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volume two

Second Helpings

Evecho and Linda Lorenzo, Editors

ReadTheseLips

Lesbian Short Writings

Second Helpings

edited by

Evecho

and

Linda Lorenzo

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FOREWORD

When we started our site to produce free e-anthologies for lesbians—something that had never been done—we hoped that the internet and local networks would get them to the women who needed these stories. We succeeded beyond our expectations. Over the past twelve months we've been peeked at and searched for by viewers the world over; from cosmopolitan coastal cities to the heart of repressive regimes, lesbians now reach out to each other through the internet when miles and social barriers cannot be surmounted.

ReadTheseLips.com continues to establish itself as a site for lesbian literature in fre(e) form with our new anthology, aptly named *Second Helpings*, available as an unlimited download from our site. Also on our site we have built a bibliographic gateway to the rich history of lesbian anthologies and a guide to lesbian-attentive publishers, as a resource to link past and present.

This book is an example of the amazing work lesbians can do for each other using the web, word of mouth and professional friendships. ReadTheseLips.com acknowledges the writers, editors and publishers who nourish the body of lesbian literature. Thanks to the readers who send us feedback and who continue to pass our books on to their friends.
















Much of our work would not have been possible without the invaluable support of our friends, mentors and families. I am constantly in awe of the encouragement I have received regarding RTL. I am personally grateful indeed for the friendship, advices and quality work of Anni, Renée and Linda, and especially their patience in keeping with the international rules of RTL. You gals are my rock. Stacia Seaman and Margund Sallowsky (aka Gundi) took time out from their schedule to provide their special skills for this volume.

As always, everything I do is to impress my Carol.

Evecho
Editor-in-Chief

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INTRODUCTION

Second Helpings arrives with more stories and an expanded scope. In our new anthology, incredibly talented, brave and articulate writers explore what it means to be lesbian and, in so doing, add definition to ours.

Please welcome in *Second Helpings* the enduring pens of Lee Lynch and Marianne K. Martin; the award-winning insights of Nicola Griffith, Susan Hawthorne and Ruthann Robson; the dynamic voices of Erin Davies and Lorenza Martelli; and the diverse contemporary adult fiction of Ovidia Yu, Fran Walker, Stacia Seaman, Lois Cloarec Hart, Robin Alexander, Fletcher DeLancey, Jac Hills and C.C. Saint-Clair.

To find out more about these generous writers, please visit their websites. In the meantime, we hope you enjoy your copy of *Second Helpings*, perhaps snuggled into your favourite spot with a drink in hand and this latest volume of *Read These Lips*.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Evecho". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a horizontal line underneath.

Evecho, June 2008.

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DINNER WITH ANYONE

Ruthann Robson

Star was not Star's name. We all knew that; we all pretended we didn't.

I'm a practiced pretender. As a child I pretended I was a boy, pretended I could speak a language from a far-away place, pretended I had sophisticated parents who drank wine from goblets. As an adolescent, I pretended I would some day have a lover with a name like Star. Now, I mostly pretend Star isn't my lover, which is usually not very difficult.

Kavita is selecting the wine: Pinotage, a deceptively light red from South Africa. "This one is good, Margaret?" Kavita asks.

"They don't have Kanonkop?"

"No, only this one—Graham Beck."

"Sounds like a beer," Jen-Jen says.

"Eh, to you 'Ozzie' girls, it all sounds like beer," Kavita says.

"Australia has excellent wines, I shall say in my homeland's defense," Jen-Jen replies.

"Yes, but in honor of Margaret, we're having Pinotage."

"Why am I being honored?" Margaret asks.

"Because you sound as if you are having a dreadful time of it and need a bit of reminding that you are special, talented, and amazing." Star is speaking less to Margaret than to the rest of us, sharing news we might have missed.

"Is it that bad?" I ask.

Margaret is in New York this year in what Star described as "a boot-camp for third world journalists." Alex had been the one to suggest she apply, although Margaret had protested that Johannesburg was "hardly third world." "Anything outside of New York is third world to these folks," Alex had argued. "And it's a great opportunity. Besides,

you've been reporting from Zim, you speak Shona, and you've got that ANC anti-apartheid activist cred." "Not to mention my being Coloured." "Oh, definitely mention that!" Alex had said.

"They treat us like troglodytes," Margaret tells me.

"All editors treat writers like that," Alex says. She should know. Alex is an editor at a rather posh women's magazine, although she would bridle at it being called a women's magazine. Gone are the days when Alex did work at what she called a women's magazine, writing about women's role in the Nicaraguan revolution. Although then, surely, "women" meant something different than "women" means now. At least to women like Alex.

"They don't treat famous writers like dirt," Margaret says.

"Oh yes they do. Just not to their faces," Alex says.

"So, Beck Pinotage?" Kavita says.

"Order two," Star instructs. "After all, there are seven of us."

"None for me," Suellen says.

"I'll drink your share," Star says.

"Just one bottle," Kavita says to the waiter. "Until we taste it."

"I know you will just love it." The waiter leans toward her. He hesitates for a moment, perhaps considering the rebuff of his earlier flirtatious greeting. ("I am Dominic, and I am here to give you lovely ladies a most memorable evening.") But he decides to persevere. "You seem like a woman of excellent tastes."

I'd like to take the waiter aside and advise him that our tastes, excellent although they may be, do not run toward men. "Drop the gigolo performance," I'd say, not unsympathetically. I've waited tables myself; I know there is a limited repertoire. A bit of titillation is an obvious strategy when the seven o'clock booking for the largest table turns out to be middle-aged women, a group known to be amongst the most miserly with their gratuities. I can't say I haven't resorted to a bit of coquettishness myself. And I'd guess it wasn't reassuring to hear the un-American accents (especially if he knows the "fair-go" culture of Australia that hasn't embraced the subservient custom of tipping) and to see the non-white faces. (I'm not going to accuse him of being racist, though who isn't?)

Kavita tastes the wine when it comes, swirls it in the glass, and announces her approval.

"Yebo!" Alex lifts her empty glass.

"So, you're talking Zulu now, my dear?" Margaret says.

"It's the trendy language this year," Alex says.

Alex—Alejandra—has a soothing roll to her *r* sounds. Her hair is now silver streaked with black, rather than the obverse, but it is as long and commanding as it ever was.

Even when she'd worn a rifle slung over her shoulder as if it were a smart purse, her hair captured the attention. In bed, her hair was like a sex organ—it certainly gave pleasure and it seemed to take it; I'd swear it got curlier. That she had turned out to be wrong and I'd been right about Nicaragua gave me no satisfaction. I left her in Managua, fearing for her, and I suppose, more for myself. I wondered if we'd still be together if I'd stayed. Probably not. But whenever I see her, my choice rubs raw.

"I'd say Chinese is the trendy language," Star says, nodding toward Suellen. Star always seems to enjoy contradicting Alex. The waiter pours the Pinotage, avoiding Suellen's glass. "So how are things with our favorite saboteur?" Star asks.

"Same old cat and mouse," Suellen says.

"Let's toast," Jen-Jen says.

"To us!"

"And to those of us not here. Siobahn in Belfast. And Donna, now in East Timor, I believe."

"I worry about Donna. Do you think she'll be safe?" I ask no one in particular.

Star answers. "People live in East Timor, you know."

"And people die there," I say. My voice sounds more abrasive than I intended. I finish the wine in my glass.

"That big old cat must be getting tired," Jen-Jen says to Suellen.

"Hard to tell," Suellen says. "But you know, we just keep putting the websites up and China just keeps blocking them. It takes them about three or four days to find one of our sites. Though last month, we had one up for almost two weeks. Someone must have been on vacation!"

"It's the small victories," Margaret says.

"Yes, but that's what's frustrating," Suellen says. She sips her water. "I don't feel a groundswell of public opinion, you know, even among progressives, here in the States. It's like Tiananmen Square was centuries ago, not like those people are still in jail. Fuck human rights. China is the new powerhouse of the global economy."

"Maybe the lead in kids' toys will help."

"And that bad dog food. Weren't some pets killed?"

"It was easier to convince people to boycott gold and diamonds during Apartheid," Margaret says.

"Not to mention Pinotage. Could we have another bottle of this wine?" Kavita asks the waiter.

"I told you we should have two," Star says.

"But really, it's hard to know what to do anymore," I say.

"I'd suggest some appetizers, at least," Jen-Jen says. "In addition to this fine 'Kamloops.'"

"Isn't that in Canada?"

"Yes. No Canadian wine for me. Beck or whatever. And order some food?"

"Please, order something."

Kavita confers with the waiter. Dominic, as if he has heeded my silent advice, is more subdued and professional. A cheese plate is promised. More wine is poured into my glass; the deep berry red refracts the light.

I look across the table at Star. She is a genius at this. If Suellen is a computer genius and Margaret and Alex are word geniuses, then Star is a people genius. I sometimes think she has friends on every continent except Antarctica and maybe even there. And not just “friends” the way I have friends, but friends she can phone, email, text, or even telegram and who will be glad to hear from her. They will invite her to their homes, and they will stay at her impossibly small apartment in the West Village, sleeping on the floor, unless they are sufficiently important so that she abandons her bed or invites them to share it. She arranges dinners at overpriced Tribeca restaurants, summoning some of us, and here we are.

“Did we toast Donna?” Alex picks up the bottle of Pinotage on the table and empties it into Jen-Jen’s glass.

Another bottle appears at the end of Dominic’s arm.

“We didn’t order that,” Kavita says. Her tone is calming and trustworthy, yet strict.

She is an expert at what she does: working with women survivors of war crimes. Name a war-torn region; Kavita has been there. I presume she is a wonderful counselor, but I can’t imagine ever calling her with my own problems. What would I say? *Kavita, I’m depressed because things haven’t turned out the way I wanted politically and maybe I should have stayed with Alex and I’m not sure I love Star or that she loves me.* What would she answer? *Oh, that sounds so dreadful. Let me just switch gears from dealing with a woman who was raped thirty-five times and was forced to watch while her children were beheaded.*

Dominic announces, “This bottle is compliments of the house.”

“That must mean we are drinking too much,” Jen-Jen says. She sips her newly poured wine. “Here is to dear old Squire Beck and his vineyard of Pinotage.”

Like every Australian woman I’ve ever known, Jen-Jen can imbibe great quantities of alcohol. Unlike any other Australian woman I’ve known, Jen-Jen is a horticulturist of indigenous flora. She’s on some quest, working with the United Nations, to have Aboriginal knowledge recognized as intellectual property. How she started doing this, I’ve no idea. She used to work at a women’s bookstore in Melbourne.

I have lost count of the bottles. But even if I knew, I couldn’t calculate my intake. There were seven of us here—six drinking—and the glasses were refilled less than half a glass at a time. Years ago, I kept my swizzle sticks. My professions—my chosen one and my back-up-waiting-tables one—were saturated with liquor. I think I’d read somewhere that keeping track of how much one drank was the first step on the road to control. I

think I've read the same about eating. I realize I am hungry.

"Let's order dinner," I say.

"If you could have dinner with anyone," Star asks, "who would it be?"

In this moment, I detest Star. What is this little game? It isn't as if we don't know each other—as if we haven't been getting along fine downing Pinotage like there is no tomorrow—and need some sort of ice-breaker.

"Kissinger," Kavita says with a ferocity that startles me. "Assuming the terms of having dinner with someone is that the person we choose has to talk to us."

"And you think he'd be honest?" Suellen asks.

"That should be part of the terms also."

"Not happening," Alex says.

"I suppose you're right. Does the person have to be alive?"

"I was wondering that too."

"Living or dead," Star proclaims. She sounds like a third grade teacher. And I hate her like I hated my third grade teacher.

"Then Gertrude Stein," Kavita says.

"Don't you think you'd get more from Alice B. Toklas?"

"No. Stein was more of a talker. I'd like to ask her how two Jewish dykes survived in Vichy France under the Nazis. And" —Kavita laughs now—"what the two of them did in bed."

"Good luck. I think I would like to invite Sappho," Margaret says. "Find out how all those fragments were completed."

"You'll be sorry," Alex says. "I think only the best words have been preserved. The rest is shit."

"Ah, may that happen to my work," Margaret says. "Let's toast Sappho, clever girl."

"I think I'd choose Lindy Chamberlain," Jen-Jen says.

"Is that the dingo baby woman?"

"The woman who said her baby was killed by a dingo out at Uluru. She was convicted and later exonerated. I've always wondered."

"So, we're back to thinking our dinner companion has to tell us the truth?"

"Yes. Let's invite Winnie Mandela."

"She is not going to admit anything," Margaret says.

"Forget truth, then. How about Aung San Suu Kyi?"

"That sounds fascinating," Kavita says. "Someone who has been under house arrest for what?... seventeen years?... I bet she is a great conversationalist."

"You're terrible," Jen-Jen says. "Rescue me, Suellen."

"I would have dinner with my grandmother. She would be truthful and interesting. And I'd ask her to cook the dinner."

"My grandmother would hate me," Alex says. "She was such a fascist whore, always

trying to prove she was white, white, white instead of full of Indio blood. I don't know. Maybe Frida Kahlo? Is that too much of a stereotype? I'd like to get behind the rumors, to find out what she was really like with women."

"You'd like to seduce her, you mean." Jen-Jen is laughing and raising her wine glass at Alex. I see a look pass between them; I turn away.

"Perhaps. But if it had to be someone alive, it would be Tina Brown," Alex says.

"What? I would have thought you'd already had dinner with her."

"Lunch only," Alex answers.

"Oh, and dinner is different?"

"More wine. A fine Pinotage."

"Try to get the Kanonkop," Margaret says.

"You don't like this?" Kavita asks, pouring more into Margaret's glass.

"Oh, I didn't say that."

"And just the two of us," Alex says.

"So, you want to seduce Tina Brown?" Jen-Jen lifts her glass again.

"No."

"But then, why?" Margaret leans forward. "I mean, not to be mean, but she is a bit of a has-been, no?"

I flinch at "has-been." It's a cruel, cruel word and Margaret is usually not so callous.

"Didn't she just try to start some new glossy-glossy that tanked?" Kavita asks.

"She knows where the bodies are buried." Alex's *r* slurs rather than rolls.

I shiver. A magazine editor? Not Ollie North or Ronald Reagan or whoever the hell else was involved in Iran-Contra and pulled down the Sandinistas and almost got Alex—our Alex, my Alex, sweet, brave, dear Alejandra—left for dead on some muddy road. But Tina damn Brown?

"Yeah," Margaret agrees. "But what would you do if you knew? There are things I want to know—things beyond what the Truth and Reconciliation Hearings uncovered—about Botha's security forces. I want to know the names of the men who gunned down all my co-workers. Lucky for me, I'm fucking some married woman and am late for work. Thinking of some excuse I can give my boss, but she's on the floor, like a bloody dog. So, I guess I'd like to have dinner with one of the men in the security force who was in Moz that morning."

I've heard this story about Margaret, but never heard her tell it. She sounds flat, passive, rote. I guess it was a long time ago.

"Can we poison the person we've invited for dinner?" Jen-Jen asks.

"No," Star says. She certainly has her rules.

“Well, then, I think I’ll have dinner with Suellen’s grandmother.”

“She would love you,” Suellen says. She gets up and puts her arms around Margaret.

“Count me in on that dinner,” Alex says.

“Don’t you dare try to seduce my grandmother,” Suellen says. Then she laughs.

“As for me,” Star says, “if I could have dinner with anyone, I’d have dinner with exactly who I am having dinner with tonight. Just think of us—strong, courageous, amazing, brilliant women. What we have survived! What we do!”

I’d like to hurl the wine in my glass at Star.

“A toast!” Kavita says.

“To us! And to Donna. Did we mention Lara? In Iran these days?”

“Oh, Lara. I worry about Lara,” I say.

“And how about you?” Star turns to me now.

“I’m fine,” I say.

“Fine? You are more than fine! You are the music of the spheres. I like to think of your students coming home and telling their moms the name of their music teacher. And mum—reliving her college lesbian-until-graduation days—wondering whether it could be the same heart-throb that is now teaching her little precious how to play an instrument.”

I have never hated Star more. True, for women—for lesbians—of a certain age, my name evokes waves of nostalgia. *Oh, I remember her, they might say. Oh, I saw her in concert. In Melbourne. In Managua. In London. In New York, Cape Town, Vancouver. I had her records; remember record albums? On turntables! Whatever happened to her?* I became a music teacher. At a girls’ school. Don’t dare laugh. It pays my bills. There are no residuals from collectives.

“I bet they drool over you,” Jen-Jen says. She lifts her glass, swirling her bloody wine.

You never did. I am sure I do not say this, but for a moment, it seems as if I have.

“But who would you have dinner with? If you could have dinner with anyone, who would it be?” Star is insistent.

I could repeat Star’s sentiments and praise present company; I could play Echo to her Narcissus.

I could say “you, Star, even though we all know your name is Minette and you were born in Connecticut to Anglican missionaries.” I could profess a love I have tried to hide, not because it shames me with its intensity, but because I am embarrassed by its pallor.

Or I could say Lara and Donna, who I am worried about. I am.

Or I could risk the truth, as unattractive as it is. If I could have dinner with anyone, I

would have dinner with myself.

Not me, now, but some younger self, aged 7, 12, 16, 22 or 26. If I say such a thing, I know what Star, what Alex, what Margaret and Suellen and Jen-Jen and Kavita would think. They would think I'd like to reassure myself that I will live to drink wine from stemmed glasses and travel to far away places and be glad I am not a boy. They think I'd want to comfort that young woman that despite the angst and uncertainty, someday I'll be having dinner with fascinating friends, enjoying vibrant conversations, and looking back on a wonderful past.

But I don't want to tell myself anything: I want to learn about my day, my night, my passions; I want to watch the way I wield a butter knife and hold my head; I want to look at what I'm wearing and how I'm laughing; I want to hear what I think of Sappho and Apartheid and Nicaragua and long curly hair; I want to taste the tiniest slice of the feast of myself. I've forgotten so many dinners, so many friends, so many desires; I want to remember. I would ask myself questions and I wouldn't lie to myself, except to be charming and complimentary.

"Whoever it is," I say, "I hope they have food at their dinner. I'm starving."

"Me too," Kavita says. She fetches her travel spice kit from her briefbag and puts it on the table.

Dominic dances toward our table of ladies, seven plates balanced on a large oval tray.

"I've ordered for you," Star says.





RUTHANN ROBSON'S books include *Cecile* and *Eye of a Hurricane* from Firebrand Books and *A/K/A* and *The Struggle for Happiness* from St. Martin's Press. She is a professor of law and university distinguished professor at the City University of New York. More about her work is available at ruthannrobson.com.



FRENCHY RETIRES

Lee Lynch

For Elaine

She couldn't believe she was sixty-five. She still felt twenty-one. Except for her knees. And her right shoulder. And her feet. Retail food had done a number on her body. But she knew a lot more about life. Except when she came up against something like this thing with her grandniece. Grand niece—that really made her feel old.

She'd wanted to celebrate her retirement with her brother in Tarpon Springs. Why, she didn't know, but it seemed like the right thing to do, despite it still being hurricane season. She'd had the party at work where she got a lifetime employee discount card for the whole Apple Cart chain, and Clove had taken her home afterwards where they'd celebrated some more, and Gloria from Texas had sent her that Nintendo Wii game thing to keep her brain sharp, but her retirement wouldn't be official until her big brother raised a mug of beer in congratulations. She'd been to Florida to visit him a lot since Maman died and had been able to watch Serge's grandkids grow up.

More and more, she could just be herself here. The warmth relaxed her. She felt like her pores were swallowing the sun's brightness. Gone were the days when she had to put a skirt on to visit Maman. At this late date, if Serge didn't like how she looked, she'd kick back and visit Tampa and St. Pete on her own.

She'd come to think of the area as a second home and was considering getting a little condo now that the Bank Street co-op was paid off. Her, Frenchy Tonneau, a home owner? She was so proud, and a second home wasn't out of the question. On the other hand, she had to stay where she could be gay and, geeze, you couldn't even get married or adopt kids if you were in Florida. Not that she wanted to do either, but she thought it stunk that gay kids who wanted to couldn't.

Today she got a little dressed up. Serge said he'd take her out for a celebration lunch at any restaurant she wanted. Of course she'd chosen Frenchy's Rockaway Grill in Clearwater. Not just because of its name. The smells of deep-fried foods—vacation smells—always got to her. She loved sitting outside under the awning, hearing the long-haired

band in the bar play oldies behind the low roar of the customers, watching all the diners in their skimpy Florida shirts and shorts scarf down mounds of fried anything; she loved sharing the boiled shrimp with the whole family, and the conch fritters were not something you could easily get in the city. Not this good anyway, or at this price.

She was wearing black jeans which she'd ironed after she unpacked them. She'd rolled up the sleeves of her best white shirt, the one Gloria sent from Texas for her last birthday, a cowboy design with lavender piping at the yoke and mother-of-pearl snaps that felt annoyingly cold against her chest when she didn't wear anything underneath. Serge was in his usual loud, patriotic, short-sleeved resort shirt with shorts so big around his beer belly his legs looked like sticks holding up a double Rocket Pop. Her sister-in-law, Noelle, wore the same, but her blouse had a huge flower print with buttons on the left, while Serge's sported the Statue of Liberty and right-sided buttons. Boy and girl, just like the rule book said. She envied their gold wedding bands and wished she had given some girl a diamond by now.

The trip was going great. It was seventy-five degrees most days with predictable late afternoon rain and lots of sunshine. Two of her nieces were there at lunch. She was surprised to see her favorite nephew Todd, who she'd always thought would turn out gay, join them after work toward the end, when Noelle left to give her daughters rides back to their jobs. One of them worked for an accountant and the other was a receptionist for a heating company. Both of their husbands had good jobs too.

"They turned out all right," Frenchy commented, watching after them. "Those teenage years though..."

"Tell me about it," Serge responded.

"We weren't that bad, were we?" Todd asked, grinning. He worked in the same plant Serge had retired from four years earlier. He had his father's machine maintenance job and was raising teenagers of his own. Todd had the family's olive skin and his dad's heavy beard, but his dark eyes were Maman's, except for her mother's constant suspicious squint.

Serge cleared his throat. "So how come you never got married, Genevieve?" he asked, eyes on the scenery, not her, his fingers tapping the table, but out of sync with the band.

She looked around at the hot, brilliant sand, the cheerful old-Florida-style colors of the restaurant, the tanned teens playing beach volleyball. She could smell their sweaty sunscreen when the light breeze blew her way. "Why would I do that?"

"It's more why you wouldn't we were wondering about."

"I think that's my business," she heard herself saying, proud of what had come out of her mouth. She'd never told them about being gay all these forty-some years. Maybe she was still a little scared, but mostly, it was good old-fashioned habit from all the years when exposure would ruin your life for sure. "Don't you?"

"Not if we're talking genes," Todd said. His legs were crossed at his heavy white socks and boots—he wore shorts to work—and she saw his upper foot jiggling about a hundred miles an hour.

"Meaning?"

"We think Todd's kid Nicole has what you've got."

The hot flash felt like a fissure up her middle, but her hands were on the verge of frostbite. She could say nothing. What was with the sudden battering ram?

Serge said, "Look at her," as if the kid was there with them.

She had noticed little Nickie's style was pretty different from the rest of the family. Her hair was very short and she brushed it straight up from both sides so it made a ridge along the middle of the top of her head, making her look vaguely Martian. She had one pierced eyebrow and orange-and-black-striped earrings that could have worked as life-savers. Nickie always wore black: black jeans, black French-cut t-shirt that let her pudgy belly poke out, black wrist band, black cord around her neck and black eye makeup. She'd even caught a whiff of marijuana off her once and, checking out the kid's eyes, had seen that she was half-blasted.

"What? She's punk, right?"

Serge looked at Todd.

"I was punk," Todd said, his foot gone still, "twenty years ago. This is different. I never had a girlfriend who looks like hers."

"The girlfriend looks like a twelve-year-old boy. Why would a girl want to look like that?" asked Serge.

She kept quiet. If they wanted to say the word gay, they could. She'd just sit tight. The waitress filled her iced tea, but the ice had all melted. Frenchy added a teaspoon of sugar, then squeezed the lemon slice she'd already used for the first glass.

"So," said her brother. "Are we right or are we right?"

"How would I know?"

"She never talked to you about it?"

No way was she going to ask about what.

"Come on, Genevieve. Give us a break here. We know you're gay. Living in the Village, no boyfriends, never wear makeup, skirts. You think we're blind?"

She was an adolescent again. Not just walking, but living on a tightrope. It took every ounce of her strength, her self-possession, to keep her balance. Even under the sub-tropical sun, she felt the cool shadows of the city streets as she made her way home from a night of gay bars and hungry young femmes. It had been a long time since she'd felt this particular terror.

"You want me to talk to her?" she heard herself say, as if the Florida heat had melted her iron will. Or maybe she just wasn't used to being afraid anymore. Or, get this, she thought, she'd never been willing to take these risks for herself, but she was damned if her niece was going to have to live like she had.

Todd leaned forward, hitting his tea glass and catching it just before it fell over. "I just want to know she's okay. I'm going to love her no matter what, but I'd like to know so I can, what—adjust her mother's and my expectations."

She stopped herself from saying, "So, you don't bug her for grandchildren or to get married? She can do both." No, she wasn't going to get into it. That argument would run

for years.

Instead she said, "I don't think so. I mean, I'll talk to her, but, Todd, *tu parles l'anglais aussi, n'est ce pas?*"

"What do I say to her?" Todd asked.

"You tell her you love her. You have the talk. You know, safe sex and being responsible. What did you say to your other kids—you've got four more!"

Todd looked blank.

Not for nothing had she volunteered in the community gay health program for the last umpteen years. "You didn't tell them anything? You just let them go out there and risk STDs, hep C, HIV and abusive partners and pregnancy?"

"I don't want her making any mistakes," Todd said. "I mean, she doesn't have to think, just because she's got an aunt in the family who's... Maybe there's still a chance she can be—"

"Normal?" Frenchy asked with heavy sarcasm.

Todd stood and waved. "There she is. I told her to come by. I need to get back to work."

