

when you're a boy

other boys check you out



Ian MacNeill | Brendan J Lindsay | Dallas Angguish
Ash Rehn | Shaun O'Dowd | Daniel G Taylor | Scott Clark
Jarred Connors | Robert Tait - *Chapter 1 - Perfect Gay Marriage*

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CONTENT WARNING This pdf contains explicit literary references to homosexual activities including, but not limited to, sex, lip-synching and home decorating.

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editorial

As Michael Stipe (R.E.M.) once pointed out, a bit of obscurity is good in song lyrics as it leaves room for people to create their own meaning. It also probably explains why we keep stealing lines from iconic songs to use as titles. An ongoing unexpected pleasure in putting these collections together is the way in which individual submissions find an aspect to the title's implied theme that we hadn't even considered. Certainly that's true this time with When You're A Boy. Subtitled Other boys check you out, the lines are taken from Bowie's highly ironic paean to adolescent masculinity, Boys Keep Swinging. We were expecting tales of connection from the thoroughly modern, utilising Grindr and Facebook, through to more evergreen methods of 'hooking up', such as dinner parties and friends of friends and, oldest of all, loitering with intent in bars, clubs or the great outdoors.

What we received instead was a diverse mix from autobiographical tales of growing up in Oz to what ageing Gen X-ers probably still call 'explorations of constructions of masculinity'. The angst of adolescence is revisited in several stories which bounce off each other in terms of their widely differing approaches to surprisingly similar themes. Grindr, however, did appear in several stories demonstrating that the more things change, the more they remain the same. (For those, like one of our editorial readers, not across the latest technology, these stories quite neatly show how it all works.) A number of writers dealt (in widely different locations) with the dual existence many of us have; one identity and mode for dealing with our biological family and another, quite different, for the gay world and our family of choice. In all, When

You're a Boy, represents the very best of current Oz gay lit in 2011.

But wait. There's more. This pdf also contains Chapter One of our new monthly series, [Perfect Gay Marriage](#) by Robert Tait. Those who've read his earlier novels (a chapter from [Trashtown](#) is available on this site) will be familiar with Robert's style, a unique blend of erotic and social satire within a fast paced adventure. Described by one reader as 'Dickens with dick', by another as 'more lube than soap in the opera genre', Perfect Gay Marriage exposes not only glittering Sydney's grubby underbelly, but also its sleazy backbottom. Each month a new chapter will be added to the site – chapter Two is already available. We hope you laugh as much as we did at this sharp satire on contemporary gay life in Australia and come back each month for another slice.

As with all our collections, we remain indebted to the authors who have made their work available for free downloading as well as to those whose stories missed out this time. As our site statistics (still continue to) grow so does the number of submissions and, as someone who's collected a few too many over the years, I hate writing rejection slips. There's no easy way to say 'not this time'. And this time there were a lot of near misses, making this collection, perhaps our best yet.

Happy reading.

Gary Dunne & Laurin McKinnon

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cherry blossom bicycle crazy

Dallas Angguish

“**Y**ou’re serious? You’ve forgotten where you live?”

“Not exactly... I don’t normally come this way... I think I’m lost.”

I was lying. It was nineteen eighty-three and I was fifteen. I was always lying. Initially, I lied to protect myself. There were things I needed to hide. Things to do with muscle and skin and tanned lads dripping with water after noon day swims in lazy brown creeks. Things to do with shaggy hair damp with sweat after bare-chested football in an empty paddock. Things to do with country youths dressed in nothing but dirt-crusted jeans, the zipper broken; eyes coyly cast down to bare feet caked with red soil flecked with grass seeds. Things to do with the beauty in the line of a young man’s jaw or in the crease at the corner of his sun-touched lips as they curl in the process of a shy smile.

Soon, I developed a real taste for lying. It became an art for me. In a way, lying was very liberating. It freed me from the banality of my, oh so ordinary, life. By that spring, I was so wrapped up in lies that I’d forgotten myself, literally. I had no idea who I really was. I was either lying about who I was, or was in thrall to some daydream in which I was

someone altogether different. The lies and imaginings were like the bricks and mortar of new selves; they remade me so that from moment to moment, in the private space of my own thought at least, I could be anyone or anything at all. Anyone but the boy I was, the boy I despised. Forget little Lord Fauntleroy, I was little Lord *Flauntleroy*; the little Lord of Forgetting. I was Dreamboy, forever lost in anywhere-but-here-land.

The upside of all my experience at subterfuge and daydreams was that, a few years later, *voilà*, I was a writer. The downside: in forgetting myself I'd also forgotten that most people can pick a liar a mile away. People have a nose for insincerity, much as dogs are able to sniff out fear.

"You're jokin'? You don't know your way home?"

I was walking home after school. That day, unlike any of the hundreds of other days I'd walked home from school, I had a companion. I wasn't well liked. I occupied the bottom rung of the pecking order. A lonely and dangerous place.

My companion's name was Peter. He had dark hair and dark eyes. Reflections of his Polish genes. He came to my attention on my first day at my all-boys Catholic school. I noticed his arms, how strong and solid they seemed, and the openness of his smile. After that we merely passed each other in hallways. He didn't notice me. My blonde hair and grey eyes didn't appear as even the slightest blip on his radar. I was used to this. This is the curse of the outsider. Outsiders become like phantoms, acquire an opaqueness of body. When you're an outsider, people look right through you.

That year, due to some strange voodoo working on Peter because of puberty, I had slipped out of invisibility. When we passed each other in the corridor he *saw* me. Then there were covert hallway smiles, and the odd hello, fired at me quickly and only in empty classrooms. There was a sentence here and there, and a single sweet whisper of my name in a silent library aisle, behind the religion section where we couldn't be seen. "Bax," he'd whispered from the other side of the shelves, peering through a gap between a black leather edition of the poems of Saint John of the Cross and a coffee stained anthology of essays about the ecstasy of Saint Teresa. When I turned to look, he winked and vanished.

It was all a mystery to me. I wasn't aware that I had become ensnared in the boys' school mojo. That we had entered what the Japanese call the 'cherry blossom years': youth. The time in-between childhood and manhood in which there is a magic that makes many things possible. Things that are impossible as an adult. Any friendship between Peter and I had to occupy this moment. It couldn't survive at any other time. Somehow he knew this. Some clock inside him had begun to chime, and the chime had brought me into his sights.

Although I knew by then that I was different, that my heart was often inclined towards members of my own sex, I hadn't developed the sort of powerful desire that other boys my age displayed. I watched the crazy hormonal schoolyard dance going on around me with considerable detachment.

Guys came up to me all the time; shifting uneasily from one foot to another, their eyes all the while on the lookout for possible witnesses. They were furtive and expectant. I didn't have a clue what they wanted. I was so used to their ridicule that I took these approaches as some kind of attack. They seemed to want me to do something, to make the first move in a game for which I had yet to learn the rules.

With hindsight, I realized that the simple fact that they had approached me—with hands in sweaty pockets rather than in fists—was for them the first move in an amateur coquetry. The utterance of an awkward greeting (*How you goin'?*) instead of accusations (*Poofter! Queer! Freak!*) or threats (*I'm gonna kill you!*) was meant to indicate their amorous intentions.

I remained ignorant of these intentions and, because of my inaction, they were forced to make further advances (*You wanna go for a smoke behind the tennis shed?*). I always politely refused. I didn't smoke; and the tennis shed smelt of sweaty feet and the mouldy wool of long abandoned jumpers.

Teenage desire, intense and unrestrained, had turned over the rules of the schoolyard universe. This upheaval made me an object of interest rather than hate. I didn't know this at the time. I thought they were making fun of me somehow, or setting me up for some cruel practical joke, or worse.

These tentative attempts at seduction took a lot of courage. My

schoolmates all knew the following disturbing facts about me: I was poor; my grandmother was in and out of the local mental hospital; my mother wore very short mini-skirts and had an auburn beehive; my older sister's boyfriend was an aborigine; my father was a violent drunk. To put it in the local idiom, we were low-class scumbags, whores, 'abo-lovers' and freaks. Worse than all of these things, however, was the fact that I was the school sissy. All forms of communication with me were therefore strictly taboo. By approaching me, my classmates risked their reputations, their privileged positions in the school's social order. All the more frustrating then when I didn't respond; when I turned my grey eyes to the ground and went silent with confusion and fear.

I was terrified of everything and everybody. Sissies had never lived long in Toowoomba, my hometown. As far as I knew, I was the only one left alive. There had been another boy once, at another school. A fat boy they called 'fat girl Earl'. Earl was found hung from the broad limb of a camphor laurel in Queen's Park, his face as black as the richly composted soil of Toowoomba's famous flower gardens. Officially, it was a suicide, but my classmates whispered that he'd been lynched for being a fag. There were other whispers about another sissy, a thin albino boy with violet eyes who lived before I was born. He was known as 'Anzac Jack'. At the age of eight, he was poisoned by his own mother. She put Ratsak in an Anzac cookie. After feeding it to him, she went to church and left him to die a lonely and agonizingly slow death; curled up in a corner of the kitchen, his fingernails scratching a pattern of misery into the floorboards. His mother was a Presbyterian. She spoke in tongues.

Then, when I was in primary school, I heard about another boy. His surname was Prissett. They called him 'Prissy Pig'. He was killed in a pig-shooting accident; shot in the back of the head by his father. But people whispered that it wasn't an accident at all. They said that Prissy was better off dead—he was effeminate and too pretty to be a boy—and quietly applauded his dad.

Toowoomba was haunted by the ghosts of sissies. They were everywhere. The poisoned albino haunted the kitchen of an old house on Campbell Street. Later residents claimed that they sometimes heard the sound of his fingernails scratching into the floorboards. The ghost of the lynched boy was said to hover in the tree where he died, making

Queen's Park a no-go zone after dark. People told stories about a certain bend of Flagstone Creek, where the sound of a little boy crying could be heard amongst the gurgling of the creek as it tumbled over pebble-stone cascades; the awful sound of a boy distraught at the betrayal of his own father.

Even if the stories weren't true, they coloured my perception of Toowoomba and its inhabitants. Is it any wonder then that I froze the minute another boy approached me. I was sure that sooner or later one of them would beat me to death. But Peter was different. I wasn't afraid of him. There were other feelings, feelings I couldn't speak about.

Besides, Peter didn't seem to mind that I was a sissy, he didn't even object to my propensity for adjectives. I had once made the mistake of using the word 'cute' in front of my classmates, referring to a stray dog that had wandered onto the school grounds, and one of the boys, Matty McNab had accused,

"You use words that other boys don't use, don't you Bax...." The implication being that I used words that boys *shouldn't* use.

"Leave him alone," Peter had said, with a firmness and finality that surprised everyone, especially me. He had defended me, in front of practically the whole class. Even still, it didn't register with me that this had been a kind of declaration. Not of love, teenage boys do not really know love, especially not for sissies, but of affection certainly. When, emboldened by my protector, I begged for clarification as to which words were not appropriate for boys, Matty McNab replied,

"Words like *cute* and *nice*, words like *pretty* and *adorable*, words like that, poofter words." For once, I was lost for words. Nary a syllable came to mind; not a noun, not a verb, not even an adjective.

By and by, Peter apparently decided—after his protective declaration, a string of ardent glances and awkward encounters failed to elicit the desired response—that a more direct approach was required. We were in the same home room. He knew that on 'pool days' I dawdled in the classroom so that I didn't have to change in front of everyone else. He saw it as an act of girlish innocence. In fact it was an act of self-loathing.

As usual, I was left alone as the other boys headed for the pool. I'd already noted Peter's absence. I'd assumed he must be home sick. I'd just begun to change when he came in. He made no pretence of being

legitimately late. He put his things down on a seat in front of me and looked me straight in the eye. I felt punctured by his gaze, opened up like a flower; a fragile, white cherry blossom.

He kicked off his shoes, took off his socks. His eyes remained firmly fixed on mine. He un-tucked his shirt, unbuttoned it, took it off and stood there, pale skin glowing in the quiet room. There was a longer than normal pause before he undid his belt, slid it out. My eyes turned to the floorboards, all geisha girl shy. I wanted to look but felt that I shouldn't. I was too polite. I was too afraid. He said,

"Hey..." and I looked up. "Don't look away." So I didn't. He undid the button on his trousers, dragged the zipper down. The sound echoed against the walls.

I saw a flash of sky blue underwear. I felt dizzy with vertigo, as if looking down from a lofty place. At the same time, I felt drowsy. It was the same sensation I got when lying on the ground watching the easy progression of clouds across the sky. Peter took off his trousers. Not a trace of shyness. Again, he paused, unnaturally long. He was so beautiful that I wanted to crawl up against his skin and die; to put my head on his chest and close my eyes and open my mouth and just cease to exist.

He detected my thoughts and he smiled. He knew his body held magic, power. I was beginning to know it as well. He turned into the weak sunlight coming in from the window and, with delicious artifice, stretched and sighed. He wanted me to note every detail of his body. So I did.

He was perfect, an ideal balance of strength and openness, of naiveté and desire. Cherry blossom. But his body was different to mine. His had a manliness mine had not yet acquired. The contrast of dark eyes and milky skin was nothing like my effeminate paleness. His was a virile luminosity, ivory under the moon. He occupied his body with full confidence. I wore mine as if it were an ill-fitting costume, or a hand me down coat.

He put his thumbs under the waistband of his blue underwear, teased me.

Then the teacher, Brother Sawyer, walked in. He wanted to know what was keeping us. Peter didn't react, just turned around all easy and unashamed and said,

"Sorry sir, I got here late."

I was consumed by fear. Fear of my heart being caught out in the open; like a pheasant, flushed out of the brush. I dreaded the bullet, the fall to the ground. The ignominy of being fetched by some slobbering hound and carried slack-necked to the feet of the hunter. I fumbled with my stuff, tried to get myself together. The teacher knew I was always last in the pool.

“Couldn’t expect you to be ready on time, could I, Bax?” he said. I fiddled with my towel, was aware that Peter had peeled off his underwear and put on his swimmers. In a way, I was glad that I had been spared that sight. I’d seen what desire did to the other guys in my class. It turned them into mindless lunatics. I had no intention of losing control like that. I feared that it was in my nature to be completely swept away, to completely lose it; to lose my mind over some boy. I was on the edge all the time. What with the fear and the secret I was trying to keep, part of me was always precariously balanced on the precipice of hysteria. And, after all, my grandmother was a proper lunatic, a certified lunatic who had been locked away. Crazy was in my blood. So I hung on tight to my little scrap of sanity.

