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lesbian short fiction



volume one:

openings

Evecho and Linda Lorenzo, Editors

ReadTheseLips

lesbian short fiction

Volume 1

Openings

edited by

Evecho

and

Linda Lorenzo

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Read These Lips: Openings
Lesbian Short Fiction, Volume 1



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Acknowledgements

From Evecho

This anthology and the ReadTheseLips.com project would not have been possible without the instant and unequivocal support of Linda, Ann and Renée.
They are the true champions of my vision.

The writers responded quickly and generously to my request back in January 2007. I am humbly grateful to them for trusting me with their stories. This anthology is about them.

Many women have moved this project along.
My heartfelt thanks go to everyone who helps bring lesbian fiction to the world and to those who matter.

Dedications

For my friends - you know who you are.

For Carol. Always.

Contents

Introduction [vi]

- Renée Strider
 - The Stripper and The Butch Wannabe [7]
 - The Blush [11]
- Pearlie McNeill
 - Soft Shoe Shuffle [16]
- Beatriz Copello
 - At The Gym [20]
 - The Women's Pool [23]
- Therese Szymanski
 - The Perfect Woman [27]
- msprism
 - The Thief's Tale [31]
 - Flowergirl Buys Bomb [35]
- Trish Shields
 - Apenty [41]
 - The Nearness of You [42]
 - The Blank Page [43]
- Lara Zielinsky
 - Study Buddies [47]
- Anne Laughlin
 - On Retreat [50]
- JLNicky
 - Getting Home [55]
- Shadylady
 - Heartbreak [60]
- A.K. Naten
 - The Eyes of March [65]
- Ren Peters
 - The Portrait [72]
 - Rediscovery [75]
- Anne Azel
 - Memory Puzzles [77]
 - Driving Philosophies [82]
- Tricia Dearborn
 - Tomorrow, When I Last Saw Her [87]

Introduction

Welcome to the premiere collection of lesbian short fiction by ReadTheseLips.com, a publishing team for free online lesbian anthologies. We purvey the interesting and the unconventional and collate them into handy compilations for your reading pleasure.

In *Openings*, we are pleased to present twenty-one reflections on lesbian life in stories and poetry. AK Naten, Anne Azel, Anne Laughlin, Beatriz Copello, JLNicky, Lara Zielinsky, msprism, Pearlie McNeill, Ren Peters, Renee Strider, Shadylady, Therese Szymanski, Tricia Dearborn and Trish Shields have generously donated their works for our first issue.

This selection, ranging from fantasy and science fiction to erotica and everyday issues, contains a sample of the increasing diversity in lesbian fiction today. There is sex (always a pleasure), and there are wonderfully expressive insights about coming out, May-December attractions, love lost and love finally understood, science and religion, inspiration, passion, and much more. We have kept the writers' delightful and individual styles, complete with regional touches, that show them at their best.

Our writers explore aspects of life and sexuality that, we hope, will resonate with you. We encourage you to seek out more of their work as they expand their repertoire.

So pull up a chair and your favourite beverage. We hope you enjoy this first issue of Read These Lips.



Evecho, 2007

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The Stripper and The Butch Wannabe

Renée Strider

Van's new girlfriend, Julia, was a gorgeous femme, a weekend stripper, and a top in the bedroom—any room. Van loved femmes. The sight of Julia's tight, round ass in her slim business skirt and her long legs made even more shapely by the high heels she usually wore always sent a surge of pleasure through Van.

She didn't really mind Julia being a stripper, but so far she'd avoided watching her lover being watched. She had asked her once why she stripped, and Julia had said that the extra money helped support her habit—a taste for expensive clothes. Besides, she enjoyed it.

What Van did have a small problem with was that Julia was always in charge when they had sex. Van, whose real name was Vanessa, considered herself a butch and felt that that was just plain wrong—against nature. But Julia had never taken Van's butchness seriously in the month or so that they'd been lovers. She often called Van, who was younger, her sweet little butch even though Van was taller.

Julia would come home late at night on weekends—sometimes Van would pick her up—still smelling of sweat and bar smoke. When she was warm and clean and soap-scented, Julia would always be ready for sex. Just like last Saturday.

Naked except for a towel knotted at her waist, with her damp hair combed back from her face and her colour high from arousal and hot water, she'd approached Van sitting sprawled out on the couch waiting impatiently. She knelt down and removed Van's socks and yanked off her levis and briefs. She didn't let Van do anything. The tone had been established right from the beginning, somehow. And Van could hardly complain, especially at a time like this, when Julia spread Van's legs wide, urging her to tilt her pelvis toward her mouth. Groaning blissfully, Julia sucked and licked her to a jerking climax.

Van was still limp and moaning softly when Julia got up, untied the towel, and straddled her. She arched against Van and grabbed her hands, pulling one to a breast and one between her thighs to slippery flesh. She rocked against Van, against her hand, forcing the fingers deeper. Van tugged on one of her hard nipples, and trembled as Julia's hands caressed her hard under the T-shirt. They kissed wetly, their tongues repeating the rhythm of Van's thrusts into her, until Julia convulsed with a sharp cry.

Obviously the sex was good, but Van thought it could be better, at least for herself, if she could just gain some control. She hatched a plan.

That Friday she was to pick Julia up at the strip club after her second set and, as usual, spend the night. She decided to go a little early, maybe

catch the last part. She wanted to know her lover better, even if it meant seeing her exposing her body to strangers.

Van dressed carefully in an elegant charcoal suit which she had bought that week. Of the finest summer wool, it fit her slim, androgynous lines perfectly. Under the new jacket, she had on a short-sleeved, black silk shirt unbuttoned at the collar. On her feet she wore ankle-high boots of satiny-smooth, black leather. A small gold circle glinted in one ear, and she'd got her hair cropped so close to her head that not the slightest trace of curl remained.

Van had never been inside the "Plaza Gentlemen's Club," as was written discreetly on the outside in blue neon script. There was another sign, framed in lights but not too garish, that said, "Roxy Rocks / Every Weekend." Roxy was Julia's stage name. She was the house dancer—the best performer and most popular. To keep her, the club paid her a salary. Normally the women at this club made their money only from tips for stripping and for private dancing in the "Champagne Room." Roxy did take tips, of course, but didn't do the private dancing. There was no public lap dancing here. For that you had to go to a dive like the one down the street with a grungy sign saying "Oil Wrestling / XXX Style."

In the large, cabaret-like bar, Van made her way to a small table, separated from the action on the stage by two other tables. The floor lighting was muted, provided only by a low lamp on each table and illumination reflected from the thrust stage jutting into the room. She knew Roxy wouldn't be able to see her from there, against the light. She ordered a double scotch from a waitress who smiled at her seductively and called her "Sir."

Roxy was dancing to a traditional striptease song. Van recognized it, as did the cat-calling, cheering audience. She thought it must be near the end of the set because Roxy was down to just a red lace camisole and skimpy bikini bottom. Van knew that she always started out in full black leotard. To the brassy sound of "The Stripper," Roxy took it all off—almost. Nearly naked to begin with, it took her all of the raunchy song to bump and grind and strip down to a tiny white thong. Van's eyes kept returning to her swaying breasts, to the nipples she knew with her lips and tongue, and a flame of arousal burned in her gut. She felt herself getting wet and was glad to be wearing dark trousers.