She watched Nicole move across the hot, white sand to them, barefoot, Texas dangling from one hand, a lavender pack on her back. She didn't want to say anything to Serge, but this grandniece rubbed her the wrong way and always had. Talk about obnoxious little show-offs. What was wrong with these kids? They dyed their hair with something that looked like black shoe polish and painted up their faces like they were mimes in a circus. Look at her: raccoon mascara—which, at least that hadn't changed since her girlfriends in the sixties. Nicole was not much taller than herself, maybe five foot one, and, while she had not lost her baby fat or baby face, she was substantial around the chest, too substantial for her skimpy t-shirt. Whatever happened to pink angora sweater sets and button-down collars? The lime-green Keds—they used to come in navy, white or black. Period. No, there were red Keds back in the day, but this green?

Nicole swung her backpack under a chair and sat with all the grace of King Kong falling from the Empire State Building.

"You remember your Aunt Genevieve, don't you, Nickie?" asked Frenchy's brother. Frenchy was startled by the note of pride she thought she heard in his voice.

The kid hadn't met her eyes yet, but gave a quick glance at her and mumbled, "Sure." Then Serge announced that he had a dentist appointment and lumbered off like a startled little bear toward his old Ford Taurus—the last year before they made it look like that old game Cootie, he always said, swearing he'd keep it the rest of his life.

And this was his granddaughter, sneaking looks at her. She just couldn't take it in: her brother was a grandfather. She was the gay grand aunt.

"It's been a while," she told the kid.

"Yeah."

"You were pretty much a little girl last time I saw you." Still was, she thought.

"That was just six months ago, Aunt Genevieve," Nicole protested.

"Something grew you up fast." The kid looked bashful for once, eyes cast down, but

a pleased smile on her lips, like she had a secret trying to bust out.

"So, uh, how's school?" What did you say to a fifteen-year-old?

"It's okay. I like it better now that we started the Gay-Straight Alliance."

She was floored. Nothing like coming right out and saying it. "What's that about?"

Nicole was meeting her eyes now. "Du-uh," she said.

"I mean," Frenchy said, "like, do you hold dances or march or hook up, or what?"

"All of the above."

Another dead-ender, she thought, embarrassed. Then it struck her that the kid really might be shy. What did she say to a shy woman in a bar? Hell, she might have had a nose ring herself if she'd been a gay kid now. "You want something to drink?" she asked. She motioned for a waiter to come over.

"A cup of coffee," the kid told him.

It was hot and muggy out so she figured Nicole was trying to look grown up, asking for coffee. "Come on. The Brownie Blowout? Key Lime Pie? I haven't had dessert yet."

"Sure. Whatever you're having."

Frenchy got a Blowout to share and she chattered about the weather and Florida and how Nicole should visit her in the city sometime. She'd never been to the city, right?

"Or Greenwich Village," said Nicole with hints of both awe and petulance in her voice, like she'd been denied her birthright. Chocolate syrup had gathered in the corners of her lips.

She didn't know whether to keep talking or give Nicole space to say something. Everything she was saying sounded lame, like adults had sounded to her when she was a teen.

When they'd made inroads into the dessert, too sweet and too chocolaty for Frenchy's taste, the kid sat back, played with her weird hair and asked, "So, you came out, like, before Stonewall?"

She realized the kid wasn't shy after all, just focused on the gay thing. She should have monopolized the conversation if she'd wanted to steer clear of this topic. Who knew? Nervous, her fingertips were hot from rubbing them back and forth on the rough denim covering her thighs. She pressed them against her glass, but it wasn't cold enough to soothe them.

"Between you, me, and the lamppost?"

"What?" Nicole asked, like she'd never heard the expression.

"I mean, you're not going to share what we're talking about with the whole family, are you?" She was remembering Mercedes' daughter Lydia, and how she'd pull out little nuggets to use when she wanted something, words that, out of context, got Frenchy in trouble with Mercedes. Except for troublemakers at her store, she hadn't dealt one on one with a kid this young since Lydia, what...twenty-five, thirty years ago?

But Nicole was even worse than Lydia. "Why not?"

"Because it isn't anything I ever discussed with them."

"You're ashamed?"

"Hell, no. I just came up in a time when, well, it wasn't talked about."

“Like, before Stonewall.”

She chuckled. “Then and now. I’m not the only one who’s careful.”

Nicole gave her a huffy look. They always had to challenge the adults. “Why? Nobody cares any more.”

“You sure about that?”

“Oh. You mean, like, Matthew Shepard? That was too tragic, but so not East Coast.”

“I guess you never heard of Anita Bryant.”

“Did she get crucified too?”

“She started a campaign against us in the early seventies. She was a famous singer who lived here in Florida and was doing orange juice ads.”

“I guess she didn’t get far.”

“At first she did, but eventually she lost the juice contract and everything else in her life.”

“So what are you afraid of? I mean, we beat them. Closets suck.”

“You think I don’t know that?” she told Nicole. “I’ll live my life the way I want and you can do the same, thank you very much. You don’t know where I’m coming from.”

“Whatever.”

“And the answer is yes. I came out before Stonewall.”

It was as if she’d uttered a magic password. Nicole’s eyes fastened on hers. “Awesome! Were you there?”

Everything in her wanted to say she had been. It was a hero thing, like she wished she could have done more on 9/11. It doesn’t make you a hero to give out free bottles of water from the store you manage to powder-covered survivors straggling past—even if you did get bawled out for doing it and had to pay the store back. At least they let her pay at cost. She thought of her young self and how she’d been tempted to make something up about being part of Stonewall.

“I never went to The Stonewall, before or after the riots. I heard about the cops bashing heads, but who wanted to get their heads bashed? I stayed away.”

The kid shoveled up melting ice cream, licking her white plastic spoon back and front, then streaking her napkin with the brown sauce on her mouth. “Did you march in the first parade?”

“I was working, like most of the gay people in the city. Working or fast asleep or cleaning house or visiting their parents in Jersey for the weekend.” She waited until she could return Nicole’s look. “I wish I could tell you I made history, but I’m just me, one of a million, trying to get by.”

The kid reached for her hands then and gripped them tightly. Okay, she thought: Nicole is femme. Her eyes had a new light in them. “But that’s just it—you lived through it. You came out in the dark ages. Just coming out then, daring to love women, took the kind of courage I’ll never need. Because of you, I could tell Mom and Dad and I could start a gay club at school.”

Frenchy felt her eyes tear up, but shook her head and shrugged. She wanted to say, “Okay, straighten up, don’t slump. And lose the gum!” It made her feel like a drill ser-

geant in the gay Navy. The Village People sang in her head. "If you say so, but all I cared about was going out on Saturday nights and having a girl and a job."

The kid wouldn't be discouraged. She must have really built up her gay aunt in her head.

Frenchy worded her question carefully. "What makes you so sure I'm gay anyway?"

"Oh, come on, Aunt Gen. Everybody knows."

"Did you tell them?"

"No! They told me!"

She felt like the wind was knocked out of her. "When?"

"I don't know, maybe a year or so ago."

"What did they do, just announce it out of the blue?"

"We were watching Ellen on TV. Ellen DeGeneres?"

She drank her tea half down. It tasted too sweet now also. "I know who Ellen is, Nickie."

"Yeah, well. Dad's just sitting there, drinking his beer, laughing his head off. He's really into Ellen. And then he says, all proud, 'You know your Aunt Genevieve is like her.' And I'm like, whoa, I have a queer aunt? I didn't know about me then. Mom says, be respectful, and I'm thinking how bangin' Ellen is, like when I was younger I used to practically drool seeing her on TV and we have all her dud movies."

Nicole, once you got her started, thought Frenchy, didn't shut up. She half-listened to her raves about Ellen and *The L Word* and K.D., thinking, and all we had was Liberace and Johnny Mathis.

"We had Johnny Mathis," she told Nicole.

Her niece surprised her by saying, "I love Johnny Mathis! He's awesome to slow dance to."

She shrugged again. "Who else was there? We suspected some women; we were right about some, not about others. Liberace? How proud could we be about that closet case? And here's my grandniece with Ellen DeGeneres and Portia de Rossi and Ringo Starr's stepdaughter and Cher's Chastity, and all those lesbian politicians to show her the way. You're one lucky duck, kid."

"I don't know how you did it back then, Aunt Gen. I don't think I could have."

Just then three teenage boys sauntered by the restaurant.

"Hey, there's the lez," the smallest of them said. "Where's Royale Ann?"

"Who's this?" asked the guy wearing a wrestling singlet under loose jeans, like he was coming from the gym. "Your Grandma Bulldyke?"

Frenchy rose up, feeling like a Bantam rooster, but very protective of her grandniece. "Back off," she said.

"It walks, it talks—"

"Go fuck yourselves, you wusses," Nicole snarled. Frenchy sat down, staring at her. She sounded like the young Frenchy, cursing out the Village toughs after they'd passed but never confronting them like this. Nothing had changed after all, except this girl could take care of herself. The boys gave a chorus of raucous laughter, but moved on. Nicole

returned to listing out lesbians until Frenchy interrupted her.

"You look like that didn't faze you."

"They're assholes," said the kid with a dismissive gesture. "Don't tell Mom and Dad about me cursing."

"You're not scared to tell them you're gay, but you don't curse in front of them?"

"Excuse me, is there something wrong with being gay?"

"My big brother, your grandfather, would have smacked me around for either when we were growing up."

"I hope you would have smacked him back."

"No way. It would never have occurred to me. He was like a father for me."

"You better believe I would if he tried."

The waitress came by, asked if they wanted anything else and gave her the check. She waited until the table was cleared. "So, do I get to meet your girlfriend?"

"I thought you'd never ask, Aunt Gen. Come on, she's only a few blocks from here. She's waiting."

"Waiting!" Frenchy laughed and figured a 10% tip, because of no new ice or lemon for her tea. She followed Nicole through the bar and onto the beach. They skirted the parking lot in silence, then Nicole slipped on her Texas and they continued on the sidewalk. "Her name is Royale Anne?" She pictured a skinny long-haired youngster in crazy clothes—a thrift store dress and shawl maybe, or white capris and a form-fitting blouse.

"Yes, but don't say the name Anne. Just Roy, okay? She'd die. She really wants to meet you. I've only been telling her about you since we started going out. And showing her pictures of you. I am so glad you still have that hairstyle."

The way Nicole said it, she wanted to ask what was wrong with her hair. She'd always worn it this way, with the pompadour and the d.a. in the back. She didn't see Serge changing his hair either. "You and me, we're night and day," she concluded. She spent the next three blocks telling Nicole how things were when she was her age. "It's like we came out on different planets." She couldn't get over having a gay niece and being able to talk like they were talking.

Royale Anne lived in a townhouse on a street of many condos, all dressed up to attract people with money, but not enough money to live on the beach. They walked around back to the pool area. The water was aqua blue, like a movie pool, the smell of chlorine strong. A slight figure quickly set down a paperback book and leapt up from her lounge chair. The young woman diddy-bopped toward them, dressed in a white, short-sleeved, button-down shirt, sleeves rolled up, black jeans with a military-sharp crease ironed into them and a sidewall with a pompadour. Except for the sidewall and the guy's aftershave, she could have been the young Frenchy. The girl held out a hand.

Nicole said, "Roy, meet my Aunt Genevieve."

"Call me Frenchy," she told Roy, as they clasped hands in a firm grip.





LEE LYNCH has been proudly writing lesbian stories since the 1960s when she was a frequent contributor to *The Ladder*, the only lesbian publication at the time. Since then she has published a baker's dozen books, her stories have appeared in a number of anthologies and magazines, and she has written reviews and feature articles for *The Lambda Book Report* and many other publications. Her syndicated column, *The Amazon Trail*, has been running since 1986.

Her works include: *the butch cook book* edited with Sue Hardesty and Nel Ward (2008), *Beggar of Love* (2009), *Sweet Creek*, *Toothpick House*, *Old Dyke Tales*, *The Swashbuckler*, *Home In Your Hands*, *The Amazon Trail*, *Sue Slate*, *Private Eye*, *That Old Studebaker*, *Dusty's Queen of Hearts Diner*, *Morton River Valley*, *Rafferty Street*, *Cactus Love*, *Off the Rag* edited with Akia Woods.

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THE STORY BEHIND FAGBUG

Erin Davies

On April 18, 2007, my VW bug was tagged with the words “fag” and “u r gay” on the hood and driver’s side window, presumably because of the rainbow sticker on the back window.

I saw it when I was on my way to my part-time job, and I stopped dead in my tracks. I couldn’t believe someone could do something so awful. I pulled my cell phone out to see what time it was, realized I was running late, and thought to myself, “I gotta go.” I opened the door that had the word “fag” plastered all over it, sat down, started my car, and headed to work. I only made it half a block; all the pedestrians were pointing and staring at me and my car. It was too much for me to handle, so I went right back to the parking spot I’d just left, ran home, and got another ride to work.

Everyone at work told me I should take the rainbow sticker off my car to prevent something like this from happening in the future, and I thought maybe that’s what I should do. I left work an hour early to go home and call the police. As I was waiting for the officer to arrive, more than fifty people passed by, and everyone had a visible reaction to the words on my car. It brought strangers on the street together to have a dialogue about it. No one knew I was in the car across the street watching them, nor did they know it was my car they were reacting to, but as I sat there, I noticed the dialogue that resulted from the presence of my car with the words on it.

The police officer who took the report asked me, “Who are your enemies?” over and over again. He didn’t see any connection between the rainbow sticker and the writing on my car. He assumed there must be something I’d done to someone to provoke this, despite my statements to the contrary and the fact that I lived in a safe neighbourhood. The idea of this being a random act of hate wasn’t something he was willing to consider.

My insurance company insisted that I drive the car “as is” until they could come look at it to give me a quote, since the damage was cosmetic and the car was technically drivable, and they weren’t getting me a rental car. They also informed me that it would be

about five days before someone could look at the car. I couldn't believe they expected me to drive my car that way for five days. I told them that the word "fag" was right next to my face and told them I didn't think they would want to drive their car in that condition. I insisted on getting a rental car, and after pressing the issue, got them to agree.

I had decided I wanted the rental car because I needed some physical and emotional space from my car and what had happened to it. But while I drove the rental car, people in my neighbourhood stopped me in the street to talk to me about my Volkswagen, which I left parked in my neighbourhood. I had no idea everyone even knew that was my car, but I guess Bugs stand out.

The following day, someone in one of my classes argued quite adamantly that I should keep the rainbow sticker on my car. I expected a friend of mine in the class who was gay to speak up and encourage me to keep it, but his response was that this was the number one reason why he'd never have a rainbow sticker on his car.

The day after that, I went for a run in the morning, and again I was stopped—this time by a parking lot attendant on the block where I usually parked my car—and had a half hour conversation about what happened, and how he felt I should remove the rainbow sticker from the Bug and why.

As we spoke, I realized people were either on one side or the other of the issue of the rainbow sticker. I became very curious and wanted to take my video camera out and interview people and get advice about it so I could make an informed decision. I could relate to both perspectives. What would you do? Keep it on and risk this happening again, or take it off to avoid it happening?

The more I thought about it, the more I realized the importance of the decision I had to make. After saying good-bye to the parking lot attendant, I headed back to my apartment. I only made it one block when I was stopped by the dialogue my car was creating. I began to feel that although I wanted to escape it, I couldn't, it was too strong; so that morning I decided to drive the Bug to school. I still wasn't comfortable driving my car with the word "fag" beside my face, so I rolled the window down.

I parked in front of the admissions building on my campus (The Sage Colleges in Troy, NY), and within one hour, more than fifty phone calls were made to public safety, who asked me to move my car off the premises (which I did not do since I was on a public street). I was dismissed from working that weekend because the admissions office did not want my car there during a scheduled open house event. I was featured on the local TV news that day, and I told the reporter that I was going to drive my car for one week to raise awareness. What I didn't say was that a week seemed like an eternity, and I didn't think I could make it.

I gained a lot of support from faculty and friends that day, and I never again rolled my window down. People encouraged me to keep driving the Bug and to take it to gay pride parades. At the time I thought that seemed like a crazy idea, but now I've done more than ten gay pride events around the U.S. I even won the most outstanding individual award in the 2007 Vancouver Pride Parade!

The following day, I got a call from a longtime friend. Cory had heard what hap-

pened to my car and saw a vision for it. He told me, "It's great you got on the news to raise awareness, but if you take it off now the whole thing will be forgotten and no one will care about it." He added, "If you have the guts to keep driving, you should take it around the country and document people's responses to it."

I thought it was a joke and put it out of my mind before I went out of town for a birthday party. But when I returned the next day, Cory told me he'd registered the fagbug.com domain name and even signed fagbug up for a MySpace page.

The more I thought about it, the more I thought I should do it. So I did. On 27 June, I took off from Albany, New York, on a 58-day trip around the U.S. and Canada. Before I knew it, I was receiving letters of support from people all around the world. Given that I drove my car for two months before I headed out on my road trip, I had a general idea of what my documentary would be about. I received over a hundred e-mails from around the world from people whose cars were vandalized in a similar way. Not only does it happen in Albany, it happens everywhere, every day. Little did I know how bad things were until I decided to see for myself.

I was able to interview more than 350 people to gather feedback about where people stand on hate crime legislation and homophobia. One of my goals was to confront the general public with my car, so I did many interviews at gas stations, or random stops like that.

In investigating hate crimes, I felt compelled to stop by Laramie, Wyoming, to see if there was a memorial where Matthew Shepard was killed. I spent over three hours talking to at least thirty people about where his body was left, and no one could tell me exactly where it happened. Even those who lived close to where the murder took place didn't take the time to find out. There is no memorial; the town has wiped their hands of it and are all very defensive about how they were betrayed. Most people there feel he wasn't killed for being gay—they believe it was just a drug deal gone wrong.

While I was taking a picture in front of the Laramie Carwash, a man named Brandon came up to me because he saw the word "fag" on my car. He was on his way from Salt Lake City, Utah, to DePaul University in Greencastle, Indiana, and had come to Laramie for the same reason I had: to find the Matthew Shepard memorial. He told me that in the five minutes it took him to go inside a local gas station to pay for his fuel, someone threw something at his windshield and made a crack in it over a foot long. Once he saw it, he went right back inside and asked the woman working there if they had video surveillance. She asked if he had a rainbow sticker or something on his car, and when he said he had an equality sticker, she told him that type of thing happens there all the time.

So as much as the people of Laramie would like to think a gay person couldn't have been killed because of being gay, Brandon's experience speaks to the contrary. Our similar experiences brought us together, so much so that we went on the adventure together and I ended up staying with him in Indiana for three days. I even let him drive the fagbug for two days to see what the reaction would be to a man driving and stepping out of a car that says "fag" on it.

Being in Indiana was a wild experience. Brandon and I got pulled over because of my

car. The cop continued to tell us that it was an “obscenity,” and I said, “I know it is.” When I told him I was keeping it there on purpose and travelling around to educate people, he said that was the dumbest thing he’d ever heard of. He told me he wanted to go get a razor blade and take it off my window right then and there. I asked him to please not do that, and when he used his fingernail to scrape the word off my window, I asked him kindly to stop. He yelled, “Well, that’s an obscenity and you should do your research on that,” and drove off.

Once when Brandon and I stopped by the side of the road to look at a map, two eighteen-year-old guys drove by and yelled “fag” out their window. Once they saw I had a video camera, they turned around and I interviewed them. They told us that they didn’t like gay people and that they had themselves written the word “fag” on other people’s cars.

One reason I went to Indiana was to investigate Aaron Hall’s murder. He was beaten and left to die in the middle of a field in Crothersville, Indiana. The two teenage boys who killed him say that he made a pass at them. No one knows if this actually happened or not—whether Hall was even gay is in dispute—but these two boys had ten days to think over what their reasoning was between the time they killed him and when they got caught. Some people think they made up the story to gain sympathy from the court, and given that this happened in Indiana, where the lack of hate crime legislation means no severe punishment for a crime like this, the boys might actually get less time as a result of their “gay panic” defense.

Aaron’s wasn’t the first story like this that I uncovered. In Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, I learned about Sean Kennedy, a twenty-year-old who was killed May 16, 2007, in Greenville. South Carolina is another state that has no hate crime legislation in effect. Sean’s killer, yet again a teenage Caucasian male, hit Sean in the face so hard that he broke his wrist.

Sean’s mom Elke and sister Dawn are actively fighting to get hate crime legislation enacted in South Carolina. Even though the boy who killed him admitted he did it because he didn’t like Sean’s sexual preference, the investigator on the case is still convinced that wasn’t the reason for the attack.

I heard about Ryan Skipper’s death when I was in St. Petersburg, Florida. Ryan, twenty-five years old, had just bought a brand-new car when two young Caucasian men stabbed him twenty times in his new car and went around town bragging that they’d just killed a faggot.

My car doesn’t say “dyke” on it, it says “fag,” and because of that, I want to know why someone would feel compelled to spray-paint on my car, punch Sean Kennedy, beat Aaron Hall, or stab Ryan Skipper. What is wrong with our society that boys and men are taught to hate each other for even thinking about being homosexual or expressing emotions toward one another? What is this machismo about? What drives this type of behaviour? That is what I spent most of my trip investigating: Why it’s okay to be a lesbian in our society but not to be a gay man.

While I was in Los Angeles, someone tried to take the word “fag” off my window

with soap and a razor blade. This wasn't the first time someone had tried to take it off; in Albany someone tried to take it off with a razor blade as well.

When I was in Moses Lake, Washington, staying at a Super 8 Motel, I was asked to move my car out of the parking lot in the morning because it was creating a "problem." I refused. It's not the first time that has happened. I've been asked to move my car two other times: at my college the first day I drove it, and at a high school I observed at for my graduate program.

While I was in Las Vegas, a seven-year-old boy tapped on my arm and asked what happened to my car. I told him someone vandalized it, and he said to me, "That's so gay." That was a moment when I wanted to freeze time and explain to him that what he was saying was hurtful and was the same thing, the same hurtfulness, as what was done to my car. Yes, someone vandalizing my car is "gay" by our society's standards—it's messed up, bad, negative, but I disagree with this young boy. There is nothing wrong with being gay.

Three weeks before I made it home, I got an email from VW of America stating that they were going to reimburse me for all my gas and car-related expenses for my trip, and they agreed to sponsor my fall/spring college speaking tour. At certain points along the way, I wasn't sure if I had enough money to make it home, but when I felt that way, so many people came forward to help me out financially. Something that could've easily made me question the goodness of people has done the opposite. It has renewed my faith. So many kind people around the country hosted me, paid for my hotel rooms, organized events for me, and gave me the emotional support I needed to be able to accomplish what I set out to do.

I had expected to come back to a welcome home party, but ten days into the trip my girlfriend and I broke up, and many of her friends have been boycotting me ever since. I was proud of myself for making it home safely and for taking the whole thing on, but returning home was bittersweet. I had to move out of my apartment by the end of the month. It was tough to be on the road in a different city nearly every day for fifty-eight days and then return home to the stress of moving.

Everything in my life has changed because of my decision to keep the words on my car and travel around to educate people. I am taking a year off grad school to launch a second tour to high schools and colleges, edit my documentary, and write a book.

I decided to move to Tampa, Florida, for five months. I hired an editor to work on my film and hoped I'd get the space and time I needed to reflect about all that had happened. On my way down I stopped for the night in North Carolina, and once I got to my hotel room, I looked out the window and saw a car that had "fag" written in big white letters on its back window. It was as if it was staring right at me. Even when I was away from my car, things like that continued to seek me out. I thought someone was playing a joke on me.

After I'd been in Tampa for a couple of weeks, someone threw rocks through the back window of my car and the living room window of where I was living. During my trip I had anticipated that would happen, but it never did, so this caught me off guard. I

faced a dilemma: Should I put a cover on my car? It was similar to what I faced when this first happened: Should I cover it up, get it fixed, take the sticker off my car? I'd driven my car like this and made it visible for over six months, and covering it up went against what my campaign was about. I decided that it comes down to fear, and how you respond to it. Was I afraid after that happened? Yes, but I felt that I was in a position to continue to take a stand about it. One person who throws a rock can scare us all only if we let them. If we refuse to be intimidated, soon enough they will be the minority.

During the month of October, I did a month-long tour that had my car visible on college campuses as part of the events. In November I flew to a speaking engagement and didn't have my car there. That night when I went to close my hotel room door, I felt a sense of relief. I realized how much stress and worry my car has brought into my life. Not only is it vulnerable every moment, but I am as well. Usually I close the door and don't know what I'll walk out to the next morning, and I have to be prepared for whatever might have happened. Although many people have wanted to help along the way, and may have had good intentions with attempting to remove—or actually removing—the graffiti, it has felt like a violation of my property.

One of my last days in Florida, I was having a really rough time. I woke up and headed out with just enough time to get to an appointment. As I went to my car, I was informed that a neighbour had removed the word "fag" from my window with a razor blade. This was after he was told I was doing a documentary and intentionally leaving it there. I wasn't in the frame of mind to stop what I was doing and have a conversation about it at that moment, so I had to make arrangements to interview the man who did it. He said he didn't want to have to look at it while it was parked next to his house.

By the end of December, my editor and I got the first twenty-three minutes of the film finished for a Sundance Documentary Grant. In January I got news that I received a \$5,000 grant from Mitchell Gold and Bob Williams, which allowed me to pay my editor to work full-time during the month of February. By that time I had moved back to New York, and it all came full circle. Volkswagen told me they plan on giving me \$6,000 for the film, but their donation is contingent on changing my logo, which they see as an infringement on their brand. Everything about this project has been like a double-sided coin, really good and really bad news. Every time I feel something great has happened, something really terrible happens in the same breath.

What started out as a weeklong experiment has now turned into a yearlong journey. Upon returning from my cross-country trip, I felt like the world was ahead of me and I could take anything on. Since then I've had a ton of instability in my life, from where I'm living to how I'm surviving financially to how I'm paying for the film to the conflict that my car has brought me on a daily basis.

While I was on my trip, I emotionally took in all that came to me. I was the one recording it all. I learned about other, more devastating hate crimes; everywhere I went, people came to me to share their stories, which were all very sad. I've had to deal with people criticizing me for what I'm doing, people I once cared about as well as strangers. I've dealt with losing friends and people who were close to me because of what I'm

doing as well as people being drawn to me because of it.

The hardest part has been dealing with the constant unknowns my car brings and always having to be in the frame of mind to take on people's reactions and actions toward me or my car. Think of all the times and places you drive your car. In the past twelve months, I haven't been able to get gas or groceries or go shopping without dealing with weird looks or comments from people.