Peter left the room with the teacher. I changed my clothes and scanned my thoughts. I was thinking all kinds of things. Most of all I was trying to work out what it all meant, why Peter had done what he did. He had awoken a strong yearning in me, but I could not believe that he felt *that* for *me*. I couldn’t imagine that anyone would. Why would they?

I was a late bloomer. My mother said so. I was smaller than everyone else in my class, and far too blonde. I had long wavy hair. I got in trouble for it. It was too long and too wavy. Everyone teased that I looked like a girl. A reform school kid told me that I’d be a hit behind bars.

He said, “You’re what they call a ‘punk’, a ‘bitch’.” I didn’t understand.

All I knew was that when I looked in the mirror, I didn’t like what I saw. I hadn’t figured out that in the world of boys’ schools and prisons I had a valuable commodity; it was possible to imagine me as a girl. In all-male environments the guys liked that. It helped them to indulge their homoerotic impulses without questioning their masculinity.

I couldn’t blame them; I liked to imagine myself as a girl as well. I was Vivien Leigh in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. I was Katharine Hepburn

in *The Philadelphia Story*. I was Simone Simon in *Cat People*. Better still, I was Bette Davis in *Jezebel*. I was Bette Davis in *Hush Hush Sweet Charlotte*. I was Bette Davis in anything at all really, even *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*. I was gone on Bette.

I spent days and weeks immersed in daydreams in which I was the leading lady of varied and complex scenarios. If I tried hard enough, I could imagine away the heavy presence of the rolling golden hills of the Darling Downs and the Ghost Gum forest that seemed to creep up the range at the edge of town like strange mummies draped in bark. I could ignore the scent of golden wattle and weeping whitewood and even forget the red volcanic soil sitting fecund and heavy beneath my feet. With all that forgotten, the whole town of Toowoomba would vanish; and I would be someone else, somewhere else.

That afternoon, I headed for the school gate with the same sense of relief that I always felt. Survived another day. I'd almost forgotten about Peter's strange behaviour. It seems unlikely that I could have so easily forgotten such a thing. But, I lived in the land of fantasy and fabrication. I was Dreamboy, forever escaping into daydreams, into inner territories; into eddies of joyful forgetting. What went on in linear time rarely penetrated the veil of fancy that enveloped me like a haze of perfumed smoke. At morning tea, I was a Geisha girl, broken-hearted over the betrayal of some young Samurai. At lunchtime, I was a barefoot boy from the Louisiana Delta, ala Tom Sawyer; walking hand-in-hand with my very own Huckleberry boyfriend by the banks of a dawn-time Mississippi. By mid-afternoon, I'd gone all Western and I was, in my mind's eye, a black garbed cowgirl ala *Johnny Guitar* having a shoot out with butch ol' Joan Crawford.

Nevertheless, a flash of sky blue occasionally crossed my mind. Like the sun coming out of the clouds for a while. Peter's underpants voodoo was formidable. Then, there he was, astride his bike, waiting at the gate. I passed him with my eyes cast down. He watched me as I walked down the street, other kids flying by on bikes and fast feet, a teaming horde. For a while I presumed that he hadn't followed, felt relieved. It was about a fifteen minute walk home. Five minutes in, I heard the slow whir of spokes. The sound broke into my imaginings, and my mind was filled with it.

I didn't want to turn around. I prayed for the whir to go away. It didn't. He coasted behind me. I turned and glanced at him. He smiled and then went down the gutter onto the street to ride alongside me. His dark eyes tried to catch mine.

"You goin' home?" He had that tremor in his voice the other guys often had; a quake of tenuous desire. With the word 'home', I saw my unmade bed, its tangled sheets. The vision made me uneasy. I didn't say anything. He waited in the silence for some offering: a word, a smile. I gave the smile. It encouraged him. "You mind if I tag along?"

I was of two minds. To be of two minds is unpleasant. To want something as much as you don't. It's a strange experience, like being torn open, scissored neatly along the spine and made into two incomplete beings. It's a kind of birth, and a kind of death at the same time. I wanted to be close to him but I didn't want him to be close to me. I wanted to see his body in its complete nakedness. On the other hand, I didn't want him to see me naked—stripped of my protective covering—because I hated my body. I didn't say anything, mute with indecision. He tagged along.

"Blue is your favourite colour, isn't it?" There was mischief in his voice. It made him more real, less pure hormone.

"Might be."

"I reckon if it wasn't already it sure as hell is after this mornin'." He laughed, spun the pedals of his bike. I heard this as the whir of the barrel of a pistol. A Colt 45, all shiny and silver. I almost saw it, in its black leather holster, at Peter's hip, slung above those blue jocks. Of late my erotic daydreams had all been Westerns. I'm talking *Red River*. I'm talking Montgomery Clift. Need I say more?

I ask, "How'd you know my favourite colour is blue?"

"Every time I see you out of school you're wearin' a blue t-shirt."

"That doesn't necessarily mean I like blue... maybe it means I only have the one shirt."

"Yeah, maybe, but like I said... after this mornin'..." Each time he mentioned what happened that morning, that moment in the quiet classroom, I clammed up. Its power over me was still too strong. I was still too confused by it. We passed half a dozen houses before either of us spoke again. "It looks good on you." he said, out of nowhere. I didn't know what he meant.

"What does?"

"Blue. It looks good on you."

"Thanks... it looks pretty good on you too." We both smiled. I blushed. I think he did as well, a little. He grew braver, teased me.

"I thought you'd die when Brother Sawyer came in this mornin'! The look on your face! Classic!"

"I nearly did die! I thought I was gonna have a heart attack!"

"So, I make your heart go funny?" His voice had reacquired its tremor. I realized that this was the sound of uncertainty, an oscillation in the psyche that could only be detected in the voice. He was thinking *Is this really going to happen? Do I really want this to happen?* I figured he was like me, of two minds about it, but for different reasons.

I stopped and faced him. He stopped, one foot on the gutter to hold him up, the other spinning the pedal. I was assaulted by the song of the pistol, the vision of the leather holster, the blue jocks. I tried to ignore it.

"What do you want?"

"Waddya mean?"

"You know what I mean. Why'd you do what you did this morning? Why are you following me home?" I waited for an answer. He spun the pedal, a cowboy cocking his pistol.

"Come on, like you don't know."

"I really don't. I have no idea."

"Don't bullshit me... you can't keep your eyes off me." The silver barrel glinted in my eye.

"Are you saying I started this?"

"Shit yeah. I aint the one who's a..." He hesitated, suspected he might be making a mistake, ruining his chances.

"A what?" I demanded.

"A fag..." There it was. My secret revealed. I heard a shot. I sensed the bullet pierce me, right between the eyes. I waited for the panting of the hound. It didn't come. I started walking. Zombie sissy walking. Phantom blood flowed down my nose onto my lips and chin. I saw the smoking gun. It clouded my vision, made me speechless.

We came to a crucial juncture on the trip home. I deliberately took the wrong turn. "You alright?" he asked, feigning concern. I could smell the insincerity. If he were to be honest he'd say *Look, are you still gonna*

get me off? Because that's all he wanted. It's not a lot, but I wasn't in a giving mood. Not that day. I had blood in my mouth.

I started to tell him an elaborate story. It was fifty percent hot air, fifty percent truth.

"My dad sure is nuts. He's a hunter, my dad, and a really good shot. He collects rifles too. He wouldn't think twice about shooting someone who'd ticked him off. I wouldn't be surprised if he had already. A real killer my dad. He's loco, shot a couple of our dogs just because he's too cheap to feed 'em." This last is true. First he killed China, our blue cattle dog, then he shot Shivers, our German Shepherd, and then Tammy, our Labrador.

I imbedded the story with subliminal images of Peter's head mounted on a trophy wall, alongside the head of a feral pig, all tusk and tufts of wiry hair. I could tell that it worked, that the story was having a negative effect on his libido.

He said, "Where the hell do you live anyway?" We'd been going up and down streets in an aimless fashion for about ten minutes.

I told him I wasn't sure where I was. I was avoiding taking him home. What desire I'd had was far outweighed by the thought of being treated as a fetish object; the prop in a strange erotic ritual, a prop whose purpose was merely to be used and certainly not to speak or feel. To be less than a whore but just barely more than a damp hanky. To be a sissy, a queer, a fag. Who would want that?

Apart from that, I was ashamed of our house. It was a dump; only slightly better than a shack. Its paint had long since peeled away, leaving the exposed weatherboards cracked and grey. Some of the windows were broken, sealed up with thick plastic and tape. The grass had grown well past my knees, and the hedge at the side had grown taller than the roof. The local kids called it the witch's house, because of my grandmother, who was paranoid schizophrenic and thought that all children were ghosts. Everybody in town knew about her and so must Peter. Perhaps that's why he was showing interest in me? He wanted to see the freak show for himself.

"Whaddya mean you don't know where you are?" he asked.

"Just that. I'm not sure where I am."

"You're not serious? You've forgotten where you live?"

"Not exactly. I don't normally come this way... I think I'm lost."

"You're jokin'? You don't know your way home?"

He could tell that I was fibbing. I could see his mind working. He was thinking I was too much work. He was thinking maybe the stories were true, maybe my grandmother really was a witch and my father a total psycho. I saw on his face the moment when my strangeness outweighed his desire. Like an unnatural shadow passing overhead.

He said, "Oh, come on Bax..." in a kind of pleading way. I almost reneged, almost turned around and led him home. But I didn't. I just shrugged and stood there, mute. His face went from open to closed in a slow second.

"Jesus! Your grandma isn't the only one who's nuts! Ya fuckin' fag!"

He pushed hard on his pedals and rode off. His face was a map of sad disappointment and confusion. I felt a little regret, but it was worth it to feel the subtle shift of power. For the first time, I understood something about the boys' school mojo. After all, I hadn't pedalled after Peter. It was Peter who'd pursued me. I had something he wanted. No one had ever wanted me for anything before. That made me feel good. That made me feel strong.

Peter disappeared around the corner, glancing back just once, full of mournful yearning, a yearning only I could satisfy. I turned my back on him.

I blew smoke from *my* pistol and sensed the weightless fall of cherry blossom petals. I caught the sweet fragrance as they crushed under my feet; and I rejoiced that I had survived another day.

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Dallas Angguish has been published in a number of journals including TEXT, Lodestar Quarterly, Retort Magazine, Bukker Tillibul and Polari Journal. His work has also appeared in a number of anthologies such as Bend, Don't Shatter (2004), and Dumped (2000 and US edition 2002). On occasion, Angguish also writes erotica which has been published in anthologies such as Boys In Heat (2008). Dallas may be contacted via Facebook: www.facebook.com/Dallas.Angguish

'a tisket, a tasket'

Brendan J Lindsay

Fantasy

I did drugs. I did men. I did women. I journeyed. I remembered. I forgot. I let go. I clung on for dear life. I fought. I gave in. I fucked. I was fucked.

I was a prissy little fag in Grade Twelve, angry at the world. *Fuck you.* I would dance and I would cry and I would assimilate knowledge till the deep hours of the morning, not rising till my mother stirred me. I was a drummer. I was a dancer. I was a debater, I was an actor. I was a writer.

Tell Me About Your Planet

Me and Liane sat in her room and she gave me a joint. Her room was a mess. We danced as we smoked. The girl looked sad, so the Rastafarian looked at her and told her not to worry. That everything would be fine. Peace. She looked up at him and the Rastafarian realised she wasn't a girl, defenceless and naïve – she was an angel. The light came from her. She took me off in her rocket and we danced on the moon and looked down on the world and laughed. I smiled. I awoke and the sun was

warm, the air was moist, but I shivered. My legs were bare and I could see how skinny they were.

I went home, I slept. My phone rang, it was Alex, my manager at Big W. He wanted me to work. I said yes. I thought of the money. At work I set up a display of cordless phones, restocked the cds, dvds, videos, computer games, and had a ten minute break in there somewhere. He knew I was stoned, I knew I was stoned, he didn't fire me. He was in love with me.

"See ya Alex," I said.

"See ya mate, thanks for coming in."

I got home, I ate, I slept, I dreamt I was in a cage at the bottom of the river, I could see my grandmother at the surface. She told me not to worry, she knew a secret, next thing we switched, I'm standing on the river bank. And she's in the cage at the bottom. She can't be saved, I can't reach her, she's dead. Even though I can see her moving.

I woke up, I thought of Alex, I thought of his thick uncircumcised dick, I thought of sucking it, I thought of fucking it, I thought of holding it, I thought of licking it till it was hard, till it spurted, till it was flaccid and clean and soft and hanging limply over my hand. I lay in bed spent, eyes closed, thinking of him kissing me.

I got up, had a shower, got dressed, went to Liane's, We called our dealer. He was out. We called a friend, he was out but gave us his dealer's name, we called him, go to his house nearby. He lived under his grandmother's house, a hobbling Greek Lady who has pictures of the original Madonna everywhere. We went into his room, he gave us pot, we gave him money, he produced a bong and invited us to stay and have a sesh, we did. Then left, eyes red, waving at his grandmother.

I danced up ahead on the way back to Liane's, I thought she was behind me until I looked back and she was gone. Where she was supposed to be was a little girl holding her handbag tight between her arm and side, hand shielding her lowered face.

"Hello, do I know you?" I asked.

Silence.

"Well I'm..."

I didn't know who I was, it wasn't me anymore. I watch someone control my body. He hunches his back, widens his eyes, smiles – no,

grins, yes grins – and speaks with a hick in his high-pitched voice.

“Tell me about your planet.”

“I beg your pardon?” the girl asks.

“Tell me about your planet.”

“Umm, I don’t know.”

The Martian stops, startled, he stares at the girl’s handbag.

“Ohhhh! You have a Paradoxian handbag, may I put something in it?”

“I guess so.”

The Martian turns around to where he parked his rocket, he picks it up and motions the girl to open her handbag. She opens it and he lowers the rocket in, until the entire, one hundred meters of the rocket is in the handbag.

“It’s scary,” the girl says.

“What’s scary?”

“My planet, it’s scary.”

“Why, what’s there to be scared of?”

“Everything.” With that the Martian looks around, twitching, afraid.

My phone rings. It’s Alex.

“Hello,” the Martian says.

He wants to know if I can work. The Martian says yes and hangs up.

“What’s your name?” the girl asks.

“Martin, Martin the Martian. What’s yours?”

“Racheal.”

I leave Racheal, go home, shower and go to work. At work I take down old shelving and put up new shelving, the whole time thinking of sucking Alex’s cock.

