

SNAPSHOTS

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The Thinking Woman's
Lesbian Romance Novelist



Snapshots by C.C.

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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.

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SNAPSHOT - Jagged Dreams Night Prowl

Red lights flash and swirl. The Triangle is in full swing. Jerky movements syncopated by white strobes. Bodies trapped in a false delirium. Teeth flashing. Elbows flailing. Hands waving limply in the air. Strands of hair plastered on sweaty foreheads. Long hair whips around. Shaved heads and spikes bob up here and there. The acrid smell of canned smog fills the air as it swirls and wraps around drifting wisps of cigarette smoke. From her vantage point by the bar, Tamara is shuffling to the beat. *Ab, and now, smoke effects. Asthmatics, take cover!*

“Hey, girl. You need to groove.”

Green cat eyes snap to the right and, by the bar, find a face that hadn't been there before.

“Whassup?” asks the girl with hair gelled into glossy spikes.

“You tell me.”

Tamara recognizes the girl she had been watching earlier on the dance floor. Actually it was the girl's very short and very red plastic skirt that Tamara had been watching as it flashed in and out between gaps on the crowded dance floor. *Nice ass*, she had thought. *Cute skirt*. She had checked out the legs and the big, red, Mickey Mouse plastic booties that made the girl look leggy in a coltish sort of way, though she wasn't that tall. *Too heavy on the gel*, Tamara had thought, curious as to how the girl's lover might touch the starched forelock. *Or isn't meant to be touched?* Tamara had looked on but her gaze had dropped away from the hair and with a silly grin on her lips, she had returned her attention to the girl's bopping red plastic butt.

The girl's hand is already closing over Tamara's. “Wanna dance?”

Close-up, she seems to be in her early twenties, fresh-faced and somewhat breathless.

Tamara shrugs. “You're all danced-out.”

“Nah. C'mon!” she says, tugging at Tamara's hand.

Tamara puts her beer down on the bar.

“Sweet!” says the girl.

And on the opening note of Slow Hand's latest hit, the girl steps

against Tamara. Her midriff top ends a good hand span before the skirt begins. Tamara's hand settles against the girl's hot bare skin but that

hand, Tamara's right hand, the one that had gotten used to the feel of Emilie's softer and thicker body moves away just as quickly, startled by the hard, flat feel of the girl's waist. Tamara brings her right hand back to the girl's waist and, knees touching, they shuffle.

Red Mickey Mouse booties in between brown desert boots. The girl nuzzles, head against Tamara's neck.

It is at that point in time that Tamara wonders if what she is doing is wrong. *Is it wrong to dance like that?* she asks herself shifting both hands against the girl's narrow hips. *It's not like I'm turned on or anything. Is it dancing like that that's wrong or is getting turned on by it? Or is it kissing that would be wrong,* she had tried to decide. *Kissing and screwing, that would be totally off-base. Like seriously wrong. Because of Emilie. Just dancing's got to be OK,* is Tamara's final assessment of the situation.

Slow Hand's breathless voice melts around her words. "Show me how to be your lover," she whispers into the mic.

The girl moves her head away from Tamara's shoulder as she slides her hands up Tamara's bare arms, up and under the ribbed seam of her tank top. Tamara looks at the uplifted face. Their eyes meet. Their eyes had met earlier while they had been dancing facing each other. When they had met, their eyes had smiled along with their lips. But Tamara and the girl aren't talking anymore and they aren't a few feet away from each other. Not anymore, they aren't.

The girl's lips flutter over Tamara's. Her tongue teases Tamara's upper lip. *To open or not to open.* A part of Tamara wants to let the girl's tongue play with hers. Part of her does not. The part that does *not* is the part that, a moment earlier, had been thinking about Emilie and what Emilie, her lover, would consider OK or not OK.

Tamara shifts her eyes away from the lens-blue round eyes of the girl. She shifts her eyes away, too, from the glitter that sparkles up and down the slick forelock. Away from the girl's smile as she moves closer in against Tamara, against Tamara's belt buckle.

The warmth that rises inside Tamara's belly tells her that she's been wrong, at least for the last little while already. She is properly turned

on, full-throttle turned on. And because she is *that* turned on, she lets the girl's tongue part her lips. She lets the girl's tongue caress hers and she lets the girl's lips nudge hers as they would a Cornetto ice cream. And because Tamara has forgotten about Emilie, one of her hands slides down from the plastic waist. Not the hand that had been startled by the unfamiliar feel of the girl's body. *No, not that hand,* the other one.

Tamara's left hand settles over the girl's round, plastic-sheathed butt and cups it. And Tamara keeps on forgetting about Emilie until she feels the girl's hand brush against the loose crotch of her desert shorts. It is only once she has opened her eyes that Tamara remembers Emilie. She knows, then, that all that is not right. Maybe it is not *wrong* but, all the same, it is not right. It is not the way she had intended for it to go. And she moves her face away from the girl's mouth. And she removes her hand from the girl's plastic skirt and she moves the girl's hand away from her cunt though it is very clear to Tamara that *her* clit wants more, a lot more, of whatever it is she has just decided was not right for her.

"Hey," she says hoarsely. "Look, I can't spin this." The girl's lens-blue eyes are not so round anymore. "*Can't?* How come, *can't?*"

"I know my cue. I get off right here. OK with you?" Tamara doesn't wait for the girl's answer. She leads her back to the bar.

"What the fuck!"

Tamara smiles. "No fuck. No fuck at all. Not tonight."

As they approach the bar, a tall woman in a basketball jersey bumps Tamara roughly enough to make her lurch but the clubber keeps right on tracing through the crowd. Tamara lets go of the girl's hand.

"Wanna drink?" she asks once they make it back to the bar. "On me."

"Wanna smoke?" the girl asks. "On me."

"I don't smoke."

"I mean *weed*." The girl holds thumb and forefinger pressed together near her lips.

"Not tonight."

Lens-blue eyes look at Tamara quizzically. "Like your old lady's lurking around or something?"

"Not lurking. At work. Staff get-together."

“Ah! I knew it!” the girl exclaims, satisfied to have diagnosed the source of Tamara’s reticence. “There’s that I’m-hooked-up-with-someone look about you. But ya gotta live, girl! Need to work yourself a longer leash.”

Tamara’s hand lay flat inside the girl’s who lifts it closer to a source of light. The Triangle is pulsing all around them.

“Can’t go getting the guilts every time you get juiced up, huh? What’s with the marks, anyway?” Zag asks, rubbing her thumb on the pale strip that cuts across the back of Tamara’s tanned hand and higher up across her wrist.

“Straps.”

“Kinky. Yummy!” She slides in her barstool level with Tamara’s.

“From my wrist guards. I ‘blade a lot. Rollerblade,” she explains, before removing her hand from the girl’s. “So why are the marks on the *back* of your hand?”

“The *guard* part sits there.” Tamara’s fingers spanned some four inches on the inside of her wrist, from a point above her lifeline to another point where a watchband would probably settle, if she wore a watch. “It’s more or less like a hard casing. The marks are from the Velcro strips that keep the thing snug against the wrist. So, what’s your name?” Tamara asks, to move the conversation forward.

“Zag.”

“Zag?”

Very slowly with her forefinger, the girl begins drawing first a Z then an A and a G over the loose cotton of Tamara’s shorts. Though the girl’s exposed thigh is cool against Tamara’s bare knee, for her, the moment has passed.

What she had felt on the dance floor when Emilie had materialized between her and the girl had sobered her up. It had reminded her of the priority she still wanted to pursue.

At that particular moment, priority number one, for Tamara, was to do what *mature* people do. What mature people do when in love with the one they’re with. With the one they’re with in their *head*. Priority number one, for her that night, was *not* to get laid, fool around, fuck around, have sex. And it certainly wasn’t about making love with the girl called Zag. Priority number one was to disengage from what she

had allowed herself and get back into idle as there was, after all, very little in Zag that moved Tamara.

Her tongue *had* but Tamara knew that tongues, in isolation, shouldn’t be made to account for much. Neither should cute butts even when wrapped in red plastic. *Just as well*, she sighs, relieved she hadn’t actually been doing any hard-core fantasizing about the girl, as disengaging from a full-heat-turn-on wasn’t one of her strengths.

She would’ve been quick to argue that she never had had any reason to practice that particular type of self-control. Not before hooking up with Emilie. As a matter of fact, she might have added, if pressed, that *that* particular type of self-control was downright peculiar and masochistically weird.

“Yeah, it’s like Zag’s one of my usernames, you know, like my code name when I’m clubbing. Wicked, huh? It’s like my friends say. No one’s ever come across anyone called Zag, right? So, it’s easy to remember. So, what’s yours?” Zag is toying with the side pocket on Tamara’s shorts. “Like you got yourself an a.k.a. or what?”

“I got myself a name. Tamahrah.”

“A bit of a Brit, are you? You sound so from the UK.”

“Yes, but I live here now.” Tamara undoes the girl’s finger from the buttonhole on her side pocket and turns to look over her shoulder. Clubbers are pressing and milling around the bar but none, as far as she can tell, are or had been looking at her and yet she had felt someone’s persistent glare tugging at the edge of her awareness.

Lights blink red above the bar. Red spotlights ignite the dance floor.

“Zag? That your friend over there, near the stage?” Tamara asks a while later, pointing at the woman in the jersey.

“Could be. Where you looking exactly?”

“Number 8.”

Tamara had just become aware that number 8 had, on and off during the course of the night, come inside her line of vision. At first she hadn’t noticed, then she thought the woman might be about to make a move in her direction. Then, the darting glances Tamara intercepted seemed more destined for Zag than for herself.

Might even be her lover. Past or present. And Tamara imagined the woman, hurting and aching, watching Zag hit on someone else right under her

nose.

“Nah. Why? If she’s been looking this way, she probably likes *you*. Wanna load and lock back? Anyway, Brit girl?” She sips her glass of beer. “What’s your star sign? Your DOB makes you how old?”

“Twenty-eight. Old enough to be your *older* sister.”

“Phoar! Tell you what,” Zag exclaims, lens-blue eyes round and wide. “If *my* sister looked anything like you ... I would’ve been in her nappies a long, long time ago. No such luck though.” She leans against Tamara’s bare arm to set her glass on the bar.

As she does, her lips hover very close to Tamara’s ear. “I don’t have a sister,” she whispers. “But how ‘bout I show you what I would’ve done if you – ”

Tamara pulls herself away from the bar rail and gently pulls Zag off her stool. When both big red Mickey Mouse plastic shoes stand on either side of her desert boots, Tamara brings her in close.

Close to her belt buckle, against her breasts. She bends her head towards the girl’s face and kisses her fully on the mouth. But it is a closed mouth kiss. And it is not a long kiss.

“OK, Zag. You’re cute in red. Got a great butt.” Still looking into the girl’s eyes, she adds, “I got turned on out there but, look, that’s all there is to it. I’m not looking for a screw. So ... let’s make this a goodbye kiss. You be good now,” she adds, her hand light against the girl’s cheek. “Not boring ... just good.” Green cat-eyes grin and Tamara turns on her heels.

Keys in hand, Tamara walks towards her car parked at the end of the lane. She sniffs the thin cotton cloth of her top. She crinkles up her nose. The door that had let her out of The Triangle swings back on its hinges, choking the thumping sounds of the music and trapping inside the billows of smoke.

Jiggling her car keys, she grins as she strides past the parking spot from where Emilie’s Jeep had been towed away the night they had first met.

If it hadn’t been for that drama, she and I would

never have connected. She looks at the driveway to her right. Still overgrown with weeds, it looks still totally abandoned and still too narrow to accommodate a car of any description and, yet, whoever

lived in the shabby house at the other end of the narrow driveway had called the cops to have the Jeep removed. She glances at her watch. *Shower. Wash hair. Still early enough to grab a DVD on the fly.*

Rapid footfalls filter through the plans Tamara is making for the next phase of her bachelor grunge night. She glances over her shoulder. No one in sight. Bachelor grunge is Emilie’s euphemism for the nights she and Tamara spend separately. Tamara grins. *No cooking. No washing up. Crap food and self-indulgence.* Tamara tosses the keys in the palm of her hand as she approaches her car. *Something nicely trivial, something seriously dumbed down. Chill out time.* Her housemate, Chris, and Amber, her lover were out of town. Tamara would have the house all to herself. *Bliss. I’ll grab something like what Em, for sure,*

wouldn’t dig. Like a Jet Li film. And with a start, she wonders what Emilie would think of Zag. *And now, what? To tell or not to tell? Nothing to say. No ... not true,* she reasoned honestly, keys jingling between her fingers. *Plenty to say but not enough to ... Not worth upsetting her. It’s all cool, like totally under control. I don’t need –*

“What the fuck!” she cries, as her head is snapped backwards. Reflexes slowed by the surprise of the attack, Tamara tries to turn around but she is slammed against the wall. She can only splay her hands in front of her to absorb some of the impact. Keys clatter on the pavement.

“You fuckin’ mad or what?” she shouts at the twisted face that has her grabbed by the neck. “Let go of me!” She tries to pry the fist loose.