This all brings me to April 20, 2008, the one-year anniversary of driving with the graffiti. I decided to celebrate what I've accomplished by transforming my car into a positive symbol of gay pride. It all started with the long skinny rainbow sticker that was on the back of my car a year ago. Putting it on my car was my way to display my "pride." Since then I've created my own rainbow fagbug sticker campaign. What better way to display my pride than by turning my car into my rainbow fagbug sticker. Now my car is one big rainbow and has "fagbug" written in large letters on both sides of the car with the website underneath. It is ten times more visible than it was with the graffiti and it continues to tell the story of the fagbug.





ERIN DAVIES has been an activist in the gay community for the past ten years. When her car was vandalized, she was in the middle of getting her masters in art education and editing a documentary about Living Proof, a theatre program she directed/produced with urban GLBT youth from Baltimore, MD. Erin's goal with Living Proof was to create a program that countered all the negative statistics (suicide, depression, homelessness, isolation, HIV, etc.) regarding GLBT youth. Given Erin's background as both an artist and an activist, her decision to drive her vandalized car is of no surprise.

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TABLE FOR TWO

Jac Hills

'Have you ever had sex on a coffee table?'

The question came out of the blue and it was sheer good luck that I didn't spray coffee all over the room.

'What the hell brought *that* on?'

'Well, I read this story, you see, and it sounded really hot and I wanted to try it. So I bought this.' And with that she plonked a large dildo on the table. Correction—a large double-ended dildo.

I knew the story she meant; it was a good one by one of my favourite authors. Until that moment, I hadn't actually thought about putting it into practice but I was game.

'So, you got a harness?' I asked, as I picked the toy up. It was a pretty good one by the look of it. Silicone, solid and expensive.

'A what?'

'A harness. Something to hold it on with. Hell, you haven't, have you? How about lube?'

She shook her head. 'I didn't know I needed something else. The woman in the shop didn't tell me that.' She was pouting. I swear to God she was pouting. She looked like a four-year-old denied her sweeties. Not for the first time I wondered why I was dating her; she wasn't my type at all.

'It's okay...not to worry...I have one at home; I'll bring it with me sometime.'

'Will you go and get it now?' She was doing that awful Marilyn Monroe voice again. 'I want to do it now.' I hated that voice. She slid across the sofa towards me and rested her hand on my thigh. 'Please.'

'Look, Tab, if you've never used one of these before, it might be an idea to try something smaller first.'

'Silly, I was straight until I met you—I'm used to it. I'll be fine. Go get whatever you need to play with this.' I gave up, finished my coffee, and headed out.

It was only a twenty-minute drive and I grumbled to myself the entire trip. 'What the blazes are you doing, Sian? What are you doing with this straight girl? I mean, for God's sake. She's called Tabitha. Who the hell names their kid Tabitha? That's a bloody cat's name. Tabby. And does she think you can just strap one on and bingo?'

Tabitha had obviously been reading my books again, the ones with the stories where the hero straps on a double and rides her motorcycle, without injuring herself, to a club where nobody even notices she's packing. And of course she's an instant expert in its use. I read those stories too and I love them. But they're stories. Real life is different. It's not that easy. I'd used a strap-on, sure. But it had taken a while to become proficient. Lots of errors, lots of awkwardness, and a hell of a lot of laughter. That was half the fun really, learning and laughing.

I couldn't believe I was complaining because a woman wanted sex. Was I getting old? God, too old at thirty-five. It wasn't as if we'd been together long enough for boredom to set in, either; I'd only known her a couple of months. It was just...Tabitha!

I picked up my favourite harness, some condoms, and a new bottle of lube. Lube is like money—there's no such thing as having too much. I stuffed everything into a rucksack and drove back to Tabitha's flat.

The door was still unlocked so I walked right in. She was already naked. Oh yeah. That's why I was dating her; I remembered now. She was a sex-maniac with an amazing bust. I could die quite happily between those beauties. In fact that was how we met. I'd been standing outside the gay pub with some friends when she walked by and I'd said, 'I want to be buried right there, face down.' With my usual lack of discretion, I'd spoken loud enough for Tabitha to hear. She wasn't upset though; she'd liked it. That alone should have been sufficient warning, but I hadn't listened to my inner voices and I'd asked her out. Fool.

I undressed and got the harness on as quickly as I could, almost tripping on my trousers in my haste. As I was carefully spreading lube on the dildo, Tabitha draped herself across the coffee table, rested one arm across her forehead and announced, in a throaty voice which I assume she intended to be sexy, 'Take me...take me right now.' The image that immediately popped into my thoughts was that of the baroness from the film *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. It was a struggle but I managed not to laugh.

I positioned myself over her while I tried to work out the logistics of fucking someone on such a low surface. I couldn't kneel, I couldn't stand, and I was a little nervous about adding my weight to the table. I decided I was thinking way too much. Carefully I slid the dildo into Tabitha. She moaned in a way that suggested she liked it. I slid most of the way out and then very slowly back in.

'More,' she said. 'Harder, faster. More.' I obliged. I got into a good rhythm, hard and fast. Oh yeah, that was good.

When she demanded 'deeper,' I rested one knee on the table to give me greater purchase and a better angle. Which turned out to be a big mistake. The only warning was a slight creak; it was enough for me to pull clear before the coffee table collapsed. Actually,

collapsed is a bit of an understatement. It shattered. Bits of wood flew everywhere.

Unfortunately, I was still attached to the damned toy and when I hit the ground, oh God. It hurt, oh boy did it hurt. I was in so much pain I couldn't even swear. I bet even childbirth doesn't hurt as much as hitting the floor point first on a double dildo. I saw stars and little flashing lights.

Tabitha was screaming and not in a good way. She staggered to her feet and I could see why. She had splinters in her backside. Very large splinters. At least six of them. One looked about half a foot long. If I had been able to stand, I would have helped her but I couldn't. I did the only thing I could—I reached for my jacket which was close beside me on the floor and grabbed my mobile phone from the pocket.

Tabitha continued to scream the whole way to the hospital, but they wheeled her into a side room and gave her some good drugs about five minutes after we arrived. The silence was beautiful. You don't fully appreciate silence until you have thirty minutes of blood-curdling screams to contrast it with. The ambulance crew had been really good. They hadn't laughed much. Well, not until after leaving us in the casualty department. Then they'd stepped outside and slid slowly down the wall, laughing hysterically. I couldn't blame them really.

I had been able to get the harness off before the ambulance had arrived at Tabitha's flat but of course I hadn't been able to get dressed. Nor had Tabitha. I had grabbed my clothes and shoved them, together with the harness, into my rucksack but I'd been naked as a newborn when I'd been brought in. I was assessed by the triage nurse and then a doctor examined me. I explained how we had come to be injured. Both the nurse and the doctor left the cubicle 'to consult'. I could hear them both gasping with mirth.

The nurse came back and apologised. 'I'm sorry, that's not exactly professional.'

'It's okay, I'd do the same. It is funny really.' The nurse was cute. Really cute. And exactly my type. I grinned at her and was surprised when she blushed. She cleared her throat and became very professional once more.

'Thanks for understanding. Well, you have some rather bad bruising, I'm afraid. You'll be in a little discomfort for three or four days. The doctor has prescribed some cream to ease it slightly. You won't be able to...ah...indulge for at least a week. And I'm afraid you'll be walking like John Inman for a day or two.' She smiled.

'Don't worry. I don't think I'll be trying that again in a hurry. I'm just praying no-one I know saw me brought in or will get to hear about this. I'll never live it down.' My mind was muttering 'I'm free, I'm free' over and over now. Great. I'm a butch dyke channelling a camp queen. And I just loved the way she described my near-death agony as 'a little discomfort'.

'We're going to admit your friend. She'll need an anaesthetic for some of those splinters but you're free to go.' Just as she said that, two orderlies walked past the cubicle pushing a gurney on which Tabitha was sprawled face-down.

She spotted me and screeched, 'You! I hate you. I never want to see you again. I'm going back to my husband. You, you, you...brute.' She burst into tears.

'Husband?' queried the nurse.

'Yeah. I really should learn to stay clear of straight girls. Bloody thing was all her idea anyway. I knew I should have gone with my instincts and not trusted that coffee table. It looked far too delicate.'

'Hmm. You should probably have used something more solid. Something like mine, it's a good stout oak one.'

It was just like the old cliché. You could have heard a pin drop. The silence was deafening. Even when I finally recovered the power of speech, all I could say was 'You?'

'Me,' she said.

I looked at her, sweeping my gaze from head to toe and back again. She was very cute. But I hadn't for one minute thought... 'My gaydar must be broken; I didn't get a single blip.'

'Most people don't. It's the uniform coupled with being what's laughingly described as a "petite femme". I get a lot of mistrust from other lesbians, especially in gay bars.' She didn't sound too happy about it.

'Well, if you don't mind my saying so, I think you're a rather attractive petite femme. Don't worry what people's misconceptions are.'

'You do?' She watched me thoughtfully for a moment or two before enquiring, 'How are you getting home?'

'Damn! My car's at Tabitha's place. I suppose it's the bus then.'

'You really think you're going to be able to sit on a nice bumpy, bouncy bus all the way home?'

'Ah, that would be a big, fat no. I guess I'll be standing.' I was not looking forward to the journey, that's for sure.

'Look, if you can wait a bit, my shift ends in'—she twisted round to check the clock above the reception desk—'six and a half minutes. If you like I'll give you a lift home. It will be a lot more comfortable for you.'

'Is that allowed?'

'No, not really.' She was looking down at the floor now. I wanted to reach out and lift her chin so that I could look into her eyes and get an idea of what was going on. I couldn't, not right there in the middle of the casualty department.

I said softly, 'What's wrong? Look at me, please.'

She shook her head and muttered, 'It's ridiculous. It's just that I've seen you in The Acorn and I liked...I mean...oh, this is stupid. I'm thirty-three years old for heaven's sake. I'm far too old to be having stupid, adolescent crushes.'

I was grinning now. She'd been in our local gay club and had been checking me out. 'Now that's flattering. Hey, don't be embarrassed. Look at it this way—I'm two years older than you and you've just had to treat me for a self-inflicted wound, dealt by a homicidal sex-toy. And that's after watching me carried stark naked from an ambulance. Nothing you can do or say can top that surely?'

She laughed. 'Well, when you put it that way...okay, wait outside for me; I'll only be a moment.'

I minced carefully across the reception area and out through the sliding doors. I looked as though I was auditioning for a part in *La Cage Aux Folles*. I felt very conspicuous.

It wasn't exactly the most comfortable journey I've ever had, in spite of the cushion she gave me to sit on, but it was a hell of a lot better than the bus would have been. And it gave us a chance to talk. She started.

'So. Sian. Are your family Welsh then?'

'Nope. English through and through. My mother liked the name. She decided that if I was a boy I'd be Sean—and no, there's no Irish in the family either—and a girl would be Sian. It could have been worse. My father wanted to name me after his grandmother.'

'Oh?'

'Her name was Daisy.' She snorted in amusement. 'Yeah, well, coupled with my last name of Gardner can you imagine the hell my life would have been at school? Right, you know my name but I still don't know yours and I'm pretty sure that crying out "oh nurse" in the throes of passion isn't the most romantic thing to do.'

'Sorry, I'm Alison Carey. And about that passion. I know what I said, I mean I know I was flirting and I mentioned tables and things—'

'Whoa. You said you'd seen me at The Acorn; well I can imagine what you've heard. I'm not going to pretend I've been a cloistered nun but I'm not all they say. Half of the women who claim I slept with them are lying. I just can't be bothered to waste my time denying it. The only reason I've never settled down is because the right woman hasn't come along. So, if what you were trying to say before I so rudely interrupted you was that you're not up for a quick roll in the hay, or on the table'—I grinned—'don't worry. But I do like you and I would like to see you again.'

She was quiet for so long a time and the silence made me so nervous, I had to say something. 'I'm being quiet now; this indicates it's your turn to talk.'

'Thank you. Yes that's exactly what I was trying to say. I'm not usually so forward, or so shy for that matter, and I'd love to see you again.'

I tried not to show how relieved I was. We exchanged phone numbers. I very gingerly got out of her car and said, 'I'll give you a call as soon as I can walk like a human being again; perhaps we can see a movie? And maybe if we date for a while and decide we like each other enough, we can take your coffee table for a spin.' Predictably she blushed.

So, did we? Oh yeah. We did. Several times. And a very nice coffee table it is too.





JAC HILLS, known to her friends as Zero, is a displaced cockney (a real one) butch now living in South-West England. She's older than she'd like to be but as family keep reminding her it's better than the alternative. She's an adrenaline junkie, which accounts for her love of adventure sports and fast motorcycles. Not to mention fast women. She loves to travel and has visited every continent except Antarctica. She writes online under the name Insane Englishwoman and has had one story published, (in the Cleis Press anthology *After Midnight*), and is hoping for more someday soon. One of these days she'll have enough guts to try for a novel. She has been writing since childhood but has only recently had the courage to inflict that writing on the world at large. Blame Xena and fanfiction. When not writing she's reading (lesbian fiction, law, politics or history), exercising, running with her dogs, working—wallpapering, painting and tiling—or indulging her tastes in music—country, Suzi Quatro and opera. Now there's a mix.
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THE ABOMINATION OF THE BLUE HIBISCUS

Ovidia Yu

If by nothing else, these people turning, drifting into my mother's wake can be classified by their reactions to the enormous arrangement of radiantly blue hibiscus blossoms at the foot of her funeral casket. Respectable church aunties draw back apprehensively with awed, appreciative whispers, while retired civil servants and nominated Members of Parliament look around surreptitiously for some hint as to the correct protocol. Most of our friends recognise it with immediate and lavish delight; some have to be reminded that this being a funeral, posing for phone shots is not appropriate.

"You doing okay?" I pull my hands out of the depths of the drinks fridge to see Hwee has carefully put on her unconcerned face.

"Of course I'm okay. Why shouldn't I be okay? We're running out of green tea. Why is everybody suddenly drinking green tea today? I thought old people at wakes only ask for bottled water, so I ordered—"

"It's okay. I already called downstairs...they're sending up some more packets of green tea."

Hweelin spent over fourteen years working in the States after graduating. As a result there's a slight foreign twang to her vowels that sometimes makes it difficult for me to tell whether she's making fun of me.

"You sure you okay?"

"Of course I am—why shouldn't I be?" I can hear the curt sting in my tone.

Hwee, wisely, chooses not to.

I don't mean to shut her out, but I cannot look at her now. My eyes dart around, scanning the room. All seems well; everyone is seated or standing, quietly occupied with drinks, nuts or conversation, but still I feel a strong sense of foreboding. I feel something I am completely unprepared for will come crashing down on me any second now. My anal-retentive nature is stressed into panic to be so unprepared, but there's no way I can

defend myself against something I cannot identify.

Of course I feel strange, you say. My mother just died, but her death was not exactly unexpected. We've already been waiting for her to die for over two years. Her doctor gave her a year, but my mother was never good at keeping to schedules.

And it's not as though my mum and I were ever close.

Hwee touches two of her fingers to her own lips and then to mine. This time when she smiles at me, I smile back and feel the chill of the room recede slightly.

"I love you."

"Just for ordering green tea? I should have asked for curry puffs too."

"This is disgraceful!"

My aunt's voice triggers a reflex that makes us leap apart. But this time it is her flower contribution Aunt Sharon is taking issue with.

"Look how green it is—it's all leaves! Do you know how much I paid for this? I specifically asked them for white lilies and white roses. More lilies than roses, I told them. Just look at it! Is that why it's been pushed all the way to one side like that? I am Yvonne's closest living relative, you know—the last from that generation—my wreath should be up close to the front! Oh my goodness... When I first came in, I was ready to call those people and tell them off for not delivering in time! And then I saw it hidden way over here—this is an important one—this is a family one, okay!"

I see the ushers, all friends of ours who volunteered or were conscripted by Hwee, looking helplessly around. *No*, Jinna is saying to Aunt Sharon, *No, you cannot move the blue hibiscus wreath because—* There is no way our sweet Jinna will be able to hold out against Aunt Sharon. I head into battle.

"Keep breathing," Hwee says. "Visualise your Aunt Sharon getting her first Brazilian wax."

No way. That could really generate some drastic nightmares.

Ten years younger than my late mum, Aunt Sharon never married. Hwee insists Aunt Sharon twangs her gaydar, but I find even the thought repugnant. I don't think I'm being homophobic—I'm just afraid she'll make us look bad, I guess, in much the same way she thinks I make our family look bad.

Even as a child people told me how much I looked like my mum's younger sister. Looking back, I suspect my tats, gym obsession, and crew cuts were all attempts to distance myself from her long, unstyled hair and increasingly fair, flabby body that her increasingly expensive suits failed to disguise. But that's not the only reason I am uncomfortable about being related to her.

My aunt is well known in local gay circles. Law Professor Sharon Lim Ching Lien, writer of homophobic rants to the *Singapore Straits Times*, is best known for her repeated attempts to make relations between two women a criminal offence under Singapore law "considering that lesbianism (like homosexuality) is abhorrent and deviant, whether consensual or not."

Of course, Aunt Sharon had been acting on behalf of her church and later the National Council of Churches of Singapore, but I suspect these were just vehicles for her own passion.

Even now I see that instead of joining one of the tables occupied by my late mum's friends, former colleagues, and church acquaintances, Aunt Sharon has chosen to lecture a table of our friends.

"What right do people like you have to ask decent citizens to surrender our cherished, logical, and fundamental moral beliefs just to let you feel comfortable about your aberrant sexual behaviour? Can you tell me that?" Aunt Sharon's voice quivers slightly. She clears her throat and looks around for a drink, but no one comes to serve her.

One of the muscle boys giggles nervously and is shushed by his partner, Raymond.

"This isn't the time or place to discuss such things," Raymond says soothingly to Aunt Sharon. A lawyer turned social worker, Raymond is used to calming down people and situations. "Since we're all here tonight in the spirit of love and friendship, why don't we all just—"

"Look—I have more right to be here than any of you! I am a sister of the deceased! I don't know what all of you think you are doing here, but I will not be subject to your tyranny. Do you hear me? Let me tell you—you all think you are all so clever, but we are onto you! We are aware of your agenda! You come here and try to force us to violate our consciences. You trample on our cherished moral virtues and threaten our collective welfare by imposing your vulgar homosexual dogma on families with young children—"

Aunt Sharon turns her attention on Gin and Carla who have brought our goddaughter to put her paper butterflies in her godgranny's coffin.

"Look at you two—adding irresponsibility to your sexual hedonism—do you realise what a mockery you are making of our strong Asian family values? What will you tell this poor misbegotten child when it asks you who its daddy is? Tell me—" Aunt Sharon towers over the child (sweeping a protesting Gin back with an arm), "Tell me—do you know where your daddy is? Huh? Do you have any idea at all? Huh?"

"My daddy is in Phuket," says little Shayli clearly, "with Uncle Ben." She offers Aunt Sharon her little pink mobile in its little Strawberry Sirotan case. "Autodial three."

"I am distressed," Aunt Sharon says stonily. "I am distressed, disgusted, and upset—all these perverts and paedophiles using my poor sister's wake as an excuse to organise one of your meetings. Do you realise this constitutes an illegal gathering? If I call the police now you would all be arrested."

But I can tell she is tired. The spirit has gone out of her fight.

"Why don't you sit down," I suggest, "and have some water—"

"You're making people drink water? Don't you have any green tea?"

Right on cue my perfect Hwee materialises, bearing chilled tetra paks of green tea. "Here you go, Professor Lim—here, let me give you two—one isn't going to be enough, they're quite small."

I squeeze her arm. "Thanks, Sweet—"

"You can change, you know," Aunt Sharon says. "You think this is who you are, but that is where the Devil is misleading you. You can choose to escape if you want to. After all the money your poor mother invested in your education, do you really want to live this destructive, unfulfilling lifestyle?"

"Weren't you also on scholarships all the way?" Hwee asks me. I nod.

Aunt Sharon ignores us. "Think of your poor mother—"

Obediently, we turn to look in the direction of the coffin containing my poor mother. Aunt Sharon winces.

"Those flowers—" She shakes her head. "They are unnatural, an abomination."

"Her mum was very happy about the flowers," Hwee says. "We got the registration and paperwork done just in time to show her."

Aunt Sharon turns her back on Hwee, on my mum's coffin, and on the profusion of *Alyogyne huegelii* *Yvonne Lim-Mitchell* blooms fronting it.

Had my mother been happy about the flowers?

The day we got the documents naming Hwee's cultivar, my mother had already gone in for her final stay in hospital. *We're just making her as comfortable as we can*, her doctor said. In other words, no more treatment, just painkillers.

We showed her the papers, but she seemed so unconcerned. I remember thinking *she doesn't realise all these beautiful flowers, soon to be shipped all over the world, are named after her*.

Seven years ago when Hwee first got excited over a bluish-lilac blossom she saw among the mass of orange-red flowers crowding my mother's hibiscus bushes, my mum said, "Every now and then the bushes come up with a funny one like that."

"Funny can be special," Hwee told her.

"Look after my daughter," Mum told Hwee in hospital after pushing the documents and flowers aside. I started to object but—

"Let a sick woman talk," my mother said.

"You know, they didn't want me to marry her father. They said I was wild, immoral, had no respect for my family or traditional values...and then of course, my Dennis died. If my sister did not help me, I don't know how I would have managed. I know Sharon believes God punished me for marrying an ang moh man but..."

"What do you think?" Hwee asked her gently.

My mother put her hand on Hwee's arm.

It was the first time I saw my mother touch my lover.

"Please look after my daughter," Mum said.

Yes. My mother did understand what Hwee had done with her blue hibiscus. And she was happy. I feel my eyes filling and blink to clear them.

“You got your stubbornness from your mother,” Aunt Sharon says. “You should learn your lesson from what happened to her! You are not young anymore, you know. You cannot go on being irresponsible forever!”

Having walked Aunt Sharon to the lift lobby, I tentatively offer her a couple of red threads. Visitors to funeral parlours should carry away something red to counter any bad luck that might have rubbed off on them from their encounter with the dead. I did not know where a Fundamentalist Christian lawyer with a fervent belief in preserving Asian Values against Western Hedonism would stand on this superstition morphed into culture.

Aunt Sharon takes the threads automatically. I stare at the numbers above the lift door, willing them to move faster.

“Should you ever decide to turn your life around, I hope you will not let your pride get in the way. It is never too late to change. I can show you testimonies of people who used to be like you but who have found God and are happy now. As the only family you have left, I feel responsible for you.”

I glance at Aunt Sharon. She is talking at the lift door, not to me.

I feel Hwee’s arm slide with confident familiarity around my waist and now she is pressing herself against me reassuringly. In sneakers, the top of my little Hwee’s head barely comes up to the bottom of my earlobes, but as she says sweetly, “Don’t worry about Denise, Professor Lim, I’ll look after her,” I believe her.

The lift arrives, but Aunt Sharon is not done yet.

“That flower of yours is an abomination,” she says to Hwee. “Hibiscus flowers are not meant to be blue. People like you have no right to interfere with nature.”

“Nobody has any right to interfere with nature,” Hwee agrees.

When Aunt Sharon is finally gone, Hwee says, “We should visit her—like once a month maybe? Now your mum’s gone, she has no other family.”

I tell Hwee if that’s her idea of looking after me, my mum should have given the job to someone else. She says I’m stuck with her.

Arm in arm, we go back into the room where my dead mother is lying surrounded by our friends. Raymond is taking a photograph of Gin and Carla posing with little Shayli in front of the massive blue hibiscus arrangement. They look guilty for an instant, but it passes once they see I am no longer tense.

I know my mother is happy with what Hwee did with her flowers. She is happy with Hwee. And with me.



SHIOK

Ovidia Yu

It was difficult to explain the nuances of *shiook*, Hweelin realised, whether to non-Singaporeans or to creatures like the nephew and niece who were raised in careful insulation from Singlish.

Something *shiook* triggers a sensation of pleasure and happiness in your gut. A great hawker centre meal can be *shiook*, but pricey haute cuisine hors d'oeuvres seldom are. However, being treated to pricey haute cuisine hors d'oeuvres by a special someone is definitely *damn shiook*...though in such a case you're more likely to apply the term to that special someone.

Her nephew and niece, now sitting across the table from her in Earle Swensen's, VivoCity, triggered no maternal instincts whatsoever in Hweelin.

Michael was still studying the menu. He was five years older than Emily, just as Hweelin was five years older than the younger brother who had set out to recreate their parents' nuclear family.

At his age, Hweelin had been uncomfortable with her feelings, her family, her school-mates—resenting herself for not being like everyone else, even as she resented everyone else for not appreciating all the qualities she hid so carefully.

Could that be how Emily was feeling? If so, she hid it well. Emily was still waiting for her to explain what she meant by calling the salad buffet *shiook*.

Well, Hweelin had not meant anything. She had been trying to make small talk. Remembering how uncomfortable she had been as a child, Hweelin was uncomfortable around children. At Emily's age, Hweelin had focused on being good—coming in at the top of her class, practicing a daily hour of piano, and not forgetting any names on her nightly prayer list. She had to keep adapting the list as individuals and items added themselves, and prayer requests morphed into gratitude or resignation. She even worked out a mnemonic to make things easier for God! It was insomnia based on religious guilt

that lasted until she left home and the family church.

“You should get to know the kids better,” her brother had said. “After all, it doesn’t look like you’re going to have your own kids, so when you are old and senile, these two will have to be responsible for you—”

Hweelin privately resolved to commit suicide at the first sign of Alzheimer’s. In case it progressed too quickly for her to remember, she would write notes to herself why it was essential for her to kill herself—assisted suicide being legal only in the Netherlands. But Hweelin knew she owed a lot to her brother and his family. Her parents would probably have reacted far worse to her if they hadn’t had their conventional son and his family to comfort themselves with.

“He’s just looking for a free babysitter now it’s the school holidays,” her sister-in-law had interjected quickly.

Hweelin quite liked Lucy; she just could not understand why anyone would willingly marry into a family like theirs. But then, if she understood other women better, she wouldn’t have been single for many years.

“So...what do you want to eat?”

Michael was still concentrating on his menu.

“I’m trying to decide between the steak and the half chicken. I mean, they say here the steak is grilled the way you like it, but there’s no guarantee they know how I like it, right? Chicken is boring, but a safer bet.”