Pale blue spotlights and a woman's voice singing slow and blue ended Roxy's set. To languid, sensual music, the muscles in Roxy's belly and ass rippled, gleaming from sweat. She writhed to the heavy beat, taunting her audience. Dark nipples stood out. Blue-black hair shimmered around her head. Van wondered if the audience were as aroused as she was.

The stage lights intensified to white. When Roxy pulled away the thong and spread her legs wide, Van stared in shock at the familiar sight of trimmed, arrow-shaped hair. Roxy thrust her hips forward, giving those

near the stage a teasing glimpse of what the black arrow pointed at. Then she flung the thong over the heads of the audience in Van's general direction. Automatically, Van reached up high and caught it easily. The audience whistled and howled as Roxy continued prancing along the edge of the stage.

Shaken, Van got up from the table, stumbling a little, still holding the thong in her hand as she made her way out before Roxy could come down and mingle on the floor and collect her tips. It was time to get on with her plan.

She walked around to the dark alley behind the club. A single lamp shone above a door like a theatre's stage entrance. Well away from the light, she slouched against the wall, and pressed a hand between her legs to relieve the swollen ache there. She sniffed the thong in her hand and groaned, then tucked it in her breast pocket, like a handkerchief.

Her fingers trembled as she took out a Cuban cigarillo from its slim box and removed the cellophane wrapper and band. In a *film noir* moment, the flame of the lighter caught her face, highlighting its angles in the gloom. She drew the aromatic smoke into her lungs. Julia would be about half an hour, she figured. After pacing back and forth awhile, she felt loose and relaxed and resumed her place against the wall, careful to stay in the shadows.

She had just flicked away a second half-smoked *purito*, its pale tendrils of smoke still drifting in the darkness, when the door opened. Julia wore stilettos and a clingy dress, its thin straps revealing golden skin in the lamp's glow. She peered around, likely searching for the absent car. As she turned to leave, Van took a deep breath and swaggered into the pool of light, hands in her pockets. Julia stopped dead, startled. Van saw caution in her face, then recognition, as Julia's eyes widened at the sight of the elegant butch.

"Van! I *thought* I smelled the... Oh... You look so..." The words trailed off as Julia raked her eyes over Van, taking in the buzzed hair and suit. For the first time in the four weeks they'd been lovers, she sounded uncertain.

"I watched you in there." Van didn't smile. Her eyes glittered as she approached Julia.

"You...you did?" Julia's expression was hesitant but contained a hint of excitement.

She saw Julia's breathing pick up, and her own pulse quickened in response. Julia didn't resist when Van seized her shoulders and kissed her throat, then slid her hands down Julia's smooth, warm back to cup her ass. Julia arched into her, a tiny whimper escaping her lips, like the beginning of a moan, as Van inserted a thigh between hers and pushed her backwards into the shadows.

"Turn around and put your hands on the wall," she said curtly, and Julia assumed the position. She spread her legs just enough, shuddering as Van ran her hands over her from behind, from hard nipples to stomach to

beneath the short skirt. Her thighs were bare, no stockings. With one hand on her belly, Van pulled Julia hard against her. Nothing was more erotic to her than a woman's firm behind against her groin. With her other hand she caressed the damp, thin cloth between Julia's thighs, from hard pube to spongy crotch, then slid her fingers under the edge, into the slick heat. This time Julia really did moan, writhing her hips to make Van's fingers go where she desperately needed them. But Van avoided Julia's clitoris and only stroked on either side. She had never felt Julia so wet. She withdrew her fingers.

"Oh fuck!" Julia gasped. "Oh god, don't—"

"Turn around," Van commanded. Julia did, sagging weakly against the wall, wobbly in her high heels. Both women were breathing hard as Van sank to her knees on the rough pavement, no doubt wrecking the new trousers, but who cared. She dragged Julia's bit of underwear down and off, over her shoes. Another thong. She tucked that one in her breast pocket, too. She pressed her hands against Julia's inner thighs to open them, and Julia hauled her skirt up to her waist and shook and moaned as Van rubbed her whole face against her till it was wet, too. She had tasted Julia's cunt before but only on her own fingers. It was almost enough to make her come. She grasped Julia's hips to angle it harder against her mouth and licked the length of her, thrusting her stiff tongue into her. Finally she sucked her clit and Julia came in her mouth, crying out her release.

They sat in Van's car near the front of the club under a street lamp, both of them dishevelled and flushed and sweaty.

"Quite the butch, aren't you," Julia said, examining Van with eyes still hazy from sex. Her hand lay on her lover's thigh.

"Told you. How about staying at my place tomorrow night?"

"If you come and see me dance first." Julia's eyes drifted to Van's mouth.

"I've been wondering," Van said, before she lost her concentration, "did you wear anything when you chatted up the tables after?"

"Ah, you should have stayed longer. Find out tomorrow."

Van took the thongs out of her breast pocket and held them out, a white one and a black one. "I think these belong to you."

Julia looked surprised. "Two?"

"I caught the other one. Did you throw it at me?"

"I didn't see you. It's too dark on the floor." Julia shifted on her seat and turned her head away, looking out the side window. Van could see the outline of her jaw clench as if she were suppressing a smile. She reached out, stroking the back of Julia's neck very lightly, and was rewarded with a shiver.

Grinning, Van shifted the car into gear.



The Blush

Renée Strider

My cousin Ronnie, the other lesbian in the family, was telling me about a recent conversation with her older brother. We call him “Straight Stan” in private because, even though all of our brothers are straight, he is the very straightest. We used to call him “Ss-Ss” for short, but that was hard to say, so eventually it became “Suss.”

One afternoon a few weeks ago, Suss was driving Ronnie back home from the garage where she’d had to leave her car for the day.

“Suss can be so sweet and generous, Lil, even if he *is* a homophobe,” Ronnie said.

I nodded. When I was barely surviving on chips and gravy in third year university, he gave me rent money for a couple of months. He just handed me a fat envelope one day and said, “Pay me back after you graduate.” He would just do things like that.

But about a month ago, he and other members of his church picketed a bar downtown which had a rainbow-coloured poster outside announcing that every Thursday would be LGBT night: “Gay Thursday.” They picketed on that first Thursday. Fortunately, it was a silent vigil, so when Ronnie and I walked by to go in, Suss only looked at us sorrowfully. He has one of those long Dutch-farmer faces and does sorrowful especially well.

So, he was all of those things—homophobic and almost fanatically religious, but often kind and accommodating, even with his lesbian kin. “As long as they don’t try to shove it down my throat,” he would say about the homos. I didn’t like to think of what “it” was.

By now you’re probably wondering why Ronnie and I put up with his attitude. We did for a long time. It’s funny, but when it’s family you sometimes make excuses. We’d say to each other: Suss really has a problem with homosexuals but not us, so he just doesn’t know any better. I think we were actually kind of grateful that he loved us in spite of...well. Can you believe it? Anyway, back to my cousin Ronnie.

“Suss was driving with the top down and it was pretty hot, so we got some iced capps at Tim Horton’s. He paid, of course,” Ronnie said. “We parked in the lot under a tree. We were making small talk. Neither of us mentioned the picketing at first. I asked him about the kids.