The woman twists the tank top higher up and more tightly against Tamara’s throat. “Fucking cunt,” she spits. “You just fuckin’ leave us be,” she snarls, lips tight against her teeth. “Fuckin’ leave us alone, stupid cunt.”

The woman in the basketball top, the one with the nice face, the one whom Zag had said was not a friend, *that* woman no longer had her face arranged in a pleasant manner.

Mouth level with Tamara’s nose, she hisses, “Ya come around again, bitch...” The woman’s breath was hot and sour. “Ya come hustlin’ her again ...” she adds. Fist bunched and in Tamara’s face, “I’ll be showing *that* up your tight little ass.” Angry spittle flew out her mouth.

“Look, bitch!” Tamara smirked, “I don’t do fisting, OK? So get that

fist out of my fuckin' face! Sit on it yourself!"

Everything had happened too quickly for Tamara, too quickly and far too violently. *Deck the bitch!* Forcefully, she brings up her wrist from under the woman's as she crashes the heel of her boot parallel to the woman's tibia. On the top of her foot. Right near the ankle.

The woman's eyes pop open wide and she gasps for air.

"Fu-ckin - hell ... C-cunt!"

Tamara shoves her backwards with a quick jab to the shoulder. The woman tethers, balancing on one foot, like a lame bird.

Tamara can't resist, "You're really lucky I don't fight, ya know?"

She unlocks the car door, straps herself and through the open window, she thrusts an index finger hard in the woman's direction. "Breathe, lady. Breathe. Thatta girl."



"Saint-Clair's social realist leanings have earned her work the reputation of "The Thinking woman's lesbian romance novelist." *Curve Magazine*, June 2005

SNAPSHOT - North & Left From Here (Take II)

Nadia's Wheatfield

Nadia confided she had accosted me on impulse, that afternoon, on the path that led from the dorm to the cafeteria. She explained that the girls on my floor had been buzzing about me, the new girl, and she wanted to check me out for herself.

She added that they had given me a nickname: French Twist.

"Why French Twist?"

"Because you're French."

She said, too, that they thought I was stuck-up. I shrugged. Nadia shrugged, too. She said that their judgment seemed somewhat categorical. Three semesters of dorm life already under her belt had apparently made her a veteran of the snapshot, boxed-in view of the world proper to many co-eds who didn't have any reasons to think out of the box. Party till your dancing shoes drop off. Find the boy of your dreams. Make him jealous a few times to test his love. And then drop him on your way to finding a more deserving boyfriend. Pop a tablet or two. Drink your best girlfriends under the table during pre-game. And oh, yeah, if there's time to spare, pump out a research paper or two.

Nadia had seen me riding around on my blue Schwinn. She was surprised that I'd be riding a 'guy's bike.' She admitted that the veil of quiet secrecy that she felt floating around me had been *her* motivation to engage me in some kind of conversation. Apparently she, too, felt little in common with many of the other girls on our floor.

"Boyfriends, and how many hickies, really nothing more than bruises, we've managed to score the previous night at the drive-in, and the race to one of his rings, any ring?"

"Yes, I've noticed. Not quite the kind of conversations to which I can contribute an awful lot." I blushed. "I mean, not just at the moment." Nadia looked at me, a question in her blue-blue eyes, but she held onto it, preferring to recount how a few days ago she had seen me in the lobby about to be kissed by Number 3 of the Longhorns football team - Ray-Ban-handsome John Dillon and his fresh face, blue eyes bordered by Betty Boop, blond-tipped eyelashes - John Dillon, the

quarterback. Well, well, she had thought. That'll give the girls another take on the French chick.

John Dillon had been pleasant while we had cheered the UT basketball team onward until the total defeat of the MIT visitors; pleasant too, as we had shared a hot apple pie and ice cream at Ma Austin's. Pleasant until the pawing-bear act in the front seat of his black Capri V8, but I could forgive him that. Just like once inside the dorm lobby, I could afford him a Fare-Thee-Well kiss on the cheek. But John Dillon had turned his head, just a fraction, so that my goodbye kiss had landed on his lips. The oldest trick in the book. Probably still works every time.

It was at that moment that Nadia had walked past, noticing the cage he had improvised around me, arms outstretched on either side of my head, palms resting against the wall behind me. She had had to wait for the lift to the sixth floor, and she had caught the flash of contempt that, she said, would've hit him 'almost like spit'. Nadia had watched, as I had pushed his left arm aside to stride towards the stairwell. She had noted the anger that had reddened his face as he glared back at me across the sea of couples milling around. Most of them were also parting for the night, but longingly, lovingly, regretfully.

"Tsk, tsk," she clicked with her tongue. "Don't know what they're like in France," she explained, "but UT jocks don't like to be treated like that. Never. And certainly not in public. Imagine the loss of face! That would've been one seriously bad trip for our John Boy!"

"Nah. I can't possibly *imagine* what a guy might feel. And not one who jumps a girl in his car just 'cause he's got an itch that needs scratching. Not on!

I'm not at all interested in thinking how *he* might think or feel."

Hands waving close to my face, Nadia had cried, "Whoa, girl, chill!"

Her exclamation had made me self-conscious and I blushed again.

She had looked at me quizzically. "Tom will love you to bits."

Tom? She had kept me so busy with the relentless flow of her conversation that I had hardly asked any of my own. Weird though, weird how that boy's name had ricocheted inside my head.

"Who's Tom? Your boyfriend?" I realized, too late, that I didn't really want to know anything about Tom.

A few weeks later, Nadia decided the time had come to share with me

one of the many simple, solitary pleasures she favored, that of walking to the epicenter of a large field of tawny wheat and spreading a quilt over a sun-bleached patch of ground. And that day, she invited me to lie next to her on the quilt, tucked out of sight behind the softly blurred line of the horizon.

Under the hot Texan sun, Nadia would feast on plump, overripe figs, on Florida mangoes, on slices of watermelon. She'd spit the dark, glistening seeds as far as she could, well beyond the quilt's edge and, there, in the middle of nowhere, she'd let sweet juices run down her chin, smear her cheeks and stick to her fingers. And that afternoon, eyes closed, face uplifted so that the passing breeze would dry her chin, she softly said, "See, Alex, if it hadn't been for me, you'd never have known about this major, totally free, pleasure in life." A flat watermelon pip landed on my thigh. I grinned.

Then came the day when Nadia said she could no longer think past the exhilaration, the total sense of freedom she felt when we were alone together.

We had become almost inseparable best buddies. Only lectures and her dates with Tom, the boyfriend, kept us apart. During the in-between hours, we studied together; she'd test me ad nauseum with her sets of ink-blots, and I'd read her the Thurber and Dorothy Parker stories I had to deconstruct for the following lecture.

One day, I came across a Marjorie Barnard story, *The Persimmon Tree*. Wanting to share the text with Nadia, I brought a photocopy back to the dorm. As I read it to her, I felt something move inside me. And I blushed. Later, much later, I found stories like *The Beautiful House*, *The Last Leaf* and *The Fire*. I brought them home to read to her. Only by then, I didn't blush anymore. We had moved in together, still on the sixth floor of the dorm, but in a double room.

On lecture-free afternoons, we'd cavort in the open air, rolling around on Nadia's quilt spread wide among swaying stems of bleached wheat, thrashing around in mock wrestling matches, each one heaving hard against the other, each struggling in earnest for the position of the victor straddling the vanquished.

On one such afternoon, because I had allowed Nadia to wriggle from

under my legs that had her pinned to the quilt, she had perched atop my hips, strong hands still holding my wrists down.

Protected from view by the fuzzy line of our swaying, sandy-colored horizon that smudged into blues as it met the open sky, our joyous shrieks were acknowledged only by passing crows. My legs had been strengthened by many a skiing holiday in the Swiss Alps with my mother, but the years Nadia had spent working with her father on their ranch had given her upper torso a strength uncommon to city girls. Our bodies responded to the unadulterated pleasure of being young, healthy and with each other. It was then that she peered into my eyes.

“Not green, not brown.” She brought her face down a little closer to mine.

“Not hazel. There’s bits of gold flecks all around.”

She kept me pinned under her, unable to shield my eyes from the dark blue pull of her eyes. Her face had moved too close to my own. My nipples had hardened even before I became aware of the tips of her sun bleached hair. It felt as if each strand, independently from all others, was toying with the thin cotton weave of my shirt-front. I became very still.

That afternoon on the quilt, in the middle of a wheat field, was the first time that I became aware of my clitoris. I became aware of the warmth that was pulsing over it, around it, inside it. I was seventeen-and-a-half, and I was straddled by Nadia, my best buddy. I struggled from under her.

I had to.

I had to ease away the shimmering-white sensation that was too unfamiliar to be truly pleasant.

Nadia returned her gaze to mine. She made herself heavier across my hips as if she had stopped supporting some of her weight with her thigh muscles. The tip of her tongue darted between my lips. Just as quickly, she sprang to her feet pulling me up with her. But not to her. It was then that my ‘muddles’ began in earnest.

My muddle about her.

My muddle about her face.

About her body, as I had seen it so many times. Naked under the shower head.

Naked in front of the bathroom mirror. Naked on her bed. Naked, skinny-dipping at Hippy Hollow, with Tom and the rest of us.

My muddle was also about her small apple-shaped breasts.

About her wiry body.

About the gap in her front teeth.

About the violet-changing-blue of her eyes.

All these muddles kept me awake at night while she slept, breathing softly, in her own bed. They kept me awake long after Tom’s after-shave and body scents, washed out of her hair, had dried up at the bottom of the shower recess.

At other times, the muddles kept me waiting while I’d lie in my bed, waiting as I had never waited for anything.

I’d wait in the dark. I’d wait for her to return from her drive-in dates with Tom whom she was seeing more often than when we had first met.

I’d wait for her to tiptoe back inside the room as per her habit, so as not to wake me.

I’d wait for the soft sounds she’d make while undressing.

I’d wait to catch a glimpse of her, as she’d sneak into the crack of light released by the bathroom door before she closed it carefully behind her.

Then came the ever-gnawing question to myself: could I ultimately trust her with my secret? Would I ever be able to tell her I loved her? Would I ever tell her that I knew for sure that I loved her because I had already been in love once, but not with a boy. I feared that, for her, the suspended moment in the middle of the wheat field had only been a wrinkle in time. Something not meant to happen.

Something that hadn’t meant anything.

Later, some two weeks later, while I was still teetering on the brink of a disquieting and unknown place, Nadia confided apropos of nothing that she had had to close her eyes, that afternoon in the wheat field. She had had to close her eyes against the delicious glow that had spiraled most unexpectedly in the pit of her belly. She said that she had had to look away from my eyes and look right into the sun till it made her eyes water.

Unlike me, though, it wasn't the rippling spread of desire that had caught her unawares, because such surging desire she had already known many times with her boyfriends. What had caught her unawares was that she was turned-on by me, her best girlfriend, not by Tom.

The first time we were able to talk about that afternoon of innocent wrestle, Nadia, almost nineteen, was a very boy-oriented girl. Making love with Tom in the back of his car was their reason for going to the drive-in. She had sat cross-legged on my bed as she spoke, hesitantly at first, of sparks that had ignited

further sparks, as sparks do. She clumsily, but valiantly, explained the flash of surprise as she had recognized her need to press herself against me. To part my lips with her tongue. To slip her hand under my shirt. When she had opened her eyes only to be drawn closer by what she'd call my 'lion' eyes, she said she just had to kiss me. Too quickly she added that, of course, she knew all along that it was all wrong.

I short-circuited. I was truly pulled apart by two equally strong needs. I was truly ambivalent. My first urge was to lean into the few inches that separated us and shush her with a kiss. My second urge was to agree falsely that, yeah, it had been a bit wrong, but no harm done, right? Actually, in retrospect, I must have had a third need: that of saying nothing, that of doing nothing, that of turning myself into a pillar of salt because it was what I ended up doing.

Nothing heroic like tumbling her over onto the bedspread.

Nothing as irreparably daring like straddling her in earnest.

Nothing heroic like declaring my true color, my sexuality. Nothing daunting like saying, 'Look, Nadia ...it's like ... I've been thinking about it. I love you.' Oh, no!

I didn't have that kind of courage then and I don't know that I'd have it now.

Coming on to straight women has never been my forte. Mind you, to be fair, I haven't allowed myself a lot of practice either. The couple of near-misses I've had with straight women quickly taught me two things: the male that's usually attached to any one of them is quite likely to become threatening; a bi-curious woman can break a dyke's heart just as easily as a dyke can, so ... no need to double-expose

myself to pain.

Nadia cupped my chin so as to better see my eyes, my lion eyes as she'd called them, as if lions didn't all have amber-colored eyes. "The moment, like on the quilt ... it's happened just that once, right? Just that once. And so quick, it can't be a big deal thing, right? I mean, it's not like we're, you know ... weird or anything, right?" Bits of quicksilver gathered in the pit of my stomach. "Absolutely," I agreed. "It doesn't mean we're weird or anything."