Faggot

It was Monday. I went to school. School was shit. I pretended I was evil. I was evil. In maths I chanted hatred at the teacher in my head. The teacher probably hated me back. He was a bigot. I kept chanting.

School was over. I caught a bus to work. Ryan was there. He called me a faggot...

He called me a faggot...

I didn’t know what to do.

I ignored it. I forgot. I went home. I smoked a cone. I smoked another.

I rolled a joint and smoked it in the bath. I discovered my bath was an ocean. I swam for a mile. There was nothing but I was warm. I dived under. I swam two miles down. I screamed. I screamed. When I surfaced I was standing in my bathroom, staring myself in the mirror. I was a faggot. I didn't care. I was lying. I didn't care.

Repeat

It was Tuesday. I didn't go to school. I went to the park near Liane's. She was there. She was smoking from her pipe. She saw me.

"Hey man," she said.

"Yeah, hey man," she said in a higher pitch voice out of the corner of her mouth.

"Hey," I replied, eyeing her.

She brought the pipe to her mouth. Lit the lighter, and inhaled.

"Anyhoo, I'm Neomaxee Endweebie," that voice from the corner of her mouth said again.

"What didya say?"

"I didn't say anything," Liane answered.

"Who's Neomaxee Endweebie?"

She looked at me stunned.

"My pipe man, Neomaxee Endweebie is what I called my pipe, how did you know?"

"Cause it was talking to me."

"Whatever, are you stoned?"

"No."

"What did it say?"

"Not much."

She brought the pipe to her mouth again, lit the lighter, and inhaled.

The corner of her mouth opened again.

"Oh my god Liane, you're such a fucking dyke, slobbering all over me, why don't you just lick out my cone piece."

I smiled. This was fucking funny.

I pulled my pipe out. Liane pulled out a small tin container with pre chopped pot. I packed my pipe, put it to my mouth, lit it, and inhaled. Lit it and inhaled. Lit it and inhaled.

Packed my pipe, put it to my mouth, lit it, and inhaled. Lit it and

inhaled. Lit it and inhaled.

Packed my pipe, put it to my mouth, lit it, and inhaled. Lit it and inhaled. Lit it and inhaled.

I left my pipe sitting in my mouth. The corner of my mouth was twitching.

"Neomaxee Endweebie is that you? It's me Peter Piper."

We didn't notice, but we suspected our pipes were talking to each other.

"Peter, fancy seeing you here," Neomaxee Endweebie replied.

"I know it's been ever so long."

"How have you been?"

"Well this fag's been sucking me off every night."

"I know what you mean, this chick's basically raping me every night."

"Dirty freaks."

I pulled my pipe out. I threw it in my bag. Liane laughed. It wasn't funny. Not anymore.

"Come on, let's get out of here," I said. We went. We ate a lot of food. We ate a lot more. We brought a lot of food and ate it in the movies. I don't remember the movie. I remember laughing. I remember crying. I remember screaming. I remember crawling around the cinema floors. I remember things crawling on me. I remember Liane screaming, telling me to come out of the darkness, to find her, to fucken find her. I remember an usher waking us up and telling us to leave. We left.

Darkness

We went to school on Wednesday. It was alright. Double drama, double dance, double sport, which we didn't do, we watched, we watched the boys. We thought they were hot. I wanted to touch them. I wanted to touch their cocks. I wanted them to touch mine. They never would. They were straight. I went to the bathroom. I touched myself.

I caught the bus to work. Out on the street, Ryan passed by in a car with a bunch of his friends. "Fag," they shouted, "Ya fuckin' fudge packer."

I was evil. I didn't care what they thought. I was evil. I thought how I would kill them. How I would suck their blood. How I was a demon. How they would fear me. I thought of how black and dark I was inside.

How black and dark I was inside.

Thursday's school finished at one. I went to McDonalds had lunch. I caught the bus to work. It was boring. I was bored. I thought about getting high. When I got home I got high. I lay in my bed in my room. The lights were off. Colours were swirling around me. Bodies were forming in them. Large masculine bodies. They were touching me. They were stroking me. It was nice. I liked it. Maybe I was dreaming. It didn't matter. It felt good. Even the goo felt good as it came rushing from my body. Maybe I was dreaming.

Forgotten Gods

The Rastafarian was used to the angel. It did not surprise him. Her visits were welcome. She was welcome. He liked her. He liked the light that came from her. She was pretty. She was unspoiled. She lifted the bong to her mouth, lit it, and inhaled. Her head tilted up and the smoke released, prayers unforming towards the heavens. Suddenly she looked directly at the Rastafarian, terrified.

Her light became a fire. She was engulfed. She was burning. She was screaming. The earth was shaking. The Rastafarian didn't say peace. The Rastafarian had left me. I was alone. I was watching my friend being engulfed by eternal fires. Endless. Endless. It Ended and she was more beautiful than before.

She gleamed. She didn't have wings. Her skin was made of Earth, covered in moss and trees. Her body was salty. Her hair was the heavens. Her voice was eternal.

"I am the Goddess of Shoes."

Shoes, the heavenly term for weed. She wasn't the angel. She had evolved. I bowed my head to her in reverence.

"At your service my lady," I said, and I was myself.

She took my face in her hands and said, "Worry no more my child, I love you. No one will hurt you. You are truly beautiful."

I was crying. The light was too much. It flooded from her hands into my body. The world she was made of was flooding into to me. I was full. I was running out of room to store the euphoria.

Suddenly Liane collapsed. She was spent. She slept. I sat there crying watching her. I felt beautiful. I was beautiful.

Discoveries

I came back from the party. A friend had dropped me home. I was half drunk. I was tired. I was brushing my teeth. My mum came into the bathroom and watched me.

"I cleaned your room," she said.

I kept brushing my teeth.

Work is for Work, It is not therapy

At work on Saturday I got to choose the music. I played redundant pop. I danced to it as I cleaned. I served some customers when they came to the counter. They wanted this pop.

"What's playing?" they'd ask. I'd show them. Sometimes they'd buy it. Sometimes they wouldn't. I danced either way.

Sara brought some returns up from the front of the store.

"Notice something?" she asked.

"Nup," I replied while dancing.

"Ryan isn't here."

I stopped dancing.

"Alex sent him home this morning," she said.

"Why?"

"He was bludging as usual."

I don't know why I told her.

"He called me a faggot."

"When?"

"Lots of times. He pretends to hit on me as a joke when I work at night with him. When he and his friends drove past me he screamed out fag at me. He's a fuckin' dickhead."

Sara stood there looking at me. She didn't know what to say. My eyes were moist. I wasn't crying. I yawned. A tear squeezed out then. I grabbed some cds. I went to the cd wall and filled them.

At lunch I saw Tessa. I told her about Ryan too. It felt like I was just a head. My body wasn't involved. I had shut it off. NO! NO! I screamed at it, You cannot feel, and it listened. I laughed as I told Tessa. Ryan was an idiot. I couldn't stop telling people, my body couldn't stop my head. My head was on a power trip.

Home is for Mothers who don't love you

I went home. Mum visited me in my room. It was neat. She looked around. She didn't like neatness. I didn't like neatness.

"It was Liane wasn't it?" she asked.

I didn't say anything.

"You can't see her anymore. Ok?"

Silence.

She shut the bedroom door as she left.

I called Liane on my mobile. When everyone was asleep I snuck out and walked to the end of my street. Liane picked me up. We drove to the cinema car park. We smoked up in her car. The smoke slowly melted and became liquid which turned to vapour and mixed with the smoke we blew out our mouths. It was a fog. The fog was thick. We held hands and walked through the fog.

I turned to Liane. Liane wasn't there.

"Rachael?" I asked.

She clutched her hand bag in one hand and gripped my hand tight in the other. She was a little girl. She was lost in this fog. She was scared.

I thought of my mother.

I spasmed. I collapsed. I threw a fit. I motioned for her to pass me the joint. I lay on the back seat of the car and smoked it all. The air was still thick but I tried hard to squeeze light from my body. I closed my eyes. I focused. I tried really hard to find the light. I didn't think of my mother.

I slowly floated up and turned to the little girl. I lied to her.

"I ... am ... the ... God ... of ... Shoes," I said in the softest yet most powerful voice I could.

Liane was back. She was looking at me. She unwound a window. The fog was lifting.

She told me to shut up. She said I wasn't the god of shoes. She knew. She knew I was only pretending. Only pretending to pretend.

Reality

Someone told Alex about Ryan. I'd told so many people I wouldn't know who. He came up to me, Alex, and asked me about it. I was half in the

cabinet changing the music that was playing. I didn't say anything. He asked again. I didn't say anything. He reached over. He took hold of my shoulders. Gently. He turned me to face him. He could see the tears in my eyes. He told me it was ok. Ryan got fired.

* * *

I was a prissy little fag in Grade Twelve, angry at myself. *Fuck you.* I would dance and I would cry and I would assimilate knowledge till the deep hours of the morning, not rising till my mother stirred me. I was a drummer. I was a dancer. I was a debater, I was an actor. I was a writer and I wrote this to fill the time.

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Brendan J Lindsay doesn't believe in the real world but unfortunately it believes in him. Literary escapism has proved an adequate therapy. Find more of his work at: iqueerinspace.blogspot.com

living legend

Ash Rehn

Along George Street the lunchtime throng of bodies heaves in all directions. Anonymous bodies alive and hungry, distracting Benny as he punches in his guests' arrival confirmation.

Handover keycards.

"Room 907. Ninth floor."

Raise eyebrows.

"Anything else you need for your stay? Maps? Tours? No?"

Smile.

"Well, have a pleasant stay."

Keep smiling until they wander away.

Benny catches a glimpse of himself in the glass wall. Smoke and mirrors. There hasn't been a pause between guests all morning. How does he do it? It's acting, baby, pure acting. Puppet face. Give him a job, he talks. Pull the strings, he smiles. Sure it isn't Disneyland but it's still acting. Back in those days, when the 19 year old acrobat playing Peter Pan sprained an ankle, Benny played a convincing substitute, despite being ten years older than the boy star. Appearances can be deceptive. Another twenty years on and it's lipodystrophy, not age, that limits his roles now.

During the afternoon lull he knocks off, puts his suit in for dry-cleaning and heads to the gym. Back and shoulders day. While pumping out his sets he spies a young stud staring at him. Boys appear positively frightened by what he likes to call his 'buff but ravaged' look. Credit goes not only to the training but a chorus line of combination therapies. Oh stare and idolise if you must. Yes, I am a living legend.

And so after the hard work comes the reward. The usual trolls are here in the steam room, three or four he sees regularly but never on the gym floor. A pretty young guy with a skinny waist and huge thighs stands in the corner. He can't be more than nineteen or twenty. Holds himself like a dancer, probably in town for one of the shows. At the beginning of his career. When the door stays closed long enough, the steam builds up and thickens. The boy won't sit down. He's worried about catching something from the benches or perhaps he just wants the attention.

Sometimes things happen here. Does the kid want action? The prospect settles in the mist, trolls holding fast.

The young guy and Benny exchange glances. It's a performance, a ritual Benny is happy to watch but that is all. He steps out of the steam and is in the showers only moments before the kid joins him. Conscious of his costume of popping veins and jowly features, Benny wonders about the younger man's fascination. But curiosity is not enough to grant a private audience. When Benny's bus arrives the kid is too slow and is left looking vainly up and down the street as the bus pulls away.

At home he turns on the screen and opens a cask of merlot. The comforting slash of alcohol in a glass is like an epilogue to his day. No one to explain to, no survival stories to tell. Tonight he plans an evening with friends. And for the cost of a 42-inch flat screen and a monthly subscription to vintage porn, here they are. Mark Wrangler (Jimmy), Brad Hunter (Felix) and so many others; his friends. And some of them were his friends. He partied with them and fucked with them. Never did porn himself of course. Good Catholic boy.

He rolls himself a smoke and loosens his jeans. Gone, every single one of them. He is the last to remain.

A living legend.

The boy from the steam-room doesn't know this life and he never will. He is of a time when the only struggles are acts of rebellion against rubber. These guys were just having fun, making history.

The kids of today can have their bareback, their fantasies of breaking taboos or whatever it is they think they are doing. It's all been done before for real.

Benny pours himself another glass. He imagines this body, this testament to his life, being gradually pickled and preserved in the fruity elixir he sips in the company of his friends. He wishes they were all still here but, as they are not, this is the next best thing.

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Ash Rehn is an online counsellor as well as a writer and has been working professionally with gay men since 1989. His writing and his therapeutic work both explore the everyday acts of rebellion that help us through life. Ash has an MA in Creative Writing from UTS and his stories have won a number of awards.

Find more of his work at: <http://ashrehn.com>



love and revenge

Shaun O'Dowd

Hugh and Owen surveyed the talent loitering around the tables on the sun deck.

Owen pointed. "How about him?"

Hugh looked and wrinkled his nose. "Too young. And what's with every boy under 25 wearing bad hair these days?"

Owen chuckled and said, "Listen to you, Grandpa."

He pointed again. "What about him?"

"Too girly."

"What about that butch one there."

"Which one?"

"The tough-looking guy with the shaved head, bristle on his jaw and the tatt on his neck."

Hugh looked. "I've already been with him."

Owen's eyes widened. "Huh?"

"I've been with him. He's not as tough as he looks."

"Why's that?"

"I took him home a few weeks ago. I thought I'd made the score of the century, picking up the most macho man here. In my room, we started

getting hot and heavy. Then he undressed and I got a fright. Under his khaki shirt and jeans, he was wearing a lacey nightgown."

Owen chuckled. "Really? What'd you do?"

"Well, I didn't do anything because he started sucking me off. Then he asked me to fuck him. I didn't know if I could go through with it. But I said yes, anyway."

"So did you?"

"No. He kind of gasped and then announced he had cum."

"What!"

"That was it. He said thanks and left."

Owen grinned and shook his head. "Mate, only you could end up in a situation like that."

Hugh shrugged. "He really wasn't for me."

Wonder Woman sashayed out of the club doorway and trotted across the deck to them. A thumping David Bowie track emanated from the club in her wake.

"Nanna, Owen, you having a nice afternoon?"

"Puki!" Hugh blurted. "That's an outrageous outfit."

"Thank you, Nanna. You think Lynda Carter would approve?"

"Absolutely. Is it for the Sunday session?"

"Yes, Nanna. Did you see this?"

Puki picked up a brochure from the table and read it out: "Glitter presents Sunday Rewind. Boogie to your favourite retro hits from the 1970s and 80s. Special performances by your exotic Asian princess, Mee Fak Toi, and guests'."