“Josh has a girl,” says Suss. “They hang out a lot in his room. We told him he has to leave the door open a foot.”

“So Josh hung a ruler from the doorknob, on the outside of the door, and always makes a big deal of measuring it exactly,” Ronnie added, and we both laughed. Josh is fifteen. He’s a funny kid.

“What about Rachel,” I said. “Is she seeing anybody?”

"I asked him that, and he said, 'You know Rachel. She wants to go to university next year, so she's too busy with her studies—and sports, of course. A couple of boys at the church seem to like her, though, so maybe.'" Rachel is seventeen. Suss is a deacon at his church and goes twice on Sundays.

"Then he brought up the bar," Ronnie went on.

"Uh-oh," I said.

"Uh-oh is right. 'You girls might want to stay away from your homo night at the bar next week. We're picketing again, maybe not so quiet this time,' he says."

I snorted. "Jerk."

"Yeah," said Ronnie. "It was weird. He said it kindly, as if he wanted to spare us the unpleasantness. He probably did. I lost it."

"You what?"

"I hit the roof, Lil. I guess I've just finally had it with him. He was so shocked that his mouth hung open, making his face even longer." My cousin giggled, then immediately sobered up.

"I yelled. I told him we were going anyway and that we didn't need a bunch of holy roller rednecks like him telling us what to do.

"'We're not Holy Rollers,' he says, 'but the Bible says—'

"'I don't give a christly fuck what the Bible says,' I holler. A little teary, to tell the truth. 'Mind your own goddamn fucking business. When you condemn gays to hell, you're condemning Lil and me, your own sister! You should be ashamed of yourself!' A real rant."

"Holy jeez, Ronnie," I said, staring at her goggle-eyed.

"Yeah, exactly. He didn't like that at all. Went all white in the face and told me to get out if I was going to take the Lord's name in vain. He 'thundered' it, like you read in books. Very Old-Testament-prophet. He even shook his finger at me."

I snickered nervously.

"So I jumped out of the car and slammed the door hard. At least I still had my drink. I haven't seen him since. I don't care, except that I won't see Josh and Rachel as often."

And that's why, instead of Ronnie, I was driving Rachel and her best friend home a couple of days later. Sometimes they'd go to her place after basketball or soccer practice, as she lived near the school. She'd take them home in time for dinner. But this time, because things were awkward on the Suss home front, she'd phoned and asked me to.

The girls were still wearing their soccer clothes. As they hugged Ronnie goodbye, I stowed their backpacks in the front of my black Mini Cooper. I had to smile as they folded their long legs into the back. Every so often I'd glance in the rear-view mirror and see their heads together as they whispered and giggled like twelve-year olds. They both had straight hair pulled back into a ponytail, Rachel's so fair and Melanie's so dark. They

reminded me of when Ronnie and I were kids and everything was hilarious. It was obvious that Rachel knew nothing about the rift between Aunt Ronnie and her father.

When we got to the house, I heard Rachel ask Melanie to stay for dinner, but apparently she had other plans. With a wave and a “thanks for the ride,” she loped up the street toward her house, backpack swinging from a shoulder. I thought I’d better go in with Rachel and say hello, as Suss’s family would think it peculiar if I just got back in my car and roared off.

They were all in the big, bright, eat-in kitchen. Fran, Suss’s wife, was standing at the stove, stirring something that filled the whole room with a steamy fragrance. Josh was sitting at the table, reading a black and white graphic novel. Suss was standing at the counter making tea.

“Lil! What a surprise. Here, taste this. Can you stay for dinner?” Fran’s face was open and cheerful. Suss hadn’t told her either, it seemed. She held out a spoon, and I slurped up some kind of red sauce.

“Mmm, really good,” I said. “Sorry, Franny, I can’t.” I was supposed to go back to Ronnie’s, but I didn’t mention that.

“Hey, Aunt Lil, will you take me for a ride in your new Mini?” I’m not Josh’s aunt, but I’m the same age as Ronnie, so the kids have always called me aunt too.

“Sure, Josh, on the weekend. So how many centimetres in a foot-long ruler?” He laughed.

Suss continued fiddling about with tea things. “Who wants tea?” he asked.

We all did. I leaned back against the wall by the door waiting for it to steep.

“I thought you were going to ask Melanie to come for dinner, honey,” Fran said to Rachel, who was drying her hands at the sink.

“I did, Mum, but she had to get home because she’s going out with Pierre tonight.”

Rachel was facing into the room, and we all happened to be looking at her as she said this. She was wearing a short-sleeved, baby-blue, V-neck soccer shirt, the same colour as her eyes. As we watched, a light pink blush crept slowly from under the shirt and travelled up the pale column of her neck. By the time the colour had moved along the vulnerable throat to her face, it had darkened, until her delicate, exposed skin was suffused with a deep rose, even her ears. I was mesmerized. It was very quiet in the kitchen.

Josh’s voice broke the spell. “Hey, Ra-ache, you’re blushing,” he said in a teasing voice. “Ooh, Rachel’s got a crush on Pie-erre. Her best friend’s ne-ew boyfriend,” in that singsong tone that every kid learns straight out of the womb. Franny smiled indulgently at both of them.

Josh’s mouth was still open, all set to continue, when Suss said firmly, in his deep voice, “That’s enough, Joshua.” Josh immediately shut up and turned back to his comic.

Meanwhile, Rachel didn't stomp off, but was sauntering slowly across the room toward the door. I had the feeling that she was trying to act casual so that nobody would think much of the incident. She had to pass me to go out, and it was only I who saw her face then. Her colour had subdued somewhat, but she was still pink. Her full bottom lip trembled, and I could see the pulse beating in her throat. Unshed tears had turned the pale blue eyes to crystal. They looked into mine, deeply and very deliberately, holding them till she passed by. And suddenly I knew. It wasn't Pierre.

As I let out my breath after she'd left, I noticed her father watching me from across the room. Our eyes locked. I'd never really noticed before that Rachel has his eyes. I have no idea if Suss could read my face. I couldn't read his. It was closed, just the opposite of Rachel's.

The moment passed. We drank our tea sitting around the table, without Rachel, which wasn't in itself all that extraordinary. It was normal for the kids to be in their own rooms till suppertime.

Afterwards, I raced back to Ronnie's, the Mini taking the corners like the rally car it is. While we sat on her couch eating from TV tables, I told my cousin the details. She didn't doubt me for a moment. I wouldn't say she was stunned, exactly, but neither of us had ever given Rachel's personal life much thought.

"I'll never forget it, Ron. This went way beyond just gaydar. I knew exactly what she was feeling. She deliberately let me see it."

"She's always adored Melanie," Ronnie said. "It never occurred to me that she was in love with her, though. Poor kid. I guess Melanie doesn't feel the same. How could we have been so blind!"

"You'd have to hide it with a father like Suss. He's not stupid. He's certainly noticed that she's not into boys. Good thing she's going away to school next year."

"Yeah. I wonder what he saw when he looked at you like that. He must have guessed."

I wonder," I said.

The following week Ronnie and I went to Gay Thursday at the bar again, this time with two other lesbians—for moral support, so to speak. When we arrived, we expected a noisy demonstration like Suss had warned Ronnie about. It wasn't though, except for an argument between a burly picketer and a flaming queen. Before they were pulled apart by their respective buddies, we heard "trailer-trash bigot" and "sodom" and "nazi" and—I'm not kidding—"seed on barren ground." Other than that, it was pretty quiet. There were only about eight picketers, way fewer than the other time.

