with the violence of a flash-flood as it courses on a parched desert bed. Silent sparks of sexual arousal, painful in their intensity, crackled as my eyes locked with yours. And already then, at the second of our reckoning, our hearts began to shrink with guilty apprehension, strong in the knowledge of what could not be.

Back at Le Chicago bar in Paris. It had become our meeting place around 7.30 p.m., giving each of you time to leave work and fight your respective traffic jams. That allowed me to go back to Eli's little flat above Avenue de Turennes after I had scoured the streets of Paris for most of the day and enjoy a shower and a read before setting out for our evenings together.

But earlier on that particular day, a Sunday, the four of you had taken me on a day trip to Provins some eighty kilometres away, on the outskirts of the capital. Sophie had parked the car on a little esplanade and we were getting ready to begin our stroll. I remember fumbling with the buttons of the padded jacket she had lent me in anticipation of a crisper winter morning, once away from Paris. I remember its colour well: a deep shade of royal purple. My gloved fingers had become furry and clumsy with the buttons. Intent on my task as any pre-schooler learning to tie shoelaces, I heard your voice.

'Tu es belle dans cette couleur. That colour really suits you!'

I turned around, surprised to realise the compliment had been addressed to me. I smiled at you, quickly, shyly. Instinctively I knew that I could not maintain eye contact or should not linger by the car. Instead, on my own, I began the

gentle climb to the heart of the village, while the four of you were still preparing to make the ascent.

I have rewound my memory to the only private dinner conversation we have ever had, back to the moment when you had explained, leaning toward me, your small cashmere clad breasts almost brushing the foamy whiteness of your dessert, “You know, Alex, when I saw you in Provins, looking so healthy, still golden from the Australian sun with that deep purple of the jacket as a backdrop, I felt my legs go under. How can I say? I lost my breath, just like that. Totally unexpected. Never saw it coming. And when you turned to face the old trail, I simply had to ask though to no one in particular, ‘*Où elle va, comme ça*, in such a hurry?’”

I had heard your question so I replied, without turning back to you, that I was getting a headstart, that I was going to breathe in the musky smell of the old stones. And off I strode, leaving you below with Sophie, Eli and Isa.

And now you added with a little girl lost expression, ‘I just stood there, alone and *désorientée*.’ You looked down, embarrassed by this impromptu confession. Yet you added a detail that constricted my throat: ‘Then I realised Sophie was looking at me, vaguely puzzled, an odd kind of smile in her eyes. Now, I know I should’ve paid more attention to that smile of hers. *J’aurais dû faire plus attention*.’

Adrienne, I did not tell you then, or did I, that a short while later Eli had caught up with me?

‘Well, well, my friend. I see you haven’t lost your touch, she said, zipping her jacket all the way up to her pale chin. I looked at her quizzically. ‘You’ve obviously made quite an impression down there.’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘Oh, c’mon! Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed. On Addy, of course!’ She moved closer to me as if to peer into my eyes while mimicking you, ‘*Tu es belle dans cette couleur*. You heard her. This colour suits you beautifully.

That's what she said down there.' She skipped ahead, then turned around, stopping dead in her tracks. 'I've never heard Addy comment on what any of us might have been wearing. Ever.' Then, half-joking, half-serious, she had poked me in the middle of the chest, in warning. 'Alex, this one's not for you. Remember, she's Sophie's partner. They love each other. And they've been at it for a long time.'

'I know. It's lovely to see. But why are you being silly. I know, you're just jealous ... ' I had replied jokingly, though amazed she could perceive something I had only just realised myself. Unsure if I needed to be wary of her perceptiveness I simply added, ' ... because purple is one colour that does nothing for your pale, English rose complexion and you know it. Purple and yellow.' Humour had often rescued me from tight corners. Eli grinned back at me. Without the confirmation she had sought, she shrugged a kind of truce and stopped to admire the tiny chapel, in silence, while waiting for the three of you to catch up with us.

Le Chicago Bar was in full swing: the air around us moved in smoky patterns but it was another well-chosen venue.

"What a day!" I said to Eli, as I sat back on the well-worn leather sofa.

"Damn right!" she smiled. "Must say, I've surprised myself during these last few days. Now, I know that when I lose my ranking at squash I can always reinvent myself and become a tour guide specialising in medieval villages for Australian tourists!" Eli playfully punched me in the arm.

"That's a thought. In the meantime, remind me not to forget your tip. Actually," I added as I got up, "the first round is on this 'Australian' visitor. Orders everyone. We'll get a head-start on Sophie."

When I came back from the bar, I came in on the tail-end of a conversation about Sophie.

“Well, not that long to go now that she’s decided to retire. Next year, right? Good on her, really,” Isa was talking to Eli. “Who wants to go on working, forever and ever, for a guy like that who needs constant propping up, huh?” We all turned to you for a reaction to the fact that Sophie had had to rush home, with only enough time for a quick shower and a change of clothes. But you remained silent, staring into the burgundy depth of your glass.