Hweelin could hear her brother talking through his son. So many words, so much thought, such utter predictability. It was frightening.

Emily was still studying her. “You’re vegetarian aren’t you, Aunty Hweelin? What are you going to eat?”

“The salad here is good.”

“Daddy says salad is rabbit food. Daddy says with all the pesticides in raw vegetables, it’s more dangerous to eat salads than French fries.”

It was not the first time it struck Hweelin that Emily was a really ugly child. On principle she believed beauty was present in all people—and on principle, that definitely included children—but still, Emily was an incredibly ugly child.

But that was not the only reason Hweelin was uncomfortable with the child staring at her.

“We should watch our nieces and nephews,” Hweelin’s partner had said. “Because that’s how the gene spreads. We don’t have kids, so how else, right?” Those were the words of a geneticist.

Hweelin didn’t want to think about Emily growing up alone and tormented the way she had. But could she help someone she felt so put off by? She didn’t understand her

reaction. Hweelin had had friends and even lovers who were uglier in purely physical terms. But Emily Gwee just made her want to walk away.

“Can I have a banana split, Aunty Hwee?” Michael asked. “I know it’s a Gwee family tradition to always get the Coit Tower at Swensen’s, but I really like the banana split here.”

Gwee family tradition. Now it was her own father Hweelin heard speaking through her nephew’s words. Whatever she thought of Emily, she could not abandon the girl to these men with their boring jokes and eating traditions.

“Daddy says your company is bound to go bust sooner or later.” Emily delivered this with the air of a child knowingly waving a sparkler closer, closer, closer to a gas leak. “He says you won’t have the sense to cash out and run while you still can.”

Business at BlueBlossoms was going fine. It was true they had turned down several offers to buy them out but—

Hweelin felt indignant pressure build up. “Your father told you that?”

“He was telling other people. I heard.”

“Who was he telling?”

“Lots of people. Daddy tells everybody.”

BlueBlossoms had been mentioned in the Singapore Straits Times as one of the new companies to watch out for; Hweelin and her partner had been nominated as Entrepreneurs Of The Year.

“Grandpa laughs when Daddy says that. I think Grandpa thinks you’ll go bust too,” the ugly child said.

“Grandpa laughs whenever anybody says anything,” Michael said.

That was also something that had become true lately, Hweelin realised. It probably saved her father having to think. She was tense. She took a deep breath and sat back.

“I have to go to the Ladies.” Emily pushed her seat back.

Automatically Hweelin stood up to accompany her to the restroom. Wasn’t that something you did with children in strange places?

“Mummy told me not to let you take me into the Ladies with you,” the girl enunciated primly. Pointedly.

Hweelin stopped. “What?”

Emily repeated—more loudly, more slowly, and with more evident enjoyment.

“Mummy told me, no matter what, I cannot let you take me into the Ladies with you.”

Hweelin almost said *what* again but stopped herself. She could sense Emily enjoying this. And she recognised the dirty feeling of humiliation.

Déjà vu. It was what being teased in school felt like.

Do you notice she always goes to the toilet when Sarah goes?

Never mind the toilet. Do you notice how she’s always looking at Sarah when she thinks

nobody's looking?

Emily was attending the same elite mission girls' school Hweelin had once hated so much. Perhaps she wasn't having as hard a time, though. Perhaps she was the one giving other girls a hard time.

"You want to go toilet then go-lah...what for stand there and talk so much?" Michael said.

"By myself?" A petulant whine edged into his sister's voice. "Anyway I don't know where it is."

"Either hold it in or *ask* somebody." Michael raised his hand and said to the waitress who materialised, "She needs to find the toilet."

"The Ladies," Emily corrected. "Isn't someone going to come with me?"

Michael studied his menu. "I have to order."

"Maybe I'll go later. I don't know if I want to go on my own."

"Either go and pee or sit down and shut up," Michael said.

Hweelin felt a stirring of liking for the food-focused, stolid boy.

Emily went.

"I'm going to eat meat till I'm thirty," Michael said. "And stay in the civil service. Then maybe..."

"Why thirty?"

"Grow bones. Get a financial foundation. What's working with your partner like?"

"What?" Taken aback, Hweelin snapped at him.

"Dad's always saying women can't do business. But look at Olivia Lum and Hyflux. And you and Denise Mitchell. Do you and your partner run everything at BlueBlossoms together or do you each take on different stuff or what?"

Hweelin was surprised to hear Michael talk about the company—and Deni—so naturally. To her brother and father these were jokes—just as she was.

"I looked up you guys online," Michael explained. "It sounds so perfect. Being your own boss. Working with somebody you can trust completely."

"It's not perfect. It can be terrifying. And Deni has great ideas, but some are really crazy—" But yes, Hweelin did trust her completely.

"Crazy, meaning?"

"Like making track shoes part of the official dress code. Getting a tattoo of a blue hibiscus—" That had been for their first anniversary. It might not be the perfect life for everyone, but it was for them.

"She sounds shiok," her nephew said. She saw a wistfulness beneath his stolid composure. "I would get a tattoo too..."

"Damn shiok," Hweelin said.

"What are you talking about?" Emily and her whine were back. She sat down, pointedly ignoring Hweelin. "You know Mummy doesn't like you using bad English."

"Salad," Michael said.

S H I O K O V I D I A Y U

Yes, salads could be *shio*. And healthy, as Hweelin learned that day...as is discovering you are not the only one in your family who is into things that are different, healthy, and *shio*.





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WITH HER COMES THE RAIN

Robin Alexander

We stood face to face under the awning of the old metal tool shed where we'd spent many hours playing as children. The constant patter of the rain was the only sound. Neither of us spoke a word. Her brown eyes stared into mine. I could feel her breath on my face. She knew what I was contemplating and she wasn't backing away.

I did then what I'd spent my teenage years dreaming about—I kissed her. Her lips were hard at first, unyielding to mine, but I continued undaunted until I felt her relax and her arm slip around my waist.

I'd read the term "melting into the kiss" in my mother's endless piles of romance novels. Now I understood that description because that's exactly what she did—she melted into me.

A loud clap of thunder startled us both and she pulled away from me. The hand that moments before was caressing my lower back was now in the center of my chest pushing me away. "I have to go" was all she said before turning and walking out into the storm and out of my life.

I stared at my dust-covered boots, cursing the heat and the drought it brought with it. I hated August, the hottest month of the year in Louisiana. It was as though the summer knew that it would soon have to relent to fall and it dug its claws in deep. The humid breeze brought no relief. Instead it clung to my face like a wet blanket, making it hard to breathe.

I took refuge from the sun on the porch, where I stretched out and longed for autumn. I wondered what life was like beyond the borders of the quiet little town that I'd grown up in and was never allowed to leave.

My father became ill while I was still in high school. I knew then that college would never be an option for me. I was needed to help with his care and to ultimately take over the sugarcane farm that generations of my family had been enslaved to. Todd, my

younger brother, was only ten when Dad passed away, and when he graduated high school, I pushed him to get an education so he wouldn't suffer the same fate. Now he was gone, living his own life. Mom, too, remarried and moved on, leaving me here to tend the family business alone.

The phone rang, interrupting my break. With a groan, I jumped up and ran into the house, hoping the phone wouldn't stop ringing before I managed to find the cordless devil.

"Hello?"

"Um...hello, may I speak to Kaci?"

"This is she," I replied testily, not recognizing the voice.

"Kaci, this is Morgan...do you remember me...are you still speaking to me?"

That was a good question. Morgan Gaudet was at the center of all my fondest memories and deepest regrets. Many nights, I lay awake reliving that kiss shared behind the old tool shed and wondering if my life would have turned out differently if I hadn't acted on my feelings.

"Hi, Morgan, how are you?" I forced myself to say.

"Not good." Her voice faltered with emotion. "I guess you heard about Anthony."

Dread filled me from head to toe. "No, I haven't heard anything. Is he okay?"

She took a shuddering breath. "He was killed the other night..." She stopped in mid-sentence and began to cry.

I sank into the chair in shock. My head swirled with memories of her older brother: playing hide and seek, learning how to ride my first dirt bike, and seeing who could spit watermelon seeds the farthest.

"What happened?" I asked as tears slipped down my face.

"He was riding that motorcycle of his, and a car pulled out in front of him. They said it was instantaneous—he never felt a thing."

Nausea washed over me as she began to sob again. I couldn't do anything but listen to her cry.

"Can you pick me up at the airport? My flight arrives at seven tonight." She finally asked.

Morgan had several siblings and a huge family that still lived in town, yet she wanted me to pick her up. For a second, it made me feel good that she wanted me, but then I was reminded of how often she'd trampled my heart. "I'll be there."

"Thank you," she replied. Then the call disconnected.

That summed up our relationship. I would be there, and when she was finished with me, she just disconnected.

I was a ball of nerves by the time I made it to the airport, and I was late. I wanted to get there early and mentally prepare myself for seeing her again. When I pulled into the passenger pick-up lane, it was too late for preparations. My heart skipped a beat when I caught sight of her; my hands felt clammy as I gripped the steering wheel.

Even though her eyes were puffy from the tears she'd shed, she was lovely as ever.

Her hair, so dark brown that it almost looked black, made wavy by the humidity, cascaded past her shoulders. How many times had I longed to run my fingers through it? Tall and strong, yet elegant and refined, she stood there, her dark eyes looking into mine, begging for comfort.

I climbed out of the truck and walked around to where she stood. Neither of us said a word as she wrapped her arms around me and held tight. "I'm so sorry," I whispered over and over as I held her.

When we parted, I loaded her things into the back of the truck. She just stood there watching me, looking so lost and confused. She only moved when I opened her door and gestured for her to climb in.

"Do you want me to take you to your mom's place?" I asked when we were on the road.

"No...I was hoping you'd let me stay with you." She said it so quietly, I wasn't sure that I'd really heard her.

"You want to stay with me?"

"I want to stay with you, Kaci."

The way she answered struck me as odd. As did the fact that she wanted to stay with me. In all the times she came home, she never stayed at my house.

"That's no problem. You know I have plenty of space. You can stay in my old room if you want."

She simply nodded, and we rode the rest of the way in silence.

The next few days were a blur. It's always sad to me that families only get together for weddings and funerals. For three days straight, we were on the go. I suppose the hectic pace kept the family busy and gave them little time to dwell on the loss. There would be plenty of time for that later.

The day of Morgan's arrival, we stayed so late at her mother's house that we ended up sleeping there—Morgan on the sofa and me on the recliner. The next two nights were spent the same way, except we were at my house. My neck and back ached from sleeping on chairs and couches, but most nights, we talked until we drifted off to sleep.

The day after the funeral, I fully expected Morgan to tell me she needed to leave, but she didn't. She showered and dressed after breakfast, then settled on the porch swing and seemed to be lost in her memories. I made us a glass of iced tea and joined her.

"When do you have to be back?" I asked, so that I could prepare myself for her departure.

She sipped her tea and continued to stare out across the yard. "Are you still seeing that girl from Lafayette?"

"It was Lake Charles, and no, we broke up a while back."

Morgan turned and looked at me. "Why did you break up?"

"She had a problem with alcohol, and she snorted when she laughed. It got on my nerves." I grinned.

Though I didn't make her laugh, it pleased me that I had at least made her smile.

"Are you seeing anyone now?" she asked and looked away.

"Just Bessie."

Morgan looked back at me with a grin of her own. "Bessie the cow?"

"Yeah, but it's not serious. She's convinced I'm just in it for the milk."

Morgan chuckled.

"I know it's udderly ridiculous, but that's how cows are."

We sat silently for a while, and I asked the question that I knew would kill off another piece of my heart.

"Are you seeing anyone?"

"I quit my job." She avoided the question, but the answer she gave surprised me.

"Why?"

"I wasn't happy." She glanced over at me nervously. "I haven't been for some time now."

I fidgeted with a piece of straw that had blown up on the porch. "Do you have something else lined up?" My heart sank. I just knew she was going to tell me her new job would be somewhere even farther away than Atlanta.

"Do you really still love me after all these years?" she asked suddenly, taking my breath away.

I'd never touched her, aside from the one kiss that we shared on the day of our high school graduation. And even though she never let me get close to her, I'd been honest about how I felt—always felt. Each time she came back home, we'd spend time together, and inevitably I'd end up confessing my undying love for her. Then she would leave.

"I'm not gonna answer that question," I said as I stood. "Why rehash it?"

Morgan grabbed my hand, forcing me to turn and look at her. "I need to hear you say it...if you still feel it."

My anger flared. "Why? So you can pack up and leave? Do you get some sort of sick satisfaction knowing that you tear my heart out every time you come here?"

She didn't flinch at my outburst. "Should I take that as a yes?" she asked with a slight smile.

I peeled her fingers from my hand and stomped down the steps. "Take it however you want. Whether I say it or not, you know my feelings will never change and neither will you."

I marched across the yard, putting as much distance as I could between us. I was angry at my rebellious heart and furious with Morgan for having complete control over it. I walked in circles until my anger subsided and the familiar feeling of emptiness took its place.

I found myself drawn to that old tool shed and went to it like a long-lost friend. I hugged one of the posts that supported the awning, trying to ground myself and choke down my emotions.

"This is where it all started," I heard Morgan say, but I couldn't look at her.

Droplets of rain drummed on the tin roof, and I squeezed my eyes shut at the memory of the day when I first made my feelings known to her.

"Tomorrow, a moving van will arrive with my things. I'm moving back home."

I kept my eyes closed and refused to look at her, though I could tell she was coming closer.

"I wanted out of this town so bad when I was growing up, but now I long for it." She paused and stood so close to me that I could feel the heat coming off her. "Actually, it's not this town I long for. It's you."

I hugged her tighter, refusing to believe what I was hearing.

"I fell in love with you in the second grade," she confessed with a laugh. "I used to dream that we'd get married one day, then Anthony dashed all my hopes when he told me that I couldn't marry a girl."

I felt her breath on my face and opened my eyes. She stood there smiling sadly. "I'm so sorry that I put what people in this town would think over you." She reached out and caressed my face as she continued. "Anthony taught me something else, though. We're not promised another day in this life, and I'm not about to let mine slip away without you."

And there she was standing in front of me again, looking the same way she did when we were eighteen. The rain was pounding away on the roof above us as it did back then, and I kissed her. This time it was only slightly different. She melted into me instantly, and I knew that this time she wouldn't be walking away.





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In addition to writing, Robin and her partner Becky Arbogast became the proud owners of Intaglio Publications in January of 2007. Robin spends her days working with the staff of Intaglio, and her nights with her own writings. She still manages to find time to spend with Becky, who she openly admits is the inspiration for the changes in her new works.

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HALFWAY THERE

Fran Walker

Yvonne slowed her rental car when the vehicle in front of her flashed its brake lights. Ahead, a camper-van, then two cars, pulled off the coastal highway. A signpost on the roadside indicated a scenic overlook.

She was on holiday. She'd come here to have fun. Tourist sites were supposed to be fun.

Yvonne pulled off the road and parked behind a small bus. Long, rough rock flats thrust out to the ocean. People stood in small groups on the rocks. Yvonne walked towards the other tourists, looking for signs of the Kaikoura area's famed whales.

"Seals!" a child shouted.

In the shallow water below the rock edge swam several adult seals and some half-grown pups. They would be ungainly on land, with those rounded bodies and stubby flippers. Much like herself teetering on these rocks in her skirt and heels. What would it be like to be embraced by the water, to have an environment that lent you such grace and support?

Families, couples, and gaggles of foreign-sounding tourists chattered and took photos. Yvonne walked away and stood alone. A gull flapped its wings and stared at her with an evil yellow eye. She turned away, feeling like an overdressed interloper, and stumbled into something. Looking down, she realised what she'd tripped against had been a person sitting on the rocks.

"Pardon me!" Yvonne exclaimed.

The woman got up and dusted off her hands. "No worries," she said. "But you probably don't want to walk any closer to him."

The woman pointed to a huge thick-necked seal lying motionless and perfectly camouflaged only a few metres away. Yvonne hurriedly backed up.

"He won't hurt you as long as you don't disturb him," the woman said.

Yvonne nodded. She felt like a seal on land, out of her element, while this woman—barefoot, face bare of makeup, wearing an un-ironed shirt and shorts—seemed perfectly at ease. Yvonne muttered a word of thanks and fled back to the carpark. After fumbling with the controls of her unfamiliar car, she pulled back onto the highway and continued north.

Twenty minutes later, she unlocked the door to the holiday cottage she'd booked for the week. Halfway House was a small private house located in the village of Kekerengu, halfway between Blenheim and Kaikoura. The whimsy of the name had appealed to her when she looked through the rental website.

Grape vines smothered the outside of the cottage, making the hallway cool and dark inside. No traffic noise, no radios blaring, no demented warbling from magpies in the trees. Not even the sound of the surf, though the ocean was only a few hundred metres away. The house felt wrapped in cotton wool. Yvonne took a deep breath. It'd be nice to be wrapped in cotton wool. Lately she'd been feeling so jagged and brittle that she half expected to find shards of herself scattered in the bathtub after she showered.

Yvonne carried her suitcase inside and glanced at her watch. Automatically she calculated the times in Sydney and London. No use trying to call either of her daughters. Heather would be at work and Raewyn asleep.

"Damn." Yvonne stumbled across the pebble beach. The advertisement for Halfway House had neglected to mention that there was no sand along this stretch of coast, just fist-sized stones that looked pretty from a distance but made walking difficult.

She picked up a seashell and rubbed her finger over the deep fluted scallops. The shell's outer side felt harsh and gritty, as if it had armoured itself against the ocean's relentless pounding. Turning the shell over, she stroked the inside. Smooth and silken, like a woman's folds.

Ahead lay some rock flats. She took off her black pumps and picked her way forward barefoot. No sign of seals. No dolphins or whales offshore, either. Just the hiss of waves, the smell of salt, the sea spray that prickled her skin, and the throbbing of her stubbed toe.

Too late, Yvonne had learned that Kekerengu was a nonexistent village, a spot on the map with nothing but one restaurant-cum-shop. The restaurant's outline looked far away now. She could walk back barefoot and bruise her feet, or she could put her shoes back on and risk spraining an ankle.

"If you walk in the water, the bottom is sandy and you won't hurt your feet."

Yvonne started. She'd never even seen the person standing there. Her clothes dripped with seawater. After a moment, Yvonne recognised her as the woman who'd warned her away from the basking seal an hour or two ago.

"How did you get here?" Yvonne said.

"I swam."

Yvonne laughed, realising how stupid her question had sounded. "I'm sorry. It just seemed an odd coincidence to see you again."

"Not odd." The woman smiled. "I live here."

Despite her wet clothes, she looked perfectly at ease. Forty-ish, small and stocky, with very round eyes, and dark, short-clipped hair that was so thick it looked like a pelt.

"Well, thank you again for pointing out that big seal to me before I walked into him." Yvonne hesitated. *Why not, dammit?* "I'm walking back to the restaurant—if you're going that way too, could I buy you a cup of tea?"

The woman smiled. "I don't drink tea, but I'd be happy to walk with you."

"I'm Yvonne Harris."

The woman shook Yvonne's proffered hand. "I'm Sarah."

Sarah descended the rock flats, then beckoned Yvonne to the water's edge. Yvonne hurried across the stretch of stones, her shoes dangling from her fingers, whispering "ow, ow, ow" with each step.

Sarah laughed. "See? Sand."

The water was icy cold, but the wet sand cushioned Yvonne's bruised feet, and late afternoon sun flooded warmth over her shoulders and arms. The back of her neck grew hot as she walked. Languid waves slid forward, flirted with her ankles, and retreated, leaving bits of sea foam clinging to her calves.

Sarah bent down, scooped up a handful of water, and used it to re-wet her short brown hair. "Aah, that feels better." Bending down again, she dunked her head into the water.

"Won't the salt hurt your hair?" Yvonne said.

"I was born here. The ocean is my natural habitat."

Sweat trickled down Yvonne's forehead. She could feel her carefully cut, dyed, curled hair wilting against her temples. "Take risks," her therapist shrinkie-lady had said. Salt was salt, whether from perspiration or seawater. Yvonne crouched down and splashed some water over her face, then doused her whole head in the waves. Astonished at her own temerity, she stood up and looked at Sarah doubtfully.

"How does it feel?" Sarah said.

"Weird." Cold tendrils of hair clung to the sides of Yvonne's neck. The seawater that dripped onto the shoulder of her blouse dried quickly in the sun.

"You're only supposed to do it if it feels good and makes you happy."

Yvonne paused, letting the waves slosh over her calves. What was happy? She remembered her mother's joyous weeping at Yvonne's wedding; her husband Geoffrey's beaming face when Yvonne announced her pregnancy; their daughter Raewyn bouncing and shrieking when she was offered that high-powered job in London. Why were all her memories of other people's happiness?

Hurriedly she changed the subject. "Have you lived here your whole life?"

Sarah shook her head. "I lived in Christchurch for a while with my lover, but she fell in love with someone else, and I realised I was just being someone other people wanted me to be. So I came home. I have to be happy in my own skin."

Yvonne halted again. Sarah's words rang in her ears.

"How do you do it?" she asked. "How do you know what makes you happy, I mean?"

Know what's real and what's a mask?"

Sarah shrugged. "I ask myself, if I were to strip away everything and everyone I know, what would be left? And then I listen to my answer. For me, the answer was that I belong here. The sea, the seals, the rocks—those are who I am."

Yvonne nodded. "I guess that's what I'm here to do. My husband died last year, and both our daughters have moved overseas. I decided to take some time to think, to decide where my life is going now that I'm alone."

Yvonne looked up and realised they'd reached the beach directly in front of the restaurant. She found herself reluctant to leave Sarah's company.

"Will you come have a drink with me?"

Sarah shook her head. "I need to keep walking. Perhaps I'll see you here again tomorrow."

Yvonne unlocked the door to Halfway House and blinked at the sudden change from summer evening to full dark. As she ate some cheese and crackers, she looked around the room. Someone else's kitchen, someone else's house, where someone else's life had ebbed and flowed. Who did she want to be? How was she supposed to figure it out?

She pulled out her mobile phone. No answer from Raewyn in London—she was probably on her way to work. No answer from Heather in Sydney, either. Who else could she call?

"Don't ask other people for the answers," shrinkie-lady had said during a grief-counselling session. "Ask yourself."

Sarah had said the same thing. They were probably right. The only answers she'd received from her family hadn't helped. Her daughter Raewyn had advised her to join some groups, to socialise, maybe find a nice man to date. Heather, Raewyn's sadly unpractical twin, had suggested a puppy as the universal panacea.

Her mother-in-law would, as usual, sob that of course everyone was still mourning the loss of dear Geoffrey, Yvonne had been the luckiest woman in the world to have married him, and wasn't it a tragedy for the twins to lose their father so young, only fifty-three he'd been, it must have been the pressures of the job, that company had never properly appreciated Geoffrey's brilliance and dedication, but then really no one had appreciated Geoffrey besides herself, and now that he was gone who was going to manage her finances and arrange for her chimney to be cleaned each year? And for heaven's sake, Yvonne, don't tell anyone you're seeing a psychiatrist. What would people say if they knew?

"Why do I care what they'd say?" Yvonne's voice seemed overly loud in the dark, quiet house.

She tried to remember happiness without being Geoffrey's Wife, or Heather and Raewyn's Mum, or Charity Volunteer Lady. When she was at boarding school, perhaps, exchanging innocent kisses with the other girls, before they'd learned that they were supposed to kiss boys? Earlier, even, when she'd been a child playing with dolls? It was disheartening to look back over three decades of adulthood and see an ocean of non-

memories unbroken by any waves of personal joy.

She'd chosen her own life, surely. She'd deliberately married a man rather than be ostracised as a lesbian; she'd chosen motherhood over career; she'd decided to come to the Kaikoura coast this week rather than go to Queenstown or Fiji. Or maybe she'd just gone along with everyone else's suggestions all her life—*yes, Mum, piano lessons would be better than saxophone; yes, Dad, I'll go to the University of Auckland; yes, Geoffrey, I'll marry you; yes, dear Mother-in-Law, Heather and Raewyn are lovely names for the babies; yes, Mr Funeral Director, I'm sure that casket will be fine; yes, shrinkie-lady, I'll take a holiday and think about how to be happy now that I'm living alone.*

She was no longer a wife. Her daughters no longer needed mothering. As shrinkie-lady had said, Yvonne had lost her roles in life, and was now mourning that rather than the loss of her husband.

The sun welled upwards, spilling pinks and oranges across the dawn sky. Yvonne sat on the edge of the lawn below the restaurant, sipping coffee and nudging beach pebbles with her bare toes. She picked up two stones from the beach and clenched her fingers around them, a black stone in her left hand, a white stone in her right, wondering where they'd come from. Smooth and oval, like flattened hen's eggs, they must have been pounded by the Pacific for ages.

She wished she could strip off her clothes, her skin, her life, and leave them on the beach, then lie in the water until the ocean had worn down her own jagged edges. Surely she wasn't the only person who felt like this. Sarah, too, had said she'd come here to find herself, or to be herself. How many women's masks and discarded memories littered this beach?

As if the thought had conjured her up, Sarah appeared from around a bend in the coastline, walking in the surf with her shorts rolled up to the top of her thighs. Leaving her shoes and coffee mug on the lawn, Yvonne joined Sarah at the water's edge. They walked along the shoreline, the water curling around their ankles.

"You mentioned you came back here because your relationship broke up," Yvonne said. "Did you find it hard living with a woman?"

"No, living with a woman wasn't a problem. And our relationship wasn't a problem. It's just that some things are mutually exclusive. Like life and death—you can't be alive *and* dead. You can't be gay *and* straight. You can't be a woman living with a lover *and* be a seal on the beach." Sarah picked up a seashell and handed it to Yvonne. "This can't be a seashell in your hand *and* be grains of sand under your feet. The sand begins where the seashell ends."

"Do you want to be straight, then?"

Sarah laughed and flicked seawater with her toes. "No, I've never wanted that! But love isn't always the answer. It's more important, at least for me, to be who I really am. If love fits into that, terrific. But love doesn't always fit. Sometimes other things have to come first."

The wind freshened, sending a fine mist of salt spray across Yvonne's face. She

tucked in her pocket the seashell Sarah had given her.