Days later, one afternoon, while I was trying to have a nap, Nadia flopped on to my bed, head to toe, as she often did. We were both liquefied by the seasonal Texan heat and the oppressive, sodden quality in the air held me pinned to the mattress. I had been trying to pinpoint the source of barely visible meanders of sweat just under my skin, as they slid sluggishly from my chest down through the flat plane of my stomach and I had watched the tiny puddle as it formed in the hollow of my navel, but I had given up. Through thinly-veiled eyelids, I focused fuzzily on Nadia who, naked body loose under the damp weave of Tom's basketball top, didn't look all that sleepy.

The loose cloth clung to her skin in patches, like the partly-shed skin of a large gecko, even if geckos don't shed. Nadia's legs were stretched out and relaxed. Her feet, in well-practiced familiarity, were close to my shoulder. The large ceiling fan was busy rearranging the swirls of thick air that clung to each of its blades and I shifted my weight slightly to the left. I became drowsily aware that my hand had come to rest on Nadia's shin. Undulating thoughts shimmered through my belly. My hand stayed on Nadia's shin, as I lapsed into a dreamy torpor.

The wheat field materialized behind my closed eyelids. The quilt was soft against my hands. The sun and the passing crows did their thing in the deep blue sky above. Nadia was there, too. She wore her well-worn cut-offs and a loose V-neck Tee-shirt. She was barefoot.

I sucked a watermelon seed clean of its flesh, poised it on the tip of my tongue and blew it on its course. The seed arched upward before beginning its descent, landing on the ridge of Nadia's exposed collarbone as she lay, facing me on the quilt, her face hidden by the
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novel she was pretending to read.
“How many times have I asked you to stop spitting these things everywhere?”

she demanded, startled. The stern tone of the words was softened by the amused smile she was trying to suppress as she raised herself on one elbow, to better face me.

“Hey, girl, don’t blame me,” I laughed. “You’re the one who taught me the craft.”

Drawing the most out of her Texan drawl, she answered, “Don’t ya give me lip, Frenchie, or I’ll whop your ass real good!” She had already laid down her book and looked ready to roll towards me. But she didn’t. Instead, she called the next shot with a mischievous smile.

“You know what you’ll have to do now, don’t you?” I looked at her, about to say something silly like Love The One You Whip, but instinctively, I knew to be quiet.

And with that knowledge came the sudden flash of desire. I held that ache tightly trapped inside my clit to better contain it. Nadia’s dark blue eyes held mine. They were smiling, warm and safe. I didn’t look away. She didn’t stop the moment.

You see, that wet little seed had landed right where I had been wishing I could kiss her. Right on the soft, pulsating skin that led to the base of her throat. Time slid the moment into a parallel timeline. Nadia rolled back onto her face-up-to-the-sky position, her throat exposed to the soft rays of the setting sun, but I knew she was watching me. Perfectly still, I imagined that it was a tantalizing rush of desire rippling through her belly that held her pinned to the quilt, as I straddled her. As she felt my breath on her closed eyelids and a tongue-caress on her lips.

Inside our room, the heat was stifling and my heart was beating erratically. I lifted on one elbow to look at Nadia. Tendrils of sweat-moist hair chorded across her throat. She looked asleep. On my hands and knees, I hovered above her.

My hair teased her breasts. I wanted to press the length of my body against hers, but I didn’t. Instead, my face alone moved closer to hers, so near to hers that her features became blurred.

My lips fluttered against her cheekbone. Her eyes snapped opened. My heart just about died in my throat. Nadia shut me out by closing her eyes once again. Time stood still and I kept as still as a gecko on a wall until she shifted under me. She arched her neck ever so slightly, allowing my lips to nuzzle the salty hollow where, only a moment ago in the wheat field behind my eyelids, the watermelon seed had left its tiny, wet imprint before falling on the patchwork quilt. Inquisitive, the tip of my tongue slid over her collarbone, tasting her skin for the first time, drawing as I went, silent symbols of love too quickly snatched dry by fan blades.

“You’re tickling me, you wuss!” Nadia giggled self-consciously. She tried to untangle herself from my encircling arms, but not to move away.

In that heat-induced moment that was running in a parallel timeline, Nadia lifted her face to better meet my lips and, very gently, she kissed me on the very special place, I had once told her no one had ever kissed me: in the little dip high on my nose ridge. She moved her forehead against my lips as they moved towards her smooth temple and brushed the baby-fine hair that grew there, at the edge of her grown up hair.

Spontaneously, I tightened my embrace and, like a familiar lover, I circled her ear with the tip of my tongue, circling in and around its fold. Her body relaxed as she pulled me against her. We rocked gently sideways. Nadia sighed. Cupped under my hand, her nipple hardened under the thin weave of her shirt. The hardness of her nipple rubbing against the palm of my hand electrified my desire. We were breathing in unison, my lips in her hair, my breath hot against her neck. She pressed her cheek against mine, eyes closed and trusting. With love on the tip of my tongue, I caressed the silky area of her temple.

Her hand ran tentatively down my hip and across, to meet in the middle, in the warmth of my thighs. My hand found its way under hers exhilarated by the clingy softness of her silk panties. Palm open, Nadia guided gently across the mound of her sex.

I cupped her cunt as I had her breast, gently, firmly, lovingly. She arched her back and slid my hand upward against the firmness of her belly. I caressed the softness of her thighs.

As slowly as a blind person might feel her way over an unfamiliar surface, Nadia guided me back to her belly, to her panties and I found my way under them. All the way to the soft, springy curls of her pubic hair. My fingers found their way into the wetness of her lips. They fluttered over her little clit, against it like tiny little heartbeats. As it hardened under my touch, my whole being focused on her soft, wet, warmth. Her breathing was shallow and fast.

She pushed her panties impatiently away from her crotch and held my hand hard against her. Hips and thighs pressed against her, I surrendered to the blinding white light that her shudders unleashed in the pit of my stomach, in the depth of my own cunt. Nadia rolled on her side, her back turned to me.

She sensed my hesitation, so she reached for my hand, to bring me back against her.

Then, in another deft movement, she rolled onto her stomach, bringing me on top, astride her. I closed in around her, hips, stomach glued to her back, my mouth brushing her ear as she rode my fingers, as they gently pushed upwards and against her sex. And together we rocked, locked in unison, locked in our embrace.

A moment later Nadia stopped suddenly. She arched her back. Her body shuddered under mine and a breath of air pushed through her lips. She lay still for a few seconds.

“Alex ... *chérie*...” she murmured, twisting around to clasp me against her. “Alex ... look ... look at me,” she whispered, reaching again for my lips, as she pushed against me to better see my own desire still trapped under closed eyelids.



SNAPSHOT – Silent Goodbyes

Gisèle

The slanted morning sun peeps over my shoulders and warms me up as I lie, book in hand, on one of the cockpit bunks. A grey sea eagle circles wide between the powdery clouds and the mast. The small island behind us sinks imperceptibly into the sea like a theatre set whisked away until the next curtain rise. Solange is at the wheel. I *was* reading but not anymore. Instead, I'm observing her surreptitiously from behind the dark lenses of my sunglasses. Hair still damp and slightly matted from our morning snorkel, her own eyes sheltered behind mirror blue wrap around shades, she looks as inscrutable as I probably do behind my own.

From the angle of her face I assume she's scrutinising the horizon. Her head is in the shade and yet the angled sun lights up the lower portion of her face and cheekbones, down her swimmer's shoulders, and hands. I watch as both of her hands run along the glistening edge of the wheel one way, and how they dance quickly back the other way. Only briefly do they settle on a quarter-to-three position. Her right foot is propped on the edge of the bunk almost touching my feet. She looks relaxed and in control. The forty-five degree angle of her leg guides my eyes to the turquoise crotch that peeps from under the hem of her old Metallica concert tour T-shirt.

The tide will be turning soon but we won't feel it till some time after noon.

I'm thinking of Paris now.

5.15 a.m. in Gisèle's rumpled bed.

What an ungodly hour to be told, after a night of lovemaking, that I wasn't the only one in *her* heart. No wonder young people have stamina. They need it to endure and overcome such moments.

“*Aime, il y a quelque chose que je tiens à te dire,*” she had said, burrowing against my neck. Em, in French can sound like the letter M, clipped. Or it can sound like *aime*, as in love, not the noun but the command form. As in an order to love. Love! *Ai-me!* She pronounced it that way, lengthening the sound, softly, sensually.

There was something she felt she needed to tell me. She had used the words, *Je tiens à te dire*, I feel compelled to tell you. Senses blurred, I extricated myself from her embrace. She had a soft, warm, languid body. How could she have been so soft and so languid? So entirely wrapped around me? In those days I often lost my sense of self, lost the edges of my body when she wrapped herself around me in that particular manner. My outer shell just dissolved into hers. I had raised myself against the pillow.

She wanted to tell me that she had another lover. Another woman. Gisèle's black hair was cut straight along her jaw line. Always slick, shiny and drum-stick straight. Never sleep-tousled, Never love-tousled. She had met this woman only recently but she was already quite fond of her. That woman had class. So much class that Gisèle felt moved to tell me about it.

"Elle est bien, tu sais. Elle a énormément de classe," she said.

Gisèle wanted me and she wanted the classy dame as well. But more to the point, Gisèle's post-dawn news was essentially that she was going to go on making love with this other woman. Better yet, Gisèle wanted to make love with her, and she wanted to keep on making love with me. And she thought, too, that one of these days we could make love together, the three of us. And wouldn't that be ever so intelligently cosmic and so incredibly sexy too.

"Ça te dit, Aime?"

Gisèle wanted to know if I might be tempted by the idea. Her question had been rhetorical. It didn't even require an inflexion in her voice. Gently, slowly, I had disentangled myself from her sumptuous body. Striped light filtered through the shutters. I had groped around for my clothes. She had propped herself on one elbow. I knew her eyes were following my movements but neither one of us spoke. Both of us were wondering how far I would go before abandoning all pretence.

"Pride, decorum," my mother used to say. "Never get too deeply entangled. Extricate yourself gracefully. No fuss, no mess. No tears, Emilie. *Jamais en public.*" No teary display.

At 5.15 a.m. I had pulled on jeans and boots and buttoned my very crumpled raw silk shirt. Love had crumpled that shirt well after midnight as we had turned into the narrow street that would lead us to

Gisèle's bed. We had kissed, kissed and just about made love, frantic love, in that narrow street hidden from view by the arch of darkness afforded to us by a deeply recessed *porte-cochère*. When we did make it to her flat high above rue de Rivoli, we tumbled down on her bed and my shirt got crumpled some more.

That morning, the morning that had succeeded that lustful exuberance, I had run a quick hand through *my* love-matted hair. I had shoved wallet and keys in my back pocket, and leant over her as she lay, still watching me with liquid amber eyes. I had kissed her lips softly. The tip of her tongue teased the corner of my mouth. Four strides covered the length of her corridor. A couple of turns of the bolt.

"Aime, don't forget Mikael's vernissage tomorr –"

The door had slammed shut behind me. How romantic! How young I was then! How ...so long ago it was!

Me, young enough to be making my way across France with only a backpack and a big heart, a big heart full of love. Me, ready to leave that big heart full of love on the doormat of some French woman's flat.

Early morning in Paris. Rue de Rivoli. Grey facades. Grey bitumen. Grey sky. Grey me. Only very few cars are out that early in the morning. The avenues belong to them. Free spirits unhindered by gridlock traffic, but only for a while longer. The ones behind the wheel are not in bed as they should have been. Back from their graveyard shift. Bereft of their lover, they race home before work. On the way to the airport, to leave or to greet. On the way to the hospital to stay.

Broken-hearted, hands in my pockets, I orientated myself, back turned to the high window of Gisèle's bedroom. Back turned to her bed tucked away on the third floor, high above this street. Behind the green shutters. I orientated my heart back towards the surface, back from the depth where it had sunk, high above the street. Behind her green shutters.

Streets empty of pigeons. Empty of sounds. I'm empty too. A woman in slippers and dark fur coat follows a pocket-dog tied to the other end of its extended lead.

Long, grey wisps escaping from her dark beanie, another woman, a very old one, lies curled up on a bench. She lies protected

from the night, protected from the encroaching morning light, protected from the world as it wakes by the transparent, three-sided, shatterproof perspex panels of the bus-stop where she's found shelter. One lone white plastic bag on the ground. Her scrawny grey arm dangles towards it as if she'd fallen asleep fingers clutched around its loops. Only sleep and death can separate her from her pitiful bundle.

And the street-sweepers hose the sidewalks. They sweep dirty water into the *caniveaux*. The cafés are still asleep behind partially raised grills. They are silent, except for the clinking of cups and the jet of steam released into a milk jug. A strong *café au lait*, two warm croissants piled on top of each other on a little white plate. Gisèle, my first love. My first older woman love.

After Gisèle and her cool approach to love I had, for a long time, shied away from older women. That, in turn, had cast me in Gisèle's role, though not in her persona. At many levels, I just didn't have what it took to emulate her. Strangely enough though, as I healed my very first heart-splitting ache, I neither hated nor resented her. Already then, I had understood that she was too beautiful, too sensual, too sexual for just one lover. All the same: *chat échaudé craint l'eau chaude*, says my mother. Something about the fact that a cat, once scalded, is fearful of hot water.