Earlier that afternoon, when the car phone had beeped on the way back from Provins, you all let out a synchronised groan and Sophie had looked at you with a silent warning to remain quiet. She picked up the receiver with one hand, keeping the other supple on the steering wheel.

I guessed you all knew who this obviously unwelcome caller might be. Eli moved her head in the direction of the phone, making her green eyes wider and round for emphasis, while her lips exaggerated the contour of her whispered words. ‘It’s him again ... her boss!’ I looked blank and she added, ‘He always does that. Calling Sophie at home, after hours, on weekends. It’s like he can’t decide anything without her.’ Eyebrows cocked in surprise, I nodded that I had understood the gist of what she had said and Isa joined in *sotto voce*.

‘According to Sophie ... he’s bored with his home life so ... he fancies himself as a workaholic. But the thing is he’s not competent enough ... to make any real decisions on his own. He’s a *foutu* director, you know, a regional director. I mean ... really!’ She shook her head in mock disbelief. Strands of blond hair fanned and twisted on either side of her face, ‘So, when something needs doing but he can’t handle it ... because he doesn’t know how, he calls Sophie to the rescue. And she bails him out ... every time. Because she’s nice.’

‘That and the fact she feels sorry for him.’ At this point, you had turned towards me where I sat squashed in the back seat, and added in a tone of low exasperation, ‘It’s been going on like that for the past five years. He doesn’t seem to have learnt much during all that time, though.’ You looked pointedly at her profile but, though I think her eyes had crinkled in what might have been a smile, if seen front on, she had remained intent on her conversation, and focused on the curves and bends of the black and white ribbons of the road ahead.

So, you had come on your own to Le Chicago Bar and Sophie, as agreed, would meet us at Le Prince Noir restaurant, a little later. You and I would later pinpoint this as both a fated and a fatal absence on her part.

In Provins we had inhaled the musty smell of mist rising over ancient moss-stained stones. We had stood still as the old bell tower called vespers, for miles around, as it had over the centuries. We had followed the uneven, steep cobbled streets, wide enough only for donkey and cart. We had strolled on the restored battlements of the fortified village, a storybook village forgotten by the passing of time, that I had dreamed about while basking under the lavender shade of a jacaranda tree, back in Australia.

The Chicago waiter, decked out in a suit that could have been Al Capone’s favourite, brought my round of drinks to the table and over the din that filled the bar on this Sunday night, we resumed our friendly banter.

Eli stretched out her long legs. “I can’t tell, anymore, if they feel taut or jelly-like. All I know is that they’re lead-heavy from so much walking.” She rubbed a calf muscle and grinned, “I won’t have any problems falling asleep tonight.” Then, she added screwing up her eyebrows, “You’d think that considering the numbers of squash games I put in every week, I’d be immune to leg tiredness!”

“It must have been the steep walk up to the rampart that did it, you know, when you caught up with me?” I could not resist another little jab.

“It’s a different type of exercise, you know,” I added, tousling her shiny, dark curls. She snuggled a little closer to me, all aggression of earlier seemingly evaporated, as I added, one arm folded around her shoulders, “That’s all very well, but I know you will all be happy to return to your normal routine in a couple of days.” I was acknowledging that none of you had had more than a couple of waking hours to yourselves since my arrival a week earlier. You had taken turns suggesting interesting and varied activities to keep me entertained after your work hours.

Leaving me to my own initiative during the day, the four of you had planned to accompany me on evening and sightseeing activities for each night I would spend in Paris. And while I lazed around each morning, before tackling the Louvre, or the Musée Rodin in search of the Danaïde the master had carved in the shape of Camille Claudel, the four of you got ready for work, stale smoke still trapped under your eyelids.

And so, later on this particular night we had left the smoky ambiance of Le Chicago and had made our way to the restaurant where Sophie was due to catch up with us. And so we were seated at yet another table, tucked away in a side room of Le Prince Noir.

“In about seventy-two hours, I’ll already be back on the plane to Nice, on my way towards ... I’m not sure what.”

A little sigh had escaped from my lips and for some reason I looked in your direction. I could have made eye contact with Isa or with Eli who were seated opposite me, across the white expanse of cloth, but no, I turned slightly to the left as I made myself more comfortable on the hard Bentwood seat. And I saw you! I sensed, more than saw, a twinge of pain cross your face and instinctively I knew that

that look was somehow related to my imminent departure for Nice. And through the unfortunate phenomenon of osmosis I met you right there, on the edge of the beckoning void that swirled upward as it wrapped itself around our ankles, reaching for our bellies to better pull us into its clutches.

Momentarily disoriented, I was brought back to the conversation by the peripheral awareness of Eli. She looked away as she felt me about to pull away from you. I glanced back at you; your eyes trapped mine and held them tightly, for the space of a nano-second which stretched into infinity. If we had effectively arrested time, Eli, not affected by our time warp had caught up with us. Somehow, I had become aware of her silent encroachment and wrenched my eyes away from yours. In a mad attempt to protect you, I reached for my glass and tapped its rim against hers.

