

# My boyfriend's back

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July 2007

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Featuring new and original gay writing from:

**Brendan John Lindsay — Phil Scott — RJ Reynolds  
John Bartlett — Ian MacNeill — Daniel Shaw — David Carlino  
Tim Miles — Jarred Connors — Alistair Sutton**

**Edited and produced by Gary Dunne and Laurin McKinnon**

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## EDITORIAL



Dear Reader

It's our pleasure to present the second anthology of Oz gay fiction from gay-ebooks. The substantial number of downloads for its predecessor, the *2006 Boys' Summer Collection*, made this an obvious next project. Like its cyber-sibling, this pdf features a broad mix of short stories from a variety of new and established authors.

'Gay writing' in the new millennium is the loosest of labels. Here at gay-ebooks we're thoroughly post-post-modern and simply define it as writing that in some way comes from, or addresses homosexual experience. This collection highlights the diversity of that experience, using a range of writing styles and approaches. The paradox is that despite all this diversity, and the fluidity of labels, common themes such as love and lust emerge.

Maybe it's the suggestion of revenge in the title 'My boyfriend's back' that drew a number of manuscripts featuring a backdrop of violence. Racist, homophobic, domestic, homoerotic – violence takes many forms. This collection demonstrates the ability of fiction to convey emotional complexities and confusion, as well as harsher realities. Selecting the best of the many submissions was a challenging pleasure – we hope you enjoy these stories as much as we did.

In other news, we have joined with Pinkboard to launch a new graffiti wall, *Mardi Gras Memories*; (see

below) a unique opportunity for members of the community to share personal tales and photos of their favourite Mardi memory of the past three decades. To commemorate the big 30th anniversary next year, we'll be collating the best of these for another free pdf. It's a genuinely inclusive way for everyone to share in creating a grassroots history of this unique Sydney event. Together these stories can spell out who we are and where we've been, in a way that's both universal and uniquely personal. Everyone has their own favourite Mardi Gras story. To tell it well in a short paragraph is a specific challenge we hope our readers and writers will enjoy. Check out the link and add your contribution.

[www.pinkboard.com.au/graffiti/mgm](http://www.pinkboard.com.au/graffiti/mgm)

And a big thank you to the authors who appear in this collection. The donation of their work makes the whole project viable for us, and free for you, the reader. To discover more contemporary Australian gay fiction, come and check out our website:

[www.gay-ebooks.com.au](http://www.gay-ebooks.com.au)

Gary and Laurin

In 2008, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras celebrates 30 years of parades, parties and festivals - a huge history

Pinkboard

Everyone has a favourite Mardi Gras story -  
You can read some of them below -  
Then add your own Mardi Gras Memory to the wall ...

# Mardi Gras Memories

graffiti wall

In 2008, <[www.gay-ebooks.com.au](http://www.gay-ebooks.com.au)> will produce a collection of the best stories on the wall.

Mardi Gras Party 2007 by Pitez Images  
Mardi Gras Parade 2006 by Owen Hanson

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## Brendan John Lindsay

### The feeling is good

There are always others, I call them *they, them, norms*. They hurt me. They destroy me. They tear at me. They do this because I am their other.

It started at school of course.

I walked the concrete path, alone, along to class. The fruit hits me and explodes. It's cold, hard. It is a wordless assault an apple in the head.

I'm on the ground and a class mate appears. Renee.

"You ok, Thomas?"

There are no words. I get up and walk along.

Renee walks too, she doesn't speak to me. She runs along to her friends.

The bell rings. Science class.

Mrs Paroz rambles, I write on my notebook over and over again, "IAG IAG IAG." A secret in a secret language for only me to know.

The new boy sits up front next to Shaun Muller. I don't know why the new boy is being made to sit there. Shaun sits there because he is 'disruptive' to Mrs Paroz. The only reason for a new kid to sit up the front next to Shaun Muller is because he wants to sit next to Shaun. This must be it. They are giggling with each other in that snickering way that all straight boys do. I hate them.



Minutes pass and Mrs Paroz is explaining enzymes. Shaun Muller bursts out laughing. The new boy does too. Mrs Paroz turns around.

"Obviously you two can't behave next to each other. James," she said, that was the new kid's name, "go sit up the back next to Thomas."

Minutes pass again with James sitting next to me. He scratches his leg. I look and turn. He scratches all the way up his inner thigh. He doesn't see me looking. I have my head down, it looks like I'm reading my notes. I shuffle my seat forward so my erection is safely hidden under the desk. Unviewable.

"Hey," he says.

I look up momentarily, "Hey."

"I'm new."

"I know."

He asks me about myself. About the teachers. I can hear him listening intently.

Minutes pass.

"Are you gay?" he asks.

"No!"

"You sound gay."

My heart beats. I do sound gay. I have an erection under the desk because of you. Fuck you. You hate me. You are a *they*.

"You are gay, aren't you?"

"No."

He will not believe me. Someone comes to my rescue, a girl, Renee. "Leave him alone. He's not gay. You don't even know him."

"Quiet you three up the back," Mrs Paroz says and the conversation is over for now.

Class ended. He follows me.

"So?"

"So what?" I ask back.

"Are you?"

"Why do you care so much? Are you?"

He laughs. "Of course not."

I hurry away. He doesn't have English with me at least. I was left in peace to discuss the placing of adverbs in poetry.

Next day he doesn't ask. I walk in the school gate.

"Hey look, it's the gay guy," James says. He's hanging around with Shaun Muller and his crew. I don't look. I walk away.

At lunch I get a sandwich thrown at me. (Being that a sandwich is not as aerodynamic as an apple, the culprit is closer.) I see him. Shaun Muller. James is next to him.

"Fag!"

Renee is there like usual. I sit with her because there is no one else to sit with. She could sit with anyone. They like her. I am her pity lunch sit. But while I am quiet, silent even, I am not alone.

My eyes are wide. I do not cry. My eyes are wide.

We are in the school hall for the first P.E. lesson of semester. Boys and girls will be segregated. I will be alone, with *them*.

We walk onto the field. We are playing soccer. I have played before. Six years from four to ten. I play because there is nothing else to do. I run with excitement. The game is coming back. I am just a boy. Not a gay guy.

No one passes me the ball.

I hear them murmuring about me. I do not care. I am too tired from running up and down the field, ball-less. Science class is next.

It is the same. He sits next to me. He whispers words under his breath.

"Faggot."

Renee does not hear.



At the end of the class I wait for everyone to leave and go talk to Mrs Paroz.

"Yes Thomas."

"Can I move seats?"

"Why?"

"I just... don't see why I should have to sit next to him."

"I think you'll be a good influence on him."

"He's... he's..." there is a tear in my eye.

Mrs Paroz stares at me.

"I won't come to class if I have to sit with him. I'll go sit in the principle's office," I don't know what else to say, "He's an arse."

"Ok," she says, "If he's being rude to you, you should tell me."

"No, it's just..."

The bell rings. I tell Mrs Paroz I have to get to class. I leave. The next day I sit with Renee at a desk nowhere near James'.

"I think you should come," Renee tells me.

"Why, so I can dance by myself?"

"It'll be fun. You can dance with me and my friends."

"Exactly, *your* friends. Not mine."

"Don't be silly. Anyway I bought you a ticket already."

"Greaaaaaaaaaat."

"You can ask your mum to buy you some new clothes for it."

I decide I will go. Renee is happy. I'm curious what goes on at a school dance anyway.

"I want this one though," I tell mum pointing to the tight white/shiny top I have on.

"Just try this one," she asks holding up a baggy red surf t-shirt.

"I can tell it's too big from here."

"Your brother would wear it."

"I'm not like Troy, mum. We're totally different people and everything. Anyway this is the new style, everyone's wearin' it."

It was a lie. Not even a little white lie. The shirt would only impound upon my obvious otherness and mum knows it. The shop assistant comes to my rescue.

"It's true," she says, "I've sold quite a few of those."

Mum thinks on this, "Do you really want to wear something everyone else has."

"Of course mum, I don't want to stand out."

She concedes. The Visa comes out.

Today I catch the bus to school so I can walk in the back way, through the oval and around the music block to where I'll find Renee. No James, No Shaun Muller. Just me and my happy little mood.

"It's hot," I tell Renee.

"I told you. Look it's not even on til tonight and you're already excited."

"Ok you were right. It's just these are the first clothes my mum has let me get that aren't like my brothers. I like these clothes. They actually fit me for a change."

I smile as the bell rings. Renee smiles too.

Of course Shaun and James say things when they see me at lunch. I don't care. Not today.

My mum drops me off and I walk down to the school hall and wait outside. Renee sees me and waves. I go over to her and her group of friends. She doesn't introduce me, we all know each other, it's high school. They don't seem to mind that I'm there.

The doors open and we go in.

NO ALCOHOL

NO DRUGS

NO VIOLENCE

These are the rules.

The *Spice Girls* are playing and we 'really really wanna zigga zig ahh'. I am dancing with them in my shiny/white shirt and everything is fun for a few dances. Then we stop to gossip and drink water.

They all think Dave Roberts is hot. I think so to. I do not say. Instead I say I have to pee.

As I come out of the men's room James is there.

"Nice shirt, Faggot."

I close my smile and walk away.

"Where you going Tom? Don't wanna come in here and suck me off?"

I walk away. I walk away. I walk away.

I don't. I tell him.

"I think you're the faggot if you're that interested in me!"

"Beg ya pardon?"

"Beg yours."

I walk away.

Back with the girls I listen to their inane chatter and we get up to dance again.

I can't be bothered dancing to *Love Shack* so I sit. Renee comes over.

"I'm going to go," I say.

"Already?"

"Yeah."

"No, you're not."

"Yes, I am. I already texted my mum to come get me."

She looks at me with sad eyes.

"If you're sure," she says.

"Yeah I am, I'm just tired."

"Well, I'll walk you out."

"No you won't, stay here dance. Anyway they

won't let you back in if you leave."

She hugs me I walk out the door. Now what to do with my time while I wait an hour or so before I text my mum to really come get me? She cannot know I only stayed for half an hour. She'll know people said something about my clothes.

I sit on the concrete fence at the front of the school. I sit and think about nothing. The street is empty there is nothing to think about.

They have pulled me down. I am on the ground. They hit me. Shaun Muller. James. Can't the cars going by see? I am tight. My face. Covered. Stand. Down. Scurry away. They come. I am hit. I am down. I am bruised.

**O!** Someone shouts and they run away.

He comes to me.

**Are you ok?**

I'm fine. I'm fine. I push him away.

I walk off. I walk away. I am not there. I am waiting for my mother around the corner.

Come get me, I say, come get me now.

She comes. I go. We leave.

She cannot see me in the dark light. My face is clear I think. The bruises are underneath.

She mentions my shirt, tattered.

Dancing.

Couldn't just be from Dancing.

Dancing, I say.

Ok, she says.

In my room I look in the mirror. Shirt off. Stings. Black. Purple. Tiny. Tomorrow they will be bigger. I touch one, it hurts. I shower. Red runs round. Out of hair. Down skin. Brown, yellow, purple skin. Down drain.

School. School will be fine. I will avoid. I will hide. I will sit with Renee and her friends. In a group.

I start school by going in the back way even though mum has dropped me off out the front. Everything is cool. Around the music block and now I'm with Renee. She smiles at me. I smile at her.

Sport is first. Soccer again. I have a headache. I lay down in the sick bay. Thighs aching.

I have a headache through science as well.

English is great though. It always is. Yes, let's discuss Poetry again.

Keats? Keats is weak, I say.

Why?

Who cares about Daffodils.

At home I peel off the layers. The skin is dark. The skin is patterned.

Mum is at the door. Renee is calling. Again and again. No, I'm too busy still. She does not enter. She doesn't want another argument from me.

I touch myself. The skin goes red. I let go. Black.

The feeling is pain, I know. But it feels like good pain. I will like this pain. I will.

I run my hands over my skin. I have showered. It is taut. Smooth. Soft. Battered meat. Tender.

I touch myself, slowly. Down.

Down. I touch myself.

I think of James.

I keep touching myself.

It doesn't stop hurting.

It doesn't stop feeling good.



## Phil Scott

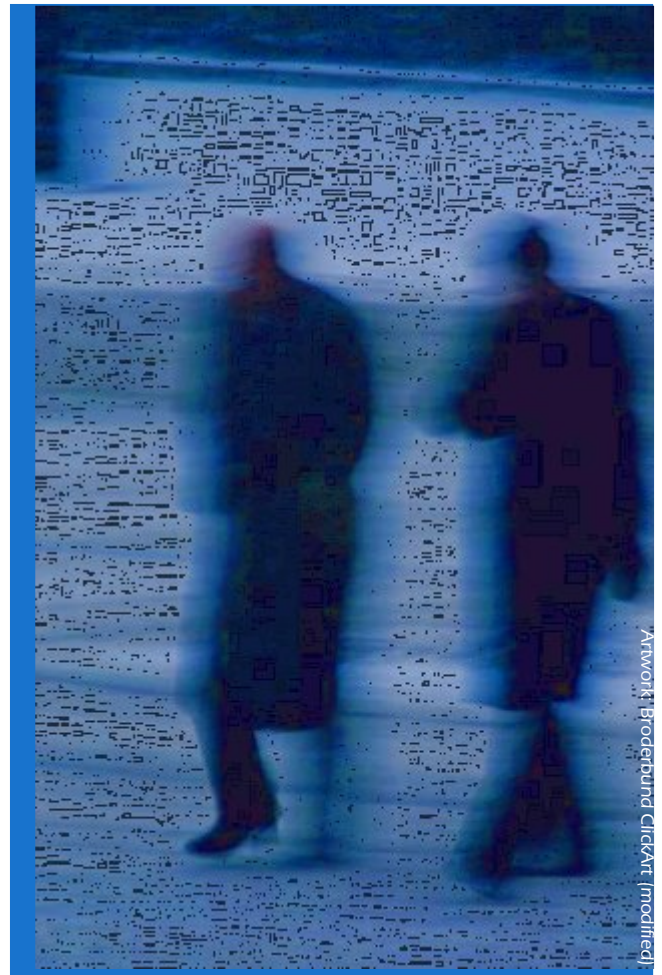
### My date with Danny

As I write I am looking at a framed photo on my desk. The snapshot was taken some twenty five years ago. It shows a young man and woman standing in the lush grounds of an old, well kept mansion. The couple doesn't own the mansion, needless to say, the Council does. It has been opened to the public and these people have paid good money to check it out. Maybe that's why somebody took the picture. A photograph signified an occasion in those days, when you had to use a camera and not your cell phone.