That evening back in Paris, I had gone to Place des Vosges to catch the launch of Mikael's month-long exposition of oil paintings and large mixed-media assemblages. I had, intentionally, gotten there late, more than fashionably late. I wanted to make sure Gisèle had already arrived by the time I got there. And she had. It's the shine of her silken black hair, alight under the ceiling spotlights that caught my eye as soon as I had pushed through the glass doors.

The room was full of people doing what people do at *vernissages*: they chat, drink, eat, and, in those days, they smoked. They whisper, too, in hushed tones as they move from one piece to another. Very few buy right there and then. Though some buy on impulse, most of us seem to need to be prompted by a lingering feeling, by a recurring memory brought upon by *that* particular piece. A heart tug that won't go away until we return to it, to that piece out of some stranger's psyche. To that piece

that's triggered something deep inside us, a longing, an almost lustful urgency, a need to possess. Some of Mikael's frames already carried the round red dot that signified the piece had been sold, I suspect well ahead of the *vernissage*.

Chatting with a group of five people, Gisèle was somewhat off-centre to the middle of the room, her back to the entrance. Her hair swayed gently from side to side as she turned her attention from one in her entourage to another. Dark and *Daliesque* Mikael towered nearby with his own retinue of admirers.

From where I was standing, near the buffet set near the left-hand wall, I could see her, striking, in a simple, black, backless dress that ended just above the knees. Well-defined calves and thin ankles led the eye to black *escarpins*, flat-heel shoes, that matched perfectly the tone and feel of her dress. She turned slightly to her left to accept the thin champagne flute from a waiter's glistening tray. A quietly elegant gold brooch enhanced her *décolleté*. It glinted, caught in the light from above.

And out of nowhere came a woman. There was nothing particular to note about her except that she wrapped her arm around Gisèle's waist in a proprietorial gesture. Her lips touching Gisèle's ear, the woman whispered something that made my lover laugh. Though there was nothing particularly unusual about this woman's movements as such, my heart had lurched. Maybe because I didn't know who she was. Maybe because I was raw from Gisèle's early morning admission, I painted that woman, the one who still had her arm around my lover's waist, in the role of The Other Woman. I never found out whether she was the one or not. What's the connection between Gisèle and Solange? Is it that both are attractive women and both are careless? Yes, Gisèle was careless too. Careless with people, intrepid too, like Solange, but only in matters of love. In matters of sex.



SNAPSHOT – North & Left From Here (Take II)

The Doe

I already knew, then, that I wouldn't want to stay long in that gray and filthy city that had become Algiers. It had long ago lost the sparkling whiteness of its architecture that, outlined against the blue of the bay, had earned it the name of Alger La Blanche, a jewel along the Mediterranean Sea. That was before Algeria wrought its independence from the colonizing clutch of France. In recent times it had become a place where an extremist Fundamentalist interpretation of the Koran had spilled over from Iran and Iraq. Hardly the place for a woman, a single Western woman at that.

President Chadli was in power and his form of dictatorship had already set Algeria apart from Morocco and Tunisia, its neighbors. In this particular Muslim country, older women wore a full-bodied white veil that covered them like a sheet, leaving only a gap wide enough to allow a one-eyed vision of the world through which they navigated. And though younger women were, at the time, exempt from wearing the veil, Algiers was certainly not the dream city for any Western woman, even less for a single one and less again for the young dyke I was.

Throgs of leering, unemployed males spilled out of cafes at all hours of the day to squat sidewalks in bee swarm formations along every main artery of the capital city. And by 7 p.m., the law-abiding residents obeyed the curfew imposed by the government in an attempt to weaken resistance to its politics.

Having sensed a presence at the far end of the pigeonhole area, Tashinka Jennett looked up from her papers; our eyes met. I smiled, she smiled back with that wide smile I had already noticed once, earlier in the week.

“Hi, I'm Tash Jennett, PE,” she explained, pointing to the silver whistle

hung by a red leather thong around her neck. “But B-ball's my true love.” She opened her left hand to reveal a round chrome stopwatch cradled inside her palm. “Tools of the trade,” she added with another easy smile. “You must be the new English teacher... the French one.”

The touch of humor creased the corners of her smiling eyes. She peered into a couple of pigeonholes but the way I stared at her dumbly compelled her to explain further. “John, the Principal, he sent out a memo to say that, this year, we'd be gaining only one new staff member, a French woman. A young one. Young blood for the English department, is actually what he said.” The woman shrugged. “It's only an educated guess that you're likely to be the ... the *young blood* he was talking about.”

I nodded. The cascade of shiny dark-chestnut hair gently brushing the top of her tanned shoulders attracted my eyes like a magnet. And then came a strange mix of questions and commands bound together.

“First things first,” she said seriously, “Our next Staff vs. Students game is on Thursday, straight after school. You play ball?”

I almost stuttered. “Uh ... *Désolée*. No, not *basketball*. Not any ball, really.”

“Ah ... Too bad for our side.” She moved towards the photocopier and rested her hands on its hard plastic cover. Just as I was about to blurt out something totally irrelevant, just to see her smile again, she added softly, as if thinking to herself, “Good hands, though. Long and strong.”

Her own hand, the one that still held the little chrome stopwatch snugly inside her palm, was pointing index first at my chest. I was not conscious that my hands, surely to muffle the thumping of my heart, had flown to my chest pressing against it the leather compendium I had been holding all along.

“Uh ... well... It’s just that...” *Come on, Alex*, I silently urged myself. *Come on!* “My father’s hands... That’s according to my mother.” *Duh! What a totally lame thing to say!* At least, I could feel that my lips had finally arranged themselves into something that could pass as a smile. A pinched sort of a smile but a smile nonetheless. As empty of wits as a vending machine out of stock, I turned towards the bank of pigeonholes and set to the task of locating my own.

“If you’re looking for your name,” the PE teacher said, pointing to the rows of wooden cells, “they don’t follow a strict alpha order.” I must have looked flustered. “Why don’t you try the bottom row since your name would’ve been added only recently. There!” Her index was pointing to the extreme right of the penultimate row. “Delaforêt. Right next to Winterston, that figures. Sounds as French as it comes, Delaforêt. Got to be you.”

“It is me. Thanks.”

What caught me off guard was the aura of energy that radiated from the woman and perhaps, too, the playful attention she was paying me. And I still hadn’t introduced myself properly. Then again, she seemed to know already quite enough about me. When I turned around, Mrs Jennett, the B-ball jock, had already loped out of the door. Oddly disoriented, I moved across to the large window for a patch of blue sky on which to tether myself, and drew in my bottom lip.

One floor below, a basketball under her arm, the woman was crossing the lawn. She stopped in mid stride as if someone had called her name. My heartbeat fluttered. Had she sensed me looking at her? She turned around, looked up and hesitated. My heart stalled, but with a shrug she resumed her walk to the gym at the other end of the path. I watched her pull out the green and grey bandanna that had been dangling from the back pocket of her shorts. *Go, Girl!* I whispered, as she disappeared through the double glass doors.

During the course of the ensuing weeks a mutual affinity drew us together, Taskinka and me. She was the only female in her department, and although there were other women in mine, I was the only one still in my early twenties. In both cases, we were the odd ones out and a companionable bonding developed between us to the point that, at any time during the school day, each of us knew where to find the other, be it in a classroom, a staff room. In Tashinka’s case, two other locations came into play: the gym and center court.

Sometimes during a spare lesson, I’d perch on the concrete wall bordering the basketball court and watch Mrs Jennett put her students through their paces. Towards the close of the session, she would let the students drill on their own and she’d sit next to me, happily discussing the progress of her ‘killer dudes’ – she only coached the top players and the top players were all boys. Most girls, she had explained, just don’t develop the fascination for rubber and leather balls that boys do. Nothing much to do at all with aptitude, it’s more about a lack of genuine interest. She discussed, too, the fear factor some of her players had to overcome to ‘better get in there’.

During lunch, we had fallen into the habit of meeting outside my classroom and from there we’d follow a donkey trail that meandered through empty fields, parallel to the edge of the school. Pale gray donkeys and brown goats, usual to the North African countryside, populated the low hills that surrounded the school. There, we’d sit on clumps of spindly grass, bask in the midday sun while we ate our lunch.

There, seemingly miles away from civilization, we’d gossip about the network of people we knew. We’d talk, too, about mutual life experiences, but best of all we’d swap stories of the Short Story genre.

Tash’s penchant was for the Russian writers while mine lay elsewhere. So after a few weeks, I tried her out on O. Henry’s *The Last Leaf* and took heart when, at least overtly, she disapproved neither of Sue or Joanna’s women-centred conduct nor of their motive. I gave her a

copy of Marjorie Barnard's, *The Persimmon Tree*, an ideal platform from which to broach the topic of my own sexuality. I could have read out loud short but sexy tales of lesbian love, too, but instead I retreated to the safe humour of the Dorothy Parker stories.

I'd often imagine scenarios revolving around my self-disclosure to Tash but I was held back by the possibility that coming out to her might mean that I could lose access to her. How can one accurately anticipate a person's reaction to homosexuality, I'd often wonder, never having had to come out to anyone but Ann. To be honest, though, what hamstrung me the most was the knowledge that beyond disclosing my sexual orientation to Tash, just for the hell of it, there was, perhaps even more importantly my simmering attraction to her. Might *that* not complicate the aftermath of a full on disclosure?

Early on, I guessed that she and Ashley enjoyed an open marriage but it was hardly a Quantico secret. All the Jennetts' friends seemed to know that Luca Scalondro was Tash's lover – a very Italian, very charismatic lover. Luca was married, too, but his wife was watching over their children's schooling back in Milan.

Ashley seemed OK with his wife's arrangement and Luca was present at most of the dinner parties the couple threw on the rooftop terrace of their Moorish mansion by the sea. Very soon after I had become a regular at the Jennetts' dinner parties, though I had never witnessed any public display of an intimate nature between Tash and Luca, usually seated at the dinner table across from her and slightly to the left, I had simply sensed he was her lover. The sexual energy I had picked up between them traveled through me as tendrils of electricity that would coil and uncoil, at times making breathing difficult. I was one lovesick puppy!

One day, in the middle of our sun-bleached field, two hundred meters away from the school, and seemingly à propos of nothing: more like we say in French, *à brûle pourpoint*, Tash asked if I had figured out something about her and Luca.

"Like what?" She had looked at me quizzically, wondering whether I was as blind or naïve as I pretended. I gave in under her scrutiny. "Like whether I've guessed that the two of you are lovers?" She smiled almost shyly. Eyes averted, cheeks red from blush, I grunted, "Well, it's not like it's a well-kept secret or anything. So, yeah, I noticed."

"Ashley doesn't mind my having a lover," Tash continued, obviously thinking that I needed an explanation as to why Luca was a welcome guest at her husband's table, "that's as long as we're both discreet."

Oh yeah, I thought wryly, if all Ashley's after is discretion ... well, hell ... I could give him all the discretion he needs. No problems there!

"Ash is a good man, you do know that." She was looking seriously into my eyes. My heart swelled up. "When he's home, we're happy together." She continued emphatically. "We *really* are and he's a marvelous father to the boys. Oh, by the way, my dear little friend, I do happen to know that my husband is genuinely quite fond of you." Tash looked straight into my eyes.

I was puzzled by the remark, and was about to reply when the end-of-lunch warning bell ripped above our open air sanctuary. I jumped up and dusted the seat of my trousers. Tash handed me my lunch box.

"Alex, hey. Come to the beach after school." I looked at her, eyebrows furrowed. "Don't frown like that," she said, thumb and index finger pinching her eyebrows together to mimic my frown. "It'll be good, you know, *la plage*, a little late afternoon sun ... I've promised the boys we'd stop there on the way home." She pressed on, cutting off what little escape route I was about to cul-de-sac myself into, "Oh, say yes, Alex." Her tanned fingers were gently cupped over my shoulder. "A little swim'll do you good. You don't see much of the boys anyway."

She pulled the gray and green bandanna from her pocket and shook it loose of its crumpled creases. "Look, got to go. I'll stop by your classroom on my way out." She searched my eyes. "Just sit tight and
Julz Barron on C.C.'s writing - Never Too Heavy – Never Too Dry or Too Light

wait for me,” she added, totally unaware of the minor tremor these last four words triggered inside me. She tied the bandanna tightly around her forehead before sauntering off - long, brown legs, very short white shorts, arms loose, the round chrome stopwatch once again dangling from her hand and gleaming at the end of its red thong.

I stood, still as the doe that has smelled a danger her eyes have not yet identified. Her shiny black nostrils inhale the breeze. The tips of her ears flick through the silence to the vibrations of the air closing in on her. Like her, I held my breath.

Why the image of this doe, frozen in mid-stride, flanks heaving, processing invisible clues, snap-released by the report of the rifle?
Why the image of a bullet in slow motion, a heart-seeking missile already on its way?

The shrill sound of the second bell ripped through the still life that had forced itself inside my heart, around my lungs, squeezing the breath out to take its place.