Sarah picked up another shell, sniffed it, then handed it to Yvonne. Yvonne held the shell to her nose.

"I can't smell anything."

"To me, it smells of home. It tells me where I am. It reminds me who I am."

Yvonne put the second shell in her pocket. She looked at Sarah. Pretty brown eyes. Winsome smile. Intelligent, insightful, confident. "Take risks," shrinkie-lady had said.

"I really enjoy your company. Will you have dinner with me tonight?"

"I can't," Sarah said.

"Perhaps tomorr—"

Sarah shook her head. "I like you, Yvonne. And you're very attractive. But I've come home to be myself. I could probably fall in love with you, but I'd have to wear someone else's skin to do it. I can't do that again. I won't."

"I don't understand."

"I need to walk a bit farther down the beach," Sarah said.

"May I come?"

Sarah nodded. As they walked, Sarah occasionally picked up seashells and handed them to Yvonne. She slipped each one into her pocket. Sarah seemed distracted, her gaze continually flicking out to sea.

Yvonne wondered what it would feel like to reach out and take Sarah's hand. She was decades away, oceans away, from the young Yvonne who had innocently held hands with her school friends. Yet that same Yvonne had returned, as unnoticed as a seal camouflaged against the rocks, offering a skin that fit better than any disguise.

What would other people say? How would Heather and Raewyn react if their mother suddenly announced that she'd become a lesbian?

Yvonne didn't care. Not about her cold ankles, or her sweaty underarms, or her mother-in-law's inevitable squawking. The breeze cooled her face, now free of its mask.

"This is where I have to say good-bye," Sarah said.

"Good-bye?"

"I'm not like you," Sarah said. "I'm not one of the once-born. In each lifetime, I have to make a choice, to live as a human, or to live as a seal, permanently, until I die and am reborn. This is the time for me to make that choice. And in this lifetime, I need to be a seal. I can't change that. The tides are in my blood."

"A seal?" Yvonne stared at Sarah, at her round eyes, her crew-cut pelt of brown hair, her solid body.

"They're here for me."

Yvonne turned and looked. On a pile of nearby rocks, seals basked. One reared up to watch them. Several more slid across the rocks and plopped into the water.

"You're joking, right?"

Sarah shook her head. "I hope you find your happiness."

She touched Yvonne's cheek, lightly, then walked into the waves. Her skin wavered, darkened, furred over. Within moments she was absorbed into the seal colony, one

brown body amongst so many.

Yvonne stood silently.

Maybe she'd imagined it all.

She pulled the shells out of her pocket and opened her fingers. The shells dropped from her hand and clattered on the pebbles.

Sarah was gone. Just like that. A touch, then—nothing.

No, not nothing. She'd left behind an Yvonne who was different from the one who'd arrived in Kekerengu yesterday. An Yvonne who would return to Auckland still unsure of where she was going with her life, but confident that she could begin the journey unmasked.

She could go back to school. She could sell the house, travel, get a job. She could go barefoot, kiss a woman, fall in love, and not worry about what people might think. She could wear her own skin.

Knowing that was half the journey.





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DOWN THE PATH OF THE SUN

Nicola Griffith

I dreamed again: my sister Diggy and I were on the beach. Although we were the same age as we are now, it was before the plague: my father and three other sisters were there, too, shadowy and indistinct. Like ghosts. We sat facing each other on the sand, surrounded by a bubble of quiet, digging.

Something got tossed ashore on a breaker: a shell, the colour of caramel and milk, big as my fist and smooth as ivory. I wanted it, even though it was forbidden.

Diggy breathed at my shoulder. I reached out and took the shell.

The air rolled and the sea heaved, sluggish as soup; Diggy's eyes widened in fear. I should have uncurled my fingers, let the shell drop onto the sand; given in. Instead, I gripped it tighter; I had found some infinitely precious thing to enrich my life always.

The seagod came roaring out of the waves. The air trembled with his anger but only Diggy and I could see him. We began to run. Everyone began to run: the sea was gaining. We were not going to make it. Still, I refused to drop the shell.

A huge wave crashed down and I leapt for the railings topping the sea wall. I caught them, held them. I had won. Then, with sickening inevitability, I realized that I did not see Diggy anywhere.

She was clinging, half-submerged, to my right ankle. Above the crash and hiss of the spray I could hear her screaming: Karo! Help me!

The tidal wave fell on us.

There was nothing I could do. I lay against the wall, holding on with the strength of desolation while one hand, then the other, was torn from my ankles. I still had my shell, my infinitely precious shell, but Diggy was gone. The seagod had devoured her.

I woke on my back, heart thumping hard enough to break bones. I lay still, listening to the lap of water against stone down below.

Next to me, Fin twitched in her sleep, trying to pull back the blankets I must have

dragged from us while I dreamed. Carefully, I slid off the opened-up sleeping bag and tucked her up. I kissed her but resisted the urge to stroke the hair straggling from her braid. Fin's hair is like Fin, wiry and black, always pulling free of restraint. She pulled me along, too; knowing Fin, I knew that grief was not everything, that Evelyn, my mother, was wrong.

I pulled on a shirt and loose trouser before I pushed past the curtain that partially divided the soaring height of the warehouse's fourth floor. Old Will lifted his head and banged his tail on the floorboards as I crossed to where he lay next to my little sister in the corner. With one hand I scrubbed at his head behind his ears, the other I held by Diggy's face. She breathed, warm and soft against my palm. My relief was immediate, as always. I squatted back on my heels and contented myself with watching her eyelids flutter as she lived through some dream of her own. The pre-dawn light gleamed on the hair framing her girl-plump face: silver blond around lightly toasted gold. Since the plague, Diggy had become more and more my responsibility. I glanced over to where my mother slept and felt the familiar confusing mix of helplessness, love and anger.

By the window, away from the warmth of sleeping bodies, the cold of an April dawn pushed easily through the thin cotton to my skin.

I rested my elbows on the sill and stared eastward to where other warehouses gaped open to the lightening sky; beyond them lay the sea. Eight years it had been like this: families like mine, like Fin's, finding and comforting each other in the quiet, in the emptiness that we would never fill. Since the plague, I had crossed paths with less than forty women and only a handful of men; all of us sterile.

It had rained in the night and the air was fresh with damp early summer greenness. Here and there tiny puddles winked in the sun. The sky was dotted with cloud but the sun streamed from a wide patch of blue and my sweater lay warm across my shoulders. Fin could tell I did not want to talk and moved just ahead of me gliding smooth and sure over the weed-patched cobbles. Now and then she disappeared, blending into shadow as she slipped, dart-slim, through a doorway or peered through a window cluttered with nature's rubbish.

Sometimes, when we walked like this along the dockfront, I tried to remember what it had all been like before, when there were thousands of well-fatted and loud-voiced people with Norfolk accents filling and emptying these warehouses all year round; when for every one who grew old and died, there was another new life to take their place. No one was well-fatted now, not the people like me and Evelyn, or Fin and her grandmother Jess. Not the gangs either, though they were loud voiced. Those gangwomen and men had the same strut and cruelty as Jess's little bantam rooster. Except the rooster made me laugh with his piercing eye and puffed-up chest. I had not seen a gang for three or four years. Luckily, they had not seen me. Jess reckoned they had probably all died—killed each other off and good riddance she said. But we still slept on the fourth floor and Fin still checked doorways and windows. We all carried knives, even Diggy, and Fin carried a garrotte as well. Old habits died hard.

The sun was a full armspan above the horizon now, the only sound birdsong and the wavelets slapping up onto the waterway's silted banks. We lay hip to hip and rib to rib in the middle of the wild wheat. The green ears flicked and rustled in the breeze.

We smiled, lazy after love. I ran my hand gently over the curve of Fin's hip, into the dip and over the upsweep of ribs and breast. Fillets of muscle slid beneath my hand. My skin, tanned though it was, looked pale as sap wood against the loamy darkness of hers. We rested like that a while.

The old waterway ran directly east where, with other waterways, it joined with the river mouth and the sea. The times that we had got here in time to watch the dawn, we noticed there was a slight tide which pulled eastward, to where the sun came up. The light seemed to suck the water towards it; I had seen twigs, even ducks, floating gently eastward to the sea. Fin called it the path of the sun.

We were too late for the sunrise today and, anyway, we were there for the eggs. We left our boots and trousers by the waterside and waded in opposite directions along the bank searching for egg-filled nests. Sometimes we would find none, sometimes so many that if we collected them all we would need to make two journeys with the basket. As I waded thigh deep, I knew this was going to be one of those unlucky days.

All around me the wheat clicked and rattled; the few clouds I had seen earlier now covered half the sky. The breeze was rising, sending cloud shadow racing over mile after mile of swaying gold and green. A long time ago, all this had been fen, wild and full of water creatures, until the farmers had dug their irrigation channels and planted their crops, draining the land of variety and vitality. Further inland, waterways were silting up leaving standing pools where weeds and rushes thrived, choking the wheat. The water birds and river creatures were coming back.

A cloud covered the sun and I shivered. I had found nothing and it was getting chilly. Time to go back.

Fin was already rubbing herself dry with her bandanna. Only two eggs, she said, not worth carrying back to Evelyn and Diggy. We cracked them and sucked, threw the empty shells away.

Fin's family had taken over a barn for the summer, half for them, half for their animals; above us, where we sat around the huge scarred table eating and talking, the roof looked to be more gap than tile. It was early evening. The sun poured through the chinks and the open door like old wine.

As Jess jabbed her fork in the air to emphasize a point, or stretched across the table to help herself to more salad, her knobby wrists flickered through hanging beams of light and shadow. Lean, with hair the gray of charcoal ash, she was the only one of the family who looked like Fin. Leoni and Sara, her daughters, looked to be just a little younger than Evelyn, and both were powerfully built women with pads of firm fat at hip and breast. Sara could look grim sometimes; she had a way of narrowing her eyes and pausing before she spoke. Leoni had a bad leg from a fall through a rotten floor two years ago. Between them they had three daughters: Fin, Rachael and Else.

Evelyn called them a tribe, though they were not that many really; they had had their deaths just like anyone else. Maybe it was because they always talked and argued, made their decisions between them. In our family, the older you were, the more right you were. Inevitably, Evelyn was right all the time.

The muscles in my neck and shoulder tightened at the reminder that my mother always had to be right, like that time when I had come home with my hand in Fin's. She had known what it meant; Diggy had grinned.

"Diggy, leave the room."

"Let her stay, mother. We're a family."

She looked at Fin. "This isn't a family."

"It could be."

"This family died eight years ago."

"We can start again."

"No."

"Listen. Please. We could all live together, Fin's family and ours, sharing everything. We'd be safer, happier."

"Happier? You've never had children, Karo, you don't know what it's like to lose them and to know there'll never be any more."

"Do you want to lose me too?" I had asked, but quietly, so she would not hear.

Fin reached over and squeezed my hand. Tears dripped onto the scarred wood in front of me and someone handed me a strip of cloth to use as a handkerchief. No one spoke, but they understood: I had no real choices. I could not abandon Evelyn and Diggy and I could not change Evelyn's mind; she refused to understand.

The tears were stopping already. After a while we cleared the table and settled down to enjoy talk and stories in the last of the patchy sunshine.

Walking back from Fin's we trailed long shadows. The warehouse stood dark against the slow fire of the sky and suddenly, again, I was angry with Evelyn, a dull rage that ground at the base of my skull. Then we were clattering up the steps and my anger settled into its usual background crouch. I sighed, more concerned about Evelyn's disappointment when we came back without any eggs.

Halfway up the third flight, Fin flashed a smile over her shoulder. "Bread."

Then I smelled it too. Despite myself I felt a rare flush of affection for my mother: she knew there was nothing we liked better than fresh-baked bread. We slowed down, taking the steps one at a time, prolonging the anticipation.

The hot smell reminded me of when I was little, years before the plague: Evelyn, standing in a gleaming geometric kitchen, smartly shod feet on polished tile, kneading dough, sometimes letting me punch at it, sometimes disappearing through the door for a moment to make sure Diggy still slept. But always moving. Even when she relaxed, took off her apron and made coffee, her fingers would stray to the nape of her neck where she teased her permed hair back into its curls. That was a habit she still had, even though she

often looked surprised when her fingers encountered hair absolutely straight from years away from the hairdresser. There was no apron now, no coffee or gleaming kitchen; while the bread baked in an old iron stove she had no toddler to amuse or baby to check on. Sometimes I had seen her sitting there blankly, almost like she had been turned off. It frightened me that she could look so not there. There was nothing wrong with day-dreaming but with Evelyn it was different. Once, when I was ill and she thought I was asleep, she had sat like that for hours. When she had finally moved, she had looked about her incredulously, then shrugged. Ever since then, I had never been able to shake the feeling that my mother really did not believe that all this was real. The long gone world of families and technology lived in her memories like yesterday. Maybe closer. She went about the business of life with an air of detachment, as though none of it really mattered.

For all its height and space, the fourth floor was hot. The last of the sun had poured directly in, mixing with the heat of bread steam and stove iron. Ignoring Evelyn's disapproval I propped the door open wide and stripped down to my shirt. Fin and I split one of the flat loaves and spent the next few minutes alternately tossing hot bread from hand to hand and burning our mouths.

I looked around, turned to Evelyn. "Where's Diggy?"

"She's not been back."

"Since when? Since she went to the food warehouse?"

Evelyn nodded.

"But she left before midday." I chewed slowly on my bread, refusing to get worried. Nothing could happen. She had a knife and knew how to use it and, besides, no one had seen a gang for years. She was hurt maybe, in a fall like Leoni's? No. Old Will would have come back here on his own. She could not be lost, she knew her way around as well as I did and, again, Will could have found his way home. No. She must be playing one of her child-woman games. I could just imagine her, warm and snug in the warehouse paper stacks, humming happily to herself, Will half asleep across her legs, totally oblivious to the worry she might be causing. She had done it before, more than once.

Without a word I began pulling sweater and trousers back on.

"I'll come with you," Fin said.

"No," I jerked my knife belt through the buckle. "Stay. Please. One of us may as well enjoy the bread while it's hot."

She looked at me steadily, then nodded: she would stay behind in case...in case anything happened that Evelyn would not be able to cope with.

Then I was down the steps and outside. The crunch of boot on stone seemed loud in the gathering dark. I trotted, then ran, trotted then ran, alternating between worry and irritation. The night was soft and warm; soon I was slick with sweat.

The warehouse I was heading for was a small one compared to most. Usually, we went in and out using a ground floor window but we had dragged open the great main doors just enough for Leoni and Evelyn to squeeze through. As soon as I saw those doors

gaping wide I stopped; I knew something was wrong. My body would not move a muscle; I was not even sure I was breathing. Was Diggy in there? Was anyone else? Without conscious direction, my body unfroze and lowered itself gently onto the cobbles. I cursed the moon; tonight it was no bigger than a nail clipping and its light only emphasized the shadow thrown by the doors. I lay there for a while, making no more noise than a spider weaving her web. I felt cold. Not the cold of the hard cobbles pushing bruises into my hips but a bleak numbness. Something had happened to stop me feeling anything except a kind of lightness in my long muscles. I listened a while longer then stood up, sheathed my knife and walked in.

It was the smell I would always remember: blood and shit. The air was thick with it, sweet and metallic. I spat into the dust and mud inside the door, trying to clear the taste from my mouth. I waited for a moment to let unfamiliar shapes of shadow and moonlight come clearer. Several crates and sacks had been burst open, the contents scattered, destroyed. For one whirling moment, feeling threatened to return and overwhelm my false calm. I forced it away.

It was Old Will I saw first. His tail had been cut off and his back legs broken. By the blood trail and scuff marks, he had been able to drag himself quite a way before they had broken his back. Will, who had never known a blow or vicious word in his life. It was easy to imagine him running eagerly, as fast as his rheumatic legs would carry him, towards the gang who forced open the doors. How many had there been? Looking at the destruction, there must have been ten or more.

Methodically, I began to search for Diggy. Row by stacked row: I walked to the end then back again, slowly, checking behind this, on top of that. Then I began to shake. I tried to push it away again but it got worse, my legs would not hold me up. I knew where she was. I must have known from when I first set foot in the place because I had carefully avoided it. She would be in the paper stacks, or near there. Or what was left of her would be. The trembling stopped enough for me to stand up but I had to lean against a half open sack of raw wool. It reeked, but not enough to cover the new smells, the sickening smells. Now that I thought I knew where she was my body seemed unwilling to obey me. For every step forward I had to clench my jaws and fight the urge to run away, to run as far and as fast as I had ever run in my life.

Diggy had always liked to leave her legs bare, hating the restriction of trousers. Now they looked horribly, painfully naked. She was lying bent backwards over a roll of gray paper, her long shirt pulled up over her face and chest. One arm was trapped and tangled in the ripped and stained material, the other hung down, not quite touching the floor. Gently, I lifted her off the roll. She was heavier than usual and seemed to flop in all the wrong places. Before I laid her down, I straightened her shirt, buttoning it back up where it was not too badly torn. For a while I tried to get her broken leg to lie straight but then I gave up; it was already getting stiff. Teeth marks and bruises covered her body from the neck down, the rips and tears would not hide those. I was crying and the angry red marks and bloody smears kept splintering and merging then jumping back into focus as tears spattered my sweater. The feeling I had now was familiar: like after the dream.

Except this was real, I would never again wake up to be reassured by her breathing.

By some chance that somehow made the other visible brutalities worse, Diggy's face was untouched. The tiny, gold-white wisps at her temples looked no different than they had this morning. There was a deep bruise on the back of her neck where they had broken it forcing her to arch over the roll. She stank, of their filth and her own blood and excretia. And there was a lot of blood. I would have to clean her up.

I soaked her shirt in water from outside and wiped at her carefully. I was dazed with hatred for those that had done this; hatred sang hot and light through my veins. I took off my own shirt and dressed her in it, hiding most of the ugliness. I looked for her missing sandal but could not find it. Very well. I took off her remaining one; that looked better. It was when I was combing through her hair with my fingers that I suddenly realized her neck sheath was empty. Where was her knife? My heart thumped like someone had kicked it. Where was Diggy's knife?

Then I was on my feet, feverishly pushing aside crates, plunging my hand into sacks. Where was her knife? I scraped my bare arms, bruised my spine shoving aside a rusted machine. I had to find the knife. If it was bloody then she had used it. That was important to me; I had to know. Where was that knife? I roared, trying to rattle the walls with the weight of my pain. I ran up and down the stacked aisles, desperate, frantic.

But it was not there. No knife. Tears were running steadily down my face now, splashing warm then turning cold on my bare chest. I knelt by Diggy's head and promised her she would have my knife, that I would put it in her sheath for her, that I would find her knife one day and use it for my own. And I cried until my face was swollen and my nose ran. Then I quieted and felt that strange lethargy you only get when you can not cry any more.

That was how Fin found me, kneeling by Diggy's head, still and calm. She thought I was in shock but once she realized I was not, she knelt next to me in silence. After a little while I stirred and turned to her. We held each other and I wiped at her tears with my hand.

"They even killed the dog." Her voice was thick. "A dog. And poor Diggy."

I just nodded.

"I sent Evelyn to get Jess and the others."

"You sent her, and she went?"

"Yes."

There were no echoes in the warehouse. Every word hung dead in the air. I was trembling again.

Fin handed me my sweater. "Here, put it on." Of course, I was cold. I hardly noticed the irritation of wool on bare skin.

"Fin, her knife was gone. But I couldn't find it. Will you look? I've searched everywh—"

We froze at the tiny sounds from door and window. With a look of apology, Fin pulled my knife from Diggy's neck sheath and handed it to me. She slid her own out of leather and motioned for me to stay where I was.

"Fin! Karo! Are you in there?" Else's voice, strong but cautious.

"Diggy? Diggy? Are you there Diggy?" Evelyn, sounding weak and puzzled. I tried to answer but my throat had closed around my grief again. Rachael and Else padded feline and dangerous around the warehouse. I heard Fin explaining, Jess cursing, Evelyn shouting for Diggy again and again until Sara shut her up. The air was hot with adrenaline, we were all breathing very fast.

Jess stooped to help me up. She stood for a moment with her tree root hands on my shoulders, letting old pain acknowledge new. Then she sighed and stepped aside: there was more.

I looked at Evelyn.

"Karo? Where's Diggy?" She started towards me. "Who are these people, why are we here?" She looked about. "Where's your father?"

I took her hand. It was limp and warm. "Don't worry. I'm here. You don't have to do anything. Why don't you go with Sara for now? I'll join you later."

She nodded vaguely and allowed Sara to steer her gently towards the door. My mother had finally retreated into her land of yesterdays forever. Rachael and Else followed them out; Jess stayed. She looked down at Diggy.

"Where will you take her?"

"Out to sea."

She nodded, then looked straight at me. Her eyes were bright. "We'll take care of Evelyn for now. Tomorrow we'll talk for a long time."

We stood waist deep in the water, silent and waiting. In front of us, Diggy's floating bier of woven rushes was already tugging against our hands. The eastern sky was lightly touched with orange. This time yesterday I was feeling Diggy's breath on the back of my hand, laughing at my stupid dreams and noticing that her face was still plump with girl fat. It would never become lean and womanly now. I would never know who Diggy would have become or might have chosen to love. And I would never know what had happened to her knife. So many things I would never know now.

Slowly, the water turned to fire; the tugging grew stronger. By my side, Fin looked serene; young and wise. Her hands were still and steady on the thick green stems. We had laid old Will on the front.

The bier tugged sharply. It was time. Without a word, we let it go and watched as it drifted eastward, down the path of the sun. Then I was humming a tune. Just a silly little thing. Diggy used to sing it to herself when she played. It was a catchy tune, easy to learn. Fin took it up for me when the melody was stifled by my tears, opening her throat to send Diggy on her way with a familiar song. As the bier drifted out of sight over the horizon, she raised both arms in salute. My infinitely precious Fin.

Close, but not touching, we walked back towards the barn and the other women; my family. All the way there we hummed that tune, Diggy's tune. The seagod had her now.





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TO DANCE WITH NO MUSIC

Lois Cloarec Hart

She has forgotten so much. I wonder if the day will come when she forgets me. It seems impossible. I can barely conceive of a time when this love we have shared and revelled in for so long will not shine for me in her eyes. But then, so much of what was once inconceivable has become our daily reality.

She once did the *New York Times* crossword puzzle in pen, and laughed when I marvelled at her speed and inerrancy. Now, her pencil moves slowly and uncertainly over a book of simple children's puzzles. Often, I will look up from my newspaper to see her staring into space, eyes unfocused and hand stilled.

I wonder what she is thinking. Does she remember? Is she bitter? Does she even recall how we met—sun and shadow, song and silence? We were so different. I had married foolishly and divorced bitterly. She, always more self aware, refused to fall into the trap of cultural expectations. She was a career woman, she declared merrily; the law was her mate, the courts her home. She had no time for the demands of husband and children. And at her assertion, all within earshot would nod knowingly. None could deny that her drive and ambition eclipsed all else in her life.

Then I entered her orbit. We came to each other late, already middle-aged and set in our ways. Our friends declared we would never last. Too different to find compatibility, they insisted. Yet we made a virtue of our mismatch. As the spotlight moved with her, I remained contentedly in the wings. Then when the curtain fell and the audience absented itself, we moved together as if our bodies and souls had been designed only for each other. In a deserted parking garage, in our kitchen, in the shelter of any four walls anywhere, she would take me in her arms. In the voice that had dazzled legal experts near and far, she would sing softly, and we would dance.

I had lived small all my life. She taught me the art of living large.

I was keenly aware that those who knew us casually considered me a doormat and wondered aloud what she could possibly see in me. In the early days of our relationship

that knowledge hurt, though I said nothing. But my distress ended the night of a dinner party we gave shortly before our first anniversary. By then our roles were clearly defined: it was her responsibility to entertain our guests with her wit and charm and inexhaustible supply of insider stories; it was my job to ensure the practical details of our parties. The arrangement suited us.

I was in the kitchen when the peal of our doorbell signalled a new arrival. I paid little heed. Though her friends were slowly becoming mine too, this soiree was dominated by her peers, the city's legal elite, few of whom I knew. Meeting *my* friends for a party generally meant an afternoon at the lake with hamburgers and beer.

When the Brie and fruit were arranged to my satisfaction, I returned to the living room, setting the tray on a sideboard. I cast an eye over our guests and looked for empty glasses to refill. When my gaze fell on my partner, my heart fell.

Standing entirely too close to her was a woman I knew well, and loathed. The new arrival had been described as my "competition" by those in our circle who enjoyed a good catfight. I held no illusions. When it came to my rival, I was not even in the running. She had an exotic beauty that I could never match. She spoke four languages fluently and had earned advanced degrees from several European universities. Her sense of style had been photographed and written about by countless fashion magazines, and her family was descended from Prussian royalty.

I was a dray horse in comparison, and my rival never once let me forget it. She initially dismissed me as a fling—my partner's way of getting back at her for a fight they'd had. It was one of many in their tempestuous on-again, off-again relationship. When our own nascent love affair blossomed and flourished, my rival was astonished at my partner's poor taste and said so loudly and repeatedly. Because both my partner and rival served together on many of the same arts and charitable committees, there was no avoiding the woman, try though I did.

My partner laughed gently at my fears, reassuring me that the other woman meant nothing to her any longer and never would again, that she loved only me. When I was in her arms and in our bed, I could believe her. But when I saw news photos of them at social events I refused to attend, I could not mistake the proprietary look in my rival's eyes or the possessive way her hand so often rested on my lover's back.

I was deeply relieved when my rival left the city on a European tour four months earlier. I should have known her absence only postponed the inevitable. Heartsick, I watched now as she laughed at something my partner said, tilting her head flirtatiously. My distressed gaze slid down my rival's sleek body, encased in a sheath that undoubtedly cost more than a year of my wages. Unable to look away, I stared at her feet, clad in glistening black stilettos that did wondrous things for her long, long legs.

I glanced down at my own feet, shod in flats. I had thought them both practical and attractive when I bought them. Now my traitorous mind fashioned an image of two women floating around a deserted dance floor, locked in an embrace that left no illusion as to how they would end the night. Neither woman in my fantasy wore flats, but one of them wore those damned stilettos.

I closed my eyes in anguish, only to hear my name called softly across the room. I don't know how I heard my lover over the crowd. It should have been impossible. Yet when I looked up, her eyes were locked on mine and her hand was extended to me, beckoning me.