To our surprise there was no sign of Suss, and he never did show up. We took turns checking, till the picketers left. Later that night when we parted, Ronnie said that next time the girls came by on a soccer day, she'd probably drive them home, and maybe even stay for dinner.



RENÉE STRIDER

Renée Strider is a Canadian who enjoys living in her favourite city in Canada. She feels at home in various places, however, having been born in Europe and having lived in the U.S. for a number of years.

She is very pleased to be included in the first volume of *Read These Lips*. More of her stories can be found in anthologies like the *Erotic Interludes* series, and the forthcoming *Fantasy: Untrue Stories of Lesbian Passion* and *Best Lesbian Love Stories: Summer Flings*. Renée can be reached at reneelf@cogeco.ca.



Soft Shoe Shuffle

Pearlie McNeill

You have the Darlington address on a scrap of paper. The music is so loud you can feel the vibration pulsating through every step as you climb the steep staircase. The entrance is on your left and you stand there a moment, willing yourself to go inside. You're thirty-six years old and you feel like an awkward teenager. When was the last time your palms felt so sweaty? Looking to the right, past the smoky haze and the flashing lights beneath the glassy surface of the dance floor, you can see a number of women crowded around an area that you assume must be the bar. You move your right leg and then your left and keep going, but your knees are beginning to tremble.

Wooden cubicles line both walls between the bar and the dance floor. Every one of them is jam-packed. There is just enough room around the edge to get past. You feel the familiar urge to run away. Everyone seems to be with somebody, or to know somebody; you can't see anyone on their lonesome.

Well, there is this one woman at the bar. She has her back to the room. In between puffs of a cigarette she rests an arm on a nearby bar stool. She's wearing a corduroy jacket with a leather patch on each elbow. You like her rakish style. But can you approach her? How terrifying. You look back towards the dance floor. Hell, if you don't do something soon, you know you'll run for the door, then chide yourself all the way home for being such an idiot.

"Would you like to dance?"

Is that *your* voice? It sounds so high and strained, like a squawking lorikeet. The woman turns her head slowly and looks you up and down.

"Forget it, kid. I'm butch too."

Butch? Whatever does she mean?

The way you ran out of that place anyone might have thought the police were in hot pursuit. A whole month passed before you felt brave enough to venture out again.

Your next attempt is at a women's club. When you rang to enquire, you were told you don't need an application form to join, you just show up. A woman sits at a table inside the door. You pay the admission charge then stand around asking her questions. How long has this place been open? Do many women come to each event? Are there regular meetings as well as these social 'dos'? At last she pats your hand and smiles. "I think you'd better go in, don't you?"

The DJ is setting up. Groups of women are clustered around the edge of what is a large space. Your attention is caught by a woman with streaks of

blonde in her hair. The expanse of floor between you seems huge. This time your voice sounds like a rooster warming up.

“Would you like to dance?”

She doesn't answer, but an odd noise nearby makes you glance at a woman who has moved quickly to stand alongside her. This woman is frowning at you. She has a big chain around her neck, the type some people use as a lock for a motorbike. She doesn't say anything, just rattles the chain a few times. Her eyes are fixed on your face. You feel your face burning; you could ignite at any moment. Making a dash for the door, you push past a group of laughing women who are coming in. Your lip is bleeding where you bit it. You are determined not to cry. Struth, you had no idea getting to know other lesbians could be so hard, so bewildering.

Then comes the night when a woman smiles at you and says yes, she'd love to dance. Anxious not to hold her too tight in case she thinks you're desperate, you sashay around the dance floor cheek to cheek. You are thrilled with the spectacle of the flashing lights beneath your feet. You begin to think your success must be linked to the clothes you're wearing. You do feel good in the new white shirt with the collar that sticks up just so, and you've tucked the bottom part of your jeans into brown, knee high boots. Threaded through the loops of your jeans is a wide leather belt. You really like the big silver buckle. What a good feeling; what a great night this is.

You're over the moon right up to the moment when you reach her front gate. “I have a husband,” she explains hesitantly, “he doesn't know I go with women.” The happy grin on your face suddenly feels like setting concrete. You can't wait to get away.

Another night, another dance floor. Her eyes are bright and you are hopeful, *again*. You offer to drive her home. She looks pleased. Outside her house you negotiate one leg past the gear stick and even manage to put your arm around her. You want her to think you've done this many times before. Does she sense that you might swoon with desire at any moment? She turns her head as though to kiss you and then reaches forward to put a finger to your lips. She says, “I go with men for money, but I keep myself clean for women, I want you to know you can trust me. Do you understand?”

You feel so cold. Did someone throw a bucket of cold water through the window? You withdraw your arm from her shoulder and mutter something about needing to get up early in the morning. You don't understand anything right now. The sight of that woman standing on the kerb, a lone figure cast in shadows, haunts you for years.

Then a few weeks later, you meet Mary Poppins. There she is in a long skirt and carrying *that* sort of umbrella, but those lace-ups don't look right—they appear more suitable for a hiker than a nanny. She's come over from Perth and doesn't know a soul. You have a drink together and she asks if you'll show her the ropes. Exactly what she means you never do find

out, but it is a good short story that ends happily enough.

Driving to her hotel, chatting about this and that, you begin to relax. Would she like to come home with you? Even as the words trip off your tongue, each one a bubble floating into space, you notice that your voice hasn't changed at all, no lorikeets or roosters within cooee. You feel your sappy grin widening in delight, and of course she says yes. Turning the car around to head for home, you remember that you added an extra toothbrush to your shopping basket yesterday. "Oh," you think, "luck is surely your lady love tonight."

In the months that follow, Mary Poppins sends you pieces of dried apricot, each one parcelled up in a plain brown envelope. You send back prunes and walnut halves. Soon you are finding erotic imagery everywhere you look.



PEARLIE McNEILL

My first writing success came in 1979 when a radio play I wrote was broadcast on the ABC. I was, at that time, part of a book venture travelling up and down the east coast of Australia; selling books and running writing workshops and talking to women in universities, schools, rural kitchens - anywhere we were invited to go - the list of invitations just got longer and longer.

Since that time, I have been published in England, Europe, the United States and Australia. At the 1998 Adelaide Writers' Festival, my novel *Counting the Rivers* won a \$10,000 award which included publication that same year by South Australian publisher, Wakefield Press. That book was the second in a trilogy about my family. The first, *One of the Family*, was published in the UK by The Women's Press in 1989. This story, *Soft Shoe Shuffle*, is one chapter in a book I am writing as a DCA thesis, the third in the trilogy, exploring the ongoing implications of growing up in a violent family. The title for this book is *Tainted Fruit*. My brothers were both violent men. My older brother was a soldier in Korea and Malaya, and a few years after his return to civilian life, he used his bayonet to knife his ex-partner. My younger brother was jailed for raping a woman. Shame was my starting point for this third book and also a more upfront look at my life as a lesbian.

Pearlie McNeill
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At The Gym

Beatriz Copello

Night after night, and for months I have been coming to the gym hoping to see her again. I have lost interest in everything. I only live to search for her. She has become an obsession. My friends keep leaving messages on my answering machine.