Puki looked at Hugh. "Nanna. That's me! I get put in brochures now."

"Well done," Hugh said and smiled.

Puki's drag persona Fak Toi was growing in popularity. She was now a regular performer at many pubs and clubs around the South East, including this one. Owen and Hugh had first come into Glitter to watch one of Fak Toi's shows and they were now regulars on a Sunday afternoon. Glitter had a wide, rooftop sun deck overlooking Cavill Mall and the beach, which today swarmed with a smorgasbord of sexy surfers.

Puki moved on to the next table to say hello. Owen started tapping

on his ePhone.

"What are you looking at?" Hugh asked.

"Grindr," Owen said.

"Oh, the app that tells you where all the boys are?"

"Yeah. It lists their profiles and how far away they are from you."

"Are there many around?"

"Yep. They're all within 50 feet."

"What?"

"Everyone's here this afternoon."

"Oh."

Hugh looked around the deck. Guys and gals lounged at the tables. Hugh noticed two guys seated at either end of the deck tapping on ePhones. Suddenly, they both looked up and glanced around the deck. Then they spotted each other, smiled and waved.

"There's only one missing," Owen said, still staring at the ePhone.

"Who's that?"

"The stupid blonde one."

Owen's former boyfriend.

"Conrad? Why haven't you gotten rid of him on that thing?"

"Because I want to know if he's coming in," Owen said. "He's a fool. He's forgotten to block me."

Hugh shrugged and sipped his vodka. Owen and Conrad's spilt had been less than amicable. When they had been together, Conrad had become obsessed with Puki (in his male form) and he'd slept with other guys behind Owen's back.

Wonder Woman sauntered past and said, "Nanna, Owen, I'm getting changed for the show. It starts in 10 if you want to watch."

"Thanks, Puki," Hugh said.

"Hmm, Conrad's come in," Owen murmured, staring at the ePhone.

They moved into the club, ordered fresh drinks and settled at the bar to wait for the show. Hugh looked around for Conrad but couldn't see him.

Owen handed his ePhone to Hugh. "This is interesting. Both Puki and Conrad are nearby."

Hugh looked at the display of profiles and, for a few seconds, couldn't understand what Owen was getting at. Then he saw pictures

of Puki and Conrad under their respective profile names, as well as how far away they were. They were both exactly 33 feet away.

"Oh, I see," Hugh said.

Owen took back the phone. "That's about as far away as the dressing room, don't you think?"

"Do you think they're seeing each other?"

Owen remained silent.

"Does it matter?" Hugh asked. "I thought you were over Conrad even before you split up. You suspected he was sleeping around. And you used to complain about him sponging off you."

"That doesn't mean I didn't love him," Owen said.

Hugh didn't know how to respond to that.

"Didn't you ever love a ratbag?" Owen asked him.

"Several."

"Who was the worst?"

Hugh sighed as an unwelcome memory suddenly emerged from the mental vault in which he had firmly shut it away.

"The worst one was the one I loved the most. In fact, he was my first love. Does anyone ever get over their first love when it ends badly? We met at college. He was from a cattle property out Roma way. I loved him so much I could have married him."

"What happened?"

Hugh sighed again. "When we finished college, he deserted me. He decided to return out west and play the dutiful cattleman. He bought a property, married a heifer and raised steers."

"Um, oh..."

"And now," boomed a voice, "make welcome to the stage your exotic Asian princess, Mee Fak Toi, and her special guest, Urma Waters-Broke!"

The opening chords of a ballad began and two drag queens stepped onto the dance floor. Mee Fak Toi had ditched the Wonder Woman outfit and, together with her drag partner, they were both a vision of the 1980s.

Their blow-waved, puffed up hair made Duran Duran's bouffants look limp; their shiny jackets contained shoulder pads wide enough to accommodate incoming Boeing 747s; and their baggy, pastel-coloured skirts, fluorescent leg-warmers and over-sized heels reminded people in the audience who remembered that era why they had secretly buried

their 80s outfits in unmarked graves at midnight.

With elegant hand movements, Mee Fak Toi mouthed the opening words of the ballad. Hugh realised they were performing the original Elaine Paige and Barbara Dickson version of 'I know him so well'.

He watched as Fak Toi and Urma Waters-Broke launched into an elaborate and graceful series of arm movements and steps to the beautiful but sad song of unrequited love. They caught the spirit of the ballad. A hypnotised spell settled over the crowd in the club.

As the song reached a crescendo, the two drag queens stood back-to-back. They spread their arms wide as the haunting vocals faded into space like a lost dream. A second of stunned silence hung in the club and then the crowd roared.

Fak Toi and Urma bowed and waved. Hugh watched as Fak Toi headed to the dressing room. Urma trotted off the dance floor and strutted over to where Hugh and Owen were standing at the bar.

"Hey guys," she said, smiling at Hugh.

"Hi Urma," Hugh said. "There is only one way to describe that performance. It was fucking fantastic."

"Thanks."

Hugh noticed, not for the first time, that Urma was very trim and quite athletically built. Owen murmured hello to Urma but he was distracted again by his iPhone.

"Wanna drink?" Urma asked Hugh.

"No, it's okay."

"It won't cost me. I have a drink card."

Hugh smiled. "Thanks, but it's okay."

Urma always offered Hugh drinks. He usually only accepted when he was three-quarters smashed. In fact, he'd had a few good sessions with Urma. She was great value. She'd even helped him into a taxi when he was legless one evening.

"How's the new job going?" she asked him.

"Oh okay," Hugh said. "I never thought I'd end up writing copy for advertisements."

"For SunCity FM?"

"Yes, the coolest and most funky radio station on the coast - apparently."

"What kind of ads do you write?"

"Well, they're mostly for plastic surgeons, tanning salons, beauty parlours, Hummer party tours, nightclubs and Pentecostal churches. I wrote one for Doctor Nolan's new surgery, The Boutique Body Shop, the other day. My favourite line was: 'Need a new nose? Doctor Nolan knows what to do'."

Urma smiled.

"You doing another show this arvo?" Hugh asked.

"Nup. That's it for Puki and me. Esme Dicken is doing the evening session."

"Oh. So you're going to get changed?"

"Nah, I think I'll hang out like this," Urma said and stared intensely at Hugh.

Hugh knew Urma could act as girly as any drag queen but, around him, she always seemed more like a boy in a frock. He realised he'd never seen Urma as a boy. When she and Puki finished their shows, Urma stayed in her outfit long after Puki had changed.

Staring at his ePhone, Owen said, "He hasn't moved for the last 15 minutes."

Hugh glanced at him. "You mean Conrad? You think he's still in the dressing room?"

"Maybe," Owen said and looked at Urma.

"You mean the little blonde one?" Urma said. "Yeah, he's in there. He hangs around Puki and drools over him like a dog with a bone. But he's only after one bone – Puki's."

"I thought so," Owen said.

The tough guy who liked wearing nightgowns strode over to the bar and ordered a drink, glancing Hugh's way. Hugh had already said hello to him that afternoon and had quickly extricated himself. He wasn't interested in round two.

Urma said hello, though: "Hi Bruce."

The tough guy looked Urma up and down and merely grunted. Then he walked off without another sound.

"That was a bit rude," Hugh said.

"Yeah," Urma said and frowned. "Bruce is a bastard."

"Huh? Why's that?"

"Didn't you know? I went out with him for two years, when we lived in Maryborough. He dumped me after we moved here."

"What!"

"I thought you knew," Urma said, uncertainty on her face. "He went home with you one night."

"No, I didn't know. He didn't say anything. Oh shit, Urma. Did I take him home in front of you? I can't remember. I'm sorry if I did."

Urma suddenly smiled. "Yeah, you did. But that's okay."

"He had a nightgown under his clothes."

"That's Bruce. He had a collection. I used to like it when he - "

"Hello, everyone."

Puki had appeared beside them as a boy. "Nanna, you liked the show?"

"Great, as usual," Hugh said.

"Glad you liked it."

Puki turned to Owen and a strange twinkle appeared in his eye. "Owen, I taking Conrad home now."

"Go for it," Owen said.

"Okay, then," Puki said and kissed Hugh on the cheek. "Bye Nanna, bye everyone."

Hugh wondered what the hell was going on. Puki walked across the dance floor and opened the dressing room door. A meek-looking Conrad came out and, doggedly avoiding eye-contact with Owen, followed Puki across the room to the main entrance. They left the club together.

Hugh stared at Owen, who shot Hugh a tight smile and said, "Gotta take a slash."

As he strode off, Urma asked Hugh, "What was that about?"

"I've got no idea. Owen used to go out with Conrad. But now I think Conrad is going out with Puki. I think Owen still feels something for him – Conrad, I mean."

"Poor Owen," Urma said. "When I went out with Bruce, I thought it'd last forever."

"Why'd it end?"

"He got the shits with me for doing drag."

"That's a bit rich coming from someone who wears nightgowns."

Urma shrugged. "Some men like guys who cross-dress, some don't."

"I guess so. It doesn't do anything for me."

Urma's eyes widened. She stared at Hugh, open-mouthed, as though he'd suddenly turned into Nana Mouskouri.

"Say that again," she said.

"What – that cross-dressing doesn't turn me on?"

"Oh, fuck!"

"What's up?" Hugh said, looking worriedly at her.

"I thought you liked cross-dressers."

"No. Why did you think that?"

"Because you took Bruce home. I thought you knew he was a cross-dresser. I thought you liked guys who cross-dressed."

"Um, no."

Urma wore an appalled look. "That's why I stay in drag whenever you're here. I thought you liked it. I thought you might...", she looked away, "...like me."

Hugh's jawbone would have clattered on the floor had it reached that far.

After a few seconds he recovered himself. "I do like you. You're great company. But I've never seen you as a boy. I'd prefer to go out with a boy."

Urma stared at Hugh for long moments. "Then I'll go and get changed."

She whisked off.

Hugh sculled the rest of his drink and ordered another.

Owen reappeared at the bar.

"So what happened before?" Hugh asked him. "Is Puki going out with Conrad?"

"No."

"Then why'd they leave together?"

Owen fixed Hugh with a serious stare. "What does Puki do for a living?"

"Well, he does drag, works part time in a wholesale mulch distribution warehouse and sleeps with men for money."

Hugh thought for a few moments. "Is Conrad paying Puki for sex?"

"No. Conrad can't afford him."

Hugh stared at Owen, totally confused.

"A few weeks ago, an aunt of mine died." Owen said. "She left me a lot of money. I invested most of it but I opened up a special fund for the rest."

A wicked grin creased his face. "Puki is getting payments from that fund to sleep with Conrad. Conrad doesn't know. He thinks he's in some kind of relationship with Puki. When the money dries up, Puki will tell Conrad what the deal was – that I was funding Puki to sleep with him. If Conrad wants to continue chewing on Puki's bone, he'll have to pay up."

Hugh's jaw tried to clatter on the floor again. "Oh my God! That is pure evil. Puki agreed to this?"

"Yeah. When Conrad was going out with me, Puki rejected his advances. Conrad got pissed off and spread around false rumours that Puki had diseases. Puki lost business because of that."

Owen's face turned foul and he forcefully said, "That little cunt is going to get what he deserves."

"Geez," Hugh said. "Revenge is a dish best served hot."

Someone tapped him on the shoulder.

Hugh turned around and was confronted by the most spunky-looking boy he'd ever seen. Athletically toned, taught and trim, the boy had bedroom-green eyes, golden-brown hair and a sexy smile that, had it been placed on a road-side billboard, would've stopped traffic.

Hugh was speechless in the face of this vision.

Then he blurted, "Urma!"

"Yeah," the boy said. "But it's really Kai."

"Oh my God, you're beautiful," Hugh said. "You should come out as a boy more often. You could get any boy you want in this club. When you're a boy, other boys check you out."

"I don't want any boy," Kai said, smiling happily. "I only ever wanted you to check me out." Then his expression grew shy. "Would you like to come home with me?"

Hugh glanced at Owen, who grinned and said, "Go on. I'll see you later."

There was really only one answer.

The two of them caught a cab over to Kai's place, which turned out

to be a small one-bedroom apartment on Chevron Island.

In the bedroom, Kai started removing Hugh's clothes. Strangely, when Hugh tried to reciprocate, Kai smiled and shook his head.

Soon, Hugh was standing completely naked before him. Kai kissed him sensuously on the lips, on the cheeks; then on his neck and along his collarbone. One hand stroked Hugh's buttocks while the other reached along his inner thigh. Hugh could feel himself trembling. It was strangely erotic to stand naked while being ravished by this hot, fully-clothed boy.

Kai raised his head and flashed Hugh his traffic-stopping smile.

"There's something you could do for me that would make this perfect."

"What's that?"

Kai strode over to the wardrobe and pulled out an item of clothing.

He wore a coy expression as he held it up. "Can you put this on?"

Hugh was silent for a second and then he said, "Sure, why the hell not?"

It was a lacey nightgown.

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Shaun O'Dowd has a background in media but is currently 'in between jobs', which has given him an excuse to spend more time on the beach and concentrate on his other much-loved career as a professional bar-stool sitter. Shaun has also written two novels which, despite the growing pile of rejection letters, he confidently expects to be released in paperback any year now.

no one reads profiles

Daniel G Taylor

Casual sex was simple – you meet, you do your thing, you leave – but the kid had deliciously rewritten the rules Jason screwed by.

The night they'd met, Jason had come across town for a hook-up off *Manhunt*. He'd crossed the lawn of the least gay-looking house in the street – no fence, car wrecks come to rest across the yard, and a barking pit bull straining at its chain – and decided to do one last check to make sure he was in the right place. He pulled out his iPhone and signed into *Grindr*. His hook-up had the same display pic here as on his *Manhunt* profile and *Grindr* reported he was seventeen metres away. Close enough.

Light shone through the security door, but the mesh hid everything in the house. With no bell or wooden frame, Jason tapped on the metal door.

A shadow filled the light.

Even through the barrier, Jason could feel himself being checked over, and almost felt he should rotate, offering a full view, like a pig on a rotisserie.

"Nah, mate. Can't do it," the voice declared.

"OK–"

“Nah, mate. Just can’t,” the voice repeated, as if expecting an argument.

Jason turned and walked away. He wasn’t annoyed at missing out on sex, that’s a risk of random hook-ups. But his throat was dry, and he’d travelled two hours to get here, which meant it would be another two hours until he had a drink. Jerk could’ve at least offered me a glass of water.

He trudged back to the bus stop and slumped into the aluminium seat. He plugged his earbuds in to listen to some tunes, then decided to see who was on *Grindr*.