The boy is slim, with 70s-style bouffed-up hair parted in the center. He wears a teeny pair of navy blue shorts and has nice legs. The girl has her hair cut short, a boyish cut, and wears a pair of dungaree overalls. She looks like a separatist lesbian but she's not. The guy definitely looks gay and he is. I took this picture. These people are my wife and my first male lover.

Why did us gay men get married back then? We had our reasons, reasons that seem almost nonsensical today: appearances, fear, comfort, safety. It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. To some guys it seemed like the only thing to do at the time.

In my case, the girl I married and I were great



friends. We agreed on things that mattered: causes and politics, bands and movies. The virtues of natural medicine and Joni Mitchell. We ambled around the world together, lived in London, got summer jobs at a resort on Vancouver Island, visited a remote Scottish isle where a vegetarian commune squatted in the hut where Robert Louis Stevenson had written *Kidnapped*. We cared about each other; we each provided something the other needed—though, in hindsight, not everything. We were constant companions, so we called it love and got ourselves hitched. Our mothers were overjoyed, and I always tried to please my mother.

Anyway, that is a big, complicated story. This is a small story about a date.

I had a job as a waiter, my best paid job yet. Five nights a week in a small theatre restaurant, a joint designed to feed and amuse comfortable middle-aged audiences. Dinner was served from 7pm by waiters in starched, white aprons; very faux-Continental, although the food itself was ordinary. Most of our patrons would have been perfectly capable of cooking the same meals at home. That was the selling point. People prefer not to be challenged.

At 9 o'clock the curtains would part on a small stage down one end of the room and the lights go up to reveal an icon from the world of musical theatre. Aging but feisty, a true survivor, the star would belt out her repertoire until dessert was served at 9.45. From 10.15 to 11 she would perform a second set, always incorporating the obligatory "Happy Birthday to You". During that number, the headwaiter would lug a cake sizzling with sparklers over to the special table. If there were two birthdays in the house there'd be two cakes, and when we got to "Happy birthday dear..." there would be chaos as

two names vied for supremacy. The beloved diva would tell a couple more stories, drop a big name or three and launch into her greatest hit. Then the lights would dim, the curtains close, she would remove her wig, change and slip out through a back door into the night before the patrons were any the wiser. She didn't wish to speak to them. "It kills the magic," she used to say. It also takes up valuable drinking time.

The theatre restaurant was owned and run by two old queens who had gotten together before anybody else there (except the diva) was born. Reflecting the owners' taste, most of the waiters were gay and/or drop dead handsome. I had never in my sheltered life met so many homosexuals. I found it unnerving but at the same time compelling. Their campy talk amused me. Deep inside I yearned to be accepted by them, and after working six nights a week for several months, I guess I was.

The headwaiter (the birthday cake lugger) was a fiercely sleek man of Greek background: George. He carried himself tall and moved quickly but accurately among the tables. Polished though he was at his job, he always gave the impression it was beneath him. Very classy. Yet in spite of the contempt he radiated towards the diners, he bawled out any other waiter who brought someone the wrong meal or dropped a plate. He could be quite cutting if he was in the mood. I was more than a little terrified of George; I'm a plate dropper from way back.

The guy who ran the show was Danny, the stage manager. He was responsible for opening and closing the curtains, rigging and operating the lights, getting the show's star on and off and safely out of the building. Danny came in early with the kitchen staff and was the last to leave at night. He did three

people's jobs for the price of one, which didn't stop the owners from treating him like a slave and driving him hard. He seemed not to mind. He enjoyed the work, he loved the old diva and, because he was chirpy and funny and unthreatening, he was the one I got to know first. He had been in show business for years, even though he and I were the same age. And he'd been around! Another waiter, a cool straight boy and part-time lifeguard, told me of the legendary parties Danny and his boyfriend used to throw. These parties would go on for days, spilling out into the street, attracting every celebrity and every homo for miles around. The booze they went through! The laughs, the sexual liaisons and hilarious incidents, like the time... well, you should've been there. The parties had ceased over the last year or so when Danny and his boyfriend moved into a smaller flat (evicted from their first one, for obvious reasons). Danny himself never mentioned the parties.

I hadn't realized fearsome George was the mysterious "boyfriend" until Danny invited a bunch of people around to watch the Julie Andrews vehicle *Star!* on television. I found out because I overheard them arguing at work. George loathed Julie Andrews, the movie was a turkey, he didn't want other people in their flat, and he certainly had no intention of spending his precious Sunday night serving food to spongers! Danny, in a way we would now characterise as passive-aggressive, fought back. "I'll organize the food," I heard him say. "I'll do everything. I always do, don't I? Loosen up, baby. We'll have fun like in the old place."

My wife and I went to watch the movie, as did the diva and her current squeeze and two or three of the other waiters. The queeny old couple wasn't there; they never socialized at this level. The

lifeguard made some polite excuse.

From the moment we entered I could sense tension in the air. I already knew George was hostile, of course. He sprawled in a large armchair and scarcely bothered to greet the guests as they arrived. My wife and I he didn't speak to at all. The others knew each other much better than I did, and my wife—shy in situations like this—knew nobody. On top of that, Danny fussed around with food and drinks in a manic attempt to incite a party atmosphere, turning his back on George and refusing to acknowledge his boyfriend's languorous inquiries. "When does this lousy fucking picture start?" "Is *this* (meaning the guests) all you could drum up? Fucking tragic, darling."

When the movie did start, George went straight into his bedroom and slammed the door. "He sure never used to be this way," somebody said. "Is he all right?" Danny just shrugged. His energy had evaporated—all the frantic food and drink serving had only been for George's benefit—and now he sat staring at the TV in stony silence.

The star, our star that is, was no great Julie Andrews fan. I suppose she had her own personal reasons. That night she was drinking neat vodka with more than her usual level of commitment. Her escort, who struck me as a complete idiot, had never heard of Julie Andrews, let alone Gertrude Lawrence, and was bored out of his mind. The movie's innate torpor made things worse. During a commercial break, Danny excused himself and barged into the bedroom, closing the door behind him. Within seconds a shouting match started up, the like of which I had never heard. We hurriedly left the two of them to slog it out.

Danny sported a black eye when I saw him the following evening. (George had taken the night off.)

"What happened?" we all asked, as if we didn't know. Danny just laughed it off. "P F O," he answered. "Pissed, Fell Over." The diva had a long, private talk with him in her dressing room.

The show that night was under par, understandably. The house was small and restless, and the main attraction was harbouring a filthy hangover. It felt like the beginning of a hard week. As I was packing up to go home, Danny came over to me. His eye didn't look good at all. For some reason I felt a lump rise in my throat. How could that stupid bastard have hurt this sweet, harmless guy? How could he have hit my friend? "Are you OK?" I said.

He didn't want to talk about that. "What do you do during the day?" he asked me.

"Not much," I answered, surprised. "My wife works. I just hang around mostly."

"Me too," he said, "so we should do something together. Lunch, a movie, make a day of it. Get out and enjoy ourselves for a change. How about Wednesday?"

"Is this a date?" I grinned in my newly acquired worldly way.

"Yeah."

I slept badly over the next forty eight hours. Some kind of emotional charge had been triggered. It felt silly, but I was excited by the thought of going on a date with a man I knew to be 'out'. I wasn't completely naïve, but still I had no tangible idea of what to expect. It reminded me of the way you feel watching a horror movie: you know something unexpected may happen, but not what or—scariest of all—when. Relax, my sensible brain assured me, you're a married man for fuck's sake, nothing is going to happen! But my central nervous system felt differently.

For our date, Danny and I decided to take a short ride on a harbour ferry, 'like tourists!' After that we planned to catch a classic double feature matinee: *The Day of the Jackal*, a thriller set in France, plus *The Sunshine Boys* (which my wife and I had seen on stage).

The date got off to a shaky start. God knows how or why, but the subject of suicide came up. "I can't understand anyone even thinking about doing it," I babbled. "Nobody has problems that can't be solved. It's, I dunno, cowardly." Danny didn't comment but merely turned his wrists over. The backs of them were criss-crossed with white scars, five on the left and seven on the right. I wanted to sink into the harbour with embarrassment—but that wasn't all. I ached to throw my arms around him. I had a strong fatherly desire to protect him, at least that's how I analyzed the feeling. Whatever it was, I needed all my strength to fight it. I'm sure I was shaking.

"I'm an idiot. I'm so sorry!"

"No, you're right," he said, "It was dumb. Calm down, honey. I would never try it again." He paused. "I was kind of an OK pianist before I did this."

We didn't talk much after my brilliant faux pas, but headed for the movie house. *The Day of the Jackal* was up first. It was stylish, I thought, but I had difficulty following the plot. I simply couldn't concentrate. My heart raced and I wondered whether I was developing high blood pressure, a condition that affected my father.

I was much more aware of Danny sitting next to me than I was of Edward Fox up on the screen. I could hear Danny breathing. I could smell him. Sharp desire (which until now I had successfully kept off-limits) focussed me. What would it feel like to touch him, I wondered? Instantly I got a hard-on.

When he placed his hand lightly on my thigh it was a total shock and I jumped. Here was the 'horror movie moment'! After the initial jolt I laughed, as you do. Then he kissed me. Leaned right over and did it. Deeply. Hungrily. I'd like to say I was transported to another world but I wasn't: I backed off and glanced around to check if anyone had seen us. Nobody had. The theatre was empty apart from a few elderly women down front. I let myself relax. "What next?" I wanted to ask, but I couldn't speak. It was as if the rest of my life up until that moment had never existed. He had done exactly what I wanted, exactly what I had been wishing for in some part of my mind I had stubbornly refused to acknowledge. I felt guilty, naturally, but also light-headed and delirious, as though my body from head to foot was connected to a low but unmistakable electric current.

We watched the movie through to the end but didn't stay for *The Sunshine Boys*. Instead we went back to his place, to the very room where his boyfriend had beaten him up. There he showed me what men can do to and for each other: gently at first, but later not so gently. "On our first date?" I joked.

"You've been waiting long enough," he whispered.

I was worried in case his violent boyfriend should burst in on us but that never happened, not once in all the weeks we were together. I fell in love with Danny, a love that pumped life into every nerve in my body and said: This is who you are. This is who you always were and who you always will be and it's extraordinary.

And now there's his old picture at the back of my desk. He looks quite different these days. His hair's nearly white and he has put on quite a lot of weight.

Heart trouble too, so I hear. We live in different cities but still I run into him occasionally. Last time we met he greeted me with a hug (as usual) and treated me to an expensive dinner—he wouldn't take no for an answer, even though I owe him more than I could ever pay back. That debt will stand forever.

Years after our affair had ended, somebody told me what had happened to George. His moody, violent behavior was the first sign of an inoperable brain tumor which eventually killed the poor guy. By then, Danny was in a relationship with a university lecturer. I heard they bickered incessantly, but at least the new boyfriend never laid a hand on him. As for me, my marriage lasted a while longer but finally, in a spirit of painstaking damage control, we called it quits.

I have a real job now (in IT) and I've been with my partner for ten years. We're happy, no question. Very compatible. Our first date was fun and romantic as well—a sweet, unanticipated surprise—but nothing exceptional. We'd both had plenty of dates before, so I guess we knew the moves.

My date with Danny, though: that was a date that changed the course of history.



## RJ Reynolds

### Between the flags

Every trip to the beach makes Drew think of a pilgrimage to Mecca. He always hears the name of Allah when Omar says 'Cronulla'. Omar just loves the sea and the sandy beach, the casual pedestrian nature of life, the way he and Drew walk close together but barely touch and hardly even speak. Shared looks, punctuated by seagull cries, are usually enough to keep them connected. For Omar the sensations of sea and sunlight and casual weekend companionship are like a seasonal thing, a counterpoint to his long hours of work, a lull in ordered activity, a time to roll up his sleeves and relax. Drew has grown up here. It is merely an ordinary place of his history, the backdrop to his childhood but the way Omar soaks it up, absorbing and assimilating it makes Drew see it differently. It becomes exotic through the exotic eyes of another.

"Want ice cream?" Omar is already feeling for coins.

"Mint choc-chip."

Omar has rum and raisin. He passes Drew's to him. They lick in silence.

They are free with and from each other, savouring different flavours together. People mill about them. The street is busy with shops. Pedestrians seem to go aimlessly about their



Artwork: Broderbund ClickArt [modified]



business. Drew's eyes are drawn inevitably to the young men, golden brown and board-short clad, wet from the sea or dry and salty from the sun. Most are shirtless, their flesh flexing naturally and unselfconsciously beneath their skin. They have mapped out masculinity with themselves, with the heat of their bodies and the temper of their talk. Drew thinks they are as tasty as hot chips. He likes the way they fill their space and spill out around themselves, their excess collectively pooling to form groups. He imagines how they fuck their girls like animals, hot, sweaty and relentless. When shouts escape their mouths, he imagines their other ejaculations, more private, telling spasms, ripe with involuntary violence.

In the nearby pub, powerful arms pull glasses to lips and mouths moistened with beer spit jokes like crude bullet points. Laughter makes a raucous song that even startles seagulls and is louder than the sea. Theirs is a rapid-fire language of short-ranged, unsophisticated comments, friendly derision, a tennis match of blunt, endearing insults. The drinking of beer seems to make them the same. They sway a little, bumping into and away from each other. They suddenly, spontaneously cheer, each catching the cry. The wordless sound carries flecks of beer and spit into the air and a fine, barely visible amber cloud of mist appears. The chorus dies a little until, out of the lull, a solitary voice blares.

"Arsehole!"

"Fuckwit!" Someone replies.

"Your round, you fucken Jew."

"I got the last one, moron!"

"Well, suck my fucken dick!"

Drew senses Omar tense, frost up and they pull apart slightly as they pass the pub. Omar mutters something low and guttural. Drew doesn't catch the

words but the tone is unmistakable, hostile, defensive, disdainful. They both watch the drinkers through the wide windows that open onto the street. Drew has an eye for curves in biceps, chests and bulging pants. Omar only sees a faceless, vulgar mob. He feels more civilised but they outnumber him. One or two of them look directly back and the strange, volatile, intimate space between assimilates them all like an expanding cloud. The meeting of gazes is unexpected, startling and disturbing, filled with too many uncertain possibilities.