“What's wrong with you? Please call back. Sam.”

“Leslie, where are you? Please ring me back. I've got heaps of news!”

“Leslie, what are you up to? Please call. Your friend Simone.”

One message after the other. These were the messages I received this morning, but I ignored them. I don't want to call them back. I don't want to speak to anyone or to see any of my mates. I want to be by myself until I find her! Sometimes I walk aimlessly for hours with the hope of a chance encounter. I even stand at the front door of women's gay bars expecting her to walk in. Silly hope!

No, she is nowhere to be seen. Maybe I imagined the whole thing. Maybe it was a fantasy. A fantasy similar to those erotic dreams that one has when sex has been unavailable for a long time. I have the feeling that if I tell the whole story to my therapist she will not believe me. Am I going mad? Am I capable of distinguishing between fantasy and reality? Certainly I am! Sometimes I fantasize that I am with her, but I know for sure that she is not there.

No! I am not mad! I know that what happened that night was reality. On the other hand, don't they say that people who are mad don't realize it? Anyhow, I won't see the shrink. I don't want to hear her saying, “Look kid, you imagined the whole lot. You're off this planet!” One thing is for sure: I'll never forget what happened that marvellous night six months ago.

That night started like any other night when I go to the gym. Usually, I attend the last aerobic class of the day which is around seven in the evening. When the class finishes, I hang around for a while. When I see that most of the women have left the showers, I go in. I like to take my time before having a shower. Sometimes I sit in front of the squash courts and watch the people play. Most nights I leave the gym when they are about to close. That night, while in the changing room, I noticed her. I was getting into my aerobic gear when I felt someone's eyes on me. I looked up and I saw her. She smiled. When I am in the changing room, I don't look at anyone. I don't want any of them to think that I go there to perv. Every time I raised my eyes, she was staring at me.

During the class, her glances became so obvious that I felt uneasy. I could not concentrate and lost my balance many times. I tripped continuously and my coordination deserted me. I spent most of the class on

the floor seeing Reeboks passing by over my head. I tried to ignore her, to stop looking at her, but I couldn't. She was beautiful! She had the most attractive shoulders I have ever seen on a woman. She looked strong and athletic, and she towered above all the other women in the class. Sometimes when women are too tall they move in an awkward manner, but not her. She moved with confidence and freedom. She had her hair cut very short. It was blond except a small wisp which had been dyed light purple. From far away I couldn't see the colour of her eyes. Later I found out that they were green.

That night after the class I did what I always do. Slowly I walked around the gym. I stopped and had a chat with one of the instructors. Later I had a drink of Staminade and finally went to have a shower. There was no one in the female changing room. I always choose the first shower because it is the biggest one and because the water pressure is better than in the others. I was just letting the water run over my body when I heard the sauna door open followed by foot steps coming towards my cubicle. For a second I was panic stricken. It had crossed my mind many times that any guy could hide himself in the sauna and then rape or even murder one of the women—mainly me, since I am always the last to leave the showers and the gym. I keep forgetting that I have learnt self defense and if I have to go, I'll go kicking. I had made up my mind not to worry too much and prepared myself to poke the eyes of whoever attacked me when the curtain of my shower opened.

There she was. Naked and smiling. "Can I get in?" she asked as she pushed me aside without waiting for me to say yes or no. Well... I was not going to say no, but I could have. I was recovering from the shock when she pushed me against the side wall of the cubicle and started to kiss me. Oh! Ha! Hum! The feeling of her skin against mine under the shower was heaven. She knew how to kiss that was for sure. As I had assumed her body was firm and muscular but not at all masculine. As she was kissing me, I opened my eyes and saw hers; they were green, green like a green lemon! I did not know what to do. I am an experienced dyke but I was in such a state of shock that I just stood there like an idiot. I tried to figure out what to do or say, besides moaning with pleasure, but nothing came to my mind. One of her hands, in magical movements, caressed my clit. With her other hand, she pressed me against her. She positioned herself in such a way that she was able to rub herself against my leg.

I wanted that moment to last for ever...

Yes! Yes! Yes, I wanted that moment to last forever. But like most beautiful things in life, it came to an end. I realised she had an orgasm because of the quivering of her body and because she said in my ear, "Oh Goddess! Oh Goddess!" It was my turn next. Yes, I came very quickly thanks to her expert fingers. The intensity of the orgasm made me feel like I was on a giant slippery dip. Down. Down. Down. As I was coming back to

reality she kissed me, just a little peck on my lips, and then she said: "Take your time. I'll wait for you outside." Stupid me! Fool! She wanted me to take my time so she could piss off without me finding her. When I came out of the shower, she had gone. I really believed that she was going to be outside. I hurried up and finished getting dressed. She was nowhere around the gym nor at the front door. I looked in the squash courts, in the sauna, in the showers, even behind the counter where drinks are sold.

Finally, I approached the caretaker who was about to close the gym. "Did you see a very tall blond woman leave the gym a short while ago?" I asked.

"No, I haven't seen anyone leave for the last half an hour," he replied.

I went out. The night was cold. I shivered. My hair was still wet. Cold as I was, I walked around the block three times. I looked inside the cars parked in the streets surrounding the gym. No sign of her.

Tonight will be six months since that glorious night. I don't want anyone else; I just want her. I won't stop until I find her!



The Women's Pool

Beatriz Copello

Saturday. Sunny. Summer. Sunny Saturday summer. Perhaps the last hot days of the season. It was a long wait for today after a shit week at school.

Breakfast. A towel, a book, sunglasses and my iPod. Deception and lies. "To the beach with my friends." I have no friends. They wouldn't understand me. I'm different.

The sun still burns. I feel an intense heat on my face. The end of March in Sydney—Coogee. I'm lucky to live so close to the women's pool, just a short walk.

My heart is racing, Oh, I hope so much that she is there. I lie on the rocks. Not many women in the pool today, too early in the morning or shopping. I know most of the regulars. She's one of them. I sit comfortably on the same rock I have sat on every weekend. She'll sit on the grass verge. She'll be here shortly. I put my earphones on and listen to Sinéad O'Connor. I'll be seventeen next week.

I'll be forty-five next week. It seems that in the last few months I've aged more than ever. I hate birthdays, especially since I broke up with Denise on my birthday three years ago. Three lonely years since then. My swimmers, my 30+, my book. It's ridiculous. I hate myself for going to the pool just to watch a kid. She must be only sixteen, seventeen, at the most eighteen. If only I had the courage to talk to her. Hail and storms. I wished it was raining to stop my nonsense. Why do I want to see her? I should be at home reading the finance and budget reports for tonight's executive meeting.

What is it about her that makes me love her the way I do? Infatuation! Yes, mother would say infatuation. I asked her how it feels to be in love.

"At your age infatuations are common."

"Don't get pregnant, whatever you do."

"Love! Real love was what I felt for your father."

"One day you'll meet a nice boy and you'll love him as I loved your father!"

What a lot of shit. Sad news, mother...I'm different. You know I like women.

What if she loves me too? She looks at me as much as I look at her. I wish I had the courage to talk to her. There she is! Her green costume matches the green grass patch. She's looking to see if I am here. Heart palpitations. The doctor said that they are common during adolescence. What about these other palpitations, the ones I feel between my legs every

time I think of her?