A display pic had him drooling even though it was only a face, and not one of the many headless, topless torsos. The kid’s profile said he was twenty-one, but that was all it said about him.

Jason typed: *Hi. How’s it going?*

Gud. U?

Bit harsh. Supposed to hook up, got rejected at the door.

The bus pulled up then. Jason pocketed his phone and by the time he was settled and took it out again, about two minutes had passed.

The spunky kid had left a string of messages:

Same thing happened to me.

It sux.

I had to wait 1hr in the cold for a train.

Don’t know what ur after. I know what ur profile says but no one reads those.

You’ve gone quiet!!!!

If u want fun I’m keen and I wont reject u ;-)

Lost interest?

Jason started typing his reply before he saw that his new friend was offline. Damn.

He quickly typed his number and: *Meeting up with you would make the trip over here worth it :)*

He pressed Send.

A few days later, Jason headed to the bus stop to meet Anthony for the first time.

But first he’d had to arrange for his brother and sister-in-law to take

care of Papà. He didn't mention to his homophobic brother why he wanted the place to himself and his brother hadn't asked, knowing that he probably wouldn't like the answer. The reason his brother was keen enough to help for a night is that everyone knew how difficult Papà was to handle, and a night of occasional sin was better than finding someone else to ferry Papà to his endless medical appointments and then put up with his tirades about how this or that wouldn't be done that way in the old country.

Most likely, Jason knew, this was another hook-up that was going to end up a waste of time. The kid was too cute, too interested in Jason, for that desire to be real.

When he got to the stop, Anthony was already there – his bus had arrived ten minutes early. The boy looked cuter than his display pic: raven-hair, black rings circling doe eyes, a vampiric complexion and his frame carried no wasted flesh. The kid could have gone to an exclusive club for the hottest twinks and had his pick.

"Thanks for coming," Jason said. He promised himself not to say anything embarrassingly stupid. "How was the trip?"

"Yeah, OK."

The kid wasn't making it easy to carry on a conversation, maybe he'd lost interest... "Now that you've seen me, do you still want to come back with me?" Stupid! Stupid!

"Yeah. I said I would."

At the house, Jason led Anthony – deliberately unassumingly – to the lounge. "I'm happy if you just want to talk."

"I've told you. You're fine." Anthony said. "Now kiss me."

Their next three hours of sex and making out was dotted with small talk. As soon as the kid got naked, his shyness vanished. Jason learned that he worked as a checkout chick at Safeway, and although his store had changed its name to 'Woolworths', Anthony refused to call it that, or wear the new uniform. He was still in the closet, doubting that his family would handle it well if he came out, and he occasionally liked going clubbing. The Peel was his favourite. Perhaps Jason could take him some time? He had a passion for trains and reeled off a torrent of facts about the bungled Myki system and about how things would be different when he was transport minister. Perhaps Jason could come

up for a day trip to the country?

Once, when they'd come up for air, Jason asked Anthony how many partners he'd had, as he was sure it was only a handful or two. Anthony named them as he counted each one to a finger. On one hand. With fingers to spare.

"Can we be friends-with-benefits?" the kid asked.

Jason hesitated, it was against the rules he lived by. But as he was about to say no, the kid gave him such a look of doe-eyed pleading that he gave in. "OK. We can talk again on *Grindr*." He felt sure that would bring a polite end to it.

Even if he hoped this was a beginning.

Three weeks into their friendship, Anthony invited Jason up to Ballarat. As they walked a lap of Lake Wendouree, Anthony plied him with questions about how to have anal sex successfully. He'd been trying with another one of his friends-with-benefits, but this one was another closet case and they hadn't been able to get it right. After half an hour of talking about condoms, lube and positions, the kid shared that he was feeling horny.

"Well you know I'm willing to help," Jason said. The friendship part of their relationship happened naturally, but Jason let the kid lead when it came to the 'with-benefits' part. He wanted to believe the kid was truly into him, yet each time they met, he was afraid it would be their last.

At Ballarat Station, Anthony whispered an order. "Fun. Now."

"Where?"

"Follow me."

Anthony led Jason into the station toilets and then into one of two cubicles.

"I wouldn't have thought you'd do sex in a toilet."

"You know somewhere else?" Anthony pulled at Jason's belt and Jason let him, even though he considered this to be an especially risky place to have sex.

A few minutes later, they left the toilet separately and met up again on the platform. The Melbourne-bound train was now ready to board.

On their trip home they whispered outrageously flirtatious nothings, trying to turn each other on. Near Melbourne, Anthony said, "I wish I

had *Grindr* here, just to see who's on." Anthony's iPod touch limited him to wi-fi. "Can you go on for me?"

Jason signed in and Anthony snatched his phone. He looked at the photos then shoved the phone under Jason's nose. "What do you think of him?"

Him was a 22-year-old latino guy. He had a foreign flag on his profile but Jason didn't recognise the country. Jason had a thing for latinos, but didn't want to seem too keen on someone else in front of Anthony.

"Yeah, he's OK."

"He's hot." Anthony pressed the phone into Jason's hand, with the enthusiasm of a puppy getting its first bone. "Send him a message."

Jason was getting a crush on Anthony, but he also knew the golden rule of having a friend-with-benefits: never fall in love or if you do, never share your feelings.

So he did what the boy wanted and sent the latino a message.

The latino's name was Carlos. The flag on his profile was Colombian and he was in Australia studying marketing, and he was pathetically unreliable.

They'd met for a first date a week ago and were now trying for their second. The first time had failed because Carlos had been asked to do a double-shift at a Spanish restaurant. Tonight, Jason had already spoken to Carlos before he'd caught the train to the city and the latino had said he was on his way. After Jason had been waiting fifteen minutes, he called Carlos and got no answer. He was about to give up when the phone rang and Carlos said he couldn't come into the city tonight because some friends had come over. Sorry.

Jason saw then that the dating world hadn't changed much since he was in it a decade ago. How had Anthony summed it up? No one reads profiles.

Before leaving the city, he visited Hungry Jacks opposite Melbourne Central station, for a pity-party dinner, when his phone rang again.

"Hey, Anthony. What's up?" The kid never called him; they always chatted on *Grindr*. In about a month, this was the second time he'd phoned.

"What are you up to tonight?"

"I was catching up with a friend, but he cancelled."

"That sucks, but it could be good. Do you want to take me clubbing? I can pay for the cab home."

"Sure. Where do you want to meet?"

Forty-five minutes later, they were in the Peel. "You'll do great tonight. You're the hottest guy here," Jason tried to encourage his friend, who he knew undervalued his looks.

"Nah. I'm just me."

"That just increases your attractiveness. No one would like if you thought you were as hot as you really are."

Anthony started to say something, but Jason cut off another put down.

"My prediction," Jason said, "is that you will find a hot guy tonight."

"I wish."

"Picking up guys is about your self-image, not how hot you think you are – or even how hot other guys think you are. Have you noticed something different about me tonight?"

"No."

"Normally when I'm around you, I put myself down because I don't feel cute enough or worthy enough for you to waste your time on me."

"Now that you point it out, I can see you haven't done that tonight."

"I've been reading a book on changing self-image. Rather than seeing myself as unattractive, I've changed it to, 'I attract guys like flies to a donut'."

"I think it's working." Anthony pointed his nose in the direction of an Italian or Maltese lad who was standing a metre away from Jason. When he saw Jason look up, he came over.

"I'm Stephen," he said, holding out his hand for Jason to shake. He ignored Anthony.

"I'm Jason and this is my friend, Anthony."

"Would you like to join us?" Anthony patted a seat.

Stephen plonked down and his eyes never left Jason. The two friends tried to speak to him, but he still ignored Anthony.

"You wanna dance with me?" Stephen asked.

Jason checked in with Anthony. Go on, the kid nodded.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Go. I'll be here."

On the dance floor, Stephen wrapped himself around Jason and strained upward for a kiss. Every time Stephen breathed in Jason's direction, Jason caught the scent on his breath: cum. Once that would have been a turn-on, but now he wanted something more than casual sex.

"I'm sorry," Jason said, pushing Stephen away. "I'm going back to my friend."

But Anthony wasn't on his own; he'd been joined by Carlos.

"So did you plan to ditch me and meet up with Anthony instead?" Jason asked Carlos when they finally caught up the Wednesday of the following week.

"No, of course not. I'm at the Peel every Friday night."

After finally meeting up again for a night at *el teatro* – because Jason reviewed theatre for *Sotto Voce* and got free tickets – they were walking to Parliament Station through the Carlton Gardens. Jason didn't know whether this was a date or not, but even if it wasn't, Carlos was funny and sensual and Jason liked the way he saw the world.

Jason had never asked Anthony about whether seeing Carlos at the Peel was a random or planned event, but he knew if he asked the kid, he'd get the truth. He sensed Carlos was hiding behind a superficial fake openness. Still, he could be wrong.

As soon as the darkness of the park wrapped them in its privacy, it took seconds for them to go from holding hands to warm, wet kissing. From there, it took minutes for them to roll onto the grass near the tennis courts and for Jason's mouth to embrace Carlos's uncut penis.

Carlos pulled him up for another kiss. "Do you have condom?"

Jason shook his head. Sex hadn't been part of his plans tonight.

"I really want to fuck you," Carlos said, his accent making the insane suggestion irresistible.

As they kissed again, Carlos took hold of Jason's hip and rolled him over. Jason went willingly.

Jason startled as a couple came toward them on the path, but Carlos had already finished. As Jason zipped up, he could feel wetness leaking into his underwear.

They walked the rest of the way through the park in silence.

"Aren't you speaking to me?" Jason asked.

"If you want me to fuck, then you bring condom."

Jason wanted to point out that they'd both made the bad choice, but this friendship was fragile already without assigning blame, even if it was shared. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to do it."

"It won't happen again," Carlos said. "I have boyfriend."

"You have a boyfriend and you barebacked me? What about the dates we've had?"

The latino shrugged. "We can't be boyfriends. I want you be my 'special' friend."

Jason had made plans to meet up with Anthony today for coffee, but the real reason was to end their friends-with-benefits thing.

Although the dating world was as full of creeps as it always had been, Jason's self-image was strong enough now that he believed that with enough time and effort, he could find a man to love, and they could help each other do their best.

He could never tell the kid how he'd made Jason a better man, as that would mean revealing his feelings. The couple of times Jason had tested whether the kid might be feeling the same way, he received negative signals.

Anthony was early, as always. He was sitting at a table at the Gloria Jeans on Flinders Street with an oversized coffee when Jason arrived. Jason got a chai latte and sat down.

"How's things? Still the last Safeway relic in the state?" Jason asked.

Anthony smiled and Jason loved that he knew how to make the kid do that.

"I have to wear the new uniform and say 'Woolworths' or I won't have a job."

They always started chatting about small stuff. The kid wasn't just shy the first time he met you, he took a few hours with you each time before he relaxed.

A chilly gust blew in through the open face of the store.

"Anthony," Jason started. "We can't be friends-with-benefits any more."

"That's OK." Anthony was smiling. "Can I ask why?"

"Because I want something serious."

"Me too," said Anthony.

Jason took a sip of his latte while he waited – hoped – for Anthony to add the words he was desperate to hear. They didn't come.

"I guess this is it then," Jason prompted.

"Thanks for everything," Anthony said. "You've taught me a lot."

Jason got up, latte in hand. "And you've helped me become a better person, even if you'll never understand how."

Jason wanted to kiss him goodbye, but he knew the kid would freak.

Jason waddled up Flinders Street toward Spencer Street, no destination in mind because all he was thinking about was how things might be different. His mind was numb with his so-called 'emotional maturity'. Half a block away, he talked himself into going back. He wanted a beginning not an ending. The kid needed to know how he felt.

He got back to Gloria Jeans and saw Carlos mince up to Anthony's table, hug him, and punctuate the affection with an obviously gay kiss.

Now different emotions warred in Anthony. He wanted to stop the kid from making the wrong choice, but knew that approach would fail. I can't make other people's choices for them.

Instead, he crossed the road to Flinders Street Station. On the platform, he pulled out his iPhone to jump on *Grindr* and try his luck afresh. But instead he pressed the home button to make the icons wiggle, then he brought his thumb down deleting the *Grindr* app.

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For Paul Marsh

At 18, Daniel G Taylor started writing for the gay press around the country, a young gay person specialising in gay youth issues. Now much older, he lives in Glenelg, South Australia, spending his time writing, reading and cooking for his best friend. He can be reached at daniel@danielgtaylor.com or via his YouTube channel www.youtube.com/wryterman



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Queen Lear

Ian MacNeill

‘Have you got a brother at home?’

Sam Lear thought about this. It was not the first time he had been asked the question. What did it mean?

The clique of five queens at David’s afternoon drinks gazed avidly grinning at him.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘What’s he do?’

‘He works at the Zoo.’

‘Is he a vet?’

‘No, he looks after the reptiles and the amphibians, sometimes. He’s a keeper.’

‘I’m looking for a keeper.’

‘You’d get bored, you wouldn’t know what to do with a keeper after the second night of pleeyzoure.’

‘Madeleine’s such a slut.’

‘She can only go with them once.’

‘That’s not true! I just haven’t –’

'And is he gay dear?' their Auntie Monte Carlo asked.

'Not as far as I know, you'd have to ask him.'

Auntie Carlo regarded Sam with her air of wise acceptance, 'I was only asking dear, no need to get shirty.'

'What's his number?' one of them said, thumb splayed over the mobile, 'I'll ask him.'

'Get him to come over. This is boring. David! Can we ask Sam's brother over?'

David flapped towards them, another vulture.

'Sure. I didn't know you had a brother, you don't talk about him at work.'

'He's never come up.'

'He'd be no good to me then.'

'He works with reptiles.'

'Don't we all. I was telling Christos about Ms Zappa (can you believe?). Honestly dear,' he addressed Sam, 'I tell these boyz I just couldn't survive there if I didn't have you to shriek with – he stopped me walking out the other day when I had to explain to Ms Zappa why I gave the wrong directions to like this total bitch who was trying to blame me for ...'

'Then where would you be?' Auntie Carlo said, 'I'm not lending you rent money again, not after the last time.'

Sam and his brother were forgotten in the hissy spate that followed. It was the only lively thing about the afternoon drinks.