On the street, in the car, in a doof-doo, sub-woofer world of blaring, hard-core, dance-club, beat-mix, four olive-skinned boys cruise for adventure. Raoul, driving, rules this canary-yellow, Monaro world. The others, three brothers, cousins or friends of friends, sprawl throughout the loud interior, smoking and mouthing "Shit"s and "Fuck yeah"s into their music, through it and out of windows. They are like a parade, not to be ignored. The horn erupts, a cacophony of sound that challenges as it splits the air. It even drowns their beats. The brother beside Raoul, looks out through mirror sunnies to the pub and he twists his neck slowly as a sly, rude grin stretches his mouth.

"Oi!" He calls to the drinkers.

"Hey, pussy boys." He raises a finger and laughs.

The taunt hits the drinkers like acid. They bristle, bridle, jump off their seats and throw curses back. Drew and Omar are caught between. Drew sees a funny side: high jinks; horseplay and 'boys will be boys'. Omar still has his eyes fixed firm on the drinkers, ignoring the car. Through the bustle of jeering white boys, Omar sees one raise his glass as if in salute then launch it and it arches, half-empty and spilling a perforated line of amber froth. The schooner spins as it sails through the air then

descends and connects with a loud, rude, sudden, cracking impact on the Monaro's clean and perfect windscreen. Incredibly, it fails to break at first but bounces off and shatters on the road. The car screeches to a stop in an explosion of curses. The drinkers cheer in unison like someone scored a goal. Even Drew sees danger now and goes to move on but Omar stays standing still.

Two teams, one olive, one white, pour out of the car and the pub and head for each other. Spectators stumble away from the fray, Drew along with them. Only Omar is left. Drew calls to him but he does not move. Omar stands firm and stupid like a bull, clearly angry, thinking the white boys are baying for him.

"Fuck you, Mohammed!" One of them jeers.

Omar purses his lips with anger and tries to reply but two olive boys push past him on either side and, reaching the white boys, start making fracas in earnest. Omar stumbles slightly then rights himself with a stiff step forward from the momentum of the push. Drew appears from somewhere, takes his arm, pulls and urges.

"Come ON!"

"Bastards!" Omar shouts with furious, fragile, self-conscious rage as if to the boys, the crowd, Drew and even to himself yet he does not pull away. The white and olive boys fight with fury now. Several score blows and there is blood. Omar pushes at one, an olive boy who turns but is confused as if unsure where to place this stranger and his uncertainty lets a white boy strike. He goes down but a brother comes aside, striking back and pulling him up at once. The tide is turning badly. Raoul regains his seat, guns the engine, blows the horn, sounding a retreat. The white boys force the olives back. Drew is frantic, pulling and shouting at Omar who finally

obeys while saving face with gestures and cries. The olive boys, however, are battered, bruised and disgraced. They cram into the car and it tears off, throbbing away at speed. Omar lets Drew walk him to safety as the white boys cheer again and curse their way back into the pub.

Omar and Drew sit in the car. Omar's wounds, while not physical are clearly visible as a strange puffiness of the face as if pride is no longer enough and has been diluted with something weaker and impure. His breath is noisy with unspoken words and unformed oaths. He is in the driver's seat. Drew sits silent and removed. There is no touching. They both nurse their anger, neither of them aware that it is their frailty which disturbs them most. Omar feels the edges of his mind curl slightly as he turns the car and parks. Slowly, he switches things off, the blinkers, the engine and pulls on the brake then he shuts his eyes and takes off his seatbelt in the dark. It is a long, slow, silent darkness that only takes seconds and, when he realises he is holding his breath, he exhales and cracks open the door. Drew has already gone to the house and Omar crunches his way up the gravel to follow.

They have been distant and cold for so long, barely speaking or looking at each other, that rolling self-consciously together into bed is almost a relief. It has become impossible not to touch and, for once, it is Drew who is first to explore, sliding his hesitant hand into the dark, hairy unknown. One of Omar's own reacts like a trap, snapping fingers around a wrist, capturing and repelling it, using the force of rejection to launch his own attack. Drew's feigned resistance is brief and futile. Very soon he is pinned, panting and slack-faced in the dark as Omar uses his weight and strength to manoeuvre them both. Their

breaths are like words but carry more meaning. Omar is louder. They do not kiss though their mouths come close.

When Omar fucks him, which he does with neither words nor foreplay, Drew obeys a silent rule that he should never close his eyes. Not so that Drew can watch but so Omar can see into them. He loves their blue-green look of the sea with a longing you'd expect from a man of the desert. He loves Drew's blond hair less, thinning and receding as it is like an empire once splendid and now in decline. Their skin together, hairy brown on smooth pale, as they press each other like continents, delights them both. Their contrast and their difference define them better. Omar is larger and life in the west has made him soft. His flesh shakes flabbily as he thrusts and Drew enjoys a secret, guiltless pleasure as it gives like jelly against his own gym-toned, disciplined thighs. Drew is mesmerised by Omar's ferocity, it overwhelms him and yet strangely, at its core, is a secret trace of desperation. Omar needs what he takes so badly. He seems smaller than his desire, lashed to it and driven. Drew cannot ignore his own pleasure. To be plundered like this enthralls him. It's a wild sensation. His attention is fixed on the feeling of motion inside him, the way they have become an engine of flesh. Somehow, for once, Omar's timing is slightly off. Their synchronicity slips with a slight crashing of gears and this only excites Drew more. It makes for a crazier ride. Omar is a-kilter, askew and slightly adrift. His thrusting becomes awkward and prolonged. He takes longer to ascend. Drew senses time stretch and pull at his nerves. He wants to here and now forever, even as he knows the end must come. Omar has journeyed so far, surmounted so much and rarely ever stumbled. He's never really lost his way and even now he pushes on, engrossed

by his own progress, pressing himself harder and further to the point, feeling himself flow through his own body madly, mindlessly until with a handful of final, inevitable blows, he escapes himself for a moment and flees into another.

He is exhausted by his triumph, sinking so fast it's like he never won and he rests like a baby on Drew's smooth, cool, sweaty back. They stay still and connected like that for several long minutes but Drew is restless, highly aroused and soon stirs beneath Omar's lifeless form. They are telling each other something without words. Drew is too excited, and Omar too dull, to really understand but their bodies know and shift themselves accordingly.

When Drew fucks Omar, which he does rarely and with some temerity, he is somehow feline, slow at first, inquisitive and full of finesse but ultimately a predator. Omar barely moves or makes a sound, except the occasional grunt. Drew is amazed, as always, to find himself inside, surrounded by a muscular tension at odds with Omar's usual soft flabbiness. Drew is ascendant now and he makes the most of it. Omar becomes even quieter still and, despite his apparent withdrawal, Drew feels him right there, motionless yet vividly alive. Drew occupies a space that is at once dangerous and safe and they both grow harder with the tension of it. It seems endless and relentless but Drew feels his climax rise within him like laughter, even hearing humour in his own gasping breaths. He smiles like an idiot as he masters the man beneath him and then loses himself completely.

Once the scent of their lust has gone stale and the bed no longer welcomes, Drew will get up and follow Omar's earlier path to the tiny, flour-sprinkled kitchen, already boasting the warm aroma

of bread. Omar prides himself on this, his one domestic task. Drew will wait patiently for him to pull his loaf tenderly like a new born child from the oven and place it ceremoniously on a wire rack on the table. It won't be flat like the bread of his childhood. It will be square and high topped, toasted brown on its crust but white and soft inside. Omar won't let Drew eat straight away.

"Wait." He'll say, "It needs to cool before cutting."

Only Omar is permitted to slide the knife's cold, serrated edge into the still breathing crust and let the perfect slices fall, one upon the other, before they eat them plain or spread them with condiments or jams. Omar will punctuate their sweet and sticky moment with his sips of coffee, far too strong for Drew, and with hungry puffs of cigarette. Drew will watch him as he eats and drinks his tea, a stranger in the kitchen, dark and dangerous and kind, a kindred spirit, a monster, strange yet not unlike himself. When the bread is gone the knife will rest redundantly between them.

## John Bartlett

### Le bel homme sans merci

*I'm trying to pick up the shards with bloody fingers, knowing that I'm a man no longer. I will live the rest of my life as a snake or a snail not as a human being. I will spend the rest of my life crawling on my stomach, eyes close to the ground, so that I don't see too much, see too far ahead, no vision of what lies in front of me. To be a human being and know too much is a curse...*

Journal: September 24th 2005

I was coming home that day on dusk and stopped at the traffic lights near the McDonalds' corner and I happened to look up and saw this cute guy dragging two black plastic rubbish bags towards the pedestrian crossing. They must have been heavy because he was really struggling. Of course I wondered what was in them. Maybe he'd cracked it and done in his old woman, cut her up into little pieces and was going to put the bags in the McDonalds' skip. The lights turned green and I laughed to myself as I gunned the engine toward home. It wasn't so funny two weeks later when I saw the same guy again.

But maybe I'd better start the story with that day. I'd driven up to Meads, a little place in Gippsland. Some guy had phoned me, said he'd heard around



Artwork: Broderbund Clickart (modified)

the traps that I did a bit of modelling and could I drive up for the day and model for him? Said he'd pay me fifty bucks an hour including travel time. Mate, I've never been paid that much before and with it being cash in hand, it was a bit hard to say no. I never did ask him how he'd got my number in the first place.

His voice sounded educated so I thought there'd be no funny business and if there was I'd probably ask for extra. I've been in a few tight corners over the years, modelling for bored housewives or husbands whose wives are 'out of town'. Often they say they've just started an art course at TAFE and could I model for a coupla hours?

Once I even had to jump out the window starkers because the bored wife's husband came home unexpectedly. We weren't even up to anything sus but she just went berserk when she heard his car and said how could she explain to her husband why there was a naked man in her lounge doing poses in her high-heels and Melbourne cup hat? I never got paid either or got my clothes back and I had to drive home starkers in peak hour traffic. It was a bit of as buzz though, as I look back. I am a bit of an exhibitionist so I guess that's why I like to go starkers anyway.

What was I saying? Yes, I drove up to Meads. It was a great day and good to get out of the city for a while. Bright sunshine, lots of cows in the paddocks doing whatever it is they do and by the time I cleared the city I was singing duets with a Britney cassette. Hit me baby one more time. Mate, I was stoked.

Meads is a tiny place. Just one pub and a sort of general store cum post office place. I'd written down the directions to the house over the phone but once I got there it all looked different and I

ended up going to the pub to ask for help.

"Mr Elphingrot?" said the guy behind the bar, "You don't want to go to his place mate. People round here reckon he's a bit batty. Anyway he's one of those arty types, you never know about them." The barman was about fifty something, wearing the usual flannelette shirt, probably never been inside a gallery himself in his life, not like I have. What did he know about art, I thought?

Mate, did I ever tell you there was a painting an old codger did of me once in the Ballarat gallery? I don't like to let on to many people coz I don't want loads of people rushing up to have a look at me. It's embarrassing when you see the finished picture up on the wall. It's funny, I like the modelling part but I don't want to see it when it's finished. I wouldn't give a stuff if it just got burned or chucked out. I get off on showing off in front of people but I don't like the idea of people creeping round behind my back and looking at my picture when I don't know about it. It's like, if I'm out there for anybody and everybody to gawk at, I lose a little bit of myself. I'm a pretty private sort of guy really.

I should've taken more notice of what this bloke in the pub said. But how was I to know then? I found the house eventually and it looked okay to me, even had one of those picket fences with roses growing over it – seemed pretty harmless so I thought it'd be cool.

Now I wish I'd just stopped knocking on the door after the first coupla minutes and everything would have been okay I reckon but no, I just had to keep on knocking coz I'd come so far and I was a bit pissed off that he wasn't there after asking me to come specially that day.

I must have knocked off an on for a good ten minutes but nobody answered. I was bloody



annoyed by then, coming all that distance if the silly bastard had got the day wrong. I walked round the house a few times calling out and looking for another door but there was still no answer and the place looked deserted. Mate I was really getting pissed off by then. There was smoke drifting outa the chimney so I supposed someone was home. But I wasn't sure and by then I'd had enough and started to walk back down the path to the Ute. Then – and this was my big mistake – I thought I'd come so far I'd have one more try before I left, I walked back to the front door and knocked once. Mate, the door flew open straight away and there he was. I got such a shock, I bloody nearly fell over right then.

Right away I recognised him as the cute guy I'd seen in the street with the black plastic bags, shaved head and sexy in a rough-trade sort of way. Just my type but a bit older than me. So I started to calm down a bit. "So you've come," he said just looking at me. I explained that I'd been knocking for about ten minutes. He just ignored that and eventually stepped back so I could go inside. And then he said something like: "As the world is round, I knew that one day you would find your way back to me." Maybe Elphingrot really was batty like the guy in the pub had said or maybe he was some sort of mad poet. I can't come at that poetry crap but I do write things down in a book sometimes, like when I'm tryin' to work out where the fuck my life's going but I'm not crazy enough to show it to anybody.

I'm trying to recall now exactly what he looked like but it's really hard for me to remember exactly. It's like I'd entered a different sort of world as I went through the door and I can't remember details too clearly now, just the main things that happened. I sure remember them. The house was pretty cluttered, things piled on chairs and tables, books,

baskets, things like that and a few black garbage bags too, piled in the corner as if someone was moving out. There was a big mirror along one wall. I remember that because I watched him in the mirror as he went to get me a beer. As he bent over to open the fridge I saw he was wearing tight torn pair of jeans with a black T and he was really hung.

He handed me a can of Fosters and I had to move a few things off a chair to make space to sit down. I remember there a big box on it and it felt like it was full of bricks when he asked me to put it on the floor. We sat there drinking for a while and soon I started to relax. I'm always a bit uptight with a new artist until I suss them out and so we talked about normal things, like the trip up and the weather, the sort of conversation you have with someone you've just met while you try to work them out.

Then suddenly out of the blue he said another funny thing. "Whatever you do, don't go though the door into that room," and pointed toward this door painted black at the far side of the room. Well, why would I? I'm not into prowling round strangers' houses without their permission. I'm pretty straight down the line really. My parents brought me up in the Methodist Church and I still even go into churches sometimes just to sit and be quiet. Yeah, it's a bit of a shock for the oldies who toddle in and see this guy with shoulder-length blond hair, tats and piercings sitting in the pew and they piss off pretty quick. Being inside a church for me is a bit like doing a sitting for someone I know, going into a trance while I'm doing it. It's like a meditation sometimes with the right person.