I hesitated. I was uncertain that I could bear any more of my rival's vitriol with any semblance of grace or dignity. I wanted to retreat, yield the floor without a battle, but my dearest would not allow it. When I did not go to her, she came to me, her eyes soft with love and her smile joyful at my presence.

I don't even remember what she said to me, but I do remember what she did. In the presence of her peers and colleagues, those who could facilitate her rise or precipitate her fall in the career that had defined her life, she made an unprecedented and indelible statement. She slid her arms around me and placed a gentle kiss on my stunned lips.

She claimed me. In front of those for whose good opinion she had always practiced the utmost discretion, she defined my place in her life. Given her deep reticence about our love, *de rigueur* for the times, it would not have surprised me if many in attendance that night assumed I was the maid, hired for the evening's entertainment.

Our invitees were far too well bred to react openly to our kiss. They were sophisticates, and even in an intolerant age, would have considered it jejune to gasp. Though my partner's sexuality had been rumoured, few but those women admitted to her bedroom knew for certain. The hum of conversation barely faltered, but I have no doubt we were later *the* topic of conversation for all our guests.

If she didn't care, I didn't care. I had no august position to lose, no career in which I had vested my heart and soul. If I lost my clerical job, I would find another. It was not as if she ripped open my dress and made love to me on the dining room table. It was just a kiss, after all—a brief, simple kiss, nothing more.

Yet it meant the world to me. Later, when my rival slunk away and our company departed, I tried to tell her, with words fumbled and inadequate. The look in her eyes told me my efforts were unnecessary. She understood it all—my insecurities, my doubts, my cowardice—and she had defended me in the only way she could.

Speechless with gratitude for her courage, I took her hand and led her to our bedroom. I let my body speak fiercely what I could not say. When at last she lay exhausted in my arms, she whispered of her love, of how there would never be another. Though I never once felt worthy of her gift, I accepted it with shy gratitude.

Did we live happily ever after? No. Over the years there were times we fought, times we stopped talking altogether, times when our lovemaking became routine or rare. Yet I can say with absolute certainty that my only regret was not meeting her when I was fourteen instead of forty-five. Even the day our lives changed forever, that never changed.

She had been a judge for less than five years and already her name was being bruited about for a State Supreme Court opening, though my presence in her life made such an appointment unlikely.

Life was good, but as small everyday lapses evolved into larger memory issues, we both grew concerned.

Alzheimer's, the doctor pronounced, and in that one word, crushed our dreams. She could have stayed on the bench. She had perhaps another year, even two, before any noticed her brilliance had dimmed. But she was fiercely determined not to stain her record. She resigned the day after the diagnosis.

That same day she turned to me, her eyes bleak with despair. She told me, when the time came, to find her a bearable place to abide and leave her there, to go on and live my life without her. I did not even dignify her words with a response, but my opinion of that idea must have been writ large on my face. She reddened, lowered her eyes, and never spoke such nonsense again.

Instead, her intrepid nature immediately reasserted itself. We would see the world, she declared. So we travelled, criss-crossing the globe, and I became the keeper of our memories. I remembered hotel room numbers and train schedules and flight arrangements. I remembered names and places and dates. I remembered old friends encountered and new ones we made on our journeys. The force of her charisma, as always, drew those we met into her orbit. So I remembered the stories she told, gently coaching and correcting if needed or, if it seemed safe, letting her fly without wires.

One evening, as we stood together at the ship's railing watching the sun set in the South Pacific, she turned to me in tears. Before she even spoke the words, I knew this was the end of our travels.

We went home. Our friends who had not seen us for many months were shocked at the changes in her. She, whose fiery legal battles were legend, had grown tentative, unsure of herself, and thus unsure of the world around her. And I, who shrank from crowds, who took shelter in my beloved books, who had played Martha to her Mary for all the years of our union, stepped forward.

I shielded my love, protecting her ferociously even as her mind dimmed and she grew unaware of the pitying stares and sorrowful looks of our circle. A new doctor to be dealt with? I spoke for her. Benefits to be applied for? I wrote for her. Battles to be waged over her legal legacy? I became her staunch advocate.

For the love of my wife, I left my comfort zone in the dust. I think I became the woman she always thought I was—strong in her defence, passionate on her behalf, confident that none could care for her as I could.

These days there are pills to be sorted, bills to be paid, and chills to be chased away with a warm blanket tucked around her weakened legs. I do all these things and willingly, for she has been my life these thirty years and will be until her last breath.

I am not unrealistic. I am also not young, and the wearisome days drain me. I know there may come a day when I cannot keep her at home any longer. I have already begun to investigate assisted living facilities that will meet both our needs, for I am determined to stay with her no matter where she goes.

But for as long as I am able, she will remain in the home we have shared. She finds comfort here, in my voice, in my touch, in finding me next to her each morning. Sometimes she even finds a smile or two.

I am a shower singer, at best, always shy of being overheard, and age has not

improved my warbling. But we grew up in the same era, and the old music is familiar and beloved by us both. Now, with her voice stilled, I sing to her. When nothing else can, the music still reaches her.

Sometimes, on unsteady legs, she will rise from her chair and open her arms wide. And as I've done a thousand times before, I step into her embrace. I sing softly until my voice is too choked with unshed tears to continue. Even then we go on, swaying gently to music inaudible, except to our hearts.





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SANGRIA, SUPERHEROES, AND SHIT BOMBS

Stacia Seaman

We didn't set out to start the world's first Lesbian Syndicate of Superheroes. It just kind of worked out that way.

It all started on a perfectly normal Friday afternoon. The four of us had decided to share a pitcher of sangria at the outside patio of the restaurant. You know what I mean, the kind with the umbrella tables where the umbrella doesn't really provide any shade but the pole has everyone bobbing and weaving throughout the meal so they can see one another's faces. So we were hanging out, sipping our sangria, waiting for our steak and shrimp fajitas.

Anyone watching us would have assumed we were old friends. In fact, we'd only met five days previously, when we all started our new jobs. We'd immediately, instinctively, clung to each other almost from the beginning. In a room full of uptight dudes in suits and power ties, we definitely stood out. Kinda like the Sex Pistols playing a barge on the Thames.

The job so far had been less than exciting. Of course, I still didn't know what the job *was*. I'd been approached in my last year at the university, told the National Security Bureau was looking for Young People Just Like Me, and been offered a three-month "training period" that paid enough to cover me for the rest of the year.

Naturally, I said yes.

So two weeks after graduation, I sat in a room with thirty-five other people taking personality tests, role-playing super-secret spy scenarios, and watching colorful PowerPoint presentations about forensics, weapons, and aliens with explosives. Then, every afternoon, they tested our blood, urine, eyes, ears, brain waves, and even—judging by the placement of the sensors—my sexual responses to various stimuli. "Don't ask, don't tell" doesn't apply at the NSB, I guess.

Brenda, Elisha, Maeve, and I banded together to combat the boredom. And to keep each other company during meals and breaks. And, let's face it, because we were the

only lesbians in the room. Today had been cut short in the middle of a particularly brutal lecture on the role of the NSB in detecting subterranean border incursions. I was just nodding off when an earsplitting pop had me diving for cover as the lights in the classroom all cut out. Before this week, “gunshot!” would not have been my initial thought, and yet today it never crossed my mind that it could be anything else. As we all stood and stretched, trying to look casual—I wasn’t the only one to duck and cover—our instructor opened the blinds to allow the sunlight into the room. He whipped out a cell phone and started talking. I heard the words “blown transformer” and cheered internally until I realized he was trying to determine an alternative meeting place to move the class to.

I glanced over at Elisha, then Maeve, and noticed that they had similar glum expressions on their faces. Beside me, Brenda crossed her arms and sighed. “I was hoping we could head out and grab a drink or something.”

Maeve cleared her throat and said loudly, “I don’t mean to be insubordinate here, but it’s already two thirty. By the time we get to where we’re going, it’ll be almost time to go. Wouldn’t it be easier to just let us out early today, and we’ll continue this on Monday?”

The instructor blinked at Maeve, cleared his throat and said, much to my surprise, “Yes, why don’t we do that. Have a good weekend, everyone.” He looked a little confused himself as we all got up and headed out of the room before he had a chance to overrule the dismissal.

In the hallway, I stared at Maeve, stunned. “Good going. I never would have had the balls to actually say that.”

She shrugged. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained. So who wants sangria? Let’s enjoy the sunshine.”

So now here we were, with our sangria, tortilla chips, and salsa, enjoying the relative coolness of the early summer afternoon. People were strolling on the sidewalks, which were full but not crowded. Cars drove by on the street, which was relatively small and not too busy. Just a normal Friday afternoon, not quite four o’clock.

Just then, a chill skittered an arpeggio down my spine, forcing me to focus on a man standing across the street from a bank, staring fixedly at a woman standing a few feet away from the ATM. The woman appeared to be alone but was speaking animatedly, and for a minute I questioned her sanity until I saw the headset. I turned back to the man on the sidewalk. He looked severely pissed.

Wow, some people just do not know how to stand in line, I thought. Then I realized there was nobody actually using the ATM and that the woman appeared to be waiting for somebody. I looked back at the man.

Ooh, here comes a lover’s quarrel, I thought. Not entirely sure why I did so, I put a hand on Brenda’s arm and tilted my head, silently indicating the angry man. To my surprise she did a double take and nearly leaped from her chair when the man started to cross the street.

“He’s got a gun,” she said.

A what?

Sure enough, when I looked back at the man, he had one hand in his pocket as he strode determinedly toward the woman at the ATM.

Suddenly the chill turned dissonant, an almost palpable tension in the air. *Something's going to happen. Something bad.*

"Oh crap," I said as Maeve and I got up to follow Brenda. "She could be right."

Elisha was on our heels at first, but as soon as we reached the opposite sidewalk, I noticed that she slowed down. I couldn't blame her; I mean, what the hell were we doing? Some pissed-off dude who might or might not have a gun was apparently set on confronting his ex—why exactly were we going *toward* them? I felt like somebody needed to do something, but what? And why were *we* the ones who were doing it?

My mind was a staccato of conflicting possibilities: *Shout! Warn people!* Which on the face of it was a good idea, but what if it turned out the man just had a bad day and was going to happy hour with this chick so he could blow off some steam? What would we say then? "Sorry, dude, we thought you were about to go postal. No hard feelings"?

Well then, get close enough to see if he really does have a gun. And make him angry at me so I'll be his target? Thanks, but no thanks. You could just take cover and hope for the best. Now that seemed reasonable. I kept walking, about five feet behind Brenda and Maeve, all three of us determined but cautious. Elisha was well behind us, and she just stood there, transfixed, seemingly frozen into inaction yet at the same time intently focused.

The man was almost to the woman, who had pulled off the headset and tucked it into her bag. Helpless—*Shout! Do something!*—I watched him reach into his pocket. He was pulling something out when all of a sudden, out of nowhere really, a whole flock of pigeons swooped from behind me—in formation, almost, as though they were on a mission—over Brenda and Maeve, and let loose on the man before turning sharply and flying away.

What the fuck? Did they just...

The man reached up to the top of his head. The birds had really done a number on him; his hair was slimy with pigeon droppings. Purple pigeon poop.

Yup. They sure did. And they've been eating berries.

I burst out laughing—*And I would have got away with it, too, if it hadn't been for those birds and their nasty purple poop*—and was about doubled over when I realized he still held the gun in his right hand.

"Zach?" The woman turned around. "What the hell—"

"Shut up and get down!" Elisha yelled, running up from behind me. She knocked the guy—Zach—to the ground and Brenda wrestled the gun away from him.

"Oh my God." The woman was obviously shaken. "I knew he was upset, but...oh my God."

By this time two cops had come running out of the bank and declared the scene under control. *Typical*, I thought. *Pissed-off dude with a gun isn't even on their radar, but a butch knocks someone down and they're all over it.*

"That was impressive," Maeve remarked as we watched the officers take over, acting as though they'd saved the day themselves.

"Sure was. Elisha took him down fast."

"That too."

Oops. "What were *you* talking about?"

"You always hear about birds crapping on people's heads, but I've never actually seen it before," she continued. "Certainly not with that..."

"Volume?" I suggested. "Or burst of color?"

The corner of her mouth twitched. She gestured toward Brenda and Elisha, who were now in a heated discussion with the two additional cops who'd just shown up. Brenda did not look happy.

"Guess we'd better go save them," Maeve said.

We walked over to the group.

"When can our friends leave?" Maeve asked the cops.

"Well, we need to take down your names and addresses as witnesses and get a full statement, and—"

"I'm not sure that's going to be possible," Maeve interjected smoothly.

"Excuse me?" The cop seemed genuinely bemused. "But you were witnesses."

"Yes, but we work with the NSB, and we really need to keep a low profile. Surely you don't need our statements when you've got the man in custody and there are so many witnesses who can tell you what happened?" As she spoke, she batted her eyelashes.

I did a double take. *What the hell? I mean, yeah, she's femme and all, but who the hell bats their eyelashes?*

The smitten police officer nodded, his eyes slightly glazed over. "I think we've got it covered. You ladies"—he said it dubiously, flicking his gaze over Brenda and Elisha—"have a nice day."

"Let's go," Maeve said, quickly moving away. "I don't want him to change his mind."

"Roger that." Brenda tugged on Elisha's sleeve to get her moving. "Come on."

"Coming," Elisha said, still staring at Zach, who sat unmoving with his hands shackled behind him and pigeon poop drying on his forehead.

"Lucky those pigeons flew by," Maeve said, looking directly at Elisha.

Elisha ducked her head. "I guess so," she said.

"And just at the right time," Maeve added. "Almost like someone called them."

Elisha looked up at her. "Excuse me?"

"Well?" Maeve raised an eyebrow. "It *was* you, wasn't it?"

Blink. Blink. Elisha said nothing.

"I *saw* you," Maeve went on. "You were just standing there, watching, then all of a sudden, purple pigeon bombs, and you're the first one to move in on the guy. Like you knew it was coming."

"Don't be ridiculous," Brenda said. "How could she possibly..." Her voice faded when she saw Elisha's guilty expression.

"Sometimes," Elisha said, then cleared her throat. "Sometimes I think about things,

crazy, out-of-the blue things, and they just happen.”

For the second time that afternoon, I stood there with my mouth hanging open. “Like, oh my God, there’s a madman with a gun, we need to stop him, maybe if a bunch of pigeons crapped on him that would do it?”

“Kind of like that, yes.” Elisha crossed her arms and looked defensive.

Maeve nodded. “It was a good thought.”

“Thank you,” Elisha said.

“So when we ran after the guy, the reason you stopped was you were trying to think of a way to stop him?” Brenda’s voice rose sharply. “And you didn’t think, I don’t know, to make him just forget what he was doing or make him forget the gun at home or something like that?”

“It doesn’t work that way,” said Elisha. “It’s not that logical. It’s always something that comes out of nowhere, when you least expect it.”

“Like the blown transformer this afternoon?” I gave Elisha a sly smile.

Her response was nonchalant. “Yes, that might have been me. I was wondering what it would take to get us out early, and I thought, hey, if the power goes out…”

We all looked at each other, clearly thinking we were all crazy for believing this and yet knowing beyond a doubt that it was the truth.

“And for that one,” Maeve said, “drinks are on me!”

After a round of high fives, we sped back to our patio table, where we gathered up our things and the fresh pitcher of sangria our waitress had thoughtfully provided, and made our way inside.

“We’d like a table in your darkest corner,” Brenda said.

When the hostess looked puzzled, Elisha added, “It’s the sun. I’m starting to freckle.” She winked at me, the roguish gleam in her eyes showing she knew darn well how appealing the freckles were on her boi-ish face.

“That was some smooth talking back there, with the cops,” I said to Maeve once we got settled.

“Thanks,” she said, blushing.

“You know,” Elisha said, “you didn’t tell him anything I didn’t tell him before you got there.”

“It’s all in the delivery,” Maeve said.

“Duh,” Brenda said. “She put the femme whammy on him. Of course he was gonna do whatever she told him.”

When our laughter died down a bit, Maeve said earnestly, “It’s more than that. I’ve always been pretty good at talking my way out of things. Talking my way *in* to things.”

“Like *that’s* unusual,” Brenda grumbled. “Hell, Sangita here can do that.” She adopted my Midwestern accent. “Elisha, I forgot to pick up a knife. Would you mind getting one for me?”

I felt my face flame.

“Not like that,” Maeve said, laughing. “I mean things they wouldn’t otherwise do. In the last few days, I’ve noticed that if I say things a certain way, I pretty much get what I

want.”

“Like the coffee break this morning,” I said, happy to turn the topic away from me. “Tiffany was about to reach for the last chocolate donut, and you asked if she wouldn’t be happier with the prune Danish. I couldn’t believe she actually went for it.”

Maeve nodded. “Just like that.”

“What I’ve been wondering,” Elisha said, jokingly smacking Brenda’s shoulder, “is when that guy was crossing the street toward the bank, how did you know he had a gun? Could you see the shoulder holster?”

“No. I don’t know. I just knew.” Brenda took a sip of her sangria. “Like I know that guy over there has a Swiss Army knife in his pocket, that guy there has a loaded handgun in his glove compartment”—she pointed to a nearby table—“and she has a replica scythe from Buffy in her trunk that she’s going to hang on her living room wall.”

We all just stared at her.

“That’s amazing,” I said.

“Those scythes are *nice*,” Elisha said wistfully.

“What’s amazing,” Brenda said, turning to face me, “is how you knew he was coming in the first place.”

“Yeah,” Maeve said. “So what kind of ESP do you have, anyway, Sangita? Clairvoyance? Precognition?”

Elisha looked slightly disconcerted.

“None of the above. I can’t read minds or see things before they happen.” Which was the absolute truth.

Maeve persisted. “But if you didn’t read his mind, how did you know what he was going to do?”

“The music told me,” I mumbled before stuffing a slice of orange into my mouth.

“The what?” Brenda gave a disbelieving laugh.

“Good one,” Elisha said. “But seriously, what’s your power?”

“The music,” I said. “A soundtrack. I have a soundtrack.”

“Music.” Brenda sounded unconvinced.

“What, like karaoke?” Elisha looked intrigued.

“No. It’s not interactive that way. It’s a soundtrack. I never consciously noticed it before, but I’ve noticed lately that I can tell what’s going on if I concentrate on the music.”

“So when that guy crossed the street to get to the bank...” Maeve twirled her hand to elicit more information.

“Tempo picked up,” I said. “Sparse instrumentation. Switched to a minor key. Means something’s about to happen.”

“And now?” Brenda asked.

“Normal,” I said. “Just normal background music.”

“You know what I think,” Elisha said. “I think this is why the NSB hired us.”

“I think you’re right,” Maeve said. “All this so-called training must be a way to bring latent abilities to the fore.”

Brenda was struggling with this. “So that makes us...”

“Lesbian superheroes.” Maeve said it almost joyfully. “They made us into lesbian superheroes!”

“So we’re gonna work for the government?” I was less than thrilled at this possibility.

“The government?” Brenda’s expression clearly said, *What are you, a living brain donor?* “No damn way.”

“We’re gonna quit the NSB and work with each other,” Elisha said firmly. “The government has enough help. We’re going to help people who really need it.”

“We need a catchy name,” Brenda interjected, starting to show some enthusiasm. “Like the League of Lesbian Superheroes.”

“Lesbian Syndicate of Superheroes,” Maeve said. “Lezzies for short.”

“It’s perfect.” Elisha held up her sangria. “To Lezzies.”

“To Lezzies,” we all echoed. I knew we were doing the right thing because the background music swelled to a crescendo just as we touched our glasses together in a group toast.

Thus the Lesbian Syndicate of Superheroes was born.

Our super-secret headquarters is located in Portland, Oregon. It’s a nice house, five bedrooms, home theater system in the living room. If you see us on the street, you won’t know who we are. We don’t wear capes and we don’t wear skintight catsuits—well, not often, and even then it’s only me and Maeve. In fact, we look just like any other twenty-something wage slaves running around the city.

We’ve worked hard over the last few years to hone our superpowers. Maeve is our leader, although I’m pretty sure she didn’t try to influence that decision. Brenda has extended her range and can detect any weapon within a half mile, although pawn shops still mess her up sometimes. Elisha’s *deus ex machina* interventions get more creative every day. And me, well, I just try to pay attention to the music, so that when trouble strikes, we leap into action.

And Maeve always gets us time off from our boring day job. With pay. She can be very persuasive, you know.





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THE WHIP HAND

C.C. Saint-Clair

Tucked deep inside a faraway kingdom there was once a hamlet where the villagers gave each other The Gift of Pain.

It was at the time of every dark moon that, young and old, they would flock to the hall behind the chieftain's house of wattle and daub. It is there that they publicly offered each other the pleasures of the flesh. "Blessed I be, O Lord, with the pain of receiving pleasure and the pleasure of giving pain," they would intone.

Whether manacled to cross-shaped beams of solid oak, hanging heavily from chains thrown over the central beam, or with spines stretched over the bulging back of a barrel, or bound and bundled into bags and thrown into the shallow end of the marsh, or blindfolded and gagged to heighten the razor-sharp cut of a blade, for each man and woman present every ounce of fear and pain was received as The Gift.

It is in this hamlet that there lived a maiden whose grandmother had given her the name of Ulahngsue. No one knew why the crone had bestowed such a strange name on such a lovely child, but no one had ever risked calling her by any other name.

Besides being blessed with a sunny disposition, young Ulahngsue's eyes, more limpid than the brook that gurgled through burnished fields, peeked mischievously through dark strands of burntwood locks. Her lips were said to be juicier than wild pears. As she reached puberty, it was said, too, that her laughter had become more heady than the sweetest of ciders. Be that as it may, by the time she was strong enough to scale up the tall aspen trees that circled the fields, the young maiden had already scrambled up many a young person's heart.

Then the day came when, crossbow at the hip and a pair of plump hares gripped firmly by the ears, a stranger drifted into the village just as quietly but surely as the mist that rose from the marsh. Clad in a top tunic the color of ripe grapes adorned with tiny quail feathers around the neckline, the newcomer, a young woman, was as welcome as the morning sun. One moment she had yet to be imagined, and the next she was in their

midst, the constant companion of young Ulahngsue.

Chunsina was her name and though she soon proved to be of unmatched goodness and sweetness of temper, it was on an evil day that St Anthony's fire took hold of her.

In spite of Ulahngsue's casting of circles to call in healing spirits, in spite of her many incantations, and in spite of her herbal concoctions, the sickness did not flee her lover's body. Utterly helpless to find a cure, she called on her grandmother.

Ear closed to the cries of the owl nested on a rafter above their heads, the crone blew cleansing smoke over the crown of Chunsina's head. Then, she blew more cleansing smoke into her nostrils, into the holes of her ears, even between her legs to chase away the evil spirit. Then, ear closed to the dog that howled to the moon, she bathed her in a vat in which various rocks and mysterious leaves had been left to steep.

In spite of all these ministrations, one night after Ulahngsue had washed Chunsina's face that had become blackened by the disease, after she had applied ointment to each of the raw sores and kissed the fever-blistered skin of her feet one more time, Chunsina's soul migrated from earth.

The maiden who had once come as a stranger to the village was buried on the eve of the Cold Moon amid the greatest lamentations of all its inhabitants, but not before, escorted by the entire hamlet, her shrouded body had been driven around the marsh in a cart drawn by a team of white oxen.

Time passed with the steady rhythms of its seasons and long after the great grief that had lain so heavily on her had finally relented, Ulahngsue accepted the favours of the chieftain's daughter, charming Deuteria. But no sooner were the handfasting celebrations over and the identical drinking goblets, tokens of their bond, barely dry, than Deuteria began to show the colours of her true self.

Tall and nervy, the woman had the temperament of a cockerel, and it was not a rare occasion when Ulahngsue would fall asleep comforted only by the ephemeral ghostly presence of her much loved Chunsina. Even when Deuteria took Ulahngsue's body for her pleasure, it was never soothing. It was always in the ways of the animals rutting in the fields. The woman had the thrust of a billy goat and it was a great consolation to Ulahngsue that the agreement, as with every handfasting bond, was to expire after a year and a day. Her bond to Deuteria would not be renewed.

One day, however, perhaps foolishly, perhaps because by then her body had such a craving for The Gift of Pain such as only her lovely Chunsina could give her, Ulahngsue entrusted Deuteria with a dark secret that had hitherto only been known by herself and her departed lover.

Whereas all the villagers abided by the dogma that warned that The Gift of Pain could only be received from a neighbour and only on the night of the dark moon, Ulahngsue and Chunsina did not. It was said later, much later, that if the mattress of straw on which they caressed each other was their castle, the corner of the house in which they had erected a discreet but sturdy crossbeam was their private dungeon. Secretly, they indulged in The Gift of Pain, in its myriad forms, whenever their lustful, young bodies craved it. Thus fortified and electrified, they would then apply such

caresses to each other that brought them to the brink of rare pleasure like no other known to the village women.

Because it was in Deuteria's meddling nature to hunger for all that regarded Ulahngsue's beautiful dead lady, she pressed her new wyf for more details.

Ulahngsue began, "It would always start in the same manner with me bringing back water from the brook and then my lady would..."

Talking about the past allowed Ulahngsue to revive such moments of pure joy that she closed her eyes to better feel and taste the memories awoken by Deuteria's curiosity. Behind her eyes, Chunsina was still on this earth, as lovely and tender as she had always been.

Their little room is aglow with candlelight. Flickering wicks paint Ulahngsue's naked body in shifting shades of pink. Though the ambient air is bitterly cold, wrists pinned under her and tied with twine, Ulahngsue's body is kept warm by the fire that burns in a corner. Animated shadows cast Chunsina's short tufts of hair as enormous spikes on the pale daub wall. Head bent in concentration, careful to not have the lice disperse prematurely, her strong hands, gentle over her lady's mons, move very slowly. As slowly as marsh reeds sway in the breeze, she guides a narrow-toothed comb steeped in honey through the fine pubic hair. Once satisfied that, for a time at least, most of the nits have been trapped between the honeyed teeth, Chunsina applies a thick coat of depilatory body sugar to the soft re-growth of pubic hair.

"Sina, give me your tongue. Please..." Ulahngsue murmurs. She cannot see through the cloth that is tied around her head, but she knows she is held and secure in her lady's care. Chunsina brings her lips tantalizingly close to her lover's mouth but does no more than tease the soft down that lines it.