SNAPSHOT – a fairy tale set in Medieval Times

The Whip Hand

Tucked deep inside a far away 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 have been 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 *pucele* 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
Julz Barron on C.C.'s writing - Never Too Heavy – Never Too Dry
or Too Light

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 - the fever that comes from the grain - 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. Ears 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 lay so heavily on her had finally relented, Ulahngsue accepted the favors 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 colors 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 neighbor 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 ..."

pure joy that she closed her eyes to better feel and taste the memories awoken by Deuteria's curiosity. Behind her eyes, Chunsina is 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 Chunsina's navel. Breath runs back up Ulahngsue's 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 site 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 startle. Transfixed, Deuteria is 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 menora.

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 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 anymore. 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 incandescenced Ulahngsue 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 violent 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 honored 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 unintelligently, 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. Firstly, 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 behavior 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 back 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 rose 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."



SNAPSHOT – Risking-Me She

She wants to go. After all she's been here quite a long time. Three or four hours already. Maybe the memories awakened have unsettled her. She needs to be alone. I understand that need, and yet a sinking feeling's already begun to invade my belly. I'd like her to stay longer. I'd like her to hang around here till later into the night.

She pushes herself off the chair. I breathe in to hide my disappointment.

She steps over to the right-hand side of my deck chair and holds out her hand to help pull me up. I give her my hand. She tugs a little and we are face to face. Body against body. And in the pit of my belly, the sharp pang of arousal cancels any sinking feeling that had been waiting to settle in for the night.

Gone the sinking feeling. Gone for now. Eyes open, I reach for her face.

I reach for her lips. I reach for her. And she's there. Her body strong and firm. Full length against mine. I feel her guide me slowly half a step back against the wall. The hard flatness of the wall is firmly against my back.

Hungrily now she presses herself against me. Against me, wedged between the hard surface of the wall and the firmness of her young body. Like she had me pressed against a tree, that century old tree, that afternoon, the afternoon she first kissed me. In the Botanic Gardens. Yesterday.

I want her. I desire her. I do, very much so. What the hell, I'm not accountable to anyone but myself. I *can* have sex. Sex, for one night, if that's what I really want. And yes, having sex with her is exactly what I want. Most of all. Right now.

'Emilie? Where's your bedroom?' She whispers hoarsely against my cheek, 'Your bedroom, Em. Take me there.'

I'm breathless. I hear her. I want to answer her. But my senses are on overload.

'Emi, please,' she says again, her mouth sliding over mine,

igniting sparks as it goes.

Her tongue unleashes swirls and rips of desire. I want to answer her.

I want to tell her, Yes, let's make love. But more than that I want to keep her in my mouth. I want to keep her against me, until that initial hunger, that gluttony, that greed for her, for her mouth, for her hips pressed against mine, I want to keep her against me until that greed subsides. Until it subsides into smouldering embers to be fanned back to fire in the privacy of my bedroom.

I reach for her hand and guide it to my solar plexus. With her other hand she brushes her hair back out of her eyes, before gently rubbing down and stroking the area below my sternum. The wavering light of the candle catches her hair closest to the glow, and paints it translucent blue. Like the translucent spray off a black wave. A night wave under the moon light. Shimmery threads against the mass of her black tendrils.

She is absolutely gorgeous, with her full breasts warm and safe in the candlelight. 'Come here,' I urge. She snuggles closer. The width of her naked shoulders, the fine and delicate skin stretched over her collarbone, full breasts, all blend together to lend her a statuesque vulnerability that's not as apparent when clothed.

She is sitting in something close to the lotus position, one hand loose over her ankles, feet sole to sole and relaxed. I am very much aware of her sex.

As the wicks flicker on the nightstands, as their glow dance sensuously across her face, her collarbone, over the immature creases of her stomach, over the length of her thighs, and the dark patch of springy hair, I know that if I could draw I would draw her. Not on the spot, no, but later. I would draw her during a re-enactment of sorts. She would let me draw her if I told her of the dance of light across the valleys and planes of her strong and healthy body.

'Hey ...' I whisper, hitching myself higher up on the pillow.

'No, not yet, Emilie.'

Her naturally husky voice is soft. Her private school accent has become incongruous in a different way now that she is stark naked,

now that she is talking sex. There's something about that soft and husky voice of hers that reminds me of BBC announcers who give us the news in tweed voices. Incongruous and definitely sexy. Her eyes touch mine and hold them. Darkened irises reflect my desire of her.

She shakes her head. Dark tendrils once more fell forward. I want to close my eyes and listen to the sensual overtones in her voice. I want to feel them behind my eyes, behind a dark screen. And yet, I also want to feast my eyes on her and feel the nexus of desire spread further through my limbs. Further, all the way down to my ankles. I want to imagine, behind closed eyes, the same desire, the same desire curled up in her lower belly. I want to imagine it stretching through her legs like a beam of light searches the dark glistening skin of the sea.

I want to touch her clitoris.

She reaches for my hand and places it on the inside of her thigh. Close, very close to where my hand wants to be. So close, I can feel its warmth. My fingers brush against her short curls. She closes her eyes suddenly and inhales. Her breasts rise, as she straightens her back. Her smooth ribs expand and still until she lets her breath slowly out through half-open lips. She opens her eyes and met mine.

'Woh.' She grins.

She leans close to my face. My cunt tightens again. I feel her physicality so strongly she doesn't need to do anything else but be here. Close. Her skin touching mine. The smooth firmness of her thigh against my hip.

The short curls that cover her pubic bone glisten in the candlelight. Why shouldn't they, when all the rest of her does, one way or another?

I had led her to my bedroom, and she had firmly pushed me against the wall visible in the chiaroscuro of the room. I like that habit of hers, that habit of pushing me, ever so gently, against something hard to better wedge me between it and her body.

As I had led her to the bed, as I lit the candles, as she had undressed, as I had undressed myself prudishly, it had become clear she wasn't going to let me take over. She wasn't going to let me rush things. It became clear, very quickly clear, that she wanted us to hold on to our desire of each other while we got sexually acquainted.

Verbally sexually acquainted. Her idea of foreplay, I had thought. Fine, though I'm not much of a talker at the best of times. And so, she had sat facing me, cross-legged and naked. She had sat herself near my hip and all I had wanted to do was get on with the anticipated delirium of making love with her.

Her hand is on my thigh. 'Hey, Emilie. What's the one thing you're like, seriously not into you're made love to?'

'Ah, that's easy,' I answer a little startled. Startled because I had, for two or three seconds, not more, wandered off.

'I'm not big on penetration. As in not at all. No matter what with.'

'So no strap-on?'

'No strap-on.'

'Ever fooled around with a bit of BDSM?'

'I read *BDSM 101*. That's as far as I got.'

At the time, I had felt it rather daring that I should even consider such a read. But I realize that, for her, it'd amount to admitting having read the '80s edition of the *Joys of Lesbian Sex*. A slow blush creeps up my cheeks.

'Well,' she chuckles. 'That's a start.' She pushes me gently back against the pillow.

Her lips against mine, the pressure of her tongue against mine, and my desire swells again as she presses her hips down to fit closer into mine.

'Emi ... just look up a minute,' I hear her say. She stops moving but my heart is beating as erratically as a seaside flag in the wind. She wants me to open my eyes and look into hers.

I open my eyes. 'Mm ...'

'Em, we need to talk.'

'I don't want to talk anymore. Please. Come here. Let me -'

'Shhh,' she says to me, as if to a child. 'Just sit up a minute.'

I know what she wants to talk about. And I flop back on the bed, desire momentarily neutralized. 'Oh no! Look, I've never done it like that. I wouldn't know how.'

'I know. Just come back up here. Sit up, please, Emi. I want to hold you while we talk about this. How aroused are you, Em?' she asks

searching my face.

'Are you kiddin'? You want to know how aroused I am? Totally fucking aroused. As in just about burstin?'

'You feel it in your clit?'

'Yes, I feel it in my clit. Where else would I be feeling it?' I ask impatiently, unnerved at the thought of what she wants us to do.

'OK. Then it won't make any difference. It's like, you won't even notice it.'

'Notice what?' I ask, pretending I don't yet have the answer.

She leans over me to reach for the jeans she had earlier discarded on the carpet.

'Emi ... look what I've got.'

The size and shape of the pack reminds me of the ones that contain surgical gauze. I watch her tear open the envelope with her teeth and pull out the square of latex. Like a handkerchief, it dangles from her fingers. She waves it in front of my eyes. I pluck it from her fingers.

'So, now what do we do with the *damm* thing?' I ask, trying a little pun, trying to sound casually flippant about the whole thing.

She covers my body, thighs on either side of my hips, supporting some of her weight on her elbows and knees. She lowers her face to mine. Her mouth, her tongue have me humming again. She dips her hips on to mine just barely touching my pubic bone, once. Barely touching it. I reach for her. Her hips dip on to mine again, gently nudging my clit. And again. A gentle tug, a pull that for some weird reason makes me think of a horse's gentle and warm muzzle, firmly nuzzling my hand for a lump of sugar. Firm, focused and insistent. She arches her back sucking air through her teeth. Totally ignited, my clitoris burns with that white surge of desire. With the totally indescribable ache of utter desire.

I hold on to her frantically searching for her mouth. Her lips hot and open consume me as I hungrily burrow inside her hips. Her strong legs hold us bound and synchronized. Her hand under my buttocks keeps me tight against her. And she brings on more of the searing bursts of lightning-white desire that sears through me with each of her thrusts.

I force myself to breathe. To breathe, to dissipate at least some particles of that urgent desire. It threatens to burst forth, to overflow. I need to contain it, to luxuriate in it for a while longer, for as long as I could.

I hold on to her like a shipwrecked sailor to a buoy in the middle of the heaving ocean. And we roll on the bed. And she is on her back. She reaches for my face. Dark eyes away from the flickering glow of the candles. Dark eyes, tight and focused inward, almost squinting. Her ribs move under my hand, slowly, rhythmically. She smiles and she runs her hand firmly through my hair, along my neck, over and under my breasts, along my back, over my buttocks. There her hand lingers.

Briefly again, her eyes settle on mine. And she closes her eyes. She closes her eyes shut tight. She brings my face to hers. She offers me her breasts. She raises her hips and offers me her sex.

She left around midnight.



SNAPSHOT – Morgan in the Mirror Skin Truth

Logline

Morgan was never ambivalent about her gender orientation: at the age of four she announced that she intended to grow up to become a man, just like her brother.

Morgan opens the door and, though *he* briefly ponders the weird scripture that still encourages a nice guy to let the woman walk in first, he moves aside for Christen. But sure enough, as she doesn't know where the light is, he has to brush past her to do the 'let there be light'

thing. As he does, she feels his hesitation. Her hand goes to his chest. More a brush than anything else, but he steps from under her hand even before it touches him and flips on the light switch. He could have turned on one of the side lights that cast a soft glow about the living room, but he doesn't.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Morgan looks at her, mouth open to speak but changes his mind. He shrugs and, instead, flips on the jug. Christen feels awkward.

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or Too Light

His invitation to come in had been spoken as an afterthought and he hadn't even suggested what for. A nightcap? A coffee? A fuck? She spots the bathroom across the hallway, goes towards it and locks the door.

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

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

"Oh fuck," he whispers. "Gotta tell her!" Eyes closed, he feels each of the pulsations that fill and harden his clit. He feels them, one stacking hard against the other and the other, so much so that he imagines his balls are aching. Christen's hand is cool on his shaft. Uh huh, he startsles, the moment I feel her hand, it'll rip right through me and I'll blow. "Oh fuck. I'm not prepared."

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

Defiantly, he presses hard enough to ease some of the ache away and, bringing his hand back up to his chest, he feels its uneven contour. Though he can't feel them through the double layer of T-shirt cloth, he knows exactly where the scars are and how they look. Even after nine weeks, the muscle tissues still had a lot of settling to do and, if the ingrown chest hairs that had threatened to turn to boils inside the follicles had finally dried up, the scars, though minimal, were still a very noticeable shade of weird pink.

The Melbourne surgeon had warned him that, if aesthetics rated high on his list, then he could do worse than wait some twelve weeks before showing off his new chest to a prospective lover though, by then, he should have resumed a normal, pain-free life.

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

"Oh fuck!"

He's back in the loop, can't shift her. Can't shift his thoughts. She's too close on the other side of the wall. He imagines undoing the buttons of her shirt, slowly, one by one. He imagines licking the hollow of her throat, and behind her earlobe, and the corners of her lips and her hair. Yes, he imagines kissing her hair, that blond, moonbeam hair of hers. He inhales its fragrance. Peppery. He feels her breast under his hand, soft and full. A nipple stands up firm against his palm.

His tongue melts around hers and she holds him tight against her and— His eyes snap open. The toilet is being flushed. He pushes himself away from the kitchen wall that's kept him propped up, eyes squeezed tight against the white tendrils of electric ache that rip right through him. Again, but this time over the cloth of his trousers, he squeezes his groin with one hand, fingers hard against his clit.