Soon after he said this, I'm thinking, when are we going to start the damn sitting but I'm also thinking well, the silly bugger's paying me for this while I drink his beer so what am I worried about? Then he

says. "Will you excuse me a minute, mate. I'm just going to the mailbox down at the general store as I'm expecting something important. You can wait here if you like."

He must be a rich bastard if he doesn't mind paying me while I wait for him to collect the mail, so that's cool with me. I heard the car drive off and then I sneaked a quick look around the room. There were a few paintings around the walls, nothing to my taste; they looked a bit odd to me, the sort of stuff I'd call post-modern. That's what I call anything I don't like. The largest was this portrait of a man in old-fashioned costume face a bit like Elphingrot, wearing this green shirt open at the neck and his long blonde hair tied back behind his head. There was even a candle burning in front of it like the shrine my nana used to have in her bedroom with a picture of my Aunt Maureen who'd left home when she was fifteen and never came back. Well, that gave me the willies for starters. I should have pissed off then and there.

I wish he'd never mentioned that other room. The more I thought about him saying 'don't go into it' the more I wanted to see what was in there. Stupid wasn't it? I'm not usually curious about things like that, but it was almost as if he'd said it on purpose to make me do it and I couldn't control myself. Anyway he wouldn't be back for a while yet so I opened the door slowly and peered in. It was so bloody dark I couldn't see anything for a while. There was no furniture except for these drawings around the room set up on easels and these two bloody enormous candelabra with burning candles in them. Mate, it was a bit like something out of a Dracula movie. Of course I had to go right into the room to see what the drawings were but I wish I hadn't. I couldn't believe it. There were these five

or six drawings around the room and they were all of me. Naked in different poses. You reckon I'm dreaming? They were so real, almost like photographs. Mate, I nearly crapped my pants on the spot, I've never been so spun out. I mean I'd never sat for this guy before in my life but he'd painted these pictures of me. I backed out of that room quick smart into the other room, grabbed my bag off the chair and headed to the front door. Man, I was outa that place as fast as I could. But when I opened the front door there he was. "I'm sorry, I have to go," I said, trying to get past. I don't know what happened but it was as if my head wanted to get out of there but my legs seemed to belong to someone else. I wondered if it was the beer. Maybe he'd drugged it.

"Of course you don't. Why leave now when you've come all this way and you did promise you'd sit for me." Mate, I wanted to leave but my legs couldn't do it and I was starting to feel a bit woozy by then. "I've been waiting a long time for you to come," he said and took me by the hand into a room where there was another easel set up and more burning candles with some sort of incense smouldering in the corner. I've never smelt that incense before or since but it did calm me down a bit and pretty soon there I was taking off my clothes and then just doing the poses he was suggesting. He sat down like a normal artist and took up this piece of charcoal and started sketching. The room was completely silent except for this scratch, scratch, scratching of charcoal on paper. Then the worst thing of all happened. As I sat there, I gradually felt as if I couldn't move and I was shrinking smaller and smaller all the time. Fuck, I've never felt so scared in all my life. My brain was straining to send this message to my legs to get up and piss off but

somehow the message wasn't getting through. It felt worse than a night on the grog. And all the while I was getting smaller and smaller, I could see this man getting bigger and bigger, taking control of me his charcoal scratching on and on. I knew he was writing secret things about me on the paper, things no one else in the world knew. I tried to call out, to let him know what was happening but my voice was this tiny little squeak like a mouse. He just smiled at me every now and then. I was trapped. How was I going to escape? Eventually when I felt I was about as big as an ant, I knew I was done for. It felt like someone had sucked out my brain with a vacuum cleaner.

After a long time, I realised that he'd left the room and I was on my own. I discovered I was able to move again but slowly like I was drugged. Probably I was. I managed to put my clothes back on and grabbed my things but as I crept toward the door I happened to glance at the drawings he'd been doing on the easel. They weren't real drawings at all but just an endless series of unconnected scratches and doodles on the paper, the sort of thing a child might do with a crayon. Man that freaked me out too. If he wasn't really an artist, what was he then? I managed somehow to get into the other room and there he was waiting and smiling this funny lopsided sort of smile.

"Let's do another session soon," he said brightly, like he'd just been attending some fucking normal 'life drawing for beginners' course or something. "I'll give you a call sometime and you can come back again if you like. I find it takes a while to be relaxed with one another, don't you? I hope the money is the right amount," and he held out an envelope as I stumbled toward the door.

Mate, I was down that path and into my ute as

fast as my shaking legs would take me. I had to stop at the pub and have a few whiskies before I could even think about driving home. Then when I got home I went straight into the bathroom to have a shower because I felt dirty, contaminated somehow, and there I found the mirror shattered into a dozen pieces and fallen into the sink, long jagged shards pointing up at me like fingers. Why would someone creep in while I was away just to break a mirror? When I looked into what was left of the mirror on the wall, I could just see the wobbly lines of my face, a bit like the guy's scratchy charcoal drawings of me. The worst thing is that ever since I just sit by the phone waiting for him to call again. I know I won't be able to stop myself going back. He's looked inside me and discovered my secrets and now I want to go back and let him take what's left.

## Ian MacNeill

### The Correspondent

‘Watch, first thing she’ll do is look for the key.’

Jane Brougham, who hadn’t made a film for ten years, despite an admiring public and respect for her abilities, proceeded to do just that.

‘She plays everything to her key light,’ the Cameraman whispered to this girl he was supposed to be mentoring, though he hardly cared whether Jane heard him or not. What could she do? She was in no position to object after word had got around about the way she behaved on that set up in New Guinea – insisting on doing her own make-up, wouldn’t wear the costumes, not taking direction, not talking to anyone. On an Australian set that was the worst sin of all. You could be drunk, stoned, not know your lines and they’d work around it. Because you were all in it together, you were all guys together. That was Film: it rained, the gaffer broke his arm playing touch between takes, the horse bit the lead man and he wouldn’t go near it, they couldn’t turn the pumps off and the water went all over the cables, a plane flew over, someone forgot to rake the lawn where the couple rolled, the guy playing the crim got pissed the night before and couldn’t even weave and bob for the fight scene, the leading lady was crying about something ... you could handle all of that but you couldn’t indulge



Artwork: Broderbund ClickArt (modified)

some talent who thought she – or he – was too big to mix with the crew. Screw that.

'What does that mean?' the Trainee asked.

'It means she knows more than is good for her.'

Jane Brougham said she was ready.

'She's getting a bit beyond it,' the Cameraman whispered. 'Take a look.'

Jane sprang into the viewer. The strength of her beautiful face was hardening a little. Her eyes had sunk into their sockets, fine lines plunged towards her upper lip. The trainee sprang back - Jane had seemed to turn her powerful gaze on her. She watched as Jane scanned the set.

The scene was about Jane waiting at an airport for an old lover to return from years overseas.

The Director checked to see if Jane was ready. The Cameraman pushed the Trainee aside and glued his eye to the viewer. 'Silence!' Jane went through her walk, pause, gaze at the non-existent Arrivals monitor. The Director conferred. She did it again. The Director conferred. Jane did it again. And again. Jane took a breath and looked over his head as the Director conferred. She nodded without looking at him. They were ready for a take. There were three before he called, 'Cut! That's fine.' Jane walked off the set.

The Trainee was astonished viewing the rushes. The scene which had seemed so simple, straightforward, ordinary now filled the screen with impatience, anxiety and self-doubt. Jane was powerful and overburdened.

'He's a poof. He's got Aids,' the Cameraman said to the Trainee as the Director lined the leading man up to emerge from Arrivals. She didn't believe him, was starting to hate him. How could he be? Look at him – he was tall and rangy and brown and ... She had never heard of his having a girlfriend but he

couldn't be. 'She only go the part because of him,' the Cameraman said, 'they're old mates.'

The Director got it in one take.

The rushes showed him emerging from the automatic door, loping down the walkway, a travel kit swung over his shoulder, looking with studied nonchalance for whoever was expecting him. The Trainee thought he was perfect - he seemed to instantly establish that he was a war correspondent returning from years away in trouble spots.

The cameras rolled. The meeting was difficult.

'Hullo Ben,' Jane said, restraint masquing her excitement and self-doubt.

'Hullo Sandie,' the Actor said. 'Thanks.'

'Thanks for what?'

'Coming out to meet me. After all this time.'

The Director wanted ... what? 'More ... um, puzzlement, like what are you doing back here, are you going to ruin my life again?'

Jane and the Actor exchanged glances.

They did it again.

'See?' the Cameraman said, 'She always knows exactly where the key is, that's really what she's playing to, she should be playing to him. He better pull her into line now or he's going to have her walking all over the film.'

The Trainee thought they were in love; Jane couldn't look at him.

They did the scene again. The Actor said, 'Coming out, it's been a long time.'

The Director shuffled the pages of the script. The Actor slapped his forehead. The Director's Assistant yelled, 'Cut!'

Jane stood there, patient.

They did it again.

The Director yelled, 'Cut! Better.' He said to Jane, 'You got the unsureness this time.'

'She got it the first time,' the Trainee said.

'Shh,' the Cameraman replied. 'What would you know? She's still playing to the key. You'll see in the rushes.'

'See?' he whispered during the viewing. 'He'll have to get some close-ups to fill that in, give the editor something to work with.'

The ex Lovers reignited but she had to help him get some DVDs to a group who could get them played on Australian T V. For various reasons the Australian government might not want this. A clandestine group was trying to prevent it too.

'I know, this is about the Bilboa Five, isn't it?'

The Cameraman said, 'No. It's about some Australian guys who got shot up in Indonesia – the folks out there in the dark are supposed to know that. Fucked if you ask me, they're never going to get it.'

The word on the set was that it was going well though they were still watching her with apprehension.

'No!' Sandie gasped, 'I did not want this. I did not want this! It's happening again. You always – What is it about you and trouble? I cannot do this again.'

The Lovers had just escaped through the mangroves.

'Cut!'

'Sorry,' the Cameraman called out, 'I didn't get that. Miss Brougham seems to be lining it up with her key. Again.'

The Trainee watched as Jane Brougham swung her gaze up at them and sighed. The Actor touched her on the arm. Jane Brougham readied herself for the fourth take.

'I think we'll break,' the Director said.

'Look,' Jane Brougham said, 'we can't get this like this again. The light's perfect. Can't we do it now?'

What do you want that you're not getting? You can't let the crew tell you how to direct. It felt good.'

They did it again. The Actor stumbled as he helped Jane out of the mangroves, muddied and bleeding. She grabbed at him to prop him up.

'Cut!'

Neither she nor the Actor emerged from their caravans for the rest of the day.

The Trainee was disappointed to see Jane emerge alone from her caravan when her driver arrived. But when the Actor emerged from his and roared off on his bike it seemed right.

Another day by the mangroves. Clouds scudded but they got it, or what would have to do.

They were hiding in a caravan park. Then there was a closed set for a sex scene.

'They'll use a body double to cut in,' the Cameraman explained to the Trainee, 'but her tits are still good. She's probably had them done.'

'What's he like?' the Trainee asked.

'He's O K. What do you mean?'

The Trainee was satisfied with the Cameraman's blush and glare.

The Actor started to look terrible. They had to arrange medium shots for him.

'What's wrong with him?' the Trainee asked.

'I told you, he's a poof, he's got Aids,' the Cameraman said. 'Poor bastard.'

But the Actor still had a beer with the crew.

They rearranged the schedule. They shot a few more chase scenes; a scene with the Actor running down a fire escape. They did fillers with a stand-in.

'You're getting quite a work-out aren't you?' the Cameraman said.

'What do you mean?'

'It's not usually this exciting, they're not wasting any time.'



The next two days they sat around because the Director was going over the script with one of the Writers and one of the Producers.

Another Producer sent a representative to keep an eye on things.

'This is why they've got insurance – one of the reasons,' the Cameraman said.

Jane Brougham was on set every day, she no longer stayed in her caravan when she wasn't needed. The Trainee thought she was magnificent.

Now Jane Brougham had to do a scene originally written for the Actor – liaise with a sadistic T V Executive who is really after the destruction of the DVDs and get away when she realises what his game really is. He grabs her by the throat and hurls her around a lot giving her the opportunity to grab a large vase of flowers, crack him with it, run into a car park and make a get away in her beat up old car. Jane Brougham insisted on many practices with the vase to get the timing right because, as she told the T V Executive, she was going to go for it. He told her he was too.

The rushes left the Trainee breathless.

Make-up had to cover the bruises on her neck. Wardrobe got her a cheongsam collar for the restaurant scene then they added a pearl choker. She checked in her mirror and took it off. Went to her caravan.

'Here we go,' said the Cameraman.

Jane reappeared with a small scarf knotted around her throat.

The Actor reappeared on the set.

The restaurant scene turned out beautifully. Jane Brougham looked beautiful, edgy, angry. The candles flickered in her eyes like dragons then softened to a glow of love. The Actor responded with obstinacy, defiance, anger, reasoning,

seduction. A 4 wheel drive crashed through the window.

Then they decided the Actor had to be beaten up by the T V Executive after all. This would explain things.

Make-up gave him a black-eye and cuts. Continuity checked their changing colours and textures. Then they decided to give him malaria. They did the restaurant scene again so that he could explain he wasn't feeling too good because he couldn't shake the effects of the cerebral malaria he got while he was working on the story 'up there'. 'And you're drinking again,' Sandie said sadly though it wasn't in the script.

He started to look worse and worse. He seemed to be evaporating before their eyes. It was extraordinary. It became a matter of waiting to see how much less of him there was each morning.

They had to run again. They had to run all the way to Byron Bay. They were chased along the Pacific Highway by a beautiful black car.

As the Cameraman had said, it was very interesting. The mock-up car interior got very hot and the Actor's eyes rolled back in his head. They had to get him out. This happened twice more. They played fans across him and planned to do a shot showing them driving up the Pacific Highway with the windows down.

The Actor suddenly sat down in the queue in the North Coast Town Post Office as they impatiently waited to buy packaging for the DVDs and send them express post to a Queensland T V station where Sandie had a mate. They propped him up and shot it from the shoulder up with the extras in front and behind crowding him and Sandie. 'Lean on me.' Jane Brougham arranged a kind of embrace which propped the Actor up.