"Sina, your tongue. All of it."

"You be patient, Ullie. You cannot have my tongue for now."

Wax pools around the wick. A clever snap of the wrist makes it pearl inside Ulahngsue's navel. Breath runs back up her throat before shaping a sigh. She is well familiar with The Tool that her lover is using for this Gift of Pain, but what she can never anticipate is where on her body the next patch of flesh will be brought to life. Where the next frisson or the next cataclysmic pain will manifest.

Another tear of hot wax slides off the candle held loosely in Chunsina's hand. It shimmers briefly before dulling in the hollow of her lover's throat. Nostrils flaring, Ulahngsue bites her bottom lip to stifle a moan.

Ulahngsue urges. "Sina, your tongue."

Obligingly Chunsina parts her lover's lips with her tongue but only dips between them like a hummingbird penetrates a flower, before returning her attention to the now dry paste that encases her lover's mons. Deftly, she yanks it in the opposite direction of growth.

Ulahngsue gasps and writhes as if the skin itself had been ripped from her flesh. Master huntsman that she is, Chunsina knows that timing is of the essence, whether in matters of pleasure or pain. Quickly she drips careful drops of wax over one pink nipple, and again, and over the other, and again. Pent-up breath explodes from her lover's lungs in truncated bursts.

"Sin-Sina, come to me now."

Chunsina's fingernail lifts the hardened wax smears, and she smiles at the sight of the red marks they have left on her lover's alabaster skin.

Totally focused on her ministrations, Chunsina dips a hand into a nearby bucket of almost frozen water. A perfectly formed icicle has appeared between her fingers. She slips it directly inside her lover's folds. With another piece of ice slipped inside her own mouth, briefly but lasciviously, she lends her lips to her lover's tongue. Again Ulahngsue begs for the weight of Chunsina's body over her own. "Sina. Please, come back to me," she moans.

Her eyes snapped open with a start. Transfixed, Deuteria was looking at her, her own eyes bright, as if made shiny with fever. At that very moment, the void inside Ulahngsue suddenly became as huge as the land that led to the horizon.

One day, not long after this recount had taken place, Deuteria asked, "How come your dead lady didn't simply use a flogger? What it means is a lot of hard work, the things she did for you."

"Oh, but she did!" Ulahngsue replied too quickly. "Hers, the one she used only in the secret of our nights is a beautiful one—"

Deuteria interrupted. "Is a beautiful one?"

"Well, yes, of course, it still is as beautiful as the last night she Gifted me." And once again, the memory transported Ulahngsue into the past.

Chunsina's glorious nakedness is strikingly enhanced by the wide collar of black doe hide through which glint a dozen razor-sharp slivers of polished bone. Cross-legged on the straw mattress, she has slid her lover's legs over her own thighs so as to bring her mons as close as she could to her own belly.

Erratic in her heartbeat, Ulahngsue is on fire. Nostrils flared for air, she writhes and groans through gritted teeth, and tears of ecstasy flow as prettily as the tears of wax had over the pinkness of her breasts.

With her lady's pink lip pulled taut between her fingers, Chunsina jabs the last of the needle-sharp fossilized fish bones till it peeks through the other side. The talon of the peregrine. Three needle-thin bones pierce the labia majora. Only two needle-thin bones pierce the labia minora.

And at last, Chunsina senses her ready for the flogging, always the last scene of their private ritual. The last one, that is, before they caress each other into a state of absolute hunger akin to a feverish delirium.

As soon as Deuteria had grasped the possibilities of what pleasures it might bring her, she begged Ulahngsue to show her The Tool with which her lady had given her so much pleasure, but Ulahngsue refused flatly.

"Please, understand how this matter is too private to share further."

This refusal triggered a fit of uncontrollable rage in Deuteria.

"My wedded wyf. What can ever be too private between a wyf and her wyf!" Deuteria was shouting so much that spittle flew out of the corners of her mouth. "Bring me

that flogger from whence that *fille de bas* has kept it hidden!" She stamped her foot so hard that straw flew from the floor up in the air.

"Wyf...I beg you to understand. It is not any of the fish bones, not even the hot wax that gave me the pleasure I have so foolishly described for you. It is not the flogger, nor any of its many tails. It was...it was..." The longing evoked by the memories awoken was so terrible that Ulahngsue was not able to utter any more. She did, however, do as she had been bidden and from behind the corner of a rafter, behind the nest of the resident *chouette*, she made appear Chunsina's flogger.

Not a common flogger was that one. Chunsina had spent many an hour crafting it to get the balance, length and weight just right for Ulahngsue's Gift. She had made the fringes of heavy cowhide, carefully bevelled to not cut her lover's skin, and the handle, though short, was inlaid with tiny river pebbles.

The heavy but flat slap of its wide tails would incandesce Ulahngsue's shoulders, but slowly. As slowly as a smoldering fire builds up intensity. The tails would caress the small of her back, and make her spine all atingle; yet, like playful pups, they could also nip the peachy cheeks of her buttocks. It was all in the power of Chunsina's loving execution.

Oh, how Ulahngsue had revelled in watching, in the bronze mirror strapped to the wall, her wide-shouldered Chunsina at work. Though the reflection was somewhat blurred, Ulahngsue could watch her as she moved to the right of the beam, then back to the left, closer in to press herself against her lady's back and sometimes reach for her wetness, further back to allow the fringes to only flick her with their tails. Oh, how agile on the soles of her feet she was, deft with the action of her wrist!

In truth, she was as graceful as a skilled swordsman at practice. Even when not at play, even as she came back from the forest, a young doe hefted across her shoulders, for Ulahngsue, the sight of her lady made her more heady than goblets of the fermented juice of mulberries.

But on that strange evening of tension, as Deuteria locked the heavy shackles around her young wyf's wrists and ankles, the room became oddly quiet. The dog didn't scratch in its corner. The owl didn't shuffle on the beam above. Even the fire kept its crackle quiet. Resigning herself to the moment, Ulahngsue pressed her forehead against the hard beam and leaned into it, bracing herself for the first heavy, flat-strapped thud. When it came, it surprised her. The thud that curled from her back over her ribcage, though clumsily executed, was not unpleasant. Neither was the next one, though it was late in coming after the first. The third strike was even longer in coming, and when it did, it only glanced her skin, as if it had been unleashed from an awkward position. Any more of these, she began to think, will soon become grossly irritating. And there were more blows: erratic in pressure, unpredictable in aim, inexplicably distant one from the other.

Aware that Deuteria was unable to control either her balance, her wrist, or her timing while using Chunsina's Tool, Ulahngsue began hoping that she would soon tire of the game and desist. But that thought had not yet left Ulahngsue's mind when the thudding accelerated and the pounding intensified. Buffeted against the cross beam as if by a vio-

lent storm, eyes riveted shut by the assault, she struggled for breath. A thud landed on the region of her lower back and, more powerful than all the previous ones, almost broke her in half.

“Deu-teria! Slow...down.”

A blinding white flash of pain ripped through her. And another. Dazed by the searing cuts, she panicked. “Deu... Deu-teria! *Break...Please!*”

What Ulahngsue could not have imagined was that Deuteria had grabbed her own single-strand whip to add lash to straps, and she was not about to break. *Break!* In all her years of receiving The Gift, even from any of the villagers, man or woman, Ulahngsue had never had to use the safety codeword honoured by all.

And the mean lash of the whip sliced again into her tender skin. Deuteria stepped closer in to release the thudding power of the flogger. Further back to unleash the ripping tip of the knotted lash. And again. The devil’s dance.

Beads of blood pearled as skin peeled off, but never for long, as the straps of the flogger smeared them flat and spread the pain deeper and deeper until Ulahngsue, like a withered leek, drooped on her cross, unconscious.

It is then that, inexplicably, the whip fell out of Deuteria’s closed fist. Inexplicably, too, the flogger was wrenched away from the other fist. Before she could even blink, its flat straps had turned against her and had her by the throat. Like so many writhing and vengeful snakes, they wrapped around her neck, darted into her eyes and slithered inside her ear holes, hooking her tongue as she opened her mouth to scream. With fingers curled taut as talons, she tried to prise them loose. She clawed and she scratched. Her eyes bulged from her head and, by the time she collapsed on the loose straw matting, her face was already the colour of rotting beetroot.

It was the old crone who happened to be returning from the forest with a fresh harvest of herbs who found them. One, dangling from the shackles nailed high on the crossbeams. The other, rocking herself and muttering unintelligibly, as if possessed by an ungodly fever.

The old crone was as familiar with The Gift of Pain ritual as any of the villagers and, though she recognized at a glance the essence of what had passed, she was appalled by open tracks that criss-crossed Ulahngsue’s bleeding back.

Now, it needs to be understood that the dogma, as it was written in the chieftain’s Great Book, spelt out very clearly that not one of the villagers was to engage in The Gift of Pain outside the monthly public ritual, and never if not under the auspicious dark moon. Everyone in the hamlet, even the *threshold-children*, fresh from their initiation into the world of their parents, knew about The Gift and the dogma that kept it a safe and sacred practice. The penalty, she knew just as clearly as Ulahngsue and Deuteria and everyone in the hamlet, was permanent banishment to a hut deep inside the forest. To a hut well away from the hamlet’s boundaries. Well away from any trail travelled in the course of the villagers’ daily business.

And as the crone listened to her granddaughter’s account of the assault, she became more than appalled, she became horrified. Not just once. Not twice. But thrice. First,

because of the garish marks on Ulahngsue's back and buttocks, even on her neck. Then, she was horrified by the reality that the lasses had indulged in taboo behaviour and what it foreshadowed. And since Ulahngsue could no more lie to her grandmother than lie by omission, she offered the complete story of her indulging in the prohibited deeds with Chunsina. And this horrified the crone a third time.

"Child, how could you!" she cried, hands reaching high above her head for a solace that even the heavens could not give her.

Ulahngsue was needed alongside the other women to do her share of the village chores. Her wounds could not be entirely concealed. The crone had no other recourse but to go to the hamlet's elderly Chieftain, who, remember, happened to be Deuteria's father. He asked for his daughter and Ulahngsue to be fetched at once.

"Remove those shirts so I can see," he ordered the girls.

He gasped at the sight of Ulahngsue's back, more striated with oozing welts than he had veins on the backs of his hands.

"And on you? Not a scratch?" he queried his daughter.

"My neck!" she cried. "My eyes! My ears. My tongue!"

"Do not mock me, child. Besides the gnawing of lice, and the bruise of the plough, there is not a mark on your skin."

"She broke the vow made to The Gift! Father!" Deuteria pointed a shaky finger at Ulahngsue. "She indulged in The Gift with her *dead* Chunsina!"

"Child!" roared the crone as she raised an angry staff above her head. "Do not *dare* speak the name of the Dead!" She struck the staff hard into the ground.

And Deuteria was banished way beyond the edge of the village for she had just broken the second and only other taboo written in the Great Book. *No one will dare speak the name of the dead and remain!*

As for Ulahngsue, though she healed well, thanks to the anise paste applied daily by her grandmother, she never, ever again, indulged in The Gift of Pain, not even in the manner stipulated in the Great Book. She did not need to. Behind her eyes, on any night she chose, all she had to say was, "Sin-Sina, come to me now."





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.

The screenplay adaptation of her novel, *Far From Maddy*, came second at the The Rhode Island International 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 Festival competition in 2007.

C.C. SAINT-CLAIR By day, a teacher of Senior English and, by night, a writer of romance with a definite penchant for social realism, C.C. Saint-Clair has written seven 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.

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.

"I am passionate about my writing. I enjoy the challenge of taking my readers through the emotionally complex landscape that I believe is the real life backdrop against which many women have to struggle, before they come into their own." Saint-Clair has written a few short-stories, of which the most popular are *The Whip Hand*, *The Fish-Whisperer* and *The Crab-Catcher*, and *Awakening*.

She has recently moved on from writing novels to writing on the topic of Classic Spirituality. She makes her files available as free downloads off her website page C.C. on Destiny.

In 2006, Saint-Clair took over the fledgling forum on the lesbian directory All Things Lesbian and has remained on board as the moderator of this new forum.

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FIRE & ICE

Marianne K. Martin

"It's not a sensible decision, Kasey."

"It's the only one I'll accept."

They stood in the kitchen, Kasey stubbornly staring out the window, attempts at making breakfast aborted. "Oh...so, is this our decision-making process? Because if it is, Kase, it leaves a whole lot to be desired."

"It's only a deck, Connie. I'm not taking on the whole damn house."

"No, but you've already admitted that you'd be cramming four days of work into a weekend. And the hottest one of the year on top of everything."

"Troy's helping me. The wood's already ordered."

"Look, it's not a financial burden. I can hire it done. You've been so tired lately. You're going to drive yourself until you get sick, or worse." Connie took Kasey's arm and pulled her around to face her. "Why do we have to argue about it?" She touched her face, a golden glow from weeks of outside work on the latest renovation. The hard crease between Kasey's brows softened slightly. "I just don't want anything to happen to you, Kase...I love you."

"That's why you have to let me do this for your mother. My mother's gone—I can't do anything more for her. This is important to me."

Connie pressed her lips against the smooth softness of Kasey's cheek. "You designed it, bought the materials, so just supervise the work now, okay?"

"She has to be able to get outside," Kasey continued, "get some sun, breathe fresh air. It'll help her recovery. I'm going to do this."

Like whispering into a head wind. "Only if I can help—and you let me pay Troy."

The pale blue eyes seemed to twinkle with amusement. "So, *this* is our decision-making process," she said.

Connie forced a smile. "Apparently."

No. It was an argument, Connie thought, as she left the kitchen and Kasey to eat breakfast or not eat breakfast. She found herself wandering about the house absently picking this up or putting that away, but her thoughts were on the argument.

I gave up ground in the argument just as I gave up ground in the kitchen. And Kasey just held with a crusade-like mission. And I've gained what, learned what?

Connie dropped onto the couch and reached for the remote. Maybe I'll stay here today, maybe tomorrow, too—let Kasey do whatever she wants. Arguments are futile, ambiguous, not like differences of opinion that you can state and let stand. Arguments have no rules of arbitration, no etiquette for negotiation, only the raw conviction, only the winning and losing of it. And at what cost? What reason or lesson can come of it?

She tossed the remote back onto the table without clicking on the morning news. How *does* a left-brain-dominant, put-the-facts-in-logical-succession kind of woman argue against right-brain emotion? Fire and ice.

"Are you ready?" Kasey called from the kitchen. "I need to be there when the lumber arrives so that I can tell them where to put it."

"Go ahead," Connie replied. "I'll drive myself." Maybe you don't argue. Maybe you let the ice melt and wait for the sediment to settle and the water to clear.

Their shorts and T-shirts, soaked with perspiration, hung like limp rags as Kasey and Troy muscled the auger into place for still another of the fourteen post-holes.

Connie watched, fresh bottles of ice water in hand, as the auger laboriously churned the hardened clay to the surface. It was her self-appointed duty to provide water and force periodic breaks.

The bit reached its full depth, and Kasey and Troy backed it out and lifted it clear. In unison they moved it to the next fluorescent mark on the ground.

Connie shouted over the rumble of the gas engine and held out the bottles. "Time for a break."

"We've got four more. Set them over there," Kasey replied with a nod toward the stack of lumber. "We'll get them."

They set the point on the mark and started the bit turning once again.

Patience. Persistence. The words silently curled the corners of Connie's mouth into tight-lipped acceptance. She turned at the touch of her arm.

Her father pulled her further from the noise of the auger. His face held the sternness typical of her childhood. Lessons to be taken seriously, wisdom unquestioned. "I thought we were going to hire the deck done."

"I am paying Troy," Connie replied. "But Kasey insisted."

"It's not good," he said, staring at Kasey. "A woman shouldn't work like that."

He was seeing the same things Connie saw—muscled legs straining against the pull of the machine, blood vessels engorged and snaking over the strength of her arms, sweat darkening the blonde strands of hair and dripping from the tip of her nose and chin. But those same things that complemented the feminine grace of Kasey's movements and turned Connie's head in a crowd only grated against all that her father thought a woman

should be.

"She's fine, Dad. She's used to working like that. I'm keeping my eye on them."

"You can say what you want about how I think," he said, his sternness drooping into a frown. "But, it's not right. Besides, it's got your mother all worried."

Her patience was surprisingly good today, but the clue was clear. He wasn't up for a discussion about it. And she had long ago recognized the futility of a one-sided discussion, or a one-sided anything for that matter. Connie handed him the water bottles and headed for the house. The thought did occur that maybe she should have fought a little harder for hiring the job out, but it quickly elapsed in logic. Her new self-appointed duty was to relieve her mother's concerns, something she had grown quite good at.

The cold air of the house chilled her into a shudder.

Mrs. Bradford turned slowly at the sound of her daughter's voice. "I think one more nag and I'm going to be fired from my own job."

Her mother's response was a lopsided smile and a lift of her stronger arm. Just above a whisper she asked, "Get me up?"

Connie slipped her arm around her mother's back and helped her to her feet. Two slow, labored steps took them closer to the window.

Mrs. Bradford's words were clear but spoken with obvious deliberation. "They don't take enough breaks."

"I know, Mom. Thus the nagging that will surely get me fired." They watched as the last of the holes were being drilled. "It's going to be a wonderful deck, with a ramp and a place for Dad to grill. Kasey designed the railing with a sunburst in it. I couldn't keep her from doing this for you... She's more stubborn than I am."

Not possible, said the milk chocolate eyes boring into her own. Their message was as telling today as the day Connie had declared that college wasn't for her, after her loan application had been denied. Giving up, giving in. *It's not possible*, her mother's eyes had said. *I know you as well as you know yourself. Figure it out*, they said.

"Maybe I can stay on the job long enough to get one more break in today."

Her mother shifted her weight to lean more heavily against Connie, and turned her attention once again to the work beyond the window. "She's very special," she said as loudly as she could, "isn't she?"

Connie tightened her embrace and kissed the side of her mother's head. "Yes, she is."

Mrs. Bradford lifted her head to meet her daughter's eyes and held them for a moment. A gentle search. A born and nurtured and knowing search. "You love her."

It was a statement, soft and clear. Not a question, not a wonder, but an affirmation of what is.

The words weren't necessary, but she said them anyway. "Very much."

Her father had disappeared into the garage. Kasey and Troy were dismantling the auger. One water bottle remained untouched in a widening wet ring on the lumber pile. Connie didn't have to ask whose it was.

"Wow," she exclaimed, "you two are incredible. I can't believe how much you've

gotten done.”

Troy, looking more like a sibling than Kasey’s cousin, dropped the auger bit next to the lumber and struck a lanky, under-developed bodybuilding pose. It made Connie smile.

“Hey, Arnold,” Kasey called, “there are two bags of cement in the wheelbarrow. Drop those at the first two corners and then get two more from the truck. I’ll drop the posts in and we’ll set the corners first.”

“What can I do?” Connie asked, offering the water bottle again.

Kasey took the bottle this time, and squeezed out one long swallow before setting it down. “Take the level and ball of string to that corner.”

Figure it out. Let the water clear. She saluted and returned Kasey’s smile. And when the corner posts were dropped and plumbed and strung and the cement filled the holes, it was clear.

Troy dragged the garden hose to each corner and watered in the cement, and then turned the hose over his head. He held the last strain of a masochistic yell long enough for Mr. Bradford to emerge from his garage sanctuary to see who the 9-1-1 call would be for.

“He’s fine,” Kasey called to him, “just very descriptive.”

Fine, and getting a motion from Connie to hand her the hose. The dots didn’t connect until it was too late and Connie had the nozzle pointed at an unsuspecting Kasey.

“Suicidal, Connie,” Troy warned.

But a powerful stream of very cold water hit Kasey just as she turned. The shock on her face was followed immediately with confirmation of Troy’s warning. She bolted after Connie, whose fight or flight instinct had stalled in indecision.

Connie could have out-run her, but it was too late and Kasey was too close. The hose was her only defense, blasting a steady stream. But Kasey kept coming. Head down, she dove for Connie’s legs and took her to the ground. She grabbed the now loose hose and turned it on Connie.

“The water, Troy,” Connie shouted. “Shut it off.”

“Are you kidding,” he replied. “This is just getting good.”

Overpowered and outmaneuvered, Connie lost her battle for the hose. She lay in the spongy grass, eyes closed as Kasey softened the spray and thoroughly drenched her.

“Admit it,” Connie said, opening her eyes when the water stopped, “It feels good.”

“Turning the tables on you?” Kasey said, plopping onto her back with a self-satisfied little laugh.

“Cooling down, taking a break.” Connie turned with a smile and met the pale blue gaze that set off a thousand fireflies. Her smile melted in response and her words had a tone of exclusiveness. “She’s getting stronger, a little bit every day, Kase. She’ll be here to enjoy her deck.”

There was always something different in Kasey’s eyes when the fire and the drive settled into a warm glow. When the all-consuming nature of it burned pure its need and rested in its knowing. Connie saw that now, and so much more.

"I haven't told you today," Kasey said softly, "that I love you."

"Oh yes, you have."





MARIANNE K. MARTIN Best-selling author Marianne K. Martin resides in Michigan with her long-time partner and two Yorkie-Poos. She is co-owner of Bywater Books, and whenever possible she enjoys building and remodeling, landscaping, art, sports, and reading.

Her novels include *Legacy of Love*, *Love in the Balance*, *Never Ending*, *Dawn of the Dance*, *Dance in the Key of Love*, and two Lambda Literary Award finalists, *Under the Witness Tree* and *Mirrors*. Her most recent book, *For Now, For Always*, released in October 2007 through Bywater Books and is also a Lambda Literary Award Finalist.

Her short stories have been included in a number of anthologies. "Fire & Ice" revisits the main characters Kasey Hollander and Connie Bradford from *Love in the Balance*, and was written as the author works on a book that explores these characters' lives nine years later.

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THE BIRTHDAY GIFT

Fletcher DeLancey

Eleanor tilted her head back and looked up—way, way up—at her goal.

“Why does that summit get further away the more we hike?” she grumbled. “I swear it’s not obeying the laws of physics.”

“Of course it is.” Anne took another gulp of water from her bottle. “It obeys the laws of visual perception. Your brain is merely interpreting a changing set of visual data.”

“Thank you, Ms. Science Teacher.” Eleanor gave her partner a pressed-lips look, but Anne was paying no attention.

“Oh, Ellie, look,” she breathed, and Eleanor followed her pointing finger. At first she couldn’t see what it was that had Anne so rapt, but then the movement caught her eye. A hawk was soaring over the flanks of the mountain beneath them, the mottled brown of its back and wings blending perfectly with the boulder-strewn landscape.

“Damn. I’ve never seen one from *above*.” She watched in amazement as the hawk flashed across her field of view, taking mere seconds to cross a distance that they’d toiled over for an hour. Then it vanished around the curve of the mountain, refusing to reappear though she stared after it in fervent hope. With a small sigh she gave up, only to find Anne grinning at her.

“Now wasn’t that worth the last hour?” asked Anne.

Eleanor tried to keep a grumpy expression on her face and failed utterly. “Yes, it was,” she admitted. She paused, part of her wanting to apologize for her cross attitude. But if she did that, Anne would ask what was bothering her, and Eleanor wasn’t ready to answer. This hike had been her idea; the last seven months of training had been at her urging, and she was damned if she’d admit her self-doubts.

Turning away from Anne’s knowing gaze, she busied herself stashing her snack bag and water bottle. Zipping the pack shut, she pulled it onto her shoulders, fastened the hip belt, and picked up her walking poles. “Ready for the rest?”

“Hold on.” Anne was rounding up her second pole, which had rolled off the rock

she'd propped it against. With a muffled groan, she bent down. "Damn, my knees are feeling this."

Eleanor held out her hand and helped her partner up. "Mine too," she said, finding it much easier to admit now that Anne had gone first. "Funny how all those miles on the Stairmaster just don't add up to this."

"Or even all those miles of walking," said Anne.

"City sidewalks." Eleanor turned and began plodding up the steep trail. "We knew it wouldn't be the same."

"But it was the best we could do," said Anne from behind her. "And of course there's also the elevation difference. We'd be winded even walking on level ground up here. Our blood just isn't adapted to the thin air."

"Maybe we should move to Denver. Then we'd be in practice walking to the grocery store and back."

Anne laughed, but it was rather gaspy. "A little high-altitude advantage isn't a nearly good enough reason to move to Denver, darling. I'm not giving up our riverside condo."

Eleanor was already too out of breath to respond. As far up the mountain as they were, it took only a few steps for her breathing to become labored, and she slipped into the mantra that she'd learned from the backpacking magazine. *Step, breathe. Step, breathe.* It was a mountaineer's strategy—moving at a slow but steady pace that the body could maintain over a long distance. *Step, breathe. Step, breathe.* Behind her she could hear Anne's harsh breaths; they were breathing almost in perfect tandem.

With her eyes fixed firmly on the trail—the better not to see that ever-retreating summit—she tortured herself by thinking about her aching knees, her right hip, her sore heels, and her exhausted thigh muscles. Where had she ever gotten the idea that this would be *fun*? It was just a high-altitude Stairmaster, without the benefit of the juice bar.

Step, breathe.

An odd whistling sound brought her head up, and she was startled to see the hawk floating straight toward them. At least, she thought it was the same one. It was above them now, but only by a matter of thirty feet or so, and when it soared over their heads, she swore she could see it looking at them. The thing was huge, much larger than she'd thought at first. Good heavens, it could have made off with a small dog. She and Anne both spun in place, watching until it once again vanished around the curve of the mountain.

"My God," Anne marveled. "Did you hear that? That was the sound of flight! The sound of air flowing over its feathers. I can't believe it. I've never heard that before."

"You are such a city girl," teased Eleanor. "I heard that sound often enough when our chickens flapped their wings."

"Oh, Ellie, it's not the same thing and you know it. She wasn't flapping her wings; she was just soaring. What a perfect, *perfect* design."

Eleanor smiled at her enthusiasm; sometimes Anne seemed younger than she was. "You're certain it's a she?"

"Yes." Anne nodded emphatically. "And I think she was telling us something."

"What was that?"

"She was saying, 'Keep going. You're almost there.'"

Eleanor laughed out loud. "You're full of it."

"Well, what do *you* think she was saying?"