Christen's footfalls place her on the way to the bathroom. Running water. He wants his heart to stop pounding. He wants the ache in his groin to stop throbbing. He wants his fear to stop. The kitchen light is hard on her eyes. Christen's hair shines like pale wheat in the sun. Maddy used to say, 'Blond like a Palomino's mane.' She squints at him in the middle of the kitchenette, all arms and legs, rangy. She heard the kettle reach the boil a moment ago, but Morgan hasn't yet brought out either cup or mug. She feels she should go. She doesn't want to make a

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

His hands, one in the back of her neck, the other strong against her lower back hold her tight. Lips against the soft skin of his neck, she feels again the explosion of desire she had felt the first time, every time, she had kissed Maddy, the first time, every time, her lips had nuzzled the hollow of her throat. Morgan hard against her, she also remembers the smoothness of Maddy's small breasts and she blinks. This is not Maddy. Morgan's not a chick. Christen thinks she already knows that but, thoughts confused by the softness of Morgan's skin, her tongue lingers on his collarbone, on what of his collarbone she can access. She wants to lead him by the hand to make soft, gentle love to him though he would, no doubt, prefer it hard and thumping. She wants to touch his chest, the flat plane of his belly, the hard angles of his hips. She wants to caress the soft part of his thighs and, yes, she wants his shaft, erect, between her breasts. She pushes away from him. Not tonight. She needs to think about this. She's not a teenager anymore. She's not after a fuck and a handshake. She's not even on the prowl. She's doing just fine on her own. Not once, in the past four months, had she even thought of replacing the memory of Maddy's body with another.

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

"Mor ... listen. I need to be going." Brown eyes shiny with desire, he

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

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

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

"No other way but," he answers tightly.

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

"Fuck," she whispers in the stillness of the cabin. "Oh baby ... if that boy's half as hot in bed as he is standing ... wow!"

Quickly, she surveys the street through the tinted windows of the cabin. Quiet, dark, not even a pedestrian walking a dog. Slowly pushing rivets through buttonholes, she undoes her fly. Eyes already closed, she settles more comfortably against the seat.



★★★★★
I had to read some sections more than once because what I was reading was so foreign to me. I have read many a woman's story in my time, but I have never read anything like Morgan's life's journey.
Once I reached the last page, I put the book down. I had a think about what I had just read. I then logged on and, sure enough, there it was – all that I needed to know: women like Morgan do exist, one in some 30,000 and my heart goes out to them for such a life must not be an easy one to live. - Jerry Everton

SNAPSHOT – Far From Maddy

Jo

* The following series of **SNAPSHOTS** do not appear in the same order as in the original text

Jo is fifteen: Jo holds the navy blue uniform skirt tightly against the back of her legs and plops on the rug. She crosses her legs and watches Isabel, her mother. Her eyes are closed. The book she had been reading lies open against *her* chest. Her hands are folded over the spine. From where she is sitting, Jo can see that the book her mother had been reading has a hard cover, a dark blue cloth cover with gold letters, but she can't make out the title from where she is sitting. She would have been able to make out the title printed on the spine under her mother's hands if she had sat at the other end of the sofa, next to her mother's feet, but she hadn't wanted to do that. Jo looks at her mother's thin frame wrapped in a black silk kimono, stretched on the velvet green sofa. She's only asleep, Jo thinks, knowing that if she wasn't really asleep, if she was dead, she'd most likely look the same.

Jo spends a lot of time thinking about death. Hers and her mother's. On the one hand, she knows she's not likely to die any time soon, herself. On the other, she knows her mother *could* die any time. One of the differences that exists between Jo and her mother is that, though there have been times Jo would have liked to die, her mind was blank as to how that might best be achieved. Oh, she knows she can slash her wrists in the bathtub and she knows she can climb on the roof and pretend to fly to the ground but such scenarios just don't feel right for her. She's been thinking that maybe *she* doesn't have the suicide gene in her DNA.

For her mother, it's different. Her mother, Isabel, has a death scenario all ready to be activated. Not a spectacular death that will leave her body dangling in a convenient place. Nothing messy for others to scrape off the walls or off the floor, as would be the case if she were to blow her brains out with her husband's handgun. Much easier on everyone, she

will simply inject herself with all the morphine vials she has secreted for that purpose. The vials aren't a secret to Jo. She has seen them, side by side, in a cigar box, on the floor of Isabel's wardrobe. Nobody else knows about the four vials tucked away in that box behind the fixed panel of the wardrobe, behind the one that holds the big mirror. Not even Jarrah. Only Jo and Jemma Wiggings, the Head Nurse at the oncology ward, know of the vials.

Jo knows because she's the only one who ever goes inside her mother's bedroom. Not her father, whose room is down the hall and who doesn't come home anymore until he thinks Jo and her mother are likely to be asleep. Not Jarrah, who doesn't live at home anymore. Not Jane, the cleaning woman, who only comes once a week. Jo has found the vials because she had been looking for them or, if not precisely for them, she had been looking for a lethal thing that her mother may have stashed away for the purpose of killing herself.

The last time Isabel had been admitted to the hospital, she had a private word with Jemma, the Head Nurse, with whom she went back a long way, way back to the school days at St Joan's when they were both prefects. Later, they connected again during their university days and Jemma had turned up again, two or three decades later, as a regular at the bridge evenings Jo's mother hosted on the third Tuesday of every month.

In the name of their many years of friendship, that woman, whom Jo knew, but not personally, had helped her mother spirit away what vials she chose not to have on the days she felt strong enough to confront her pain unaided, preferring to save these vials for later. For the *greater* need she'd have of them . . . later. No one knew except for Jo because, as is often the case with bright children, Jo hadn't needed to be told to know.

Cross-legged on the rug, Jo looks on as her mother rests, fairly sure she'll look the same after she'll have emptied all the vials in the syringe that lies, away from the vials, in its unopened wrapper tucked inside the shadows of a top drawer. *Four vials today*, Jo thinks, *but there might be more*

vials in the cigar box when the time comes unless, of course, the time comes tonight. Her black hair has fallen into her eyes. She pushes it back away from her cheeks. Another thought crosses her mind. There might be enough of the stuff left inside that syringe. There might just be enough for me, too. She looks at her own thin wrists and how they stick out of the pale blue sleeve of her St Joan's uniform. She pinches her thin calf muscle and rubs her fingertips over a protruding anklebone hidden by a ribbed, white uniform sock. I don't suppose I'd need much to go under. Jo unfolds her coltish legs and stands up, loosening her skirt on the way up. This room needs light. Can't be good for her to spend so much time in the dark.

One hand already poised on the plantation-styled shutter, Jo suspends the motion. "Will she or won't she," she whispers, eyes back to the supine form of her mother. *Will she be upset with me for letting light inside the room or will she smile and say what a wonderful idea I've had?* She shifts her weight on the other foot and considers the most likely outcome.

Jo takes in a big breath and pulls both shutters towards her, folding them back, one at the time, on their hinges. Eyes shut tight against the sudden burst of clear sunlight, she holds on to her breath. Even from behind her eyes shut tight, Jo knows her mother is stirring. She hears the rustle of her silk kimono. "And what might Little Jo be doing with her eyes scrunched up so tightly?"

Jo lets go of her breath and beams a smile. Her mother is not upset with her. She opens her eyes and lopes to her mother's side. When Isabel Brenner calls her daughter by the pet name of Little Jo, this is the clue that she's feeling well. When Isabel Brenner feels well, she is good to her younger daughter. More than her father who is seldom around, more than her older sister who only visits over lunch when she does, Jo has had to learn to gauge what reaction any of her actions are likely to trigger. She has learnt to anticipate a whirlwind of vituperations that may or *may not* eventuate at any given moment.

Isabel smiles. She sits up and pats the space on the sofa near her hip. "Come and sit here. Let me have a good look at you," she says with

motherly tenderness. Jo flops on the sofa next to her mother. Isabel makes a mental note to make an appointment for her daughter at the hairdresser's. "We need to do something drastic with that hair of yours, my little darling. I hadn't realised we had let it go so long. Never mind. James will know how to shape it again into that lovely bobbed cut. Have you been here long?"

"Oh, no," Jo lies energetically. "Actually, I just got here and I was deciding whether or not you were ready to be woken up."

"Well, if my little girl's already home from school it signifies that the best part of the day's already come and gone." Isabel reaches for her daughter's dark head and pats the top of it, gently, slowly. "So I'd say it's high time for me to have a look at what's left of it, huh? Before it all ... fades away. Don't you think?"

"Absolutely." Jo grins a smile that etches two parallel little grooves on either side of her lips. "The light's still bright but the sun's all soft so, if you wanted to, we could walk through the garden."

"Splendid idea," replies Isabel, lovely grey eyes still tender on her daughter's face. She notices Jo's pale cheeks. *That girl needs to go to bed a lot earlier than she does. Too much late-night studying.* "But first, tell me how was your day?"

"Just fine," Jo says. Absent-mindedly, with a fingertip she traces the shimmers of the silk gown stretched over her mother's legs. "Would've come home earlier but Miss Shay asked me to stay back. She thought I should help one of the other girls becau—"

"And what could be so terribly wrong with this other girl that she can't help herself?"

"Oh, it's OK, Mama. I didn't mind," Jo replied a little too quickly. "Anyway, there's really nothing wrong with Chrissie, the girl, except that she's new and she's always hated Maths and she's finding the catching up a bit too much. What with the other—"

"Oh, well, if you don't mind, then ... I don't mind," Isabel smiles into bright, eager grey eyes, eyes that look painfully like her own. Like hers did *before*. Before her life cracked around her like old varnish. Something kicked inside her stomach. "In any case, it's nice to do something for other people, isn't it? Besides, going over what *you* know and being clear enough about it to explain it to someone else is as good

a way as any to review and internalise the ... stuff.”

“That’s exactly what Miss Shay said.”

“Well, there you go then.” Isabel smiles. “And how is the wonderful Miss Shay these days, anyway? It’s been a long time since you’ve - ”

“So, what d’you say, Mama? A walk in the garden and then I can tell you about our netball non-event and you won’t believe what the coach said when ...”

Something kicks again inside Isabel but whatever it is, this time it stems from a murkiness that is different from the weariness she felt only a moment ago, about her faded beauty and hers that had become a hollow existence. This time, the irritation is more immediate. Its source is her daughter’s excited chirps about some teenage irrelevance that is about to make the moment slip away from her.

“So?” Jo stands up, holding out a gallant hand to her mother. “Shall we do the garden rounds, my Lady?”

Isabel ignores her daughter’s hand. “We will, dear. Not just now. In fact, I am feeling a little weary after all this chattering.”

Sensing too late that she must have become careless at some point in the conversation, Jo looks at her mother more carefully. She can tell her mother is already closing up on her.

“Mama,” Jo asks softly. “Would you like me to get you anything? Earl Grey? Rum and raisin ice cream? I stopped for some on the way home.” Grey eyes bright.

Isabel is feeling the familiar heat rise up along the length of her body. The heat is familiar, the anticipated outcome, too, is familiar. The middle part is also familiar, and though that middle part is the part she knows she *wants* to alter the most, she cannot harness the energy that it would require for her to do so.

“No, dear. Maybe you should just leave me alone ... for now. We’ll talk later.” Beads of sweat break on Isabel’s forehead.

Jo rises again. “OK, then. I’ll go—”

Isabel snaps back. “And where would you be off to so quickly then?”

The frown that tightens her grey eyes isn’t lost on her daughter. “Oh, nowhere really,” Jo answers quickly, keeping her tone soft and easy.

“I mean, I thought I’d go up to my room and make a dent in my homework, but I can do that later.” Jo plops back on the sofa near her

mother’s shins.

“Well, my girl, don’t let me stop you from your obligations to the world out there. It certainly needs you more than me.” The voice is cutting and cold and bitchy. Jo knows not to look at her mother, not to look *into* her mother’s eyes, not now. Not anymore tonight. The gentleness that had been there, in the lovely grey eyes, only a moment ago, she knows is gone. The skin around those eyes, she knows, is tight and parched because Isabel’s jaw is clenched, because her face is closed. “After all ... ” the voice rises and the tone becomes too highly pitched, “ ... that fucking world will be *around you* a lot longer than I will.”

Jo flinches. The cigar box and its four vials tucked away in a corner of her mother’s wardrobe flash behind her eyes. She blinks. Her heart thuds inside her chest. She knows her mother has just thrown a cheap shot but even a cheap shot, if it is prophetic, cannot be discarded with a simple shrug. Besides, the F word always hits Jo in the guts when it’s spat out carrying her mother’s voice. It almost physically winds her. It sounds so different *then*, very different from when her school friends say fuck or fucking.

When Isabel spits these words out, they are hard, vicious, truly foul, so Jo absorbs herself with the patterns of the richly coloured rug that spreads across the living room floor, aware, too aware, of her mother’s shins against her thigh. “So, by all means, go! Run to it. Do whatever it is you have to do. Go perform for the fucking world. Go embrace it.” And with a sudden movement, Isabel’s shins connect with her daughter’s side, with the soft part between rib and hipbone.