They were captured and held outside the North Coast town. They had posted the DVDs anyway. The agents beat him up to force him to tell where the DVDs were. Then they threaten to beat her up. It was clear they were going to shoot them in any case. As they stood in the bush, waiting their inevitable fate a plane flew over. 'The North Coast Mail,' Sandie says. The Trainee wiped away a tear. 'It's referencing Casablanca,' she explained to the Cameraman.

Of course the Producers had insisted on an escape and a romantic clinch. But even with the explanation of the second bashing, he didn't look plausible.

'Look!' Jane Brougham said, 'Let's leave it there. The DVDs will get through – that's the story. Our relationship is too thwarted to come out convincingly as happily ever after. You underestimate the public.'

A Muri woman who had noticed the pistol pressed into the Actor's back outside the post office saves them and drives them out of the bush track in another battered car. There was to be a Close Up of them in the back of the car, smiling. The Actor passed out again. The Cameraman moved away in disgust. 'I can't do this,' he said. 'I think I can,' the Trainee offered.

They got it in the can.

The Actor died before they had a rough cut.

It was widely reported that he had died of complications from Ross River Fever caught while filming his last film, the thriller *The Correspondent*.

One of his actor mates from the Industry gave the eulogy. 'Women loved him,' he said.

This was widely reported.

The Trainee glanced across the cathedral aisle at Jane Brougham. Her face was granite.

At the wake Jane Brougham took her turn at the mike and said, 'Women may have loved him but he loved men – young men. Let's at last, when it's too late, accept him for what he was. We killed him as much as the disease.'

The Cameraman nodded in the direction of Jane Brougham after his second beer, 'She'll never work in the Industry again,' he said.

But the Trainee had moved on.

## Daniel Shaw

### My boyfriend's back

There he was, Ryan Vine. The instant I caught his eyes my heart swerved violently and I had to look away.

It had been so long ago, I'd almost forgotten him. Correction – I could never forget him, but he had receded into the history of my life and faded away with the hedonistic whirl of my twenties.

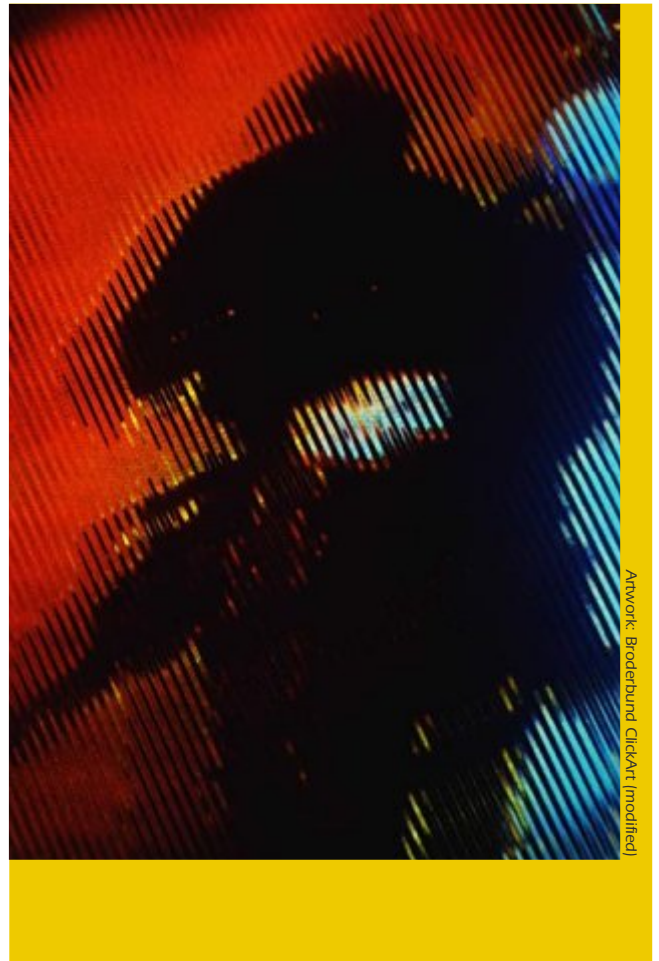
It was the middle of winter and I was shopping for a book for my brother. He's easy to buy for – I just go straight to the boating section of any bookstore and pick up the first thing I see. I wrap it up, give it to him with the receipt, then he takes it back and exchanges it for whatever he really wants.

He sails regularly, so I get kudos for trying.

Anyway, I stood slightly out of sight for a moment wondering what to do. Should I say hello? I was sure it would be awkward because it always was. He comes from a different world you see.

"Eddie!" He said, smiling and coming over. He shook my hand like a businessman. Nobody ever calls me Eddie. My name is Edward, yet he never called me anything else.

As soon as I heard his voice, it all came back to me. Perfect memories. Of course they hadn't been perfect when they happened – I'd had no money and was under a lot of stress. But time enhances



Artwork: Broderbund ClickArt (modified)

memories and improves them – much like embellishing photos on a computer.

“Ryan, what a surprise! My god I haven't seen you in... how long?”

“Five years.”

“Wow. You look good. What have you been doing?”

“I was inside.” I already knew this.

“For five years?”

He nodded. I didn't quite know what to say. I thought the effect he had on me might have worn off, but it was still there. I could feel the excitement just looking at him. After spending six weeks with him all that time ago, I knew he was completely unpredictable. What would happen now?

“When did you get out?”

“September last year, it was rough. You're looking well, Eddie.”

I'd heard on the grapevine he'd been involved with an armed robbery. Somewhere near Vaucluse. Or Double Bay. Somewhere ritzy in any case. That's where all the money was, he was fond of telling me. I was never shocked at his crimes, only surprised that he hadn't been caught sooner. He'd been either extremely lucky or very talented.

“Feel like a beer mate?”

“Sure.” I was supposed to get a haircut, but that would have to wait.

We stopped at a bar with chrome beer taps and paintings of fruit on the walls. I looked at him as he pulled a cigarette out of the sleeve of his Bonds tee-shirt. He was a little shorter than me with blond cropped hair, and deep blue eyes. Not classically handsome though. In the street you probably wouldn't look twice at him; but he had an energy that bounced from him the way sunlight does off gleaming chrome.

I sipped my beer, conscious of the electricity between us.

“So why were you inside?”

“Some cunt dobed me in.” he said. “You remember Roddy? We done a job in a servo and he got caught. When he 'fessed up, they came knocking for me. Bastard.”

“Some friend.”

“Yeah. I'll kick the shit out of him when I see him again.”

“Right.” I smiled at him, wondering how our worlds ever collided. But they did just that, one sunny afternoon when he was shoplifting in Harvey Norman. I saw him as he walked out. He picked me up in the Junction. Right there in the street.

Shocking.

One of those times where you get the door closed and rip each other's clothes off and fuck hard and fast with a hunger reserved for a feast after a famine.

Afterwards he smoked a cigarette and I went around the house and picked up all our clothes. I'd picked up his underpants, which were like a straight boy's. He was out of sight so I'd sniffed them – a minor perversion of mine, and they'd smelt musty and soapy. He also had about four tattoos adorning different parts of his body. One on his back of a Chinese fish, a mermaid on his left bicep and a dagger and a heart on the other. They weren't the usual gay tattoos, of tribal bands and Sanskrit bullshit about peace and harmony. Oh no, they were sailors tatts that had been done in a bout of binge drinking and club hopping, probably while he was on drugs and well before the age of sixteen, I shouldn't wonder.

His hand was cupped around his beer, fingernails

bitten down to the quick and grubby in parts. I could see the mark near his thumb where he and a school friend had tried to tattoo themselves with a needle and a ballpoint pen.

The salacious memory of our pick-up raced through my mind.

"You still play the fiddle?"

I nodded.

"And you, what have you been doing?" I said.

"I just had to go and see my probation officer. She's cool. The other one was a bitch. I told them I wanted her changing."

"Really?"

"But Janice, she's really good. Lots of helpful advice to keep me out of trouble."

"So you're on the straight and narrow?"

"Tryin' my best mate. Tryin' my best."

Somehow the thought of him staying out of trouble was something of a disappointment. The vagrant element of his personality became integral to his character. To imagine him with a job in a supermarket or something, disheartened me.

"You've been a good boy since you got out?"

"More or less. A bit of dealing, but not much else. An old mate of mine is into this credit card thing. They work in a pack see, and asked me if I'd do the nicking. They nick 'em, then get these class looking birds to go shopping at David Jones and stuff. As much as they can before the card gets reported. All organized like. Sounded good. If I wasn't on probation I probably would have, but I can't risk it."

In spite of my pity for his enforced captivity, the capacity for eroticism of all those men being thrown together without female company for months on end, was something which had loitered in my mind,

and indeed in my adult video collection, for quite some time.

"How were things in prison?"

"Fucking sucked mate. I was bashed twice in the first week."

"My god, really?"

He was cavalier about it. "They have to sort out the pecking order. Let you know who's boss."

"I suppose there was lots of groping and stuff too..." I said.

"Once or twice." He sucked on his cigarette. His brown arms were so muscular and solid, I could have bitten right into them.

"What, you mean you were involved?" I said in mock horror.

"Well I 'ad a bit of fun, nothing violent though. That fucks people up. There was lots of drugs though."

"In prison?"

"Yeah. That's the currency in there. Dope, speed and stuff."

"Where do they get them from?"

"There are sources." His cryptic answer warned me not to ask any more questions.

I wondered how much those jaded eyes had been privy to. I was eager to know more, but the distance between now and our old relationship had brought a modicum of decorum to my conversation. I had to admit though, I was getting toey just looking at him.

"Sounds like you were living the life of Riley." I laughed.

"Gotta get your kicks where you can, right?"

I sipped my beer, with a growing awareness of my weakness for alcohol in the afternoon, and how it always makes me randy. We had spoken for a while, and there was now a natural lull in the conversation. I knew I was about to make a mistake, but just then,

I became a little desperate for him, and threw caution to the wind.

I recalled memories of when I was a student at the Con, and meeting in the street that day. Within seconds we were walking together down to his apartment.

A squat, he'd told me.

Which added up. I couldn't imagine him paying good money for trifling things like rent. I moved in with him practically that afternoon. I painted a huge mural on his living room wall of an Ancient Greek landscape, replete with centaurs and minotaurs rendez-vous-ing in a shady glen. All very homoerotic.

I wish I'd taken a photo of it now.

Living with Ryan was exciting. You never knew what would happen next. He would disappear during the day, then he would bring me home presents like shoes, mobile phones and watches. At the time it never occurred to me to ask where this stuff came from. I assumed he had a business or something, for there was always a room full of goods waiting to 'be shipped'. Video games were a particular favourite. Seeing him on the bed in his underpants dodging imaginary cars with a joystick in his lap, is another enduring memory.

Sometimes feral looking people would come to the flat and take stuff away, but it would quickly be replaced.

I remember it was a sultry month and I spent most of it in shorts studying the rudiments of music and sawing out Bach's partitas on the violin, being late for lectures and then ending up in the bar each night with the Musicology students. I'd get home and often Ryan would be there waiting for me. He never asked where I'd been or who I'd been with, he would just walk right over to me and tell me to take

my clothes off. Then make me pose in various states of undress while he lay on the bed looking absorbed in me, ripe with lust. When the charade was over I was maneuvered into whichever position took his fancy, and I'd be made to perform.

My friends told me they thought it sounded degrading, but I confess, I wouldn't have changed a single thing about him or my summer of love.

Not for all the tea in China.

I realised after a while that everything with Ryan had fallen off the back of a truck. I'm a law abiding citizen and was shocked when I confronted him, and he told me that all the presents he had given me were lifted from various department stores all across the city. Then he proceeded to tell me what was from where.

I was outraged. But not so outraged that I would give them back. That's all my scruples were worth, I'm afraid.

Once I remembered going with him in his car to somewhere out west where he met some bloke in a deserted road and they chatted amiably for a while, then Ryan in a swift succinct movement, head butted the man and he fell to the floor dazed, blood trickling from his nose. Ryan walked casually back to the car as though nothing had happened. The scene filled me with a dread that sank into my guts. I knew suddenly that this could happen to me should he take issue with something I said. It scared me, but it was also a potent aphrodisiac. As soon as we got home, I stripped and teased him so much that he abused me all afternoon in a carnal sweat.

It ended just as strangely and abruptly as it had begun. One day I was shaving when I got a text message:

*'getout now, pollice on way get monney in tea caddy.'*



*Will call soon.*' (sic)

Tea caddy? A good place to hide loot; I hate tea.

I got dressed and got the money (there was about \$200) and then grabbed my violin and left.

I never saw him again.

All of those memories and more, swirled around me in the bar; the pick-up, the money I still owed him, the thought of him naked...

"You busy for the rest of the afternoon?"

"No. Why?" he smiled. As soon as I saw that smile I knew we were on. He might tease me a little, but I'd get there in the end.

"I bought a new unit and thought you might like to come have a look." I cast it in, hoping for a bite.

"A new flat, eh?" He too sipped his beer, then smiled at me. After a few seconds, during which I thought I might explode, he said, "Let's go then."

\* \* \* \*

It was just like I remember, but this time a little better because I hadn't been expecting it, and I had forgotten how sexy he was. Clothes in disarray all over the room, grunting and grinding on the sofa, the floor, the table, and finally the bed. Nobody ever treated me like he did. He pushed me face down into the mattress, and held my head down in the crumpled doona, while he screwed me relentlessly all afternoon and growled hot obscenities into the back of my ear.

Afterwards, he got up and walked to the bookshelf. The winter yields memories that are more nostalgic than any others. The darkening day and him silhouetted against the window in my warm apartment will stay with me for much longer than the sex. There was a small wind coming from

the gap under the door which tried to spoil the scene, but I ignored it.

"Nice picture," he said, nodding to a print of Rothko next to the window.

"Thanks. Can I have a cigarette?" I asked. I'd quit a long time before, but I was feeling particularly carefree. There are moments that are given to us only fleetingly and we need to savour them; some things are relished more profoundly with a smoke.

"Sure." He flicked the packet over. I loved watching him naked. He was a joy to behold. He pulled out a book and flicked through, the breeze from the pages sent particles of dust in the light, dancing around him. His penis teetered as he moved.

I lit the cigarette. It tasted bad, but I pushed through it.