Watching Anne's expectant face, Eleanor felt a happy little lift in her heart. "I think she was saying, 'Welcome to my land, strangers. You have my blessing.'"

Such a flight of fancy was quite out of the ordinary for her, but Anne's wide grin was ample reward for her daring. "I think you're right," Anne said. "And look, so am I." She pointed, and Eleanor was astonished to see that they had somehow halved the distance to the summit. Why, it actually looked within reach now.

"How'd we do that?" she asked in blank surprise.

"Stepping and breathing." Anne lifted her water bottle with a flourish, drank deeply, and wiped her mouth. "Shall we finish it off?"

With a sudden surge of confidence, Eleanor pulled out her own bottle. "I believe we shall."

They hiked perhaps another twenty minutes when the sound of sliding rocks alerted them to another hiker on the trail ahead. Moments later a young man came into view, his long legs eating up the ground. They stepped aside to let him pass, but he slowed to a stop and looked at them with a surprised smile.

"Well, hello!" he said. "You're almost there."

"We know," said Eleanor with some asperity. She had eyes; she could see for herself.

Oblivious to her tone, the man continued, "Have you seen the golden eagle? She's been soaring around here for the last hour."

"That was an *eagle*?" Anne's eyes were enormous, and the man seemed pleased with her reaction.

"Oh yes. They're not unusual in these parts, but it's still a thrill to see one." He warmed to Anne's obvious interest. "I like them much better than bald eagles. Baldies are thieves at heart; they'd just as soon steal food from another bird as catch their own. But goldens are consummate hunters. I think they're the ultimate bird of prey. And so beautiful, don't you think?"

"How do you know it's a she?" asked Anne.

"Because of her size. Female raptors are quite a bit larger than males."

"Really?" Eleanor was intrigued in spite of herself. "Why?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. It's not true of most other birds. Raptors are different."

"Are you a biologist?" asked Anne.

"Guilty as charged." He gave them an easy grin. "I work for the Forestry Service. They pay me to climb up and down these mountains. But today's my day off, so I went to see an old friend." He gestured toward the peak. "I climb it every summer. This is a special place. But then, I think you're about to find that out for yourselves."

"Yes, we are," stated Eleanor with certainty. Something in her tone must have gotten through to him, because he dipped his head in an oddly old-fashioned salute.

"Then I'll leave you to it. There's nobody else up there—you've got the summit to

yourselves.”

“Oh good,” said Anne. “That’s what we were hoping for.”

With a last smile and wave, the man set off again, loping down the trail as if his knees were made of springs. Anne and Eleanor faced forward, and this time Eleanor didn’t even need the *step, breathe* mantra, because every step brought her visibly closer to the summit, and her excitement was overwhelming her fatigue. They were starting to come into the view as well, and it kept getting more and more glorious, and then she realized that there were no more steps to take. They were there.

Anne came up beside her, and for several minutes they both just turned in place, staring at the three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view.

“Lovely,” whispered Anne. Eleanor could only nod silently. She’d dreamed of this for so long, and now that she was here, she could hardly believe it. All of her aches and pains, her tired lungs and her weariness were of no consequence; she was *here*.

“We did it,” she said in wonder.

Anne put an arm around her waist and hugged her close. “Yes, we did.” There was a note of pride in her voice that made Eleanor feel rather warm, and she turned on impulse to pull her partner in with both arms, their packs making the hug a bit awkward.

“I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have here than you,” she said, and kissed her. “Thank you for putting up with me.”

“Well, I’ve been doing that for a long time. Why stop now?” Anne smiled as she pushed her away. “Enough of that, we’ve got a toast to make.” She shrugged out of her pack and Eleanor followed suit, her eyebrows nearly crawling off her forehead when Anne pulled out a miniature bottle of champagne and two plastic cups.

“What in the hell—”

Anne pushed the cups into her hands. “I couldn’t let this go by without a proper celebration, now could I? And I must say I’ll be glad to drink it, because this bottle was damned heavy.” She draped her scarf over the bottle’s neck and began untwisting the wire basket.

“Good heavens, Anne.” Eleanor watched in bemusement. “I can’t believe you carried that all the way up here.”

A loud *pop* startled them both, and the scarf jerked into the air before falling to the rocks, the cork trapped in its folds. Anne held up the bottle. “Smart, eh? I didn’t want to litter with the cork.”

Eleanor could only nod as she held out the cups, which were soon full to the brim with foaming champagne. Anne stashed the empty bottle in her pack, took a cup from Eleanor’s hand and held it up. “To your birthday,” she said. “And to the woman I’ll love and admire to the end of my days.”

“I hope that’s a long time yet.” Eleanor tapped her cup to Anne’s and drank. “Hm. Not bad for warm champagne.”

“I know. I couldn’t figure out how to keep it cold.”

“I think I like it warm.” Anne looked at her askance, and Eleanor grinned. “Thank you, love. For coming with me, for bringing champagne...and for believing in my outra-

geous dream.”

“I believed in *you*,” said Anne.

Eleanor nodded. She knew that—had counted on it, in fact, for a good many years now. Wrapping an arm around Anne’s waist, she took another sip of her drink as they gazed over the incredible scenery. The reality of precisely where they were standing began to sink in, and she laughed in a sudden burst of giddiness.

“So,” she said, “what shall we do for my seventy-*first* birthday?”





FLETCHER DELANCEY is a marine educator and science writer who left her beloved Oregon to seek her heart in Portugal. She now lives in the Algarve with her partner and stepson, and spends her time writing, learning to speak Portuguese, and getting acquainted with an entirely new ecosystem. She has come to appreciate the slower pace of life that the Portuguese enjoy, and has learned that nothing inspires writing quite like a warm, sunny afternoon, a view of the ocean, and a glass of Hendrick's gin and tonic. With a garnish of cucumber, of course.

In the lesbian fiction world, Fletcher is best known for her four-novel *Past Imperfect Series*, as well as the recently completed first novel of the *Chronicles of Alsea*. These novels, as well as a few short stories, can be found on her website. She can be reached via email at fletcher.delancey@gmail.com.

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ELENA

Susan Hawthorne

Let me tell you a story that I've never told. Will you trust me?

Once, many years ago, I was travelling alone in Greece. I was in the mountains, the mountains of Crete. A place that started with Ana—all the places starting with Ana are high in the mountains. I was walking through a village. All the women wore headscarves of black. They were beautifully embroidered with long tassels hanging from the scarf's edge. I bought one and tied it tightly across my forehead. With it I felt safer. As I walked along a dirt street, I saw a woman standing just outside her front door on a balcony. She stared at me and then after a pause beckoned to me. *Ela*, come, she said. I was puzzled but also curious, so I went. I climbed the steps onto the balcony, and she invited me into her small kitchen. White walls, Mediterranean blue ceiling, a blue table in the centre of the room. On the walls were small gold icons. Later, when I looked more closely, I noticed that they all depicted Mary.

She served me a strong cup of sweetened coffee. We exchanged names. Elena she said. When I said Ekaterina, she beamed and said something far too quickly for me to catch. But I heard the word *Hecate*. After coffee we sat. Me stumbling through some sentences of broken Greek, she patting me on the knee as she responded with more complex ones. I didn't understand it all. So I was a bit surprised when the knee patting turned to hand caressing. She picked up my left hand and pointed to its ringless fingers. Only then did I notice that her hands too were bare. It hit me like an electric jolt. Here was this woman, say in her midthirties, too old for the ringless hands to be innocent, who had picked me up, the dykey looking tourist, for some sexual gratification. I couldn't decide what to do. On the one hand, I was excited to discover that even in this mountain village there was at least one lesbian. On the other, I wasn't sure that I was ready for a sexual encounter at 11 a.m.

I said *Psappha*, pronouncing it the Greek way. She lifted her head back in a Greek nod. *Kai mou*, and me, I said leaving her in no doubt that I too was a descendant of Psap-

pha.

There was a moment of silence. Then she grasped my right hand in her two and pulled me towards her. Confusion. My language was not sufficient to go into the subtleties of why I felt myself pulling away. If I walked out then, I would give up the chance of getting to know this woman, of finding a lesbian way into the Greek language and culture. I went with her, discomfited by the dual sense of me using her and she using me.

We were careful. The disrobing was slow and gentle. She gazed at my belly with a sense of admiration. I admired the strength of her arms, the solidity of her hands, rough from physical labour. A woman on her own, a lesbian in a Greek village, would have to do everything by herself. We smiled uncertainly as we went down on the cot, for this narrow space could not be called a bed.

Her passion was raw and yet somehow dignified. I felt like an amateur in her arms. As we made love, I recalled the images I had seen that morning. The sun in a clear sky, the ragged mountains, the bleating of sheep and goats, and this woman on her balcony. It seemed unbelievable that I should be here in her house.

It wasn't just a one-day stand. I stayed for a while. I was aware of the stares from the village people. It was clear that I was not the first woman to be enticed into this wayward woman's house. We shared our resources. My budget helped her budget, and we could even afford a few luxuries. Staying with her helped me too. I had a roof over my head and, in spite of the crush, a kind of bed to sleep in.

Three weeks was long enough. By then we had exhausted our common interests. I could not engage in long conversation, and she was frustrated by my incomprehension. And I wanted more too. I wanted a woman who really knew something of her Greek lesbian heritage. I had expected her to know things about Crete that her village life had not given her. I told her that she should get out of this village, move to Iraklion or Chania so she could meet others like her. But she was rooted in her village in a way I could not (and would not) understand. I thought, if I can leave remote rural Australia, why can't you leave isolated village life in Crete? It's a conundrum that exercises me still. How should a lesbian live? Should she prefer the diaspora and lose her roots, or should she remain inside an oppressive culture and take what comes? Elena had decided to take what comes. And I was one of those who came, and who left just like all the others.



SAPPHO'S BUTTERFLY

Susan Hawthorne

I'm twenty-two when I'm
kissed by Sappho's butterfly,

at nine I vowed not to
marry before twenty-three.

I wake with the word
narbeewindward in

my mind. She said, *narbee*,
it means butterfly in

Korean. It's a many-coloured
poikilothron and as artful

as a spider, cunning and
all knowing—we ask one

another riddles, we speak
in codes and tell stories

I tell you about Aphrodite
she's no nymph, she's as

ancient as sea and sun,
rising from the sea with

the sun upon her brow
the ocean melting, she's

no maniac, and mortality,
she says, is for the birds.

In spite of our low birth
rate and centuries of

persecution we've never
been eliminated.

poikilothron athanata
is what Sappho calls

Aphrodite—the many-
coloured deathless call

of love. At the centre of the
universe is a giant egg—

was it swans or ostriches
emus or cassowaries

who laid the original egg?
I don't care, you say, as

your child legs carry you
away from the chasing

swans—and on your face
a look of shocked surprise.

*Did you know that Komodo
dragons can do parthenogenesis?*

That old virgin birth trick
again. On a cold autumn

night a full moon rises over
your dead brother's grave.

The church spire is glowing—
floodlit it lifts rising above

the body of the church. So
many years, so much time

but when I remeet the spurned
lover there's a moment of

shock while I realign myself
and see once again the moss

green hat of the woman on
the plane, feel the cold in

my bones as I wake on the
carpet at dawn before the

burnt out fire. A letter from
my friend in Tonga who is

listening to the fairy tales of
turtles, and swimming in a

bottomless pool, diving
deep, surfacing for air

and more stories. On a winter
solstice day I eat three

mushrooms, ambrosia and
call on Aphrodite and Circe,

no wallowing in a pigsty
for me, no swill, just the

dance, the laughing flutes
and transformation.





SUSAN HAWTHORNE has two collections of poetry, *Bird* (Spinifex, 1999) and *The Butterfly Effect* (Spinifex 2005). Her work also appeared in a Penguin four-poet collection, *Four New Poets* (1993). Poetry and fiction have been published internationally including in *Meanjin*, *HEAT*, *Hecate*, *Island*, *Westerly*, *Blue Dog* (Australia), *Sinister Wisdom*, *Rain and Thunder* (USA), *Tessera* (Canada), *Slow Dancer* (UK), *Arabesques* (Algeria). She is also the author of a prize-winning novel, *The Falling Woman* (1992) and co-editor of three anthologies, *Moments of Desire* (1989), *The Exploding Frangipani* (1990) and *Car Maintenance, Explosives and Love and Other Contemporary Lesbian Writings* (1997). She is a publisher, academic and is a Research Associate in the Postgraduate Writing program at Victoria University, Melbourne. A poem from *The Butterfly Effect* appeared in *Best Australian Poems 2006* anthology edited by Dorothy Porter (Black Inc.) Her collection *The Butterfly Effect* is available through the Spinifex eBookstore at www.spinifexpress.com.au Email: hawsu@spinifexpress.com.au



SERIOUS

Lorenza Martelli

In a world of recovering alcoholics and recovering crack heads, recovering wife beaters and recovering philanderers, a recovering serious person is never taken seriously.

“You can’t be serious?” the neighbor says.

But what if I tell you, what if I prove, that being serious is as dangerous to your health as being an addict? What if I reveal beyond a shadow of a doubt that being serious causes more pain and suffering than any compulsion commonly accepted by the American Psychiatric Association? What if?

Well, fuck that. As a recovering serious person, I no longer have to prove that I’m right. I can just state my opinion and then quietly follow it with a request to the bartender for another highball. Truthfully, I didn’t even know what a highball was until I looked it up on Wikipedia. Fortunately, being a recovering serious person, I no longer feel guilty about that.

You know, in recovery groups, it’s common for people to share their redemption stories. But since I have no group (most serious people never take that first step of admitting a problem), I’ll tell you. Oh, sure, you probably don’t want to hear it, but you’re too pissed to stop me, and I’m too eager to share—a definite recipe for the telling of a good redemption story.

You see, I was raised in a stereotypical family. Oh, I know it’s not politically correct, but my Italian American family was very Italian American in the Scorsese kind of way. Anyway, being raised in a stereotypical family and not feeling particularly stereotypical, I learned to look outside my family for guidance. And since it was the seventies, most of my suburban neighbors were WASPs. I quickly discovered that you can learn a lot from a WASP. Granted, I was too young to learn about highballs, but I most certainly could learn about reserve.

So, I learned to be reserved, and being reserved is not far removed from being serious. In fact, being reserved served me quite well in school. My father’s tendency to

threaten even one-armed, war-veteran teachers for some mild offence was much better suited for the loan shark industry than the schoolyard. In fact, my WASP tendencies made me head of the class, and being head of the class naturally lent itself to being cerebral, and being cerebral is even closer to being serious than being reserved. I became smart, and while smart can solve many problems, it can also create its fair share of problems. You see, smart has its own way of thinking it can solve every problem, but of course, it can't. There are some problems that smart can't solve because, frankly, they're not problems; rather, they are problematic because they don't quite fit our visions of the world.

No need to be cryptic. Let me explain. You see, learning from the WASPs, I created a plan for my future. It was really quite simple: good grades, good college, good career, good marriage, good kids, good retirement, good grandchildren, good death—a simple recipe for a good life. And everything was going quite well. I achieved high marks in school, was accepted to a good college, and even graduated Phi Beta Kappa. But then, well, it happened rather accidentally.

You see, I met a Greek. Not like an Athens Greek. More like a diner Greek. But she was worldly to me. She was from Queens and Queens is close to Manhattan. So, naturally, she was cosmopolitan. And well, being Greek, she was somewhat stereotypical herself. Think Sappho and you'll know what I mean.

Well, the Greek said, "I don't want this to affect our friendship, but as a bisexual woman, I find you very attractive."

And I said, "I'm very flattered, but I'm not that way."

But secretly, I was thinking I might be that way, and I knew a Deadhead who once told me to try everything twice because the first time might just be a bad trip. And I hadn't even tried this once. So, the next day, I told the Greek I had changed my mind, and she literally blew my mind. I was shattered, reconfigured, and reborn. I was gay, but she was only bisexual, and she left me for a man within six months.

In the aftermath of my personal Inferno with no Beatrice to guide me, I decided to return to my plan. Along came the good career and the good boyfriend, but I just couldn't muster the passion to play the part of the good lover to the good man. I seemed to lose interest even before the foreplay. So, naturally, the good boyfriend left and I had to try again.

One day, I thought my luck had finally changed when I met a man. He was Jewish and you know what they say about Jewish men: they make the best husbands. And he was a social worker, and you know what they say about social workers: they make the best listeners. From experience, I can tell you that both of those statements are unquestionably bullshit. But since I was hiding my predilection for women, and he was hiding his predilection for pornographic female bodybuilders and compulsive masturbation, we naturally married.

And then life became very serious. He was unable to hold a job while I worked and paid the bills, and two children arrived—not immaculately but sloppily, and our mothers died. Suddenly, the only thing I wanted was a warm bath with Jim Morrison singing

“When the music’s over, turn out the lights” and me sinking slowly into a moonlight drive. But suicidal tendencies aside, I knew that even sloppily arrived kids deserve one responsible parent. So, I let the water out of the tub, got dressed, and then got divorced.

After the divorce, I still grappled with salvaging the relationship for the sake of the kids, but then one night at a Japanese restaurant, I realized that sake and Sake are practically the same word. I decided liquor would probably benefit me more than remarriage, so I got good and drunk. Now, sitting across from me was a beautiful woman, a real, honest to God, beautiful WASP of a woman. Blond hair, blue eyes, champagne glass tits, round ass, gorgeous lips. And after years in the desert, years away from an oasis, I just had to proposition her. Now, I am not the propositioning type. But fortunately, sometimes, the groin rules over the head.

“My apartment is empty. The kids are not home. You could come over. We could get naked. We could make love.”

“Oh, I really don’t know,” she said, “I am married and even though it’s not a sexual marriage, it’s still a marriage.”

“It could just be for a night. It could just be for a kiss.”

And then she came—physically and, eventually, literally.

I asked her if this was her first time. I didn’t want to take her across a line she was unprepared to cross. But I realized that she had had others before me. I realized she was experienced.

She was a wonderful lover, the kind of lover who knows where you’re going before you even do. She took me to the highest states of passion I had ever known. I was told I impressed her equally.

I didn’t know what would happen next. I didn’t care. But then after our first night, there were other nights and still others. We were and are wonderful lovers. We love to make love. There is no hesitancy or prudishness. Whenever we can, we make love. At first, I wanted more. In fact, I’ll always want more. If I had my way, she would be in my bed every night.

I would sit my children down and say, “Mommy’s gay.” They’re not stupid. They know the score. Living with daddy would be like being orphaned anyway because he never gets out of bed until practically evening. He never gets them to school on time or takes care of them in any meaningful way. He never buys them clothes or takes them to the dentist. So, they would naturally say, “Whatever. But just keep the rainbow flag off the terrace, at least until we graduate.” And I would take her in my bed and make love to her every night because I finally realized that if you don’t want to make love every night to your heterosexual lover, you’re probably gay. After all, when the attraction’s right, you have to make love.

But she doesn’t think that’s the right course of action. She thinks it’s best if we keep our respective situations intact. She thinks we must respect everyone, even old Ted, her asexual husband. So, there’s no running away together or domestic partner ceremony. Some folks would think it’s just too closeted, but I’d rather be with her than be with another. So, what can I do? Get it while you can like Janis said.

And that's what led to me admitting about the whole serious thing, because if I get real serious and real pride oriented, I'd have to quit her and I just can't quit her. Because you can't just pick a lover like a can of soup. You can't just walk through the aisles of the grocery store and pick the can that's best for you like low sodium and low cholesterol. Love isn't like that. It's not a formula or a recipe. When love calls, you either answer or you lose.

In my case, I answered. If my failed marriage taught me anything, it's as simple as this: If you're attracted to someone enough to want them every night even when she's not there and especially when she is, then you know you might just have something. I mean sometimes people think they're in love, but once they get it, they don't want it anymore. Or if it's too hard to get, they find another. But not me and not love. I want her as much today as that night long ago in the Sushi bar.

So, what can I do other than to learn how to be a little less serious? To not get hung up about the definitions and the situations? To let my heart rule a bit more and my head a bit less? You know, when I was a child, my sister was always getting in trouble because she just couldn't quite keep her mouth shut. She had a way of making every child within a thirty mile radius laugh when they weren't supposed to. She was a joker, a clown, a troublemaker of the highest caliber. Even when she got smacked or grounded, she just couldn't resist making us laugh.

And so, while my mother would say, "Don't speak until your father has eaten." And my brother would say, "Don't speak unless he demands an answer." My sister would just speak and laugh and ignore even the direst warnings. She was the light in the darkness.

Because I was raised Catholic, the light always seemed to pay a price for overcoming the darkness like being betrayed, beaten, or destroyed. But because I was raised with my sister, the light always seemed to shine again. It just couldn't be destroyed. Oh, people would try to destroy her, but in the end, her light had more energy than all the darkness that surrounded her. She just had to shine.

These days, I think I'm beginning to shine. Not some high-tech, energy-conserving shine. More like the shine of a single bulb in a less than perfect room, but I'm definitely shining and the more I shine, the less I know about what the answer is for every situation on the planet, the less answers I seem to have.

So, it's one more for my baby and one for the road. Tonight, my lover is watching a movie with her family and my kids are visiting relatives for the night and I'm here. And I'll always be here because, after all, here is always where we are.





LORENZA MARTELLI is a writer, teacher, mother, and educational outreach director living in New York. She does love roses and periodically reminds herself to stop and breathe.

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Second Helpings, Read These Lips: Volume 2, Lesbian Short Writings is brought to you by:

Evecho, Editor-in-Chief and Publisher

Evecho is a literary mongrel. Her reading influences are an eclectic mix of sources, all interesting, that lead her to unexpected places and people. Lesbians and lesbian lit is a long and infinitely delightful degustation menu to her. She's a great fan of lesbian literature and believes the future is bright for lesbians and queer girls exploring expression in all media. Evecho has coordinated, managed, headed or been somehow involved in local, regional and international LGBTIQ events for many years.

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Linda Lorenzo, Editor

In her former work life, Linda Lorenzo was variously a high school English teacher and department chairman, a teaching associate at Brown University, and adjunct faculty at the University of Rhode Island, teaching the much maligned freshman writing course.

Her current work is all about lesbian fiction. In addition to serving as editor for *Read These Lips*, she is a freelance editor of lesbian novels, poetry, short stories, and erotica. She also has had her own work published in *Read These Lips: Openings* and in *Fantasy: Untrue Stories of Lesbian Passion* (Bella).

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Renée's earliest copy-editing experience was for the undergraduate newspaper. No computers, so she'd have to trudge downtown by 6 a.m. on press day to deliver the copy to a commercial printing press.

She was once an academic librarian where creating bibliographies was par for the course, though never as much fun as this one. They didn't have pictures, or titles with words like *butch*, *femme*, *leatherdyke*, and *lust*.

Some of her short stories can be found in lesbian anthologies such as *Read These Lips: Openings*, *Fantasy: Untrue Stories of Lesbian Passion* (Bella), *Best Lesbian Love Stories: Summer Flings* (Alyson), and the *Erotic Interludes series* (Bold Strokes).

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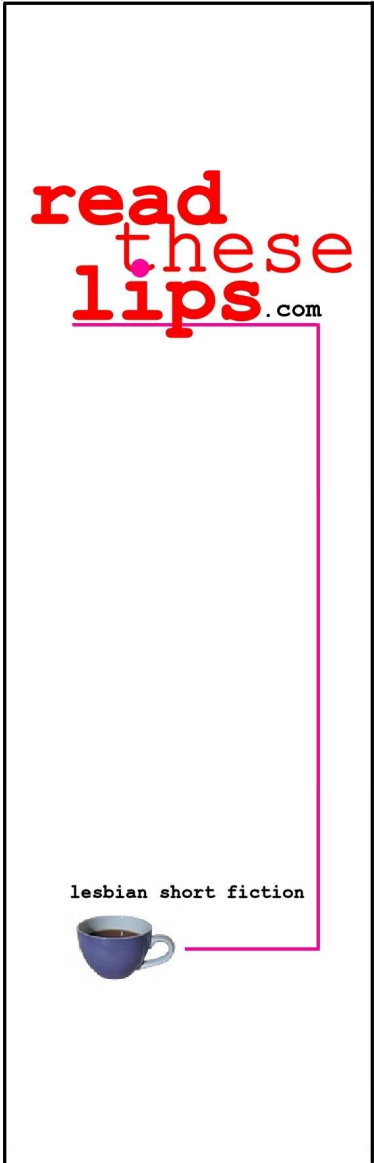
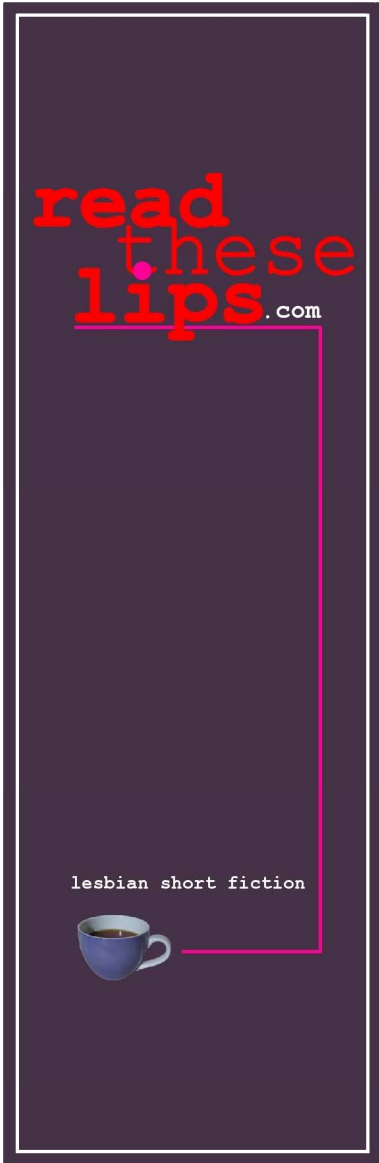
Ann Dunan, Designer

Ann can more regularly be found in the scene shop of a theatre creating many of the visual elements for live entertainment or business productions. Not a writer but an avid reader, Ann is an accomplished artist, designer, carpenter, props builder, sculptor, but a downright crummy seamstress. She is happiest backstage in the sawdust, paint, and darkness.

Ann lives in Florida which, about half the time, isn't all that dark. She invites you to click on the pink dot and can be contacted at design@readtheselips.com

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