“To us and to yet another great day! *A nous et à Sophie!*
To us.”

Sophie did join us shortly afterwards. She made her way around the table giving each one of us a hearty bise on one cheek before settling on the chair left vacant for her between Isa and you. I remember thinking then that the cold imprint left on her cheek by the winter wind blowing outside felt as cold against my lips as the knot of ice suddenly lodged under my solar plexus.

The only other thing I remember of that evening are my desperate efforts at avoiding Eli’s prodding looks, as she peered at me through her thick eyelashes, every time she lowered her head. I sensed she was trying to lock me in a silent confirmation that she had, indeed, interpreted correctly the essence of what she had caught in mid-air, just then, and earlier, with the purple jacket incident.

But the conversation resumed around the table. Isa told us about an article she had recently read in *Le Monde* newspaper about the rising number of rapes of young boys and

how our Western laws and our societal attitude were both antiquated and blind in regards to these occurrences.

“Apparently,” she said, loosely paraphrasing the article, “It’s not just the well-being of men in jails and of young men living on the edge that is at stake here. What seems to be the latest concern for social welfare groups, here in Europe and in the States, is the rising incidence of boy rape. It seems that more and more little ones are raped either by a parent, by a trusted other for paedophilic sex, even by their male siblings. Boys from five to fifteen seem to have become a new ‘at risk’ group in regards to rape.”

“Welcome to what’s been a female reality for—”

“What’s new, really?” said Eli cutting in on Sophie. “The world’s been turning a blind eye to the on-going rape of women over the centuries,” she added, looking sideways at me.

“I assumed that it’s because rape, like menstruation, like birth, are undervalued or devalued like most other women-related issues.”

“Okay! So, okay, the good news for females is that maybe, just maybe, now that the issue of little boy rape has hit the headlines our lawmakers and our hospital staff and our neighbours might start paying attention.” You spoke looking carefully at Sophie first and then at Eli across the table from you.

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

C. C. Saint-Clair

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

I saw the way you looked at her but she had already turned to Isa who was pursuing her point.

“Quite true. Any kind of violence. Not just physical,” Isa added, “If it weren’t for them ...” suggesting that the world would be a better place if men, on the whole, had evolved differently.

“Maybe that could work, too, as bumper sticker philosophy now that it’s no longer cool to wish they should all be sent to the moon.”

“Yeah, it’s a sad world all right but all the same, I don’t think these incidents involving either boys or young men need to be called rape.”

Silence, then a pause. You all looked at me but it was you who eventually asked, “Well, what should they be called then?”

“Hey, call me territorial,” I replied as light-heartedly as I could, “but I think the term ‘rape’ should be ... like saved for what it’s always been referring to: the forced penetration of a female by a male.”

“What does it matter who endures the ‘forced penetration’ as you say? A victim’s a victim,” Sophie said categorically, following the traditional line of thinking.

“Absolutely. I am not trying to belittle what is happening to boys or innocent men who have never dished out violence to anyone. But as far as I can see these sexual aggressions already have a name. Predating the writing of the Bible. These are called acts of sodomy. They can also be called anal rape. But not just rape.”

“What you mean is that rape is a woman’s ... prerogative.” You smiled on the last word. Did you actually see my point or were you simply diplomatically playful?

“Something like that.”

“*Mais enfin*, a rape is a rape, *non*? And it doesn’t matter what it’s done with either. A bottle, a broom or a finger ... anywhere.” Sophie was not disposed to differentiate between one type of sexual violation and another. Yes, both were against the will of the penetratee.

“Is it a matter of anatomy, then?” Isa suggested as she filled up our five glasses, one by one.

“For me, yes. Absolutely. That article you read, Isa, is about what is happening to males, younger and older, and it clearly has to do with the forced penetration of someone’s anal ... anal ... duct. *L’anus*,” I explained, gently trying to modalise and remain neutrally distant from the topic. “While rape is the forced penetration of someone’s vaginal duct. *Le vagin*. Men, be they little or bigger or older, simply do not have ‘vaginal ducts’ or uteruses for anyone to penetrate.”

“Okay, maybe. It’s a matter of semantics,” I threw in, conciliatory.

“Semantics and anatomy,” I heard you confirm softly. I looked up as you accepted the basket of bread Sophie was passing you.

“But what does viol or rape really mean, etymologically speaking?” Eli asked us.

“Does it truly only refer to a vaginal penetration?” No one knew for sure. But we all thought we should look that up.

“Well, yeah, sure but besides that, I mean who knows what they call it in Russian or in Bambara? My point is, why should women, now, have to share this word with male victims, whatever word has been used for centuries and across the world to refer to that very specific victimisation of the female kind?”