A biography of Beethoven stood beside my Beautiful-Naked-Men-In-Artistic-Shots coffee table book. I pride myself in taking enjoyment from the whole spectrum of cultural entertainment. He perused my books, and pulled another one out which I'd been meaning to read.

"You read this?"

"Not yet."

"It's bloody thick isn't it?"

"It most certainly is. Pass me your underpants." I said.

He laughed and threw them over. I buried my face in them and breathed in deep. "I still have your \$200." I said.

"You remembered."

"Of course. How could I not? It was the only thing I had to remember you by!"

"Sorry I never called you back. It's hard in prison."

"I'd have visited you."

"Didn't want no visitors," he said.

He walked over to the window and stood overlooking the tree-lined avenue. The lamp shed a light on his body making him look like an ancient Roman Statue, only with tats.

I have always been a slave to my emotions, but this time, I knew that I couldn't be. If I bowed to a whim it could ruin everything I've worked for. I would be greedy for one more hour, and then I would relinquish him to the world.

I'd let him go, and never see him again.

I put out my cigarette and showed him something hot to pique his interest.

His interest and his groin responded and twitched in unison. He came and kissed me. I could taste the beer and the cigarette and I could smell that secret, heavy crotch smell about him. The afternoon was almost dark now and I thought I heard rain on the window, and a slight draught through the door.

The afternoon was flawed I know, but I knew that with time it would become perfect.

## David Carlino

### Camelias

*I wish to share with you my days of happiness;  
everything in the world except pleasure is vain.*

1, 1

'The Victorian' is a respectable establishment, I have always thought. The kind of place, also, you don't mind arriving early to. A bar where performance artists mix with doctors, who mix with students and shop-boys and girls. Its patrons are its theatre. Echoes of a fabricated Colonialism shade the place, bamboo upon dark oak and teak. Indonesia, South Africa? Palms and an icy cocktail, while the fans twirl and the winter wind outside blows cigarette butts along the streets of Darlinghurst. It was July, yet the place was warm. I was there to help celebrate Gloria's birthday, our mid-twenties were steadily encroaching, a time to make decisions. Not tonight though. I studied, instead, the different faces that freckled the room. Pretty, happy, social faces. Faces with darkened lips and smiles which opened wide and spoke wit or drunken humour; often both. It took more than just a few gins for the same to happen to me. I needed real incentive, a real opportunity to let go of *my* reticence. My own recent love-related chagrins whirled and bantered inside my head as I sat there



Photo: © 2003 L McKinnon

with Gloria, sipping a gin and tonic and trying my hand at festive platitudes. Those dramas I created daily, ones whose validity or justification I wasn't particularly sure of, yet of which I was reluctant or incapable of forgetting, still tormented me, and my thoughts slowly turned to Daniel.

I had met him a few weeks earlier, and the difficulties of our so called relationship were testing. He had a boyfriend, he'd said. But he was overseas. They had agreed to live their lives and then work out things when he'd return. That was enough for me. I had been, stupidly, attracted to his tall, gamine body and his child-like arrogance, his alluring dissoluteness. I knew Daniel didn't feel for me what I wanted him too. He was looking for fun. I was looking for more. And that's how I came to Massimo.

"Michael I've set you up tonight!"

"Gloria..."

"He's a doctor. He's cute! You'll like him!"

"I'm seeing someone..."

"Too bad. You'll be impressed. Trust me. Anyway it's my birthday. Why am I giving out presents on MY birthday! By the way, where is MY present, Michael?"

1, 2

He studies me with his enormous brown eyes. The dark, Mediterranean sort. Eyes that look deep inside my own and offer an understanding I am not prepared for. I reel from the realisation and move back into my seat. As I look back up I try not to laugh at his theatrically bushy eyebrows.

"What do you do, Michael?"

"Well, I finished Uni last year, I'm a teacher. I work in retail at the moment, though. I've sort of taken this year off."

"Cool."

"Gloria tells me you're a Doctor."

He glances over to her.

"Yup. I also finished Uni last year. Thank God."

"A doctor... and you're Italian... your parents must be happy!!"

"Yeah, well, my dad's a doctor too... I suppose he's happy. You're Italian as well Michael?"

"Yeah – I was born here in Australia; my parents are from the South."

He leans over towards me and whispers from behind his drink: "Mine are from all over."

I smile and take my own in my hand, suddenly aware I'm flirting with this gorgeous man. I can't believe my luck. He's flirting right back.

\* \* \* \*

*Ah, perhaps he is the one that my heart, lonely even among crowds, would often delight in imagining in mysterious colours.*

1, 3

Massimo drove me to Daniel's, who had refused to accompany me out that night. Served him right, I thought. This wouldn't have happened if he were there like he should've been. I was tipsy, and flattered that he'd offered to drive me home. I didn't tell him about Daniel. I said I had planned to stay at a friend's place. It was the truth, after all. Daniel was nothing more than a friend, no matter which way I looked at it. The intimacy we had shared over the past few weeks lacked the depth and Passion that I was familiar with from the novels I read. Missing was the poetry of romance. Missing was what was right here, standing next to me by the car. Wisps of his dark chest-hair discreetly peeked out of

the top of his shirt as he opened the door for me. He took off his expensive looking coat. I looked at him, amazed at his beauty, still reeling from the shock of his being interested in me. He threw his coat on the back seat and leaped in. I kept mine on.

\* \* \* \*

"So... where to then?"

"Surry Hills – since it's on your way."

"Cool."

He drives, silent, apparently pensive. My mind is cloudy, my perceptions somewhat confused, still I am happy. We approach Daniel's house.

"So, we'll catch up soon, yeah? Can I have your number?"

"Sure."

I smile shyly.

He looks at my eyes, my lips, and laughs.

He grabs my thigh and squeezes it exaggeratedly, sucking in his teeth.

"See you soon, babe."

"For sure."

He leans over and plants his abundant lips onto mine. Our breath one, for a brief moment.

2, 1

"How did you get here?"

Daniel glares at me, barefoot and shirtless, cigarette in mouth.

"I got dropped off by a friend of Gloria's." I let go of a giggle a little too animated for the current climate. He seems annoyed at the way his evening has turned out and I feel as though my gloating is legitimate.

"Are you drunk? Fuck I'm going to bed. I'm tired and bored. Are you coming?"

3, 1

Massimo and I organised to meet the following Monday for what was to be our first date. I suggested we meet at McMahon's Point, under the Bridge, for some pizza and wine. That day at work seemed endless. Being the ever worrier I tormented myself on whether or not I was doing the right thing, my feelings of guilt in relation to Daniel visiting me spasmodically. I hate lying. But nothing had happened yet. I needed to give myself this chance. It was just too good to pass up.

\* \* \* \*

I notice from my window that it is cold and windy again as I sit on the train, my stomach doing cartwheels, as I head to my date. I wonder what he'd be wearing, if he'd look as handsome as he did last Saturday at 'The Victorian', what he'd say when he'd see me. After hours I get off the train and make my way down to the water. The night is quiet, there are few people about. I suddenly feel lonely and, hands deep in coat-pockets, look around for movement or noise. The cars continue to whiz past alongside me as I approach the shore and notice, suddenly, the gargantuan red lips of Luna Park, smiling maniacally. They keep me company for several minutes until I see him walking down in my direction. At first he seems topless – impossible! As he approaches I realise he is wearing a beige sweater.

"Hey."

"Hi."

"Have you been waiting long, Michael?"

"No, it's cool. Just got here."

"Good."

We look at each other, unsure what to say next. I

break the silence.

“So, Pizza?”

“Yeah great. I'm starving!” he says, as he thumps his belly.

We laugh, as he places his large hand on the small of my back and leads me up the path that leads to the café.

After ordering, we buy some wine from the liquor shop next door, which we bring with us down to the water. We both sit on a park bench and dig into our pizzas and wine with animated gusto. The night is dark and the harbour reminds me of an enormous inkwell. Our eyes rarely leave each other as we talk of our families, our work. Massimo shows me, in these few minutes together, that what I seek is in reach, in full view in fact. Not solely the domain of fiction. Here is possibility, the promising. We finish the wine in record time and, warmed up by the alcohol, food, and conversation, finally succumb to an embrace such as which I had never experienced, yet one I had been secretly anticipating all day. *At table we can open our hearts.*

“Let's go for a walk, Michael.”

“Sure, O.K.”

3, 2

We walk along the Harbour Bridge, hand in hand, the sea breeze in our hair. My heart is light and alive with buzz from his kiss, my head still reeling from his loving embrace. Thoughts and conversations turn to things artistic; the burden Violetta carries with her in *La Traviata*, the atmospheres the many and varied smells of Venice procure. His love for travel and knowledge of art astounds me and we kiss once again, this time it is I who pulls him close to me, under the bright lights of

the bridge, with the sound of cars whizzing past.

“Stay with me tonight.”

“Of course I will.”

4, 1

We walk the short the distance from the station to his place; one of those converted factory type buildings divided up into trendy apartments. We take the elevator to his floor and walk to his door. In the excitement of the moment I drop my cell phone from the balcony. He smiles and tells me to wait while he retrieves it. When he gets back I am leaning against his door, trying to get my lighter to work. He takes it from me and lights my cigarette. I exhale, and he grabs me by the back of the head and kisses me yet again, sweet, long, forever. I fall backwards through his doorway and stumble into the dark of the hall, and tomorrow.

*O love, mysterious, unattainable, the torment and joy of my heart.*

The End.

Translated Excerpts from *La Traviata* by Giuseppe Verdi.



## Tim Miles

### Swimming with the dolphins

Outside the restaurant window the ocean is calm. Seals sleep on the sundrenched rocks while shags wait patiently for the catch of the day. Further out – beyond our vision – dolphins will be frolicking and albatrosses skimming the surface like miniature Boeing jets. We saw all of this yesterday when we went swimming with the dolphins. Who would have thought I'd be the one to get seasick. Glad Sime was there. He held me around the waist while I spilled my guts out. I've never been so glad to jump in the water and swim with those dolphins... and Simon. It helped the seasickness go away.

Our table is next to the window and it's hard to tell whether the other diners, mainly families and American tourists, are staring at the view or us. Simon says we probably look like a couple of backpackers who have stumbled into the wrong restaurant. But it's Christmas day and we're both away from home – so why shouldn't we too enjoy Christmas lunch in style. If Meagan were here people wouldn't think we were a couple of queers. But what does it matter? We don't know anyone of them – and that waitress, Janelle, is certainly checking me out.



Simon and I have been touring New Zealand's south island for the past week. Christchurch, Queenstown, Marlborough Sound and now Kaikoura. Driving around in a Mazda sports hire car and staying in luxury hotels. Damn doing it the hard way. Most people would expect a couple of twenty year olds to be hitching and backpacking. But dad gave me the money and said take a friend. A present for passing my second year law school exams – and an excuse to celebrate his divorce from mum and spend Christmas alone with his new girlfriend.

We clink our champagne glasses and by now everyone is so immersed in their food, drink and chatter we seem like one big happy family.

Merry Christmas, Sime old pal

Up yours, Josh.

God, he looks ridiculous in that green paper hat which fell out of the bon-bon. But handsome in a boyish kind of way. He blows into the plastic whistle and this large tongue pokes out at me just like a blue tongue lizard. After a few drinks Simon can act stupid – just like me. I've known Simon since the first day at high school. Opposites attract they say. Simon sailed through the law school exams with three distinctions and two credits while five passes were good enough for me. Meagan says I lack discipline. Right now she'd be telling me to stop drinking so much and behave sensibly like Simon – except he's the one blowing the whistle and wearing the stupid hat.

The lobster tastes great. First time Simon has eaten

it. And the oysters – you know what they say about oysters. Ah that waitress. I'm starting to feel really good. And horny. Wonder if Sime feels the same way? Only one waitress between us. Maybe she has a friend. Simon will say 'don't be silly'. Always reticent about women. A waste according to Meagan who tells me her girlfriends are always asking about him. Typical of Simon – always holding himself back.

We finish off the meal and I use my charm on Janelle to slip us another bottle of champagne to take to our hotel room. The view from our room of the huge ocean expanse and distant snow-capped mountains makes up for having to share a bed with Simon. I had asked for a room with single beds overlooking the harbour but the only one left with a view was a room with a queen size bed. I looked at Simon and said "ok with me" and Simon said "no problem".

The sign on the bedside table says 'no smoking' but I light one up just the same. I've been trying to give up cigarettes but after a rich meal and champagne I can't help myself. Simon doesn't mind and he too is puffing away. The room starts to feel more comforting as our cigarette smoke swirls to the ceiling. The matching floral curtains and bedspread suddenly appear artistic instead of mundane. The beige walls take on a yellow glow as the sun starts to fall beneath the snow-capped mountains. And the only sounds outside are an occasional passing car and the slow surge of the tide against the sand.

That Simon. Who would have thought he would bring those pills. Wait till I tell Meagan. Better not. She's always nagging about substances. I just call

them party pills. Good to see him with some colour. His white skin can't take too much sun. And the jet-black hair – bog Irish looking according to Meagan, who tells me everything about men's looks that I wouldn't notice. Haven't heard him fart. Holds everything in. Have to laugh:

Hey Simon. Here we are. Couple of guys in a hotel room, full of booze, smoking and popping pills and no one else to party with.

I peek at Simon's Hawaiian shirt which is now unbuttoned to the waist. His undeveloped chest, with its small pink nipples, looks like it would bruise with the slightest touch. No pock marks or acne disturb his porcelain clear face. And I think how really different men are to women? Apart from no tits and having a dick and balls, Simon is rather beautiful. Not that I'm attracted to him in the same way as Meagan or that waitress. But it's still an interesting question. Is there anything wrong with my admiring Simon for being who he is? Simon, the tall good looking guy with a reserved manner.

I take my tee shirt off. My hairy chest is ugly compared to Simon's but women seem to like it just the same. Doesn't matter with Simon. After the dolphins we showered together. Just like brothers really. The brother I never had. I cross my hands on my chest as if I'm praying for something to happen. Close my eyes. And cautiously take Simon's right hand and place it on my right nipple. I open my eyes and look down at his long fingers. There are no hairs on his knuckles and I can see the blue veins running through the white skin like aimless rivers. I look down at his body and see he is playing with his dick, beneath his cargo shorts. He looks into my

eyes and raises his eyebrows as if to ask is it OK to continue. I nod and he places his hand on my thigh. He closes his eyes again and I move my face closer to his. I've never kissed a man before, but I kiss him gently on the lips.