She's here. I should wave at her. But if I do she may decide to come and talk to me, and if she comes closer she'll notice my age. If she knew I was forty-five, she wouldn't be looking at me. I bet she's short-sighted and hasn't noticed my grey strands of hair. I'd love to caress her all over. How silly of me to fantasize about making love to such a young woman? Tomorrow I'll make an appointment with the hairdresser and get rid of all my grey hairs. She's reading, an HSC novel perhaps? School certificate books? A lesbian story? I'll walk to her and ask her why she keeps staring at me. Oh God, I can't; I'm glued to the ground.

Maybe my mother didn't give me enough love; that's why I like older women. I should talk to the School Counsellor. I dream. I dream of holding her hands. I dream of running my fingers through her grey strands of hair. Today, when she leaves, I'll follow her. Her address: a treasure. Hummm, perhaps a love letter under her door. I dream. I dream a beautiful dream: I rest my head on her breast.

Sagging underarms. Sagging belly. Loose skin. Wrinkles. Sagging breast. I lost my daring spirit. I don't take risks. I'm frightened of changes. My memory is failing. Stress. Cautious about meeting new women. Sitting at home with a book.

There was a spirit who hid in a young woman's body. She liked to have fun. She lived deeply. She loved passionately. She played with the cards on the table. She had ambitions, and plans, and hopes, and faith, and... What the hell is wrong with me now?

To be the book that her hands hold. To be the towel where her body rests. To be the hand that covers her skin with suntan lotion. To kiss her. To make love to her. To be her friend. To learn from her. The water will cool my senses!

Why do men have affairs with young girls and no one cares? What would my middle-aged friends say if I walked into their houses with a kid hanging from my arm, one who is even younger than my son? I can hear them:

"Cradle snatcher! Cradle snatcher! Cradle snatcher!"

"Look at that old woman with the young girl."

"She probably has money and the kid is with her because of it."

"Maybe she is her daughter."

"In ten years time she'll look like the young woman's grandmother."

"What a ridiculous mismatch."

"Some women near the menopause go a bit funny."

Tomorrow literature. No *The Well of Loneliness*. No *Patience and Sarah*. No *Sappho Was a Right-On Woman*. She keeps looking at me. I smile. I feel stupid. Silly smile in a pimpled face. Why would a sophisticated, mature woman like her want to be with me? Pimples. Fat. Insecure. Shy.

"Anorexic," says Mum.

"You're too introverted. You need to come out of your shell," says my sister.

"Walk straight. You'll get a hunched back," pestered my father before he ran away with his secretary.

Waves breaking against the rock. Fantasies taken away by the seagulls. I murmur my love to the wind: please give her my message. Pain. A pain in my belly. A sweet bitter taste in my mouth.

I should put an ad in LOTL to meet someone. I have been alone for too long. I'm sick of lonely nights! I'm sick of getting into bed to cuddle my pillow! I'm fed up with the monotony of my hand's well-rehearsed movements! A successful life. A successful career. A fat account in the bank. Good clothes. A good car. The opera. The theatre. Lots of friends.

Waves breaking against the rocks. I have a secret. I yearn a young woman and I feel so empty...

She's getting up. She is leaving.

She saw me getting ready. She's leaving too. Gosh, maybe when we get to the street we'll say something. But what?

"Coming back tomorrow?"

"Sure. Are you?"

"Yeap."



BEATRIZ COPELLO

Dr Beatriz Copello is a poet and fictions writer. Her poetry book *Women Souls and Shadows*, Bemac Publishing, 1992, received excellent reviews and was highly commended in the Wild and Wooley 1993 Awards.

Beatriz's poetry and fiction has been published in literary journals such as *Southerly* and *Australian Women's Book Review* and in many feminist publications. She has read her poetry at events organised by the Sydney Writers Festival, the NSW Writers Centre, the Multicultural Arts Alliance, Refugee Week Committee, and many other events. Beatriz Copello has won various poetry prizes including First Prize in the 2000 Sydney Writers' Festival, "Tell Your Story Competition", with a performance poetry piece. Her poetry has been translated into Chinese, Polish, Italian and Spanish.

In April 1996, Beatriz was invited to present a paper and read her poetry at the 11th Annual Conference of the American Association of Australian Literary Studies, at Humboldt University, Arcata, California. Beatriz has also been invited to read her poetry at the Ubud Writers Festival, 2005.

In November 1997, she received from the Australia Council, Literature Fund, and Emerging Writers Grant for Poetry.

Her play *Malinche's Fire* was performed at the Belvoir (Downstairs) Theatre and was selected to be read at the International Women's Playwright Conference - 2000, Athens, Greece.

Her novel *Forbidden Steps Under the Wisteria* was published by Abbott Bentley in Sydney, and *A Call to the Stars* by Crown Publisher. Her book of poetry *Meditations At the Edge of a Dream* was published by Interactive Publications -Glasshouse Books.

In 2003, she was awarded a Doctor of Creative Arts Degree (Creative Writing) from the University of Wollongong.

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The Perfect Woman

Therese Szymanski

I stood across the room from her, admiring her shapely figure and beautiful face. I was staring and almost drooling, and in fact, my hand touched my mouth to be sure I was not. Even from this distance, my heart beat faster, my hands trembled, and I practically broke out into a sweat.

She was that...that...

Perfect.

Even across the broad space, in the dim light, I could tell her golden hair was pure spun silk. I knew her creamy skin was soft as a newborn babe's and smooth as a polished pearl. It would taste sweet to my tongue, and be as lickable as an ice cream cone.

The many yards between us were empty as I stared at her, focused only on her. I could tell that her curves, hidden by a slight, silky dress that did not so much cover as accentuate, were smooth and full, and her legs, long and lush.

I knew I had to drop to my knees and worship her. I smiled as I thought of me being on my knees in front of her. Everything around me ceased to exist as I thought of it. I wanted to be on my knees in front of her, burying my face between her soft, open thighs.

I would make her open herself up for me, to me. I would make her give herself to me.

She would want me that badly. I would be the only butch she would ever notice.

I could imagine it all in my mind's eye. I would be on my knees, burying my face between her thighs, her naked, exposed breasts would fit perfectly in my hands. Her nipples would grow hard and large when I licked them, when I squeezed them between my thumbs and forefingers, when I bit them.

Nothing was going on around me—nothing could go on around me—that would pull my eyes from her—that would take my mind from her.

I could imagine how easily her slender waist would fit within my arm as we danced cheek to cheek. I knew how she would feel pressed against me as we swayed gently to the music.

I stared across the room at her, oblivious to all else, and envisioned our lives together.

She was sweet and witty, smart and sultry, but never sulky, depressed or desperate. She would perfectly complement me. She would make me all I could be.

And she would find her own heaven with me. I would make her come

until she couldn't move. I would make her await my return home from a hard day at work. I would make everything come alive for her. I would make it all mean something to her.

I would shower her with gifts, and she would never pay attention to another butch, no matter how much they wanted her. She would be mine and always be true to me.

Our entire future passed in front of my eyes and I smiled.

I admired her from across the room and her golden hair shimmered in the low lighting. I saw our entire future together in an instant.