C. C. Saint-Clair

“*C’est vrai. Depuis les hommes des cavernes ...* since cavemen clubbed women on the head to drag them back to their cave,” Isa looked at you as she spoke, “since the billion maidens raped as war bounty from antiquity to now, even without mentioning what goes on—”

“In our civilised streets—”

“And in their homes and yeah, the act of rape has always been perpetrated by dominant males and inflicted on ‘weaker’ females.”

“Or weakened females,” I added dryly. “But anyway, what’s wrong with sodomy as an alternative noun?”

My thoughts lingered around the issue well after we had moved on to other topics, caught on the thorn of rape as surely as by a line of barbed wire. I couldn’t just move on as the rest of you did. Not with my own understanding of what the word ‘rape’ meant to me, perhaps even to most female rape victims, we who, despite our separate histories, were united by the common bond of survival.

Later that night, you and Sophie dropped me back to Eli’s flat. I was thankful she was sleeping over at Isa’s, glad to be alone with my thoughts. I stayed up by the window but not to rest my head against the cold pane as I had done the night before. Not to replay your smile, the chestnut warmth of your eyes. I did not try to imagine you asleep, Sophie’s head on your shoulder. I did not imagine you at all. Instead I listened to the sounds of Paris at night and I tumbled back in time through a dim tunnel of swirling dark violence.

Silent Goodbyes
C.C. Saint-Clair

Romance With Substance

“Erotic dreams have always been, in retrospect, the first symptoms that my heart was no longer in tune with my mind. They are the first moments of an often long string of silent goodbyes.”

Emilie

“Silent Goodbyes is an insightful, clever and descriptive work of our own relationships and our own ‘goodbyes.’”

Andrea Russell

“OK. Emilie is neither quirky nor zany. Won’t make you laugh. Won’t make you cry. That’s because she’s real. She could be me, on a bad day. Or is it me on a good day? She could be my next door neighbour. If my next door neighbour was a lesbian.”

Kate Madden

Set on board a yacht sailing the Whitsunday Islands in The Great Barrier Reef, and in the river city of Brisbane, Australia, *Silent Goodbyes* introduces forty-five year old Emilie Anderson as a new central character.

When a particular set of emotional triggers forces Emilie to grapple with her insecurities, what begins as a weeklong sailing trip becomes a journey into Emilie’s heart and soul.

Sexual tension, desire, infidelity, and personal shortcomings all highlight this powerful third novel.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Excerpt begins on p. 130

Skipper by day, dishwasher by night. Great dinner, though. Thick slices of Atlantic salmon nappées with lightly spiced cream and salmon roe. Delicately delicious. The tab for me lies in the washing up in our diminutive sink. In the process of splashing water over the comparatively gigantic cooking implements, I've drowned yet another box of matches in a tsunami of dirty water. Luckily the galley light is not strong enough to shame me into mopping the rubber linoleum. Not right now, please! Not just before bedtime.

Up the ladder I go, struck as always by the visual effect of a handful of mast-lights gathered together, seemingly suspended in mid air to form a frail gateway to the galaxy. I turn around. She's at the bow. Feet dangling under the safety lines, forearms resting on the steel railing of the pulpit, she seems lost in thought. Maybe she's simply absorbed by the mesmerising, endlessly changing colour patterns that dance on the moonlit ripples of Indian ink. She didn't jump off the boat today, she didn't even complain about the weather. She's been good and being good doesn't give her any feel-good feelings. Being good makes her droop and wilt.

After a light breakfast we had snorkelled in tandem, her hand on my back. She's a much stronger, more natural swimmer than I am but during our morning snorkels over the reef I propel myself a couple of flipper flips faster than she does. At one time, while we were hovering above the twenty-metre abyss, I thought that the great gloomy depth, sucked inside the eerie, slanted chasm of brown coral and particles trapped in filtered sunlight, might entice her.

We had been skirting the abyss side by side but while I made sure my belly remained somewhat protected by swimming a couple of metres above the coral reef-bed, Solange swam totally exposed to anything that might have been lurking deep within the dim waters below.

Her hand left its position on my back and through the foggy Perspex of my mask I saw her veer away from me, propelled by the yellow blur of her flippers. My breathing stopped inside the hollow plastic snorkel. I lost sight of her when the yellow of her flippers had totally dissolved in the water ahead. Coral cluttered the shallow depth ahead. The gloomy gorge of unfathomable depth hovered at my left. Exhaled air chugged through the snorkel. I remained where I was, softly flicking my own flippers, determined to go on with my underwater promenade. Movement at ten to twelve on my left, right above the chasm. The emergence of a pale shape.

We looked at each other goggle-eyed. Her hair fanned and floated around a face a few shades paler than when dry. Eyes large and wide but all other expression lost behind the fluo plastic of the mask, lips stretched over the rubber mouthpiece. She swung into a wide circle and closed it with her hand once again on the small of my back. She let me lead her a little to the right and her body, too, was safer above the rising coral bed.