Man that feels good. And I realise I'm not just saying that to myself but saying it to Simon as we both look at each other and our eyes reveal surprise and joy at the closeness. And I think briefly about Meagan and what she would think and then forget her and realise it's the secrecy of what we are doing that makes it so exciting. And then I remember how hard it is to get Meagan excited about anything – even sex. So maybe what I am doing is something I should have done a long time ago.

Simon sure knows what he's doing. I usually do all the work with Meagan but here I feel I'm the one being seduced – especially when Simon puts a condom on my hardened dick and rubs a generous dollop of lube in his arsehole.

When it's over ...

We lie with our backs to each other. I relish the touch of his flesh against mine. I feel I own his arse now. Would really like to turn around and cuddle him but he doesn't seem to want that. So cool, that Simon. Doesn't show any emotion. Funny, I'm not interested in that waitress anymore. First time with a man. There have been fantasies. Once I woke up after a wet dream wrestling naked with Joe Spillane, the sports master. And a couple of jerk-offs in the showers after football practice. But fucking up the arse? So different but so good.

And just as I'm starting to doze off...

I feel a tap on my shoulder. Turn around to see Simon with a condom in his hand and glint in his eyes:

My turn, Josh.

I remember the dolphins and the way we swam amongst them – and their joyous playfulness. And Simon's big blue eyes magnified behind the goggles. And the black wet suit that made his sleek body look like one of the dolphins. And I think this is like swimming with those dolphins again. You just never know when they will jump out of the water and surprise you with their sense of fun and ... recklessness.

Ok Sime, but take it easy.

## Jarred Connors

### And you're gunna be sorry

"Ow, mate." I could tell by the downward inflection on 'mate' that even he thought I was in a lot of trouble. I struggled to wipe the crap from my eyes but it was so painful that I stopped as soon as I touched my face. It felt hot, wet, and gritty – and there was a large slab of loose skin on my cheek. But most of all it was numb, and painful. My head throbbed violently.

"Ow, mate." Suds repeated, staring intently at me; my face, and my body. He obviously couldn't find anything better to say. I wanted to stand up and I struggled to get to my feet. My left leg folded back under me and I yelled with pain as I collapsed back down.

"Don't move! What happened?"

The world spun about my head as I just lay there. For a few moments I tried to compose some sort of answer for him, but my brain wasn't working normally. I looked up at him and tried to smile. Error. My face felt like it was going to fall off and I instinctively raised my hands again to feel it. I groaned, loudly.

"Shit, Moss, you're smashed up properly this time. What can I do?" The street light was behind him so I couldn't see his face, and that was maybe just as well. He put his hand on my shoulder trying



to stop me writhing about but I jerked back from his touch.

I attempted to get up again and this time Suds tried to support me. He grabbed my arm and I got up to a sitting position but the pain swamped me again and I fell backwards in a heap on the road. I lay there for a bit, looking at the stars, trying to get some energy back, trying to make sense of all this, trying to get some control back.

"Shut. Shit. Shit!" I said, attempting to put some perspective into the situation. Swearing had about as much positive effect as 'Ow, mate,' had. And I was spraying blood and other bits as I spoke. I let the pain wash over me again as I lay there. I tried to spit out the mess that was in my mouth but I mostly dribbled; my jaw didn't work properly and my lips felt swollen and sore. I couldn't see much from my left eye, but I knew there was a lot of crap in it; I could feel it as I blinked. I could see something with my right eye; but mostly just pale shapes – the only street light was a long way off.

Something said I shouldn't accept the clocking off that my brain was advising me to do. 'Don't pass out,' I recalled from some TV medical show. But I desperately yearned to sink into the warm welcoming darkness that was just there, just out of reach.

Finally, Suds stopped mumbling to himself and started doing something. He checked out bits of me; not actually touching anything, literally inspecting me at arms' length. He opened my shirt where it was torn and he harrumphed as he discovered more damage. And more. The lane was too dark for him to see much really but apparently it didn't look good from his point of view. Nor mine, come to think of it.

"You're fucked," he announced. "What'll I do?"

I rolled around on the ground trying to get up, overwhelmed with the horror of it all again. I was swearing a lot and not making sense. My writhing about hurt so much I stopped. We both went silent, thinking. Suds looking worried and a bit scared, me sniveling and wallowing; both of us trying to work out what to do.

"Where's your phone? I'll call for help." Suds never took his phone with him when he went out; I always did. It was his best idea so far, and I struggled to reorder my brain to remember where it was. I tried to check my pockets, but my arms, my hands, weren't obeying instructions yet.

"Pocket." I directed thickly.

He patted me down to find the phone. It was in the pocket I was lying on, of course. Perhaps that'd explain the pain in my hip, I thought positively.

I moaned again as he and I tried to turn me over enough so the phone could be freed. It seemed to take ages to do, and I was enveloped in waves of pain again. He finally freed the phone but as he brought it up to look at, the battery and the broken front face dropped to the road and the screen was hanging loose. It wasn't ever going to work again.

"That's fucked too," he said, and he threw it at a wall where it broke into even more bits. Through my haze a thought returned; it'd been there for a while. My bed would be so perfect right now; warm, dark and secure; I could sink into oblivion there. Perhaps I'd wake up and this would all be a dream. I moaned again as another wave of pain washed over me.

"I'll go get help. Stay here. Don't move. I'll be back in a couple of minutes." Suds waited for my protest before he moved out of my blurred focus. It was now quiet; apart from the thrash metal band still thumping in my head.



I sat for a while and tried to get some kind of order into my brain. Overall, it wasn't looking very good. I needed medical help but first I needed to get off the road. I sort of half-sat up and looked about me. I started scrabbling towards the edge of the road and somehow was able to move. My leg protested violently but I found if I didn't think about it, the pain was less. I crabbed on my hands and knees over to the welcome height of the low gutter and I then turned and sat clumsily, waiting for the pain wave to pass. I could see my left leg was halfway to hell, and sitting at a strange angle, the foot not obeying normal dress rules. And there was blood everywhere.

I knew he was a sex hunter; the way his eyes caught mine and stuck; he held the gaze too long. There was a little smile as we drew level, then a half a nod when we passed. I slowed and looked back. He'd done the same. I knew what that meant.

Suds and I were in the city; our regular Thursday evening late night shopping. Suds looked at me and I knew he'd seen the hunter marking me too. The hunter looked towards the fire stair exit, and headed straight for it, without looking back to see if I was following. He didn't have to, he knew I would be there, as hunters know. He went through the door which closed, but didn't latch fully, behind him.

"That's mine," I said to Suds, "Give me half an hour. I'll meet you downstairs at the cafe," and I gave him my shopping bags.

He was waiting for me just through the door. As I paused, checking him out, he smiled and stepped right up to face me. He was stocky, dark, jeans and tee-shirt; pretty nondescript really. He grabbed me and was all hands as he started to explore my body. I grabbed a handful of his bum then his crotch,

which seemed substantial.

"Let me see it," he demanded.

"What here? How about we..." My brain couldn't think of any alternatives that quickly.

"Here. Now."

That decided, he had my belt undone, zipper freed, and pants down to my knees in about three seconds. It was suddenly cool out here on the stairs. He dived on my cock and swallowed me fully. He made lots of saliva and only withdrew to wank me; I was at full strength very quickly.

I reached to get at his cock, and fumbled too much. He swiftly undid his jeans and dropped them to the floor. He wasn't wearing underwear. He was big and not yet fully hard but the weight of it was already obvious. You don't get fucked by cocks this size without a lot of prep. He didn't seem like the kinda bloke that would do prep.

He started and, looking around, grabbed my hand and led me outside to the rear lane, both of us with our pants around our ankles. I was glad it was already dark. We penguin-stepped our way outside and found some privacy down the side of a large waste bin in the lane way. The stench from rotting food in the bin was overpowering. He stepped out of his trousers and rummaged through them to find condoms and lube. Without discussion he decided I got the condom, he the lube. He put one foot up on a bin protrusion and pulled me in behind him. We were at the right height, and he quickly relaxed. He wasn't at all passive as he matched my fucking with his own.

...

Suddenly there was a sharp crash, and I reeled at being smashed across the back of my head. I fell forward and staggered to the ground beside the bin. I scrambled away and tried to put some space

between whatever it was that attacked me, us. As I turned, I could see a man close to me. He had a wooden plank in his hands. That must have been what had hit me. He had jumped us and was still waving the plank about, threatening to do more damage. I shouted out loud to alert someone, anyone, but I could only hear the whine of air conditioners over the ringing in my head. I started to really spin about. It hurt.

"Dirty fags," a voice spat out behind me.

"We gonna thrash your arses," said another voice. I heard the scrape of wood on the road as I turned around.

There were more, three of them. White, nasty and looking for trouble.

"Did you like that?" one said, "Having his dick up your arse?"

Another, "We gonna teach you a lesson, filthy fags. You ain't gonna wanna do that again."

The hunter, who'd sprawled on the ground in front of me as I collapsed, got to his feet looking frightened as he summed up the situation. He grabbed his jeans and took off, heading for the street. Two of them, not the one nearest to me, moved to block his exit, and as they drew near to him, one of them swung a steel bar at full stretch at about chest height. It caught the hunter across the guts, winding him and more no doubt. He folded onto the pavement without a sound. One of them, a blond, threw a kick at the naked groin of the crumpled body.

"Dead shit. Got you, now," he said as he spat towards the body. "He's not going anywhere."

But unbelievably he was, and the moment they turned away from him, he was on his feet and down the lane. He was off so quickly they didn't even try to chase him.

"Let him go. This is the one we want," said the nearest one as they all turned back to face me.

Lunchtime, and I got away from the office for half an hour. I met Christopher for a bite to eat at the Juke Box, a sixties chrome and glass milkshake bar on George street. We ordered snacks and juices.

"What happened to you last Friday? We went looking for you."

"Ah, Suds and I got into a situation," I explained. "This time it fucked up everything, for the night... and for the weekend."

"Sometimes, you two get into an awful lot of trouble. Is it ok now?"

"My angle is. Pretty much. Suds, well you know, he takes his time to work through some issues." I tasted the the apple and carrot juice. "It's my problem really. We'll talk it through again over the weekend." I hoped anyway.

"Speaking of sorting out, I saw that closet creep Ricardo last week, in a bookshop in Paddington. Though why he was there amused me; I doubt he can read, let alone comprehend the meaning of books! I don't think he saw me. Have you had any contact?"

Ricardo was a cute (well to me anyway) short term ex-boyf of mine, who Christopher had never warmed to, in truth had actually insisted shouldn't be trusted. I ignored the advice, and the insurance paid for the new tv, dvd and laptop, after I'd smashed the laundry window to fake a break in, that is.

"Sorry about my choices in men. I am only practicing to be a homosexual, you know." I didn't really want to go down the Ricardo path, not today, not with Christopher anyway. So I changed the subject, "You're up for the Canberra trip next

weekend? The game's on Saturday."

"I'll be there. Don't worry." We took our drinks to a booth. The jukebox up the front was playing a very familiar girl group song. "But don't change the subject. Explain to me the sort of mess you and Suds are in this time."

I hesitated, then confessed, shrugging my shoulders. "Oh all right, it involves Ricardo, unfortunately. I didn't know it but Suds picked him up at a bar Thursday night and bought him home. He'd never met Ricardo when we were together, so he never linked my gossip to him. Anyway, one thing led to another and there he was on Friday morning – at breakfast! Ricardo, in full dressing gown mode, making coffee in *my* kitchen!"

"Shit, that's scary. What'd you do?"

"Well, at first he tried to smooth talk me and make excuses, but I didn't let him have the space. I stood there and yelled for Suds who finally appeared still wet from the shower. 'Do you know who this crim is?' I asked him. It turned into an enormous bally-hoo but I insisted that Ricardo had to leave, right then. And he did, eventually. Suds was stunned and shocked over it all. Ricardo even threatened me as he left, called me a shit and said he was going to get his mates to give me a good 'going over' – his words."

"Shit, will he do anything?"

"Well, here's hoping he's as stupid as he appears to be. Anyway I'm not scared of him, he's just a little thug."

## Alistair Sutton

### He's back ...

When my friend Brandon announced he wanted to get in touch with his ex, Trent, I could think of numerous reasons why this wasn't a crash hot idea. I'd thought Trent was a dickhead as well as pretentious and vain. The sort of guy who would smile at you at a party when introduced, then stab you in the back as you walked away, pretending you'd never met the next time he saw you. Why rake up the past? There was another minor detail, Trent was dead. Brandon appeared to have forgotten this.

"Not at all," Brandon dismissed my observation, as we sat in our favourite club one Saturday night. Leaning forward to be heard over the loud music he added, "I've found a medium."

"A what?"

"A medium. You know. Someone who can converse with the spirit world. He's got impeccable references; look up his Blog if you don't believe me."

"I'll pass thanks."

"He's the real deal, I'm telling you, Phil," Brandon said trying to allay my scepticism. "He's not only a medium, he's also a clairvoyant."

"Whatever," I said, surprised by this turn in the conversation, not our usual choice of topic on a night out. I knew Brandon had never entirely recovered from his relationship with Trent, his first. Despite



the disparity in their ages they'd forged a bond, at least until Trent's premature death from a heart attack at fifty-three. I always wondered how long the relationship would have lasted if Trent hadn't the uncharacteristic grace to die when he did. I kept this to myself. I knew Brandon has some loopy ideas, he's fascinated with the Bermuda Triangle and believes Atlantis existed. He reads Manga comics.

It irked me that I'd introduced Trent to Brandon after having a brief flingette with him myself, before Brand. Brandon didn't know this. He thought Trent was a mate from my aerobics class, a lie I'd cultivated because I thought Brand would sneer at me going for someone so old. That was more his scene. Still I never dreamt that they'd become soul mates. I wasn't jealous, I just realized I couldn't stand Trent. For the sake of peace I pretended to like him, while calling him a vicious queen behind his back.

"It means a lot to me, Phil," Brandon said interrupting my thoughts. "He was special. We'd go for long walks on the beach at sunset, he'd buy me flowers...."

"Yeah right, Brandon, I get the picture," I said cutting him short, not wishing to hear a long dirge on Trent's merits. "Sorry. I just don't think you can contact the dead. Do you mate? Honestly?"