Jo has anticipated the kick. One knee is already hovering close to the carpet. It doesn’t hurt. Her mother never hurts her. It’s just that sometimes, she moves brusquely, without thinking. It’s because she has been very sick. It’s because she’s still afraid to die. It’s because it’s all been going on for too long and her father is never home. Jo knows all that, just like she knows it’d be useless to hang around to placate her mother. Once the mood has turned, she knows the best she can do is stay out of sight and out of reach. Out of reach of the harsh, painful words, out of reach of any object that can suddenly become airborne, like the hard-cover book still open on the smooth silk of her

mother's kimono.

Such a book hit Jo once and its corner caught her, tearing the skin just above the right eyebrow. It didn't hurt, but Jo had fretted all night, trying to invent a plausible reason to give everyone at school the next day. Even her teachers would be asking her about that cut and bruise. She couldn't have said that she got it playing hockey as all her friends were on the hockey team and they hadn't played a game, not even a practice game that day. In any case, if she had been hit with a hockey stick there, right near the temple, she reasoned, it would've done much more than *graze* the skin. And, well, when it came to netball, she really couldn't think of anything happening on the court that could've left such a mark either, not just there above her eyebrow.

Jo moves away slowly. Over her shoulder, she asks, "So, Mama, is there anything you would like me to bring you?"

"Yes, *there is*," Isabel hisses, "and don't you pretend you don't know what it is." Her voice rings clear. "If Jane's still around, get her to make me a vodka and tonic. If she's not, do it yourself. Didn't think I'd ask for a *glass of milk and bikkies*, did you?" The tone is icy with sarcasm. "And straighten up that posture, will you? Can't stand it when you skulk around all slumped like a beaten dog."

Jane is the woman who comes in to clean the house and do the weekly shopping. She had come in at the time when Isabel's bone cancer had caused her excruciating pain. The cancer had spread from cartilage to bone, but once blasted by an aggressive treatment of chemotherapy and radiation, the tumours that held on to her bones, leech-like, pretty much shrivelled up and died. Once the critical period passed and Isabel no longer truly depended on either the laxative treatment or the vials of morphine to dull the strident pain of tumour pushing against bone and nerve and cartilage, she substituted them for alcohol in the form of vodka and tonics. She "self-medicated" not only the fear of the cancer returning but also the emptiness cultivated by her husband's abandonment, though they still shared the same roof. Jane had remained even as Isabel had moved into remission.

Jo knows that too-precious-to-let-go-Jane has already left because her car was not in the driveway when Jo had come home. Her father wouldn't be home until late and Jarrah, her sister, wouldn't come around until Sunday lunch. So Jo goes into the kitchen where all alcohol is kept so as not to be "so bloody tempting."

In a tall glass, Jo pours three of the little silver measures and tops them with Indian Tonic. Because her mother prefers crushed ice to ice cubes, she retrieves two handfuls of crushed ice from the freezer compartment and watches the cold crystals slide slowly into the liquid.

She sets the glass on a silver tray there for that purpose and, though her mother hasn't asked, Jo adds a little bowl of cashews. Her mother likes cashews and Jo knows that it is best if one eats when one drinks, though she wonders if the eating part still has any relevance when it comes to alcoholics.

* The following ~~Snippet~~ happens much earlier in the novel

"Near the toilet block on the east side of the park," Detective Sergeant Jensen had said. Maddy looked around to get her bearings. *East? Where the fuck is east?* She looked up at the sky. Twenty-metre tall Moreton Bay Fig trees, though not trees of the fig bearing variety, swayed against the grey sky. "East is where the sun rises. A lot of help that is," she grumbled.

Behind a line of trees she spotted a toilet block. Is that the right one? Her heart, already fluttering under her ribs, switched to a mad tattoo. *What if she doesn't want to see me?* Maddy was slowly freaking out. *What's she gonna do when she spots me? What if she runs from me?* Like a bird beating against a glass pane, Maddy's heart would not be restrained. She felt the shimmery release of adrenaline. Cold sweat cooled the palms of her hands. She stopped walking. *Get a grip, girl*, she admonished herself, bottom lip drawn in. She lifted her face to the sky. The grey sky was breaking into sliding patches of blinding white.

A soft breeze that came from the river swayed the long arching
Julz Barron on C.C.'s writing - Never Too Heavy – Never Too Dry
or Too Light

branches of a large poinciana. Its gnarled trunk and exposed thick root system suggested its great age. Some of the trees in New Farm Park are centenarians. That's just about as old as anything in Brisbane, itself 'discovered' in 1832 and settled a few years later as a penal colony. Though, of course, the Aboriginal population had been thriving there and everywhere in the vast continent for at least the past 40,000 years, feeling safe in their understanding of the cosmos and their belief in Mother Nature. Safe in their DreamTime.

"Right. And even now, they're still strangers in their own land," Maddy said to the breeze. *Can't believe this.* Eyes tight, she nibbled the inside of her lip. *Can't believe she's just like, here ... Somewhere,* Maddy thought, struggling to remain in control of her emotions. *And she's been here all along. Her choice all along.* Maddy bit on the lip loop. Eyes squinting in concentration, she scanned the area. *What's done's done. It's the next few minutes I've got to handle right.* The river breeze found her face and ruffled her hair. *Breathe, Mad. Go find the eastern side of the park.*

New Farm Park, with its famed rose garden, had relevance to Maddy, as it did for the great majority of Brisbanites, but only as a lovely inner city park that stretched alongside the river. The park was a place where, over the years, she and friends had gathered for the occasional BBQ or picnic on the lawns, a game of Bocce, or a toss of the Frisbee with someone's borrowed dog. A nice spot to chill with friends out for a lazy Sunday gathering. Never in a million years did she ever foresee the day when this park, or any park, would become the backdrop for a strategic moment in her life.

Maddy approached the toilet block cautiously. DS Jensen had been categorical. 'Let her see you first,' she had said. 'Walk slowly. Don't make her feel cornered.' And Maddy also remembered the policewoman's reminder that *her* needs, Maddy's, were not only subordinate to Jo's, they had to be totally non-existent. So, Maddy made herself breathe again. She became aware of her moist palms and she wiped them on her jeans. *Fuck this,* she thought, annoyed with herself. *I don't do sweat. My hands never sweat.* She rounded her back like a cat, held the position a few seconds, straightened her spine and pushed her shoulders back. *OK. Let's spin this now before I lose it totally.*

Ahead of her, on the other side of a picnic table, a waist-high hedge in a wide horseshoe configuration delineated the brown grass from the adjacent Sydney Street. Heart in her mouth, Maddy sat at a table and scrutinised the area ahead. Followed by a woman whom Maddy immediately assumed was her mother, a little blond girl atop a wobbly pink bicycle pedalled over the patchy grass surface. "Slow down, Lisa," the woman called out. "Don't you come crying to Mummy if you go flying ass over kettle, you hear?"

Maddy watched them as they came more directly into her line of vision. The little girl slowed down and stopped pedalling altogether. Something to her left, close to the bushes and hedge, held her attention but from where she was seated further away at the wooden table, Maddy was too far to see what it was. The little girl, interest visibly pricked, veered left and began pedalling towards the hedge.

Her mother picked up her own pace and strode after her, calling her back. "Lisa, you come back here now. Right now!" Maddy watched the mother as she accelerated her pace. She watched her toss the magazine she had been holding into a large rubbish bin. "I mean it, Lisa. Won't tell you again!" she threatened.

The mother's words, or had it been her tone, seemed to mean something to the little girl. By the way the back wheel of the bicycle kicked out, Maddy guessed that the little girl had applied sudden pressure to the brakes. By the time the woman turned around and resumed walking in the same direction as before, she was holding Lisa's hand firmly in her own and the pink bicycle frame, off the ground, in the other.

As they retraced their steps, Maddy heard the mother's scolding. "You must *never* go near people like that, Lisa. I've already told you about them, haven't I?" She shook the little girl's hand.

"But, Mummy, I just wanted to see—"

"No *buts*, Lisa, you hear me? There's nothing out there for you to see, they're abos."

"But they weren't doing anythin—"

"They're *Aborigines* Lisa. They're a nuisance." The woman looked over

her shoulder. “They don’t work. They don’t wash. They live off the dole and they spend good taxpayers’ money on metho.”

The little girl lifted her head. “Mummy, what’s *meto*?”

“*Metho*, Lisa. Methylated spirits. That’s what Daddy uses to clean things in his workshop.”

The little girl’s eyes widened in alarm, her mother tugged at her hand harder but neither said another word.

“Stupid bitch,” Maddy muttered. *I guess they’ve got their own reasons for living like that. Shit, that woman’s way off base, feeding her daughter all that sad crap.*

With a shrug, she got up from the bench to have a closer look at the Aborigines the little girl had spotted. Just then a tall figure detached itself from the background of bushes and moved in her direction.

Maddy plopped back on the bench. Actually, her legs gave in and her tailbone hit the bench heavily. Jo was coming towards her. Breath dried up inside Maddy’s throat but her heart, like a piston, thudded hard inside her chest. No thoughts formed inside her head. No words formed inside her mouth. For all intents and purposes, Maddy was transfixed by the apparition.

Jo’s long, loose-kneed stride propelled her to the rubbish bin that stood almost half way to the picnic table. She reached inside and retrieved the magazine Lisa’s mother had thrown in only a moment earlier. Jo shook it. Something detached itself from the cover. Jo kicked whatever it was along the ground with the rubber toe of the well-worn, lace-up Converse that Maddy knew so well, but kept her attention fixed on the cover of the magazine. Slowly, head bent and reading, she made her way back from where she had come and Maddy stayed slumped on the bench, hands shaking, a thin spray of cold sweat between her skin and her T-shirt. She exhaled forcefully to chase the light-headedness that was threatening to settle inside her head. *So it’s true. She lives in the park. Just like the cop said.*

Head on her forearms, Maddy closed her eyes. The slow ebbing of the adrenaline left her faint and shaky but it also allowed in its place a wave

of relief that flooded to the tiniest particle of her being. *She’s all right. Not hurt. Not dead.* Her first thought, badly phrased as thoughts often are, had been an automatic thought association of relief that went along the line of *Unhurt. Undead.* Couldn’t let that hang around though. It made Jo like a Zombie.

“Wow,” Maddy exhaled forcefully. “*Yes!* God, thank you,” she added, face raised to the sky, fists clenched tight against her thighs. It’s only then that she realised how far she had managed to push back the fear that Jo might’ve come to serious grief, even if, at the time, way back at the Burleigh Heads police station, DS Jensen had reassured her that no woman was laying unclaimed, either in hospital or in the morgue.

After the rush of adrenaline and the wave of relief came the spike of elation. Hot on its heel: the consternation of finding herself not *allowed* to run after Jo. Not *allowed* to turn her around. Not allowed to hug her tight and say, ‘Where the *fuck* have you been?’ *OK*, Maddy made herself reason logically. *One thing at a time. She’s alive. She’s here. I can see her and she’s looking all right.* She pushed herself off from the picnic table and moved towards the area where the little girl and her mother had seen the Aborigines. Cautiously, because she assumed Jo might be hanging with them, she hugged the line of bushes instead of cutting directly across. And sure enough, some ten steps further in she could clearly see one Aboriginal woman and two men sitting on a patch of dry grass.

Maddy wanted to ask the group if they knew the tall chick who had walked past only a minute earlier but again, she thought that if they *did* know her and they told her someone was asking after her, Jo might freak out and move on. So, head buzzing with what-ifs and why-nots, Maddy flashed to the group a quick wave of acknowledgement, but maxxed-out and totally at a loss as to what to do next, she turned her back to them and walked away. She passed the rubbish bin, the toilet block and the picnic table - each a landmark superseding its equivalent back in the Burleigh Heads picnic area.

“Maddy.” The voice was barely louder than a whisper but it made Julz Barron on C.C.’s writing - Never Too Heavy – Never Too Dry or Too Light

Maddy spin around on the heel of her work boots. As she did, instinctively, she knew to lift her eyes a little higher to meet Jo's face.

And there she had them; Jo's grey eyes peering down to meet hers, grey and shiny from under unevenly cut strands of black hair. Park sounds and street noises stopped.

Much later in the novel

Jo – a solitary figure by the great rose garden. Earphones dangling around her neck, arms at her side, she was undecided. Last night had been rough. Last night, she had had a panic attack and, as she stood motionless in the morning light, her indecision stemmed mostly from *not* wanting to focus on why she had been thinking so hard about Maddy. A succession of cones had left her zonked in a weird way. And so in the morning light she stood by the rose garden, itself looking like the bad side of a bad trip, mangy-brown and headless, except for a couple of thin stalks dubiously crowned by wrinkled roses. She looked at them dully, wondering whether their sad state was because these were way too early for the season and had died before their time or because the season had already come, gone and left them behind.

The thought that Maddy was holding on made her frown. She decided Maddy was just like those roses. She was like the roses in the sense that their season had come and gone and, yet, neither Maddy nor the roses seemed to have cottoned on. Teeth clenched, one by one, Jo's long fingers pulled at another rose's petals. Deliberately, slowly she did it, one parched petal at a time, with the same nasty intent as the little boy who pulls the wings and the legs, one by one, off a grasshopper.