Schools of fish, soft and pink, fluorescent yellow, coated in velvet colours had passed below us. Fish with a purpose. Clams had clammed up as they detected the shadow of our presence, their thick lips of luscious iridescent purple, green, and mauve clenched tight between the two valves in foot-wide clownish grins. Large parrotfish had swum past foraging between coral stems with their parrot beak. Shafts of sunlight, floating plankton, blue-tipped antlers, pink bouquets of spiky stems, little oasis of colour atop decimated colonies of brown coral, big round balls that resembled bulging throbbing brains, all had been laid out for us. But the clownfish and the more exotic sea anemones had yet again eluded us.

I could go over to the bow now and sit beside her, interrupting her reverie but I'd rather stay back a while longer

C. C. Saint-Clair

and simply look at her, as if I couldn't simply walk over and sit by her side. As if I didn't know her. As if I could only observe her from afar. Unseen. Unnoticed.

And I choose to stay at the stern, leaning against the wheel locked in place for the night. I breathe in the stillness. I inhale the quiet. The only sounds once again emanate from the dinghy's underside. Quiet peaceful soft-mouthed sounds like those of a gentle and contented suckling mammal, one that, though no longer hungry and about to drop off to sleep, still holds on to the nipple. Unconsciously wary of tomorrow. Involuntarily afraid of letting go.

Solange. My grey-eyed lover bundled into the bulky sweater that matched the colour of her eyes on a wintry morning, legs warm inside her old grey fleecy trousers, hasn't heard me come up the companionway. Maybe I should, after all, sidle up to her with two glasses of chilled Tatachilla as a peace offering though there hasn't been a war. Then I could say, 'a penny for your thoughts'. I could but I won't. I prefer to stay back while allowing her more time in which to let herself be drawn into the golden patterns cast by the moon as they float on a sea the colour of Indian ink, on a sea as glossy and slick as silk. The Southern Aurora glints and shines above us.

Solange. The woman whose recklessness, exacerbated by the unstable environment that is a yacht at sea, in an area where wild water creatures are at home, stresses me beyond reason. The woman through whom, I know, I could learn something important about myself, if only she and I were wired a little differently. If only she and I were a little less the way we are.

I often feel I should somehow backtrack twelve months or so. Backtrack to the end of our period of grace, of our honeymoon. Backtrack to recapture the early liberating thrill of being with her. The thrill before the fear.

There was a time when I felt that if I could emulate a little of her trusting nature—trusting of the moment, trusting of people—I might be able to redirect my insecurities away from the basic belief that something could always go wrong and would if I ever became careless. If ever I relented in my caution.

But it hasn't worked out that way. I guess I haven't allowed it to happen that way. Instead, I've become passively resistant. And all I now think of her insouciance and intrepidity is simply that she might well be suffering from the James Dean Syndrome; youth and fitness, as in her case, are invincible. The thing is that she's some twenty years well past mature teenagehood. I'm hoping that tomorrow, our last full day on board *Lazy Moon*, will come and go by quickly. Uneventfully.

After Gisèle and her cool approach to love I had, for a long time, shied away from older women. That, in turn, had cast me in Gisèle's role, though not in her persona. At many levels, I just didn't have what it took to emulate her. Strangely enough though, as I healed my very first heart-splitting ache, I neither hated nor resented her. Already then, I had understood that she was too beautiful, too sensual, too sexual for just one lover. All the same: *chat échaudé craint l'eau chaude*, says my mother. Something about the fact that a cat, once scalded, is fearful of hot water.

That evening back in Paris, I had gone to Place des Vosges to catch the launch of Mikael's month-long exposition of oil paintings and large mixed-media assemblages. I had, intentionally, gotten there late, more than fashionably late. I wanted to make sure Gisèle had already arrived by the time I got there. And she had. It's the shine of her silken black hair, alight under the ceiling spotlights that caught my eye as soon as I had pushed through the glass doors.

The room was full of people doing what people do at *vernissages*: they chat, drink, eat, and, in those days, they

smoked. They whisper, too, in hushed tones as they move from one piece to another. Very few buy right there and then. Though some buy on impulse, most of us seem to need to be prompted by a lingering feeling, by a recurring memory brought upon by that particular piece. A heart tug that won't go away until we return to it, to that piece out of some stranger's psyche. To that piece that's triggered something deep inside us, a longing, an almost lustful urgency, a need to possess. Some of Mikael's frames already carried the round red dot that signified the piece had already been sold, I suspect well ahead of the *vernissage*.

Chatting with a group of five people, Gisèle was somewhat off-centre to the middle of the room, her back to the entrance. Her hair swayed gently from side to side as she turned her attention from one in her entourage to another. Dark and Daliesque Mikael towered nearby with his own retinue of admirers.

From where I was standing, near the buffet set near the left hand wall, I could see her, striking, in a simple, black, backless dress that ended just above the knees. Well-defined calves and thin ankles led the eye to black *escarpins*, flat-heel shoes, that matched perfectly the tone and feel of her dress. She turned slightly to her left to accept the thin champagne flute from a waiter's glistening tray. A quietly elegant gold brooch enhanced her *décolleté*. It glinted, caught in the light from above.