It was happy. And very, very sexy. I knew she would run her long fingernails over my naked back when I made love to her, scratching it so hard that I would scream in pain if I wasn't in ecstasy between her legs.

I knew she would wear lingerie...and only Victoria's Secret underwear. Everything she did would be to please me, so I would take her.

I grinned to myself realizing that pleasing me, being sexy for me, would bring her what she would want—multiple orgasms. What a simple equation—she turns me on, and then I give her what she wants. We both get what we want.

Taking her became a taste on my tongue, and I knew I had to have it.

I knew I could be the one for her, and she for me, but she was beyond my grasp. Yet, like a magnet, she drew me from across the space that divided us.

I approached, shyly at first, then I began to hope that maybe somehow she might notice and remember me, so I tried to put a butch swagger to my walk and a confident tilt to my grin. My eyes lit up on their own when I thought she might see me.

As I hoped she might see me and remember me.

I knew what she was, yet she still seemed to see me and notice me. I knew she couldn't really see me or notice me, was wholly unaware of me, yet I couldn't help but become more and more aware of her as I drew closer.

My smile was stretching across my face, while she stood absolutely still, her green eyes staring directly in front of her, as if she didn't even notice me. But her perfume floated around me like a cloud of heaven, making my head swim, filling my senses with her essence.

But she didn't even realize I existed.

I had to have her, possess her just for tonight, but...

I furtively glanced about me, and then wrapped my arm around her. I didn't care about anything except having her for this one moment. I pulled her in close and ran my hands over her sweet curves, as supple as I'd imagined. I lifted my hand to cup her right breast, and it was as soft as I'd hoped. Her nipple became incredibly large and hard when I squeezed it. I ran my hands down her inner thighs, pushing them apart. Then I cupped

her cunt in my hand. It was nice and hot.

But she didn't move a muscle.

"Put this in her ear," Joan said to me, handing me a key, "and you'll see what my lil' Robo-Hottie can really do. She's all yours, after all. Happy birthday."



THERESE SZYMANSKI

Therese Szymanski has been short-listed for a Spectrum and a few Lammies and Goldies, and made the Publishing Triangle's list of notable lesbian books in 2004. She's written seven Brett Higgins Motor City Thrillers (*When the Dancing Stops*, *When the Dead Speak*, *When Some Body Disappears*, *When Evil Changes Face*, *When the Corpse Lies* and *When First We Practice*); edited *Back to Basics*, *Call of the Dark*, *Wild Nights*, *Fantasy*, and *A Perfect Valentine*; has novellas in *Once Upon a Dyke*, *Stake through the Heart* and *Bell, Book and Dyke*, and has a few dozen published short stories.

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Photo by Karin Kallmaker - Provincetown, MA, USA.

The Thief's Tale

msprism

“Gather 'round. I have a tale to tell and tell it well; a coin of silver spins the spell. A coin of copper ties the knot to show you things you never sought.”

It was a Travellers Inn in the middle of nowhere on the road to somewhere where I first heard this story. The bard was tattered—feet torn from her journey, face full of dust and grime—but her voice held none of that. Her voice was full as a ripened orchard warm with sun and honeyed hues. So we gathered round and tossed our fee, for it was a long, dark night, and time was slow in passing. Not being of wealth or comfort, at first I hesitated and then gave copper...

Before grabbing a fistful of the thicker branches, she tapped the small dagger hanging snug at her waist twice for luck. Next a toehold and she was launched slithering through the wet glossy leaves like liquid ebony. She smirked at the ease with which she rose; fifty years of peace had allowed the writhing hederas to thicken and flourish and now provided a million handholds a hundred feet up to the Princess's window. In war or times of threat, this sturdy green ladder would have been cut down and stripped away for that very reason.

Far below, the palace guards were sleeping curled into any crevice that kept the chill wind at bay, the meagre heat from the brazier barely seeping into their cold bones. In the cobbled streets and market square, tired bunting and banners lay limp, the drenched cotton already stained from wedding white to drab grey by rain and chimney soot. No heaven's bless for this royal ceremony. The quarter moon shone weakly on the slick granite walls as thunder clouds closed down the far horizon and the North wind rose. For her it was a perfect night.

Finally level with the tiny aperture, she stole a glance inside. The room was lit by a sputtering candle; its flickering shadow alone danced on the walls. With one twist of her slim hips, she slid in and crouched focussed on the breathing of the solitary occupant, a young woman of royal descent and lauded beauty.

Satisfied all was still and the royal bride-to-be was deep in dreams, she stood and scanned the boudoir. Her keen eyes picked out her prize, and stealthily she stepped across the Persian silk to the jewelled dowry lying on the counter.

“What do you want?”

She spun to see a startled face gaze up at her from the silken folds of a

vast canopied bed. Knowing there was no threat, no ladies-in-waiting, no guards at the door, just herself and this Princess in a tall and lonely tower, she waved a languid hand towards the glistening cache,

“All your jewels and all your gold,” she said in a velvet voice.

“My dowry!” The gasp was accompanied by rustling silk as the princess emerged from the confines of the majestic bed. “You’re stealing my dowry?”

“It is my trade, your Highness. I am a thief.” The whole kingdom knew of the fabled treasure that would ensure a royal union and another fifty years of peace.

Shadowed eyes widened and shone with what the thief presumed were tears,

“Don’t cry, sweet Princess, it’s just a dowry. Just coin and gem. There will still be a wedding. I can’t steal love.”

“You’re a woman!” The gasp held disbelief.

“I am a thief.” Each stood staring as the candlelight danced over fine and handsome features—the swarthy and scarred, the porcelain and noble.

Glowing thunder roared and rent the skies apart, at least a fathom of rain fell on the shingled roofs and ran in rivulets through the cobbled gullies. Both flinched, their stillness broken. The princess closed the distance in a few short paces. Reaching up, she clasped the leather jerkin, small fingers knotted into fists. At first she seemed to shake the tall dark figure before her, but it was she who trembled violently.

“Take me with you,” she whispered.

My companions and I leaned closer and not for need of the fire’s warmth; it was her tale that mesmerised like dancing flame. So still were we a spider’s web would have rippled like timpani in the quietness as she sipped her ale. Throat now moistened, she continued, her voice chimed like frosted crystal.

The thief froze. Her arms hung by her sides; her black eyes locked in shock with those blazing up at her, shining but not with unshed tears as she had thought. With one small glance, she found herself drowning in another’s hope.

“Take me with you.” Again the terse plea. It found a resonance deep within her from a thousand other abandonments. She had always been alone, lived alone, worked alone. She had turned from many; few had ever turned from her, but then they were the few who had mattered. She had always been alone. Fear once more crept in to sever her heart and leave her blood cold and stagnant in her veins.

“No.” She pulled away and abruptly began to stuff all she could grab into the cloth bag she carried. Again small hands dragged at her shoulders, spinning her round.

“Take me. Please. I cannot be married to a man I’ve never met. Take me away from this empty life. I have prayed for you. I have wished for you. I have spelled for you so often and now you are here. Free me,” she whispered with such impenetrable passion the thief’s scalp tingled.

Black eyes blinked with caution and the superstition of her trade, her caste, her life. “Spelled me?”

And now she wove magic into the mystical and we were bewitched for her story held darkness and heat and broke every dictum we common stock were governed by, even in our dreams. Our coins had spilled before her on the table and in the firelight my copper penny glowed.