"Who knows? But at least I'd like to give it a go and I don't want to do it alone...."

I looked at my best friend's dark eyes, always so expressive. "When?"

"As soon as I can arrange it."

Immediately I felt apprehensive. Me and my premonitions. I tried to allay my misgivings, but couldn't.

Two weeks later I found myself pulling up outside a seedy looking stucco cottage at Hill End. It was six-thirty in the evening and already dark.

"Is this it?"

"Yep. This is the address. Park over here, Phil."

"How much is this going to cost?"

"Never mind that, it will be worth it."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Don't be a wanker. You know what Trent meant to me."

"Yes, Brandon." I didn't elaborate. Obviously I'd hidden my antipathy towards Trent well. Too late now to back out anyway, Brandon was pushing the doorbell.

Almost immediately, the door swung open silently, as if by itself, which I felt was creepy from the start. A balding old guy with an egg shaped head stood looking at us, a gloomy hall stretching behind him. He looked suitably weird, so I gathered we were in the right place.

"Who were you expecting, young man? Madam Acarti?" The egg shaped headed man glared at me and I had the uncanny sensation he had guessed my thoughts. Great!

"Who?"

"Never mind," he said impatiently. "Just come in."

Brandon made the introductions as I tried not to stare at the bizarre interior, a mixture of pseudo Tibetan kitsch and South American tribal art. The old guy's name was Martin. He told us to remove our shoes before we stepped into a large sparsely furnished living room. Brandon had some difficulty with his shoes, as he'd decided to break in a new pair of runners with ridiculously complicated laces and straps.

"This way," Martin said, ushering us into a small room at the back of the house which I suspected

\* \* \* \*

had been a bedroom once. "Refreshments?"

"No, thank you," we chorused politely.

"We must have some Chinese tea; it will cleanse our auras," he insisted.

"Give me a break," I muttered as the guy poned off. Brandon knuckled me in the ribs.

"Behave yourself, Phil."

"Okay, chill. I guess you're paying for it. I still reckon the whole thing's a bit dodgy."

Brandon glared at me as we sat in silence, listening to new age music emanating from a portable disk player. Every now and then you could hear water gurgle on the disk, which made me start to think I might need to visit the lavatory.

Martin came back with a small brass tray laden with an earthenware teapot and three small glasses with silver handles. I took a sip of the hot liquid, and was pleasantly surprised by its smoky flavour.

"One should never conduct a séance in the dark, that is a common misconception," Martin huffed as he settled his bulk into a large cane chair. We were seated on teak dining room chairs, mine digging uncomfortably into my back. Dimming the lights slightly, Martin proceeded to hand us candles, three each.

"First we must 'charge' the candles," he said.

"Huh?"

"Hold the candles in the palms of your hands," he explained patiently, noting our surprise. "Try and visualize their symbolic power. There are three of us present, so the number of candles should be divisible by that number."

We shrugged and tried to concentrate. I suppressed a cough.

"The incense is cinnamon, frankincense and sandalwood," Martin said with a sharp look at me. "One needs them for their energy and it will help

you to focus." I doubted that as I wondered if I'd need my puffer.

"Breathe deeply!" This time I coughed. Ignoring me, Martin turned to Brandon. "Do you have something of the deceased's with you?"

"How about this?" Brandon handed over Trent's favourite cock ring. "It's been washed."

Martin's face was unreadable as he rolled the shiny metal ring in his white hands.

"Ah yes, I see."

"See what?"

"Shut up, Phil!" Brandon hissed. I wondered what Martin could see. Knowing some of Trent's proclivities, did it involve a leather harness? But I kept quiet.

"Now we will join hands," Martin intoned. His sweaty jelly-like clasp made me cringe. The things one does in the name of friendship I silently cursed. Before us on the table a luridly coloured wooden Ouija board was laid out with a single glass upturned at its centre. The letters of the alphabet were mapped in intricate font around its edge, while the words Yes and No were inscribed at its centre.

"Now what?" I muttered. Brandon kicked me under the table. "Ouch!"

"Concentrate!" Martin chastised. Think of the deceased. What was their name?"

I couldn't help thinking he should know that if he was supposed to be a clairvoyant.

"Trent. Trent Parker," Brandon said.

"Trent... a strong name."

I rolled my eyes, but nobody was looking.

"Spirits of the other-world. Speak to us mortals if you will?" Martin said loudly in a sing song voice. I glanced at Brandon to see if he was buying it. His eyes were shut and his mouth clenched. I guessed he was. Despite myself I felt a creeping chill at the



base of my skull.

"Spirits of the other-world, speak to us mortals if you will," Martin repeated in his pompous thin voice. He could certainly put on a decent show I thought grudgingly.

Nothing happened. The room remained silent. I wondered how much this debacle was costing Brand.

"Boys, think of the spirit. Think of the spirit that was Trent Parker.... We ask you to commune with us this night, Trent Parker," Martin said in a prissy tone that reminded me of my pre-school teacher, Miss Carmichael. Unbidden I thought of the time Trent, notoriously near sighted, had cruised a figure for two hours late one night at New Farm Park. Upon finally summoning up the courage to walk over to chat up the object of his desire, he discovered it was a wheelie bin. I sniggered at the recollection as reported to me by a convenient eye witness.

Suddenly the temperature dropped. I flinched as Martin's grip on my hand tightened. Brandon's hand felt clammy as he too clutched me.

"Yes!" Martin cried out. "Spirits of the other world I can sense you! Allow us into your presence if you will!" In a lower voice he said, "Place the index finger of your right hand on the glass, gently."

I reached for the glass, as did Brandon and Martin, the tips of our fingers touching across its rim. A sharp pain hit my chest and I shuddered involuntarily.

"What's wrong?" Brandon asked.

"Concentrate! Trent Parker, are you there?" Martin repeated himself. Holding my breath, I wondered what would happen. Then the glass moved as if by itself towards the word Yes on the board. Still holding my breath I looked at Martin and Brandon. I hadn't detected any discernable

pressure from either of them. Had it moved by itself?

Martin made a show of picking up the glass and placing it back in the centre of the board.

"What would you desire to know of the spirit?" Martin asked Brandon.

"Is that really you, Trent?" Brandon's voice was raw from emotion. I felt guilty as it dawned on me how important this ritual was to him. The glass slid back to Yes.

Martin repositioned the glass.

"Did you live in New Farm?" Brandon asked.

"Be specific," Martin whispered.

"Did you live in Moray Street?"

The glass slid to Yes, then moved away, before hovering back onto the Yes.

"It's him," Brandon breathed in awe. "Are you happy?" The glass started moving again. This time to the No on the board.

"Why not?" Brandon's voice caught in his throat.

*Why is he here?* The glass moved over each individual letter around the edge of the board as we concentrated on the words they formed.

"Who?" Brandon asked.

Suddenly the pain in my chest hit me again and I broke into a cold sweat. I knew who the spirit was referring to. Me. A foreboding swept over me and I wanted to break the connection, yet I remained rooted to the spot.

The glass went into a flurry of moves over the letters, making it hard to keep up with the meaning. But it was clear enough.

*Why did you summon me?*

"I wanted to know if you were okay?" Brandon said.

The glass flew off the table and shattered onto the wooden floor. Martin threw himself back into the chair and screamed a blood curdling cry.

"The connection is shattered!" he shouted before appearing to go into a dead faint.

"Are you okay Brand?" I asked concerned, ignoring the slack jawed medium.

"I think so. Yes, I'm fine. Let's try it again."

"I think he needs a rest," I said looking at the inert figure beside us. Martin awoke with a start and clutched both our hands, much to my discomfort. The temperature dropped again and three of the candles blew out.

"I think he's back!" Brandon said rapturously. I sat petrified, frozen as if in stasis. Lot's wife turned into a pillar of salt. I was colder than I had ever been in my entire life.

Martin's eyes rolled to the top of his head and in a funny deep voice he snarled.

*"You thought I wasn't good enough you little prick!"*

"No I didn't, Trent, I loved you," Brandon said with tears in his eyes. I had tears in my eyes too, from the sharp pain in my chest. I felt as if a hand was clutching at my wind pipe and squeezing slowly.

"Brand..."

"Quiet Phil," Brandon snapped. "This isn't working, it couldn't be Trent. Maybe you were right Phil. Are you putting this on Martin? Tell me."

*"This isn't the first time you've been a false friend."*

"What do you mean?" cried Brandon, "You've been watching too many episodes of 'Crossing Over,' I want my money back."

*"Not you. Philip!"*

"Philip?" Brandon said, glancing at me nonplussed.

*"Yes. Philip!"*

Another pain wracked my chest, as I wondered maybe Trent hadn't loved Brand as much as we thought. But he couldn't have loved me? Could he? I'd never thought twice about him, after he'd started

seeing Brandon.

*"Exactly!"* the spirit shuddered out of Martin who sat slumped in his chair. Three more candles went out and I felt like I was falling.

"I don't understand," said Brandon, "this is ridiculous."

"Why are you doing this?" I gasped.

*"Karma. It wasn't I who was the vicious queen my friend, was it?"*

"What?" Brandon said sounding confused.

I knew. Guilt competed with fear for ascendancy in my fevered mind.

*"I should just put a knife into you and turn it, real slow."*

"I didn't do anything," I protested, gasping for breath.

*"Didn't you?"*

"This can't be Trent, I don't know what I was thinking," Brandon said, disgust in his voice.

"Brand...", I wheezed as my lungs clenched.

*"I'll show you!"*

"Oh snap out of it," cried Brandon.

Martin's eyes suddenly opened and he focused intently on us. "What happened?" he said in his normal voice.

"What was all that about for Christ sake?" said Brandon angrily. "I don't think it was funny."

"Tell me what the spirit said," Martin said calmly, totally unfazed by Brandon's reaction.

Brandon hesitated. "I thought it was him, Trent I mean. Then I thought it wasn't. It just didn't make any sense. What did you think Phil?"

"Don't ask me," I said trying to get my breath and avoid Martin's scrutiny.

"Sometimes the spirits work in ways we don't understand," Martin offered.

"Ain't that the truth," I muttered.

"Anyway, whoever it was is gone," Brandon sighed dejected, sinking back into his chair.

I wasn't so sure of that. A numbness suddenly overwhelmed me. I sensed another presence in the room, just as the last three candles went out and the shaded table lamp fused. Plunged into darkness, I felt nauseous, my fear palpable, like a living thing. I felt an icy hand rest upon my shoulder, and a faint unearthly breeze blow past my ear. Like a hiss of steam. The pressure on my windpipe returned, but much worse. I gasped for breath within the throes of a full blown asthma attack, everything blurred as I collapsed.

\* \* \* \*

I came to looking up into Brandon's worried face, cast into relief by a red flashing light.

A sudden silence as the ear piercing siren was switched off. My mouth was covered by a ventilator, the stink of liquid oxygen reeking in my nostrils like a sweaty pair of jocks. The ambulance stopping jolted my prone body on the stretcher.

"It's okay Phil, you had an asthma attack. We're at the hospital now. You'll be fine."

*"I wouldn't count on it Phillip..."*, a sickening voice echoed inside my skull...

### Brendan John Lindsay -

has a degree in creative writing but no degree in being queer, instead he dreams of orphans (emotional or otherwise). Soon he will finish his honours year and look blindly into the future. For now he happily edits *The Definite Article*, QUT's student magazine.

### Phil Scott -

is part of the political revue team at the Sydney Theatre Company, starring in more than ten shows, including *Sunday in Iraq with George* and *Revue sans Frontieres*. He is ongoing script consultant on the stage musical *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. Also known for his solo cabaret shows, Phil has had four novels published here and in the US: *One Dead Diva*, *Gay Resort Murder Shock*, *Get Over It* and *It's About Your Friend*. Phil writes a weekly column *Ad Lib* for the Sydney gay paper *SX*.

### RJ Reynolds -

lives in the upper Blue Mountains of NSW. He does queer community development work and runs personal development programs in schools in western Sydney. He has had a handful of short stories published in the past couple of years.

### John Bartlett -

dabbled in a variety of professions before turning to writing fulltime. He was a Catholic priest, kitchenhand, movie extra, funeral attendant, masseur and public housing worker. Since 2000 his features and short stories have been widely published and his first novel *Towards a Distant Sea* was released by Indra Publishing in 2005. Currently he tutors in Professional Writing at Deakin University and works as a freelance writer and editor.

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### Ian MacNeill -

not only survived the threat of a fourteen year sentence for unnatural acts but also Queer.

### Daniel Shaw -

I was born in Yorkshire England in 1970, I studied English Literature at Middlesex University, and I emigrated to Australia in 1997. In between then and now I also went to live in Barcelona for three years, but only started writing last year. I am currently enrolled in the UTS Masters in Creative Writing, and I'm third of the way through. I'm currently at work on a novel, which will form part of my masters. I live in Sydney with a partner of three years.

### David Carlino -

is a 24 year old Italian-Australian from Sydney, who speaks French, has studied Art History, and lists Kate Bush as his hero. He was inspired to start writing by a gay-ebooks promo for submissions which makes this his first short story.

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### Tim Miles -

works as a precedents lawyer. His non-legal (but not illegal) activities include writing short stories, playing tennis, tickling the ivories and spoiling his dog, FoxyLoxy. Tim was a finalist in the 2000 and 2001 Sydney Writers' Festival pitching competitions and has had several articles published in SMH's Heckler column. This short story is the second published by gay-ebooks. The other short story, *Prodigal Son*, was published in the *Boys Summer Collection 2006*.

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### Jarred Connors -

once lived in Sydney's inner west but has recently resettled in Tasmania where he shares a large house with his kelpie, Butch, and grows vegies for food, grapes for wine, and trees for fun. While yearning at times for the temptations that only a big city can provide, (say a Sunday evening Long Island Iced Tea in a chipped enamel mug) he is resolved to learn to enjoy more meaningful pleasures. Dedicated to my new mates James and Roger, and to all lovers so casually and carelessly abandoned.

### Alistair Sutton -

is still happily writing fiction along with the odd article for *Queensland Pride*. He enjoys quiet walks along the beach, cosy nights at home with his Lipstick Leather Bitch Slave Boy (his long suffering partner of fourteen years) and an occasional session of self-flagellation. He involves himself in the local community by loitering around public places after dark, while taking his slave boy for a well earned break from his small box in the basement. Alistair is yet to attend a séance but did see a ghost once....

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