And out of nowhere came a woman. There was nothing particular to note about her except that she wrapped her arm around Gisèle's waist in a proprietorial gesture. Her lips touching Gisèle's ear, the woman whispered something that made my lover laugh. Though there was nothing particularly unusual about this woman's movements as such, my heart had lurched. Maybe because I didn't know who she was. Maybe because I was raw from Gisèle's early morning admission, I painted that woman, the one who still had her arm around my

lover's waist, in the role of The Other Woman. I never found out whether she was the one or not.

What's the connection between Gisèle and Solange? Is it that both are attractive women and both are careless? Yes, Gisèle was careless too. Careless with people, intrepid too, but only in matters of love. In matters of sex.

The moon is reclining comfortably portside, lazy on her axis, looking very much like the supine blood-tipped, honey-coloured curved horns of Isis's headgear. Isis, often depicted with tears, is tonight too thin and frail to shine down on us.

Solange is still absorbed by the silky dark shimmers on the water's surface and I watch her watching them. And the longer I stand my back against the wheel, watching her pale shape draped over the pulpit, the more I feel the tug of love. That tug is the reminder I need that beyond her idiosyncratic behaviour that collides with my own search for equilibrium and equanimity, she is the woman I love; a woman attentive to my *other* needs. And they are many. She's also a woman who is hard working, self-driven and caring. A woman who takes pleasure in cooking gourmet meals. A sensual woman totally clear about her sexuality. None of that I should ever take for granted.

The moon is low. The other boats are anchored some two hundred metres away, closer to the strip of sand. I close my eyes as I breathe in very slowly, pushing the air deep inside to the deep tip of my lungs and slowly I let it out. I visualise the expelled breath in varying shades of soot. On the back of each exhalation ride accumulated tension-induced toxins and dingy remnants of curdling resentment that have been constricting my abdomen, backed up all the way to my collarbone. Again, and again I force deep breaths down below my ribcage. These deep breaths force me to straighten my spine. Again and again I exhale feathery volutes of smoky grey soot.

With my eyes closed, newly conscious of the gentle rocking of the hull under my bare feet, I know that if I went over to her and sat behind her, I know she would edge back a little to fit more snugly between my legs. I know we would just sit amicably, together enough, yet separate, for a little while. As her body warmth began radiating from her back to my chest, I would bring her back a little more into me, against me, so as to lean my back more comfortably against the slanted cabin hatch. Her hips wedged between my thighs, her back against my breasts, my hands folded over her stomach, my mouth near her ear, we would not need to talk.

Words haven't been good for us these last few days. No. No words. We must not speak. I would just brush the top of her head with my lips and inhale the furry warmth of her hair and rediscover the tattoo she has there, that of a tiny little bluebird caught gliding forever, never getting anywhere. She had had it done at a time when she wore her hair very short. The little bluebird sat high on her nape, just below the cut of her hair. Many a love session has begun in that position, with her wrapped snugly against my stomach and chest, my face buried in her hair breathing warm kisses on the little bluebird. The little bluebird was more of a free spirit back then, wings wide open, visible to all, getting its share of light and sunshine. Now that she wears her hair brushed back in longer strands, days go by without my catching a glimpse of the little tattoo. And so now, my back to the wheel, I imagine the little bluebird gliding, invisible, behind a curtain of dark tendrils.

I would part that curtain of salty hair and kiss the little forgotten blue bird. Ever so slowly, I would run my tongue over its shape and she would remember. She would bend her head exposing more of her nape to my lips. And so, I would kiss behind her ear. Slow measured, firm kisses to compensate for the warm wetness left within its fold knowing the crisp night air, finding it there, would pick it up. I would slip

my cold hands under her thick sweater. Her nipples would harden and rise. But my hands would know to rest on top of her T-shirt until she reached for them. I would not allow them to roam freely. Not until they had been warmed by her warmth.

And so, in between the two layers of her clothing, I would slowly, dreamily, run my hands over her stomach, her chest, her breasts, her erect nipples and feel them tighten a little more as each of my fingers wandered inquisitively over them. Lips and breath near her ear, I would tighten my embrace around her. She would fit perfectly snugly inside my legs, inside my arms, against my heart, against my sex. Some time later, she would push her lower back against me and reach for my hands, lifting the thin layer of her T-shirt, welcoming them in against her skin, warm, smooth, responsive, vulnerable against my palms. My hands would take over heady with the permission she had given them to take her, to love her. Empowered by her need and spurred on by mine, they would glide under the top of the fleecy trousers she wore rolled down at the waist, ballerina-style, to keep them from sliding down her hips. And press against her sex. And my hands would caress her thin hips and round they would go across her stomach and back over her breasts. And her nipples, hardened by desire uncoiled inside her loins, would catch ever so softly, ever so slightly, under each of my fingertips.