On the train home he wished he hadn't gone. He'd known not to but when you work with someone, another gay guy, another queen and they think you're their friend and you have acted like their friend ... He'd hoped ... He thought there might be someone there he could relate to. He felt he had to fit in somewhere but he was never right. That was about the third time someone at one of those things had said, 'Have you got a brother?' It meant someone butch – butcher? – butch. Someone handsome instead of whatever he was – prettyish? Someone with a deep voice and confidence who looked at home dressed in board shorts and some T-shirt with something beyond cool printed on it. Someone who didn't care he had hairy thin legs so no-one else did either. Someone

who wasn't somehow wrong, like he was.

Sam decided to change. Whatever he had (nothing? he'd better get something) wasn't working for him in any case.

His father asked him how the drinks had been.

'Not much.'

'Still. You've got get out and about, you never now who'll turn up.'

'Any girls there?' his sister called from the T V room.

He ran into the vultures clustered around Auntie Carlo at Arque.

'Hey it's you! I almost didn't recognise you.'

'It's the haircut,' Sam said.

'You didn't tell me you were coming here,' David said, 'you could have had dinner with us.'

'It's more than the haircut,' Auntie Carlo said. 'I hope you're not on steroids.'

'They shrink you.'

'You get tits and then they have to cut them out. Then something turns to something in the blood and you get the opposite.'

'I knew this little pretty – really pretty Thai guy who went on them. You ought to see him now. It changed his whole personality. He used to be so sweet and now he's like the gorilla of death ... He never smiles. And he's got these amazing teeth.'

'Anyone can have amazing teeth these days.'

'Anyone can have anything these days.'

'Get some hair then.'

Auntie Carlo threw her glass of Campari and soda into Madeleine's face.

Sam escaped as the bouncers pushed through.

'We got thrown out,' David whispered, 'and they took Matthew's photo and everything and he isn't allowed in for six months. What'll he do? And Carlos – she's a cunning bitch – got away with it because she said it was self-defence, Matthew threatened her and she panicked and one of the bouncers knew her and said, 'You need to go now, the cops are coming. So we went and Carlos just walked into a taxi and left us there. And we ... couldn't get a taxi. I told them not to take that stuff.'

'Sounds bad.'

'So what happened to you? You hightailed out of there.'

Sam got up to walk away.

'Queen Lear!' David called across the tearoom, 'that's what they call you even though...'

Even though what? Even though he'd put a distance between himself and David, Lady-in-Waiting to Auntie Monte Carlo Queen of the Vultures and the rest of the flock. Even though he had a sort of butch haircut which cost a lot and which made his ears look like jug handles and even though he was going to acting classes so he could learn to walk and talk, even though he wore clothes that made him feel like he was someone dressed up as a first year apprentice motor mechanic trying to look cool, even though he felt he was getting it expensively wrong and ... The trouble was it was working, kind of.

One of the guys had said, 'Why are you carrying on like that?' then the other, 'That's not you, you shouldn't try to be like that. That's not you.'

Trouble was, that was the only moment in the whole dinner date-back to my place night when he hadn't been carrying on.

He should have gone home; the sex was despondent.

He'd said to the other one, 'You don't know what's me, I'm a lot of things.' That hadn't turned out so well either so that was that.

His father put an arm around him and said, 'Just be yourself, you can't be anyone else, you're the only one who can be you.'

'I like him trying to be butch,' his sister said, 'girls find that so-o cute.'

His brother said he'd sort himself out, the worst thing you can do is try, especially too hard and he should do a TAFE course so he wasn't stuck with all those Call Centre nocturnals.

His father said they should worry about themselves first, we've all got issues.

'Iss-shoos!' his sister shrieked, 'I love the way you say that, you're so serious.'

They were doing *King Lear* in acting class. He had nightmares in which he was Tom O'Bedlam on the heath and a storm was blowing

him around and he was lost in the darkness and terrified he would accidentally fall over the White Cliffs of Dover. He was freezing.

His father was talking to him, the light was on, he was drenched in a cold sweat.

'I think you better give up the acting classes son, not everyone's suited to it. You've got a lot out of it, even your dumb uncle commented how much better you're presenting yourself – couldn't bring himself to say it to you man-to-man but that's good old CEO Abel for you.'

Sam thought he might join the Navy.

His father made him an appointment with his counsellor.

'How'd it go son?'

'I don't know.'

'What'd he say?'

'He said I had gender dysphoria.'

'What's that?'

'You're not happy with your gender.'

'Bullshit! You played the beautiful game.'

'O K Lawrence,' his father said to his brother, 'let him make up his own mind.'

'So did I,' said his sister. 'Maybe I've got it too – what is it again? I could tell people when they're boring me about their allergies of AAAAAHHHH-duh.'

'You're right, everyone's got something these days. This dyke at work pays a fortune to have her dog desensitised to dog biscuit because she's a vegetarian and can't touch meat. You oughta've seen Maria Sagazio's – she's the canine vet – face when she said that. You'll be right mate, don't worry about it. Waste of money. You'd be better helping pay for a set of wheels or a bike,' he said to his father.

'Well, we won't go there, will we? I think you were the one who taught me my lesson there.'

'It's so unfair,' their sister said, 'I didn't get any help with my first set.'

'I paid for you to go and stay with your mother and her drop kick boyfriend, didn't I?'

'Yeah, well. I hope I don't lose my taste when I'm going through the menopause. What a dickhead, I don't know how she stands it. D'you

know what he said ...?’

The nightmares stopped. Sam’s father thought that might be enough of the counsellor then.

Sam stopped paying for the expensive chopped up hair; he could never do the product right anyhow.

‘Don’t stare – I said don’t look now! It’s Queen Lear.’

‘She looks different again,’ Auntie Monte Carlo said staring unabashedly at Sam who was carrying two drinks through the Arque crowd. ‘I always quite liked that boy, he’s got something.’

‘He hasn’t got what you like.’

‘And what would that be according to you?’

‘What’s he wearing? What’s that dressing gown thing?’

‘It’s a wonder that Hone let him in.’

‘I’d say it was what got him in, it’s rather chic.’

‘It’s a kimono.’

‘It suits his chest. He must still go to the gym.’

‘Or he’s still on steroids.’

‘They’re all on steroids.’

‘Oh look.’

The vultures craned their heads.

Sam handed a drink to Takumi. Takumi made a funny little Japanese bow. Sam took the kimono off and helped Takumi into it.

A couple of the vultures jumped on the spot, another tried to stretch his wings. They croaked. They beaked their drinks.

‘It’s not even his.’

‘What’s he do now?’

‘Marine upholstery.’

‘What the fuck’s that?’

‘He upholsters boats – you know their seats and things.’

‘How’d he get into that?’

‘That Japanese guy he’s with is the designer right?’

‘Apprenticeship. Something like that. TAFE. He can do cars too.’

‘I bet he can.’

They sank their heads on their necks and looked about sideways in the hope of another comforting cavity to bury them in.

While he was waiting for a taxi a guy leaned out of a car full of other guys.

He braced.

'Where'd you get the jumper mate?'

He told him.

In the supermarket shopping for Dad, basket slung across his arm, a guy said, 'Do you know where they hide the *crème fraiche*?'

He didn't but he helped him find it.

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'Queen Lear' is Ian MacNeill's farewell to the wonderful time he has had with gay-ebooks

rede empti on

Scott Clark

It had been more than an hour since the brown shirts had attacked the underground bar and Gunter remained paralysed with fear in the same hiding place he had taken to during the frenzied panic of the first few minutes of the attack. From this darkened corner of an adjoining room hidden behind crates and barrels he had seen the bar broken up, its patrons savagely beaten but despite his best efforts he had not seen Christophe since the brown shirts had first kicked the door in. For the first time since Hitler had been appointed Chancellor, the Nazis had added a campaign of violence against Berlin's homosexuals to their hate-filled rhetoric and now even the most optimistic Berliner could no longer simply write off the hate-filled speeches as merely politics.

Gunter noticed the sounds of breaking glass, smashing chairs and violent beatings had stopped. He could now hear the sound of the brown shirts marching in the street, chanting party slogans and spreading their message of intolerance to any Berliner near enough to hear the messages of hate that is the foundation of the new Germany. Gunter then realised that with the bar empty his chance to escape was now.

Gunter crawled out from behind the crates and barrels and crept through the wreckage that until just an hour earlier had been a bar all the while looking to see if Christophe had been spared the violence. Every step Gunter took through the shattered building made him feel more frightened. He found an exit into the alley behind the warehouse which had housed the bar. Once outside Gunter quickly surveyed the alley. Upon seeing no members of the dreaded Brown Shirts he allowed himself a brief moment to breathe and make his plans to disappear into the Berlin night using the back streets to find his way home.

Gunter took a deep breath and ran away from the alley as fast as he could. He was sprinting like he had not done since his school days. He took a turn around the corner of a narrow Berlin back street and ran straight into the large figure of a man dressed in the signature brown shirt of the SA. Gunter collided into him and both men fell heavily onto the cobble stone street. Gunter was terrified and apologised profusely to the man and offered him his hand to help him back to his feet. The Brown Shirt rudely pushed Gunter's hand away and swore at him. He got to his feet and asked, "Where are you going in such a hurry, huh? What are you; a Jew or one of those fairies?" Gunter's body went cold as though his blood had turned to iced water. Gunter recognised the voice, a voice he had known all his life. The Brown Shirt still didn't look at Gunter he was instead more interested in making sure his uniform was straightened out. "What's your name? Give me your identity papers to prove it!"

Gunter smiled to himself as he said, "Eric, surely you recognise your younger brother?"

The Brown Shirt's face was one of extreme shock, he instinctively grabbed Gunter's arm and pulled him into a nearby laneway. Once out of the street Eric said, "My God Gunter. What have you been up to?"

"Nothing, Eric, nothing you need concern yourself with."

"Really? Dressed up in this neighbourhood, I can guess where you've been."

Gunter looked to the ground and said nothing. Eric breathed deeply and said, "Take off the tie, throw it away, untuck the shirt, make yourself look like you live in this dump and follow me!"

Eric lectured Gunter the whole way about how Germany had changed

for the better and that he too could be a part of this great new Germany but that there was no place in the new Germany for disgusting men who turned their back on the laws of nature. Finally Gunter protested, "Eric, you've known me all my life how can you say such hateful things?"

Eric looked around and then leaned in close saying, "Gunter, brother, you've been lead astray. You were the victim of some dirty old fairy who took advantage of you and..."

"I wanted to be taken advantage of, I've always wanted to be taken advantage of and nothing you or any of your flag waving thugs can say will make me say anything different."

Eric wore a sinister smile as he said, "Nothing. You say?" Eric took two steps toward his brother and still with the same sinister smile he leaned in very close and said, "Perhaps actions will speak louder than words. Now I am going to show you something and you had better keep your ears and your eyes open. But if you want to see the sun come up in the morning then you had best keep your mouth shut."

Gunter felt fear again. For the first time in his life he was genuinely afraid of his brother and it was fear that made him follow his brother's instructions. Eric said, "Now the story is that I caught you trying to get a look at the action here tonight and that I need to take you home before Mamma worries about you."

Gunter would have protested about being eighteen years old and not needing his big brother to baby-sit. But on this night he saw something had possessed Eric, an evil that had turned him from the educated German literature classics scholar into a brutal street thug. With such a transformation Gunter decided not to argue. Eric and Gunter walked onto the main street and there in front of Gunter was a scene from hell. There were fires on the street, Brown Shirts milling around, laughing and taunting the huddled groups of tormented men all sporting injuries from the very plain bloodied noses, cut heads, broken bones to the less obvious internal injuries from a well placed jack boot to the ribs or belly. On the other side of the street two trucks were being loaded with the men from the street. Gunter could see Christophe. His beautiful blond hair was red with blood and his body hung lifeless between the two Brown Shirt thugs who were dragging him by his arms toward the truck. The two thugs picked Christophe up and threw him onto the truck.

Another Brown Shirt on the truck looked down and asked, "Hey genius, did you check to see if this one's still breathing?"

One of them turned and said, "He's breathing, not sure for how much longer."

Gunter turned away, and tried to show no emotion, showing empathy could cost him his freedom. Eric returned and said, "Come on let's go."

The two brothers said nothing while they walked home. Gunter was shocked by his brother's actions.

Gunter had known Eric was conservative but never believed he would become violent. They walked into a small square not far from their home. Eric turned to his brother and said, "Sit down, we should talk about all this."

Gunter did not argue he sat down and waited for his brother to speak. Neither brother said anything so eventually Gunter said, "You know you call us fairies. Does it make you feel tough to beat up someone who think is weak?"

Eric shook his head and said, "That is not the reason why we do our work."

"Oh it's work."

"Yes it is work. We need to clean up Germany and get rid of the moral decay that caused our defeat in the last war."

"Even if that moral decay is your own brother?"

Eric's expression was one of anger, his breath quickened and he said in a forceful whisper, "Nothing will stop me personally from being involved in this work, nothing or no one will stop me joining the SS and if I need to prove my loyalty by taking my own brother to Buchenwald, then that is precisely what I will do."

There was a long pause in the conversation before Eric continued, "Now Gunter, Mamma has suspected for a long time that you are different to other boys and in the Germany of five years ago you could have done what you do and the police wouldn't have done anything but now if you visit bars like you did tonight or spend time with those kind of men like you did tonight then you'll find yourself in Buchenwald too. Get yourself a girlfriend!"

"I'm not like you Eric! I'm different, I was born this way and I can't get a girlfriend."

"Then be a bachelor and exercise self control! Above all else, don't give in to these unnatural desires because if what you're telling me is true then for you my brother celibacy is a matter of life and death."

Gunter looked to the ground and mumbled, "Buchenwald. Is that where the men being thrown onto the trucks are going?"

Eric sighed and then said, "They'll go before the courts first and in all likelihood get sentences of ten years or more. Then they'll go to Buchenwald." Eric turned to Gunter, put his hand lovingly on his brother's shoulder and said, "Do not concern yourself with your friends you saw on those trucks tonight. They don't have a future. You on the other hand Gunter, you have a future. In a month you need to report for duty with the army. If war does come it will be over with quickly, then you can return to Berlin and live out your life as a Reich war hero."

Gunter took Eric's advice, burying his desires deep down, excelling in his army training and earning commendations from his superiors. Peace time came to an end in September that following year and Gunter's unit was in the first wave of the invasion of Poland where he earned a medal for his bravery under fire. The following spring Gunter was sent to the Western frontier and was part of the invasion of The Netherlands where he was seriously wounded. After many months in a German military hospital he was reclassified as unfit for front line duty and retrained as signals operator. Gunter was stationed in the south of Nazi-occupied France where he monitored British naval communications. Gunter was pleased to have this assignment. He had seen enough battles and was happy to be away from the war.