Once the rose's petals lay on the dirt totally separated from its heart, Jo resisted the urge to bruise them under her rubber soles. She resisted the urge to trample them, pricked by the realization that, if Maddy was on *her* mind, it could hardly be Maddy's fault. *If* the white flash of insight gained from last night's bong-blaze had dissipated as rapidly as the morning dew that had gathered around her during her fitful few hours of sleep, *if* thoughts of Maddy were back in her head, it was simply because *she* hadn't yet successfully exorcised the dependency

Maddy represented.

The idea that she, Jo, was actually doing active pain management, pain management for a deep-seated heart wasting disease suited her for the moment.

"Protect the heart. Protect the heart," she repeated to herself. And then, "Maddy, please, leave me alone. Please," she added so softly the word failed to reach her ears. She looked away from the rose garden, jaws clenched on the determination never to allow herself to be made vulnerable. Not by Maddy. Not by anyone else. Not ever.

Jo shoved aside the image of Maddy with her hand. Disbelieving, she stared at the back of her hand where a rose thorn had just scratched her and shook her head. Even *dead*, they still fucking bit.

Tiny beads of blood stood diagonally across the back of her hand, pale under the delicate fork of raised veins that was always vulnerable to knocks and grazes. She frowned at the angry red mark, not because it hurt but because she had already decided that the hardest thing to keep clean were her hands. She knew it was from sitting on the ground so much, from spending so much time around grass, dust and dirt. She looked at her fingernails. The thin crescents of grime were wider under the nails of the index and middle fingers of her right hand than under any other.

A novel that's nice and sexy +
a novel that's thought-provoking =
a Saint-Clair novel! – Jill Mathers



"I admit it: I am a serious fan of Saint-Clair's urban spins on our queer culture. I enjoy very much the variety of the issues she covers under the guise of lesbian romances." – Veronika Clayton, Sydney

SNAPSHOT – Risking-Me

The Kiss

Woh! Woh! Wowwh! Breathe. Deep and slow. What now? Simple. If you can't backspace you gotta process, Emilie. You can't *backspace*. It's done. Can't be undone. Can't delete it. *You just gotta process it.*

Yes, I really need to understand how it went – I mean, how it happened. It's around 5 p.m.

She comes around unexpectedly.

I open the door, she comes in.

We're not even at the hugging stage of our friendship.

So I just smile at her and say, 'Hey.'

She answers, 'Hi, Emilie. Hope I am not disturbing you.'

She's not disturbing me but I'm flustered.

I'm flustered having her here. Unexpectedly here at the door.

Silly thoughts run around my head like, is the house tidy?

Like, is the bathroom tidy? Like, am I tidy enough?

I mean, there I was in my study, minding my own business, not expecting anyone. And here she is.

But I don't tell her that I'm flustered by her unexpected visit.

Instead I say, 'Hey, not a problem. I'm happy to see you.' Because *I am* happy to see her.

So we move into the living room, she drops her bag on an armchair and I ask, 'What can I get you?'

'Coffee is fine,' she answers.

I make two. She starts telling me about the day at work.

She asks me how mine had gone. 'Not bad... on the surface,' I answer, 'these days it's to know for sure because anything can happen, at any time.' She answers that she knows what I mean. So, here we are in the kitchen where she's followed me, with me making coffee and she's leaning against the counter. And we talk like two old friends.

Cool. So far, I don't have a problem with that.

We chat some more while the coffee plunger does its thing with the coffee grounds.

I ask her what brought her to my neighbourhood and she says that

she had some business on *this* side of town, on her way back from somewhere else, not work.

And she thought she'd look up my street on the off chance that she might spot the Jeep. 'If you were in, then I thought we might do this, chat for a while. If you were not busy,' she adds.

She had remembered the street but she says she's lousy with numbers. 'Unless I write numbers down, any numbers, I won't remember,' she explains. She shifts against the kitchen counter and she unravels her thought further. 'I thought the likelihood of more than one red Jeep parked on the street would be slim, and if there happened to be one, like not in a garage, just sitting there, then I'd try my luck.'

And I tell her, 'Lucky you, there was one.'

'Lucky me, indeed,' she confirms with a smile.

And I get the cups and saucers. I pour the coffee.

I ask her how she likes hers because sometimes people have a type of coffee at home but have another preference when they're out.

Like I don't use my cappuccino machine very often.

But I often order one of these frothy coffees when I'm out.

Never after dinner though. And she says, 'Let's keep it simple. Nice and strong will do.'

'Does that mean black?' I ask, and she nods. 'Cool, that's how I have mine too when I'm home.' I lift a cup and saucer to put in her hand – It's from that moment on that I can't figure out what exactly happened. Well, I do know what happened, I mean I was there.

What I can't place is *how* it happened. It's not that it happened quickly at all. Because it didn't ... happen quickly. It happened ... quite slowly, in fact. Quite slowly, I'm sure of that. I *think* I'm sure of that.

The cup full of coffee kind of wobbled on the saucer and she reached out for it to steady it. I guess that would've been her intention. But – next thing I know – my breath catches in my throat like a valve's just closed up.

I'm totally aroused. I can't even open my eyes.

I don't even know my eyes are closed, shut closed.

Not until I try to open them. Her lips are on my lips. Her tongue is warm. Her tongue is firm against my own.

I'm aware of one of her hands against the small of my back.

The other is against my cheek. I'm aware her hips are not pressing against mine. No, not pressing at all.
Just *there* against mine. Sex against sex, but we're totally dressed. Jeans and all. I think the kitchen counter is actually propping me up. I don't know what's happened to the cup and saucer. I don't know what's happened to the cup of coffee I had been holding towards her only a few seconds ago.
Seconds or minutes ago? That's the kind of thing I can't work out. I can't comprehend the waves of desire that has just flooded through me. Her mouth is just so soft, so deliciously soft.
So deliciously tantalising. I mean, this is crazy.
I was not even thinking about her. I was right here, right at home, minding my own business.
She comes around. I make us some coffee.
Next thing I know I'm holding on to her because it feels just so mad, so hot. I know is that I'm totally turned on, totally humming and the ache of desire that's rippling upward from below my navel is just so strong I can't open my eyes.
Like I can't open my eyes into strong sunlight. The difference is the sunlight is out there somewhere. The blinding, searing ache is inside me, throbbing from inside my clit and reaching so far beyond it that my heart's pounding against my ribs.
I need to move back, I need to see. I need to think. I need all that but I don't want her to stop kissing me.
I don't want her to stop holding me.
She senses me shift in her embrace and she lets her tongue play forward, more forward ... on my lips. And then she slides her mouth to the underside of my lip, to my neck below my ear. Her breath flutters and teases the whorl of my ear.
I breathe in. I breathe in, but the ache in my groin presses me more tightly against her. I reach for her face. With my two hands, I reach for her face to bring her mouth back against mine.
Hungry. I can't explain that hunger.
I'm only aware of her tongue. I'm aware, too, of her sex behind the knobbly seams of her jeans.
I'm very much aware of my clit too, throbbing against the knobbly

seams of *my* jeans.
I can't open my eyes. And behind my closed eyes I imagine an apple. Not an apple. No, not really an apple. More like a crunchy, fresh-juicy, juicy bite. No, not an apple.
A mango.
The beautiful flesh of a deliciously ripe mango.
The soft texture, the light flavour and the sweetness of its juice.
Oh, the voluptuous business of burrowing inside the firm flesh of that most sensual of fruits.
And her lips move away from mine to hover, to flutter. I'm aware of my kiss-swollen lips.
They, too, throb when released from the pressure of her own. Even with my eyes closed, I sense her lips.
And I feel them, and I feel the tip of her tongue at the corner of my mouth. Less overpoweringly sensual now.
Her mouth is in a gentle mood, now.
A gently teasing mood. It has feasted.
It can be playful now that the urgent craving's been sated.
I open my eyes. I finally open my eyes.
So close to her, I discern only the splash of white hair near her right temple.
Hands flat against her shoulders, I push her back gently.
She is warm.
She feels tightly wound under my hands. I don't want her to go away. I just want to look at her. I need to know the colour of her eyes.
Her eyes are always dark at night, even across candlelight.
But I know they're not brown. I just know they're not.
The low late afternoon sun is still shining in through the kitchen window.
'Alex,' I whisper, hoarsely.
Her face, her eyes are hidden against my cheek. 'Let me look at you.'
I touch the top of the bristles of her hair. Softly. Soft. Soft bristles, not spiky at all. Soft and thick, salt and pepper except for the clump above her temple.
'Mmm ... Emilie, I –'
'What colour are your eyes?'

'My eyes?' Her words are muffled.
 Again I push gently against her shoulders to make her look up.
 'Hey, what colour? What shade of green?'
 Slowly, reluctantly it seems, she pulls away and straightens up.
 She isn't much taller than I am. I would've said she was.
 Her sex is still resting against mine.
 Mine's still pulsating. Pulsing with a heartbeat of its own.
 Warm against the seam of my jeans.
 But her face is far enough removed now and I can see her eyes.
 Her eyes are soft. Soft and not intense.
 For once her eyes are just green. Dark green, soft green.
 'Ah. I can see them, now. I knew they weren't brown at all,' I say softly,
 bringing her back closer against me.
 She inhales deeply. I feel her intake of breath.
 As her shoulders rise, as the air travels downward towards her stomach,
 I feel her stomach move under her belt.
 She exhales slowly. 'My passport says they're hazel.'
 'Your passport's correct. Hazel they are.' Then, I remember something.
 'Should we have that coffee now?' I ask, feeling more assured now
 that my heartbeat's beginning to settle. Now that the heat in my loins
 is manageable.
 She sighs. Again, she leans forward. But not for a kiss. She wraps
 her arms around me and she hugs me. She doesn't say anything. She
 doesn't whisper anything, she just hugs me.
 And she unwraps her arms. And she inhales deeply like I do. I have to
 breathe in deeply when I've been shallow breathing for too long.
 I breathe in deeply when my lungs tell me they need more. I need
 more.
 I need more air. I need more of her. And in my head I begin to panic.
 Why the panic? Kissing Alex is not going to make me pregnant.
 'Emilie, it's OK,' she says. 'Yes, let's have that coffee, shall we?'
 She runs her fingers through the silver-white bristles of her hair.
 Why does she say, It's OK? I haven't said anything. I haven't moved
 much at all. I'm still standing there. I breathe. I smile. I run a hand
 through my own hair to push it back. I let my hand return to her
 shoulder.

I let my hand move slowly across the skin of her collarbone. I can
 see the hollow in the space between her neck and the open collar of
 her shirt. Luminous jonquil yellow is the colour of that shirt. Bright,
 striking colours suit her. They suit her skin tone. A matt, tanned skin.
 She has closed her eyes. Her collarbone rises and falls. My hand drops
 lightly to the curve of her breast, down to her stomach. And my hand
 stops there. It has to stop there because of the thickness of her belt.
 The thickness of her belt doesn't allow my hand to travel beyond. And
 I breathe in. It's good that she should have worn a belt today. A thick,
 saddle stitched, leather belt.

"Risking-me" was the first romance novel in which I embedded a societal issue. Its real focus is domestic violence in our midst. In the days I wrote it, in too many lesbian communities, the topic of abusive partners was kept conveniently loose and intangible through a Don't Ask/Don't Tell code of silence. It is now estimated that the instances of DV within same-sex relationships match fairly closely the frequency and intensity experienced by the heterosexual segment of the population. Why would it be any different? As lesbians, gays or straights, we are all products of the 'greater western world society' and its stressors. Besides, there is commonality when it comes to our parents and the emotional baggage that was passed on to them, before they passed it on to us." **C.C. Saint-Clair**



REAL STUFF ★★★★★ **March 22 2008**
Reviewer: My2 (USA) – see all my reviews
Risking-me is really about 2 of the 3 things I most worry about: one is my fear of repeating abusive patterns as I've known them for most of my life. The other is of putting my emotional self at risk. So, I can say that I found this novel very relevant. Besides, there's a sex scene in there that's set up from the beginning, but ... if you're patient, you'll get the full effect as a delicious reward. Very sexy – Myra
[review on Amazon.com]

C.C. Saint-Clair's Bio

Born of French parents in Casablanca, C.C. 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.

She is as passionate about the sensuality of her writing as she is about exposing the readers of her brand of romance to the emotionally harsh landscape that she

believes is the real life backdrop against which many women have to struggle, before they come into their own.

Neither airbrushed nor high-profile, Saint-Clair says, though admittedly attractive in their own idiosyncratic way, her 'women' are not typical romance heroines in that they do not need rescuing. They rescue themselves but not from any physical danger.

"There are no 'prestige' targets, no sinister political plots to evade, no serial killers to contain. My characters' quest is emotional fulfilment within their ordinary lives, not only as teachers, police women, veterinary surgeons and mechanics, but also as disengaged Gen - Xers. And the irony is that, within this simplicity, lies the complexity of life and love's role in defining it."

Since her return from a challenging trek inside the jungles of Sarawak, Saint-Clair has written the screenplay adaptations of *Far From Maddy* and its stand-alone sequel, *Morgan in the Mirror*, her seventh novel.