I know that she would take my hand and slide it downward to the edge of her nascent short curls. Her hand would cover mine for a brief instant, just long enough to convey a silent order to mine. And my hand would understand. And familiar with the shape of her sex, it would move and curl around the nexus of her desire. Her breath would stand still in her throat until it found its release in a soft moan.

There against her sex, my hand would linger to play, to decipher in Braille the contour of her need while my heart

C. C. Saint-Clair

would pound against her shoulder blade. My own loins, electrified by her arousal, would press back against her hips. Lips swollen with desire. Her lips, her tongue velvety moist inside the palm of my other hand, tracing the length of my fingers, teasingly firm over my fingertips, nuzzling, nipping. Hot breath, hot lips close around the contour of her ear, insistent now, hungry for more. Wanting to close around the softness of her sex. Wanting to taste the satiny smoothness of her sex. Here. Now.

And because I know all that, because I know my own desire, I duck below deck to retrieve a pillow. And I will sit behind her at the bow. I will lay the pillow against the cabin hatch. I know she will edge back a little to fit more snugly between my legs.

Risking-me **C. C. Saint-Clair**

The bleak backdrop of *Risking-me* is woman to woman violence but, as in all Saint-Clair's novels, her main focus is the delicate and sensual web that she weaves around her central female characters, whose main desire is to get on with life through love.

Risking-me is about taking risks. It is about facing, rather than hiding from one's insecurities. Risking-me is about triggers.

What prompts Emilie to involve herself with one woman as opposed to another? Forced to make more choices that are emotionally draining and risky, Emilie has no choice but to find herself and confront some of her hang-ups.

But above all, *Risking-me* is as sexy and sensual as it is relevant to the modern lesbian reader.

'Risking-me', looks at the everyday realities of women. C.C. Saint-Clair explores issues such as domestic violence, ageing and age difference between lovers, as well as the universal fears of rejection and impermanence. Within the context of these everyday realities, there are also fun times and moments of exquisite connection between women. Will Emilie's self-reflexive musings lead to insights which might gradually allow her to 'let go' and to risk becoming involved with Tamara, who is many years younger? Layer upon delicate layer of erotic sensation and desire between Emilie and Tamara is portrayed subtly and passionately through Saint-Clair's sensuous language and imagery. This subtle, sensuous, slow spiralling of stimulation and sensation reminds me of the French confection 'mille-feuilles'

C. C. Saint-Clair

(literally, a thousand leaves)—multilayered, simultaneously rich and light, creamily textured and delicious.

J. Dougherty, PhD

Jagged Dreams **C. C. Saint-Clair**

Jagged Dreams, C.C. Saint-Clair's fifth novel, another BookMakers' Ink publication, begins when Emilie finds her lover, Tamara, unconscious near her Jeep. It soon becomes apparent that a violent blow to the head is the cause. Beyond the fear of possible complications not yet ruled out by Tamara's doctor, Emilie and the police need more clues than they have regarding the attacker's identity and motive.

This novel is about the disturbing reality that becomes Tamara's during the time she spends in the ward, inside her bed, inside her head, while her thoughts go on, sliding and slithering away from her.

Romance with Style and Substance (Reviewed by Veronica Clayton)

Jagged Dreams targets two social evils, homophobia and incest, and though it is also about love and commitment, its greatest contribution lies in the intelligent and sensitive handling of the issue of abuse. In spite of its serious exposition of such topics, *Jagged Dreams* is also a sexy tale of lesbian lust and love. It is a romance novel tightly wrapped inside a 'whodunnit', a novel that offers something to everyone without weakening any of its parts.

Sexual violence, emotional violence: for most of the thirty-odd hours since Tamara, a victim of random attack, collapsed in the grounds of a deserted parking lot somewhere in an Australian city, her thoughts are a shaken and stirred cocktail of memories, stretched and distorted by the warped reality of dreams and nightmares. Yet, despite the dark thread

C. C. Saint-Clair

of violence woven through the novel, one of its most lyrical moments occurs only hours after Tamara becomes the unwitting witness to the ugliness of sexual abuse.

It is in the vineyards of Bordeaux—Marielle is eighteen and straight. Tamara, at twenty-four, is the older woman who, though she is terribly attracted to Marielle, understands that when the young woman eventually sneaks into her bed, snuggles against her and begins a dreamy exploration of her body, it is more an emotional connection Marielle is seeking than sexual gratification. Tamara intuitively recognises that Marielle's fragile psyche might construe any overtly sexual response on her part as yet another act of physical domination. That nighttime visit is a very touching, very tender moment because Tamara's sensitivity is, ultimately, what brings Marielle not only to survive the ritual of incest her father has been subjecting her to but also to find the strength to finally break free of him.