Gunter had been used to receiving regular letters from Eric but he noticed the letters had stopped two weeks after the invasion of the Soviet Union started. It was now November and five months had passed since his last letter. "Schmidt!" a sergeant called out.

"Yes, sergeant." Gunter replied.

"Your brother is on leave and here to see you."

"My brother?"

"Yeah, that's what I said. Now get a move on before I change my mind." The sergeant snapped.

Gunter limped as fast as he could out of the communications barrack

and found his brother dressed in his black SS uniform. Eric turned and saw Gunter limping toward him. Gunter stopped and gave the Nazi salute saying, "Heil Hitler!"

Eric smiled and said, "Enough of that Gunter. I'm here as your brother not as an SS man."

Eric embraced his brother, smiled and said, "Gunter, walk with me." Eric turned and said cheekily, "Or limp with me."

Gunter grinned and said, "I can still beat you in a fight even with a bad leg."

Eric's demeanour changed instantly and he became morose saying, "Gunter, I've got very bad news and that's the reason I'm here."

"OK, Eric. What's happened?"

"Gunter, Mamma was killed in a British air raid. I was told a few days ago, she was buried yesterday there was just no time to get you back to Berlin. I used my position to get leave to come and see you."

Gunter stopped in his tracks and whispered, "My God, no, no, not Mamma!"

Gunter turned away so that Eric wouldn't see his tears.

"There's no shame in tears Gunter, not for our mother. God knows I've shed a lot of them."

Eric continued to walk when he turned and said, "Gunter, Mamma isn't the main reason I came to see you. I am ashamed to say that Mamma's death was just the excuse to come and see you about something more important."

Gunter was angry when he demanded, "What the hell could be more important than Mamma?"

Eric replied, "Gunter, you're right, you were right then and you're right now. Gunter, I need to talk to you and you alone. Don't breathe a word of this to anyone."

"What's going on, Eric, are you going to give me some state secret about her death?" Gunter asked through tears.

Eric was stony faced when he said, "Something like that Gunter. What you're going to hear, well if you repeat it you'll put a rope around my neck."

"What the hell, Eric?"

"Gunter we need to get out of Europe. We need to find a way to get

to Britain but preferably America.”

Gunter stopped suddenly, turned to Eric and said, “Eric, what the hell is going on?”

“Gunter, we couldn’t have left with Mamma still in Germany, they would have killed her. When I heard she had died I knew what I had to do. What you have to do with me.”

Gunter was stupefied and in a disbelieving tone he said, “Now Eric, I’m not what you’d call a devoted Nazi, but I am a proud German and I took an oath to defend Germany. We can’t desert our posts during a time of war. That would be treason and you being an SS man you’re supposed to not only believe that you’re supposed to inspire that in others! Now when I go back to my post, I’m going to forget this conversation ever happened. An oath is oath Eric! Papa taught us that.”

“Even if your oath is to a murderer?”

“Who’s a murderer?”

“Gunter, I said you were right, because you weren’t taken in by the Nazi myth. I had the swastika blindfold taken off my eyes a week after we went to Russia. They sent me there as an observer. I watched as the men dug ditches, then the trucks arrived, they forced them all to strip naked and then the men, the women and the children were all shot in the back.”

Gunter said nothing at all, he stood motionless for more than a minute. Eric then continued, “Their clothes were then sorted and given to the locals.” Eric began to sob, “The last day I was observing the special actions, that’s what the high command call them, there was a doll on top of the clothing pile, some treasured childhood possession left behind while the doll’s owner was shot into a ditch all because of who her parents were.”

Gunter managed to stutter a simple question, “But why?”

“They’re Jews. Hitler, Himmler and most of the SS plan on killing them all. If there hadn’t been some bungling with my orders I would have been kept in the dark about the plans myself but they made a mistake and I not only found out what was happening in Russia but I saw it firsthand. Whatever rumours you’ve heard about the actions of the SS in the East. The stories are true, they’re all true, and in fact the real story is probably far worse than the rumour.”

Gunter and Eric remained silent simply staring at each other. Gunter eventually spoke up and asked, "Has mamma been buried properly? Was she given a Catholic funeral?"

"She was, Gunter, I organised that and took flowers to her grave."

"Knowing that she was buried the way she would have wanted to be buried I can leave."

Eric smiled again and said, "I'd hoped you'd say that. I've got everything organised just follow my lead and do exactly what I tell you."

Gunter walked back with Eric to the communications barrack to report to his commanding officer. Gunter accepted wishes of condolences from his comrades and then left with Eric on his forty-eight hours compassionate leave. Gunter sat down in Eric's SS vehicle and after the vehicle left the base Gunter said, "OK Eric, we're away from the listening post; what's the plan?"

"We're heading to a hotel room that's been paid for the next week so no one will notice the uniforms we are leaving behind until after we're in Lisbon."

"And then?"

"Once in Lisbon we go to the British embassy and seek asylum."

"Sure, but if we don't get asylum?"

"Then we try the American embassy and if that fails we buy an illegal journey with smugglers to Ireland and then Britain. Don't worry about it I've got information the British will want – that's our ticket."

"Have you thought about the possibility the British will turn us down and treat us as enemy combatants?"

"Of course, but it's better to be behind British barbed wire than it is to be behind SS barbed wire. I've got forged travel documents I bought from a man in the SS forgery unit."

"Can you trust him?"

"Of course, I can, he has the strongest motive to keep quiet."

"Oh yeah, what's that?"

"Self interest. It turns out he forged his ancestry document. His great grandfather was a half Jew. That's more than enough to get him kicked out of the SS and considering how embarrassing that scandal would be for Himmler, my forger friend would probably find himself in Buchenwald."

Thoughts raced through Gunter's mind. He of course knew his brother was right. He also knew that he couldn't continue to serve a nation that had done what Eric had witnessed in Russia but he also knew that this was a one way journey. He knew he would be branded a traitor and that he could never return to Germany. Eric noticed his brother deep in thought and he asked, "Something on your mind?"

"Yes." Gunter replied, "We're no longer German. We're turning our backs on our home and becoming Englishmen or Americans."

"Look at our nation's history Gunter. We aren't the first Germans to leave and being an Englishman won't be too bad."

Gunter sighed, "Yeah, of course you're right and at least we will be free."

Eric smiled and said, "I've forgotten what that feels like. Just remember, being a homosexual is illegal in England too, it's just that the punishment is not as severe as in Germany."

"Don't start with that, Eric. I did what you told me and I haven't touched another man since that night at the bar. No one knows what I am."

"I know what you are and after a long time thinking about that I realised it doesn't matter. You are my brother, first and foremost."

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Scott describes himself as an accountant by profession and author by inclination. "Being an accountant is a living but imagining characters and bringing them to life is what gets me out of bed in the morning." He's been writing short stories most of his life but rarely shared his work with others aside from close friends, family and his always supportive life partner Brian. After a few failed attempts to get published no one was more surprised than Scott when Redemption was accepted for this publication.

deep and mean in still

Jarred Connors

High-revving and flat out, with only a 'yaahooo' for as a warning, Dad yanked the tractor's steering wheel hard right and it ploughed over the water-filled mud ditch and straight into a big thistle patch. Higher than us, the dark green spiky heads jerked and slashed the air as the tractor crushed the plants down into a new pathway. Some heads, older, meaner, broke free from the tall plants and flew off in every direction.

For us on the trailer, there was no escape. We clung on to the rails while being wrenched about, captive to the tractor's violent path, all of us yelling in sheer fright. The muddy water showered over us but worse than that – the freed flying thistle heads bit sharply when they landed on our skin; it was a real test of our fears. Panicking, we watched for those heads coming towards us; screaming and pointing warnings if any came too near.

Some birds, presumably happily munching on thistle bugs or seeds, were flushed out of the thicket in full panic; their wings flashing blue and green in the bright sunlight. I imagined I could hear the noise of their flapping above the volume of the tractor, the barking dogs and our

wild yelling.

And so Dad drove on; he never looked back, out the other side of the thistle patch and back on to the track; the muddy water again spraying all over us from the spinning big tires. He was laughing loudly and seemed completely oblivious to our panic. It only took maybe twenty seconds but I still can recall the smell of the bruised and mashed plants.

We were relating those not-so halcyon days of growing up on the farm. Dad's tractor antics were burned into our memories, each individually ours to savour. At the time, I hated his games; even looking back, some of his behaviours seem deliberately both abusive and mean. And I can still sense the dread I felt when I twigged he was about to launch into another of his mad episodes.

But these days Dad couldn't do tricks any more; now he needed a walking stick to get around and his short-term memory often confused him. So as we re-tasted our fears, Dad was busy, pushing another plate of dry date scones, sweaty piklets, or crumbling fruit cake into our midst, encouraging each of us to 'put a bit of weight on'.

It was 2007; tomorrow was Mum's funeral, and we'd all made it home in time.

The next day had turned out dark and with a forecast of rain; exactly the sort of weather you'd expect for your mother's funeral. Dad, in deep dark blue, was stoic; bruisk but ok. He was puffy about the eyes but nothing was going to get him rattled; the rest of us did as best we could.

It hadn't occurred to me at all that we, the family, would be some sort of leaders-of-the-pack in the day's processions, our cars left first and arrived last, somehow pathways were opened to direct us to front positions. The ten-fifteen call for the church, had us all in a panic to get ready on time; dusting off and ironing rarely worn suit and tie combinations. Outside, the rain made the colours appear washed out, dull and grey; our bright wedding white traded for dull funeral black.

Bored family children, looking like young versions of ourselves, a time-warp of family traits, ran around frantically getting underfoot and in the way. They misbehaved and had accidents, tore and muddied their Sunday best clothes; and had their mothers threatening dire restrictions when they got home.

There was a never-ending barrage of questions about vital, but mostly unimportant, details and too much food and endless cups of tea. All I wanted to do was be swallowed up by the small crowd: I just said yes to everything.

But very quickly, bad habits of long standing get an airing again. Buttons get pushed and we all react accordingly. Aunt Maud, (husband, Arthur), got it started by insisting that they had to be seated near the left-side exit door because Arthur was now on crutches and getting a little unsure on his feet. Problem was Aunt Christine's family was already seated there and she didn't want to move because she was taking the 'official' photographs. Much hissing ensued until the sub-minister intervened.

Despite specific instructions about the service and her burial, mother, once again, though finally this time, didn't get what she wanted. By the time someone realised the error it was too late to change the plan. So she got a religious service, hymns, readings and all the usual ballyhoo that she so detested in life, and took up a full six foot plot at the cemetery, feet towards the morning sunrise, rather than having her ashes scattered in her beloved Tamar River. I swear she was tossing about in the coffin as we carried her down the aisle for the last time.

We busied ourselves in the kitchen. It was television news time, but there were so many of us there wasn't room in the lounge. The aunts and uncles hushed and settled the gaming kids while my sister and I finished the kitchen clean up. We'd been talking all day so we'd run out of things to discuss. Tonight, television seemed surreal, especially after the funeral. Dad had gone to 'have a little lie down'; poor bugger, it must've been a hell-of-a day for him.

Eldest, born-again, sister, Julia, asked about my work but not about home life (so what's new?) as she stacked the cups and plates away. She knew I was gay, the result of an earlier argument where I'd risen to her bait and said too much. She now launched into news of a whole range of marriages, divorces, births and deaths of family and friends. At the mention of the third new baby I decided to protest.

"Enough, already," I jumped in, "You know, I'm not really that interested in marriages or divorces. Or babies for that matter. Have some

grace; don't forget some people aren't even allowed to get married, yet. Not that we want too, anyway." This was not strictly true, the boy and I had opposite feelings about the issue. He was in favour, I was against but we rated it at about the same value as both of us deciding to wear white T-shirts to the same outing, embarrassing but not a major issue.

"It's not the same thing," Julia counters, "Two blokes can't have a marriage. Or have kids. Nor can two women."

Oh dear, "Julia, where have you been hiding? Surrogacy is hardly unusual these days for gays or anyone else. Lesbians can even get IVF now in some states. And it's easy to use a turkey baster to get pregnant!"

A distasteful look briefly cracked her smug smile. Was that graphic enough to make her rethink? But do I want to go on with this? I won't win, I know.

Her lips set thinly in the echo of turkey basters. "You can't use IVF on them. That's not right. Shouldn't be allowed. There's so many normal married couples who need help to have kids. It's pure waste on them."

"On me," I corrected her, "On me and my partner." A bit of a silence ensued; although crashing dishes and slamming cupboard doors suggested she wasn't coming around. She wouldn't dare ask if we were actually planning a family, would she?

She turns to me. "So how is what's-his-name these days? Is he the same one you brought home the time Dad caught you playing about in the shed?" A ploy and an accusation to make me regret starting this conversation.

"His name is Kevin. And, you don't have to be so rude."

"Our priest says the time will come when all homosexuals will be cleansed from the earth." She let that sink in some, "Maybe you should heed his advice."

Now, I'm no longer amazed when she makes statements like this. However I did know something of this Father John. And his advice. He'd taken to giving personal advice and instruction to some students at our high school and the latest rumour suggested there'd be some action on his own personal cleansing very soon.

"Really," dog to dog, I snarled back, "How much of that crap to do you actually believe, Julia?"

She ignored my question. "If you want my advice, stop playing

around, find a good girl and get married, properly.” She folded her arms, clenching her fists tightly and tried to stare me down.

“Oh, Julia, I can confirm that I definitely won’t be following your advice.” I hoped my best insincere look settled it all but somehow I doubt it.

In July that year Mum came to stay for a week or two. Kevin was away – down south for a conference – so it was very well timed. She knew he shared the flat but she didn’t know that we shared more personal bits too. We moved some of his stuff into the spare bedroom to make it look like he lived there.

So Saturday morning, sunlight streaming into the kitchen, the papers spread all over the table, a big pot of tea, Mum still in her dressing gown, and me burning the toast. She was planning to go shopping later, I was yet to think up my excuse for not going with her.

“Did you know Julia is trying for another baby? God willing, of course.” Mum, looked up, peering across the top of her reading glasses, looking for a reaction from me.

“God? And all along I thought it had to do with sex. You know, man, woman, private bedroom exercises. These days you’d hope God should have better things to do,” I replied, waving at the front page. She already knew my feelings about god stuff.

“You may be right, although I suspect Julia has organised Him to be involved somehow.”

I realise she’s serious. “So what does Michael think about Him sitting on the end of the bed while he works on his procreative exercises? Is that a bit kinky or what?”

Mum looks at me sharply. She realises I’m teasing. “You shouldn’t make fun of them like that. They’re good people really.”