Jagged Dreams is a novel that brings hard-hitting issues to the romance genre without compromising it. Make no mistake, though it foregrounds violence, *Jagged Dreams* is really about love. And while real time is suspended for Tamara who drifts in and out of consciousness inside a hospital bed, the reader still has to work out whose act of violence has put her there and why.

C.C. Saint-Clair writes with luminous language and creates remarkably visual scenes. The topic of violence perpetrated against women in general, but more particularly against a strong cast of endearing lesbian characters—that spans five novels—is visibly one that preoccupies this author. Thus her portrayal is always compassionate and moving, hard hitting yet dreamy. It is romance with bite and substance. And with a great deal of style, too.

A genuinely great escape on rainy days. A seriously engaging read on sunny days.

Far From Maddy
C. C. Saint-Clair

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

Far from Maddy explores the potential for dependence and loss inherent in any close relationship. On the eve of twenty-two year old Jo's intended move in with her lover, Maddy, in urban, working-class Australia, Jo simply vanishes. So begins the strange tale of her self-determined disappearance and Maddy's desperate search to find her.

As a child, Jo had tried to survive her mother's illness, alcoholism and suicide the best way she could. There was also her father's emotional distance, and the loss of a much older sister when that sibling left home. Years later, Jo's interactions with Maddy, within their loving relationship, trigger her unresolved childhood issues. Her fear of emotional dependence on her lover reflects her fear of abandonment as a child and, so, in a pre-emptive strike, she runs away from Maddy before Maddy might think to abandon her.

Far from Maddy is about the wounds of childhood which we know may be re-opened by subsequent relationships, particularly those with intimate others.

Saint-Clair's distinctive voice, unusually poetic for lesbian grunge, vividly describes this complex, emotional and psychological landscape. Yet there is no proselytising, no judgement, only a compassionate portrayal of each woman, be she the mother, the daughter or the lover, as she tries to live her life the best way she can.

C. C. Saint-Clair

Woven throughout this tale of emotional brutality, and a young woman's desperate bid to find herself, is the leitmotif of this 'thinking woman's lesbian romance' writer: Saint-Clair's erotic, subtle and sensuous language of desire, lust and love between women.

It is easy to fall in love with Saint-Clair's protagonists: 25 year old Maddy, achingly at a loss to understand why her young lover has dropped out of sight, and Jo who needs to find self-love before she can ever be any good for herself, for Maddy, or for anyone.

Engrossing and insightful, tender and raw, *Far From Maddy* is a sheer delight: while your heart goes out to Maddy, you know it is Jo who needs to be made whole.

Review by Kathy F
(for Queensland Pride, Australia. September 2003)

If romance novels that are emotionally raw and sensual without drifting into melodrama are rare, finding a romance writer who consistently lives up to their PR is even rarer.

So it's impressive that C. C. Saint-Clair, dubbed the writer of the "thinking woman's lesbian romance", achieves both with her latest novel.

Far from Maddy is an absorbing blend of thought provoking and intimate affairs, likely to please fans and new readers.

Set mostly in Brisbane, *Far From Maddy* introduces us to flame-haired mechanic, Maddy, and her enigmatic new girlfriend, Jo.

Just as the young lovers are celebrating their decision to move in together, Jo disappears. The shock leaves Maddy

shattered, and immerses both women in unraveling a past trauma.

Maddy and Jo are possibly Saint-Clair's most endearing characters yet. Although atypically grungy for a romance, their relationship maintains the poetic eroticism that Saint-Clair novels are renowned for.

Maddy is appealingly self-assured even in a crisis, but it's Jo who's bound to win readers' hearts.

As a little girl lost putting on a brave face, Jo's so exquisitely tenderly written you'll be holding your breath waiting to find out her fate.

Tamara from the earlier novels, *Risking Me* and *Jagged Dreams*, also returns for a cameo.

The "thinking woman's lesbian romance" writer moniker probably stems from Saint-Clair's addition of social issues to the romance staples of personal transformation and seduction, and *Far from Maddy* is framed against the lives of New Farm Park's homeless.

If that sounds deceptively unromantic, think again. Saint-Clair utilizes compassionate insights about loss and the origins of homelessness to complement the lovers' own dilemmas perfectly, heightening the empathy and suspense.

Overall, *Far from Maddy* is an exceptionally well written treat of a romance.

About the Author



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

By day, a teacher of Senior English and, by night, a writer of lesbian romance with a definite penchant for social realism, C.C.

Saint-Clair went on to write another six novels.

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

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

Though the sensuality of her writing appeals beyond label boundaries, her work quickly attracted the tag of 'the thinking woman's lesbian romance'. It is a description that captures both the sensual romanticism and the socio-politi-

cal realism underpinning her storylines in which reflections on the choices we make, the risks we take on our many (un)resolved personal issues rise to the surface.

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

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

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

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

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

Neither airbrushed nor high-profile though admittedly attractive in their own idiosyncratic way, her ‘women’ are not typical romance heroines, in that they do not need rescuing. They rescue themselves but not from any physical danger.

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

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

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