“Mum, don’t. This born-again stuff is very off. You can see that, surely?” Oops, I may’ve gone too far, again. In silence I focus on trying to finish off the article I’m reading but after the third start of the same paragraph, I realise I’ve lost the thread altogether.

“We haven’t talked about you. Are you seeing someone?”

Yes Mum, I’m fucking Kevin. “Oh, no, no one in particular.” And in her terms that’s not strictly a lie, really, I mean, she’s thinking female

liaisons.

"It's high time you were thinking about settling down, and having babies."

"Mum, there won't ever be babies, let me assure you."

"You're kidding me. I know you better than that. Will I get to meet her while I'm here?"

"Mum, there is nobody." Now that is a definite lie. Kevin, forgive me. God, forgive me. Everyone, forgive me. "I wish there was." Oh, why do I always lie in clichés?

I stew in my own cowardice for a bit but then I have to soften my last claim up a little. "Sorry, Mum, I fibbed. I am seeing someone, but we're not ready to talk about it yet. We just need some time to work things through."

"Very mysterious, do I know her?"

"No, Mum, you've not met them."

"Them?"

I have to end it now. "Enough. I'm going to have a shower. What time are you going out?"

"Oh, you're not coming with me? I may get lost!" She fakes alarm.

"Unlikely, mummy dearest. I've got a few things to do. You can find the shop you want on your own?"

"Of course I can. You do your bits. I can manage," she peers out the window as if distracted. "You know, I'm sorry I missed Kevin this visit. He sounds like a nice fella."

Where did that come from?

Next morning, Dad was up early, though I had at least made the tea before he appeared. No-one else was up yet. I poured him a mug and we went out onto the back porch to sit in the early sun, warming to the day. Birds celebrated the morning and it felt peaceful, harmonious. The silence between us seemed natural, remedial, not threatening. As we clasped our steaming mugs I wandered off in my own thoughts.

"You know your mum always really wanted you to get married, and have kids?" Dad was speaking quietly. It was still early and as he turned to me his face was shadowed in the deep slanted yellow morning light.

"You know that wasn't going to happen! She did too."

"Fiddlesticks! You could've," he kept on, "if you'd really wanted too."
"I talked to her about it. Oh, Dad, let's not have this discussion today,"
I gave him an exasperated look; we've all seen how funerals bring out this desire to have 'deep and meaningful' conversations. Instead I tried to recall the time of the earliest flight home.

"I know a thing or two too. I was in the war, remember. There were good, special, blokes in our company. I know. And I knew too what they got up too. But afterwards, after the war, they went home and got married, and had kids too."

I was not paying a lot of attention. I pined for our flat, my home, the boyf. I could see him, tangled in the sheets, still asleep at this hour.

I said nothing.

Dad said nothing.

"I had a very good mate, in France," he started and I looked over to him. "His name was Charley. He got killed defending a stupid thing, a building that turned out to be just a stable, only had a horse in it. A damn waste, damn waste."

What was he on about now? "Dad..." I'm not sure if I wanted to ask. And it was much too early (for me anyway) to get into his war memories.

"A waste of a life. I hurt real bad for a long time. Never told your mother."

Never told Mum? What?

"What are you saying, Dad?"

I waited; he took his time to think some more.

He leaned forward towards me and said in a low voice, "Charley and I were mates. We did everything. Together. I do mean everything."

My mind tossed about all the wrong interpretations. "What do you mean 'mates'? In what sense?"

He gawchuffed. "You, of all of them," he waved his arms towards the sleeping house, "you know what I mean."

"You and he? You mean..."

But dad wasn't going to say any more; he just sat back in his chair and stared off somewhere.

Kevin had opened the paper to the puzzles section and was already

filling out numbers. He didn't get up when I gave him a hug and a 'good morning' kiss on the back of his neck. He did mumble something.

I poured coffee. "It got quite cold last night. At one point I reached out to find you but you weren't there."

"Yeah, I moved about midnight, you were snoring and I couldn't get back to sleep. I had to have a wank." Actually, he still looked kind of sleepy.

"So, you owe me one."

"Sure. Any time. Your place or mine?"

Re-establishing family harmony took the rest of the morning.

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Jarred Connors is a pen name, a foolish ploy that's now hard to undo. His previous bios are false; this one's not much better.

Robert Tait
perfect gay marriage



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Chapter 01

The Couple in the Tiffany Frame

There'd be many roads to travel before the truth was reached, but the first, the one where it all began, was by far the best, if judgement was based on wealth and power (and in Sydney in the second decade of the twenty-first century that was indisputable).

Wolsely Road, Point Piper, home of Australia's richest man, a would-be Prime Minister, and dozens of other names familiar to even irregular readers of the financial pages. Rich men, mostly in their fifties, sixties and seventies, but with several younger ones also, heirs to family fortunes or the rapidly successful, thirty-somethings flush with fast money from mining, phone applications or whatever other current enterprise took from the many and gave to the few. There were some self-made women on the Road, but even less than the ten percent of women on the boards of the ASX 200. No, Wolsely Road's female residents were almost entirely wives, the rich spouses of rich men, careful not to put a foot wrong themselves but willing to support their husbands through their every peccadillo, the dubious business deal, the mistress in Elizabeth Bay, the not-spending enough time with the children, all for the marvellous trade-off of never having to work, of shopping instead, and Pilates, and long charity luncheons.

It took fifteen minutes to get there from Taylor Square, although almost as long for the cab-driver to locate the street number. The



traffic was light because it was Saturday morning, but the down-side of that was Matt's Friday night had ended not too long before. It was rare to have a business meeting on the weekend and he'd planned to be in bed by midnight, but it was the Friday night of the Queen's Birthday weekend, the mood was wildly infectious, one drink had led to twenty, the Oxford had led to the Columbian then the Shift then oh god, he didn't want to think of what venue, let alone what contraption, he'd ended up in. Fortunately he lived around the corner from that particular den of iniquitous acting-out, so he'd been in bed soon after his last orgasm and managed a couple of hours of fitful dozing. Still, with each speed-hump in Rushcutters Bay his brain felt as if it bounced off his skull-bone, and when the cab accelerated up Double Bay hill he worried the mostly liquid contents of his stomach would accelerate even faster.

He spent a few minutes composing himself after the cab drove off. Chapstick on the lips, a zhush of the hair, several deep breaths, and a good look around. There wasn't a soul in sight; the Road was still and quiet. Mostly everyone would be away for the weekend, he imagined, up at Palm Beach or over in Queenstown. Although it was hard to know, since every mansion was designed so nothing inside could be seen from the street, past the multi-car garages and the designer foliage. Actually, it was going to be a beautiful day, not cold like the previous week but bright and sunny, the kind of day anyone in northern Europe would be happy with in summer, but was still quite usual in the middle of a Sydney winter.

One final deep breath and a press of the doorbell. A heavily accented voice answered, Matt explained himself, then did as he was told so as to move from public space to some private realm. On the other side of the security gate the man with the accent was waiting, old, stout and completely bald, but immaculately presented in suit and tie. He beckoned Matt to follow, then led him down a series of wide corridors until they arrived at a large living area at the front of the house. Strangely, instead of a showroom of imported Italian furniture, or an art gallery specialising in muscular modern Australian art (Tillers, Quilty and Cullen), the sensation of stepping into the space was like walking on to a stage. The sunlight was overpowering,



amplified by its reflection of the harbour below, every object was perfectly dusted and placed, the multiple vases of flowers were the most beautifully arranged he'd ever seen, but there was something else besides, a feeling that very little living happened there, that the room had no history or depth, that made him feel as if it was a set. It was a place where people did what they were expected to do, where unpleasantness was avoided, where masks were worn.

So he did what he was meant to do, sat on a low leather sofa and waited. Although not for long; very soon there was the faint noise of shoe on marble tile, before an imposing figure entered stage left. Usually when Matt met a famous person he was disappointed; they were shorter or scruffier than their photos, but not this time. There wasn't a hair out of place, a pore unmoisterised, or a muscle not recently given a work-out. Although not so formally attired as his assistant, his chinos, a navy blazer and pink-striped shirt still looked as if they'd been bought at Ralph Lauren the day before and put on for the first time.

"Matt, good morning. Thanks for meeting me at such short notice." His handshake was firm, although the hand cold.

"No problem at all, Mr Eckersley."

"Please call me Stephen. Would you like a coffee?"

"Strong black would be good."

There was no waiting this time; almost instantly the bald man appeared with a steaming cup and placed it on the coffee table next to Matt.

"Thank you, Josef," said Eckersley. He smiled as Matt took his first sip.

"So, I've never done this before. Rather a novel experience. You might need to hold my hand. Not that I'm apprehensive. You come with the finest recommendations. As I said on the phone yesterday, discretion is an primary consideration, and I've been assured you're absolutely trustworthy in that regard."

It was true. When Matt had left the Police Force in dramatic circumstances two years before, then embarked on a career as a private investigator, he'd quickly realised that those who succeeded in that odd and misconstrued (although often very lucrative) profession,



were those who told their clients what they discovered, and not a single other person. Not partners, not best friends, not even mothers. No matter how famous the person investigated was, no matter how outrageous their behaviour. Matt's secret of success — his reputation — was that he kept secrets.

"And it doesn't hurt that you bat for the same team." He lowered his voice. "Not that Josef does. He has a string of Zsa Zsa's he never lets me meet. But I'd trust him with my life, and normally he'd have done this job. Except his health problem has returned ..."

"I always start with my fee," Matt said, not only because it was best to get that out in the open, but because it tended to save time, weeding out the wannabes from the serious clients, then explained his hourly rate and additional costs structure.

"Seems reasonable," said Eckersley. "And next?"

"The purpose of the enquiry. What you want to find out. What you're worried about."

Usually there was a sigh then, or even a sob, but not this time. Instead a charming smile. "Oh, I'm not worried. I'm in love. Head over heels. I'm feeling peculiarly blessed."

"Then ...?"

"Yes, why are you here? Due diligence, I suppose. Risk management. I'm on a lot of boards, you know, and it drives people mad but I'm the stickler, the one who asks too many questions, who doesn't rest until every unforeseen eventuality is revealed and every hidden liability calculated. I've saved the shareholders of Australia's a lot of pain over the years, I can tell you. And perhaps it's not quite so necessary but I can't help carrying this desire to know everything into my personal life."

"Do you think the person you're in love with could be seeing someone else?"

He didn't merely smile at this; he laughed. "No, no, no. He's head over heels as well. And faithful, I'm as sure of that as I've ever been sure of anything. No, it's not the details of his current life I'm concerned about ... It's his past."

"Why don't you just ask him?"

"I have."



"But you need to check, make doubly sure?"

"Look, perhaps it wouldn't matter so much if I wasn't who I was or if we didn't have planned what we have." Eckersley stood up, walked across the room to collect a Tiffany frame, then handed it to Matt. "This was taken a month ago in Tahiti — when I proposed."

Matt looked at a pink sunset, and two happy, handsome men in front of it. Eckersley was his immaculate self in a crisp turquoise polo shirt, while the younger man wore a v-neck tee, just tight enough to show off his stunning pecs, and had slightly longer hair the wind was playing with.

"Gay marriage will be through parliament this year or next," said Eckersley, "and what we'll need soon after is someone high profile getting married to show the nation the whole thing's not a joke. Just as happened in England with Elton John. I love my boy, and I do truly want to marry him, but I see a chance to do my duty here, to do something of great social benefit, perhaps for the first time in my life. I want to show we're not just as good as them, but better." He waved his hand in a wide arc through the air, seemingly to indicate his Wolsely Street neighbours.

"What's his name?"

"Er ... Cameron." He took the photo and placed it back exactly where it had been. "Cameron Walker."

"And my job is to investigate his history?"

"You know what the Australian press is like," Eckersley harumphed.

"They can only be managed up to a point. Oh, the marriage will get major coverage; I'll have enough A-list guests to make sure of that. I think even my friend Tony will come. But then some sleazy journalist will start digging around. I've got no secrets myself. Even when I was married to a woman all those years ago, I never played around. I only started dating men after the divorce was through. And not one of them would or could dish the dirt. I've never done drugs and I don't like kinky sex. Cameron says it's the same with him. I believe him but I have to make sure."

"What does he do?"

"He's not working at the moment. He's a dancer. Actually that's



how we met. He was in *Wicked* and we found ourselves standing together at the opening night party. The romance was very slow and old-fashioned, I'm proud to say. We dated for six months before he slept over."

"Does he live here now?"

"He still has his own place in Altair. Shares with another dancer. Of course he'll move in after the honeymoon."

"What's the time-frame?" asked Matt. "When do you want my report?"

"I've got business in London next week, not exactly sure how long I'll be away. Does a month sound realistic?"

Matt nodded, while taking out his notepad. "Just a few other details please. His family, where he was born, went to school, worked. The basics."

"Perth, a city I've never like so try to avoid. Cameron's an only child and his parents died in a car accident when he was fourteen. He was raised by his dance teacher aunt — Glenda I think her name was. She died too, of breast cancer just before we met. Lots of sadness in his life, but you'd never guess from his positive attitude. He got into the Australian Ballet school in Melbourne, then came up here with *Wicked*. Anything else?"

"His birth date?"

"His birthday is the ninth of March and he just turned ... twenty-four. It's been a pleasure meeting you, Matt, and I look forward to your report. Josef will write a check and see you out. All the best, my friend."

He decided to walk back to Surry Hills, try to wear himself out completely before going back to bed. Leaving Eckersley's house he thought to himself how this was going to be one of the easiest cases of his career, verifying the obvious, perhaps finding a few skeletonettes in the closet, but nothing too unusual for a hot-blooded young Aussie gay male, nothing that would cause Eckersley to call off the wedding. But the closer to home, with the cockatoos squawking chaotically above his head in Paddington, and other screechers now day-partying on Oxford Street, his feeling changed; his, sixth-investigator's-sense kicked in and he started to think there was



something about the whole set-up that wasn't quite right. Eckersley was such an anal, self-important prig — could someone twenty-five years younger really love him as generously as Eckersley claimed? Someone like the beautiful boy in the Tahiti photograph, with such a mischievous twinkle his eye, although that clichéd phrase wasn't quite right. As Matt wrapped himself in his slightly unwashed sheets and just before he fell into deep, deep sleep, he realised a better way of putting it: the *dangerous* twinkle in his eye.

TO BE CONTINUED

Each month a new episode of *Perfect Gay Marriage* will appear on our website: <www.gay-ebooks.com.au>

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