A dainty hand with ringless fingers splayed before a dark and startled face.

“I am betrothed against my wish. Love cannot be sold. Not one day has passed that the ring falls from my finger. A ring worth more than this...tenfold.” She indicated the corded ropes of sapphire and emeralds, of rubies and pearls. The thief knew this was the royal ring, a rumoured diamond torn from the earth by blood and death. The wearer cursed to be forever loveless, but bearer of riches beyond measure.

“I know this curse—the choice is love or wealth. I am a thief. I can take the ring and still leave you.” She glared harshly into the soft gaze before her, but it was like trying to stamp her foot on marsh grass; she just sank in.

“The spell will tell and tell it well,” came the soft answer.

Transfixed, she felt her nape cupped by a small, cool hand, the other gently stroked her scarred cheek as her mouth was drawn down to brush against lips of softest satin. Cinnamon breath exhaled and a delicate tongue trembled along her lower lip.

“Take me to the thieves’ taverns and the pirates’ dens. Bring me into your life. Cleave me unto you, for you are spelled and you are mine.”

Now it was the thief who trembled, inhaling scent, feeling textures and sensations her meagre, cruel life had never allowed her even to imagine. The words were magical elixir to a parched and lonely heart. And then she felt the weight on her finger and pulled back to see the frozen drop of poisoned flame sparkling there. Her curse? Her fee? A ransom paid for a princess not yet saved?

“Take me while we still have time.”

Her curse? Her fee? In a heart so cold there was no doubt...the curse could never touch her; her fee was on her finger. But could a thief hold true and save her? That was my question, the only one. I needed her saved—saved from loneliness, saved from lack of love.

The words picked up energy from the storm outside, filling her with a

humming current of need, stripping bare her hidden dreams, exposing her ugly fears. She sucked in hot breath and her heart lurched, pooled blood and dormant emotions shuddered, then coursed through her body heating from within. Her eyes latched onto the hope-filled ones below as curse and spell co-mingled on her finger. She was shattering like shell.

The rain departed with the dawn as weak daylight pierced through glowering cloud. The morning maid was first, soon followed by the Captain of the Guard and then the royal advisors and administrators. The King was simply awakened and informed. Told, as his bath was drawn and his valet lifted the voluminous nightshirt from his skinny shoulders, of the empty tousled bed, the abandoned dowry and the fabled diamond ring lying on the silken rug as if fallen from a finger. A thief had come and stolen love.

She pocketed her coin amid hurrahs and thank yous. Smiling she stood and wrapped her cloak around her. A simple nod took her to the door.

Bereft, empty and confused, I stood too and followed, but what could I a lowly seamstress apprentice say to a Bard of such wit and talent? From the rain-streaked window I watched her move to the stables where the poorer sleep. And behind me, as murmurs turned to cries as bags were found ransacked and pockets plundered, I saw a dark rider emerge. A strong arm swooped down to pull her tenderly up behind, and soon both riders disappeared into the murk of night.

“Did the ladies cry?”

“Oh, yes, they always do. It is a love story after all, my thief. Did you do well?”

“A small bag of gold and a bejewelled dagger. Various bits and pieces. Enough to keep us for a month.” She was rewarded with a squeeze around her waist. A warm smile creased her jagged scar. Heads bowed against the winter winds and rain, they rode on.

Amidst the uproar of the patrons and the platitudes of the innkeeper, I returned and sank back into my seat. I had nothing to lose, nothing for another to take...or so I thought. I sat quietly trying to understand the sadness in my heart, the emptiness that seemed to swamp me more than ever before. I yearned for something I wasn't sure I understood or even deserved. Then my eye glanced upon my small penny left abandoned on the table whilst all silver had been taken. Was my offering so little even for a thief's accomplice? No, I believed it to be a token of sorts. It winked in the firelight and I reached to reclaim it with a small smile. For the first time in my comfortless, unhappy life, my heart fluttered gently with hope for an unknown future and a promise to myself to find my own happiness. I thought of my Bard, her story, her history. A thief had come and stolen love.



Flowergirl Buys Bomb msprism

She met her in the hotel lobby as requested, punctual to the second, easy to spot in that white retro Mori Hanae summer dress with the bold red hibiscus splashed across it. One leg was elegantly draped over the other as she delicately sipped her Armagnac. A white sandal dangled casually from her foot. She looked cool and relaxed in the afternoon heat.

Such a warm drink for a hot day, she thought, already overheated in her Moschino denims. Approaching quietly, she observed the seated woman's features. With short dark hair, almost Latino black, well-cut and glossy in the soft sunlight, her features were regular and tanned, rather nondescript—the kind of face you swear you'd seen a million times before in the street, a photo-fit of the blandest Caucasian features possible. It was certainly not eye-catching, but again not unpleasant to look at either. The mouth had a fuller lower lip and was painted to match the colours on the dress, and the eyes...the eyes were a fusion of the liqueur in the glass, honeyed caramel layered with a sensuous copper undertone, warm and rich, dancing with light; they were welcoming as they glanced up and looked directly at her.

The lips creased into a pleasant smile revealing even white teeth. She set down the glass and rose to meet her, hand extended in a mannerly greeting.

"Flowergirl." She introduced herself as they shook hands. "How do you do?"

"Bomb." The handshake was warm, firm and inviting. "I'm well, thank you."

She indicated towards her glass. "May I get you a drink?"

"No, thank you. I don't drink."

"Good. Let's go up to my room."

The room turned out to be a suite, understatedly elegant, like her. On entry she silently motioned Bomb to wait in the centre of the lounge while she took a seat by the window.

"Tasya."

The bedroom door opened and a diminutive young woman entered dressed in a loose white linen top and trousers; her bare feet moved quickly and quietly across the thick carpet. Gracefully she flowed to her knees as prim as any ballerina, head bowed before her Mistress.

"I'll have a soda water on ice with a twist of lime." The young girl floated to her feet and hurried away.

Flowergirl turned her attention to her guest. "You can disrobe."

As a cool breeze billowed the muslin curtains, she leant back into the soft upholstery and watched with idle interest.

Bomb bent and quickly removed her Havaianas sandals. Straightening to her full six foot two, she removed the T-shirt next, freeing small sturdy breasts that pushed out from a well-honed chest and abs. The nipples puckered automatically. Next she unbuckled her belt, unzipped her fly and stepped out of her jeans; bending quickly from the waist, she stripped off the black bikini briefs and stood almost to attention waiting patiently for inspection.

Tasya reappeared with the requested drink and, setting it on the coaster by her Mistress's elbow, once again sank onto her haunches, head lowered.

Ignoring the beverage and its bearer, Flowergirl sat for a few moments simply admiring the beautiful specimen before her. The tall Afro-American had turned quite a few heads as she strode confidently into the hotel foyer earlier. Broad-shouldered and shaven head, her fine facial features were feminine while her musculature provided an androgyny that was very attractive. Now standing naked before her, small-breasted, mons shaved clean as requested, it was easy to admire the melding of skin tones from burnt toffee to bruised black across the topography of the woman's body.

Slowly rising, she moved quietly towards the black woman standing motionless in the centre of the penthouse lounge, her darkness contrasting vividly with the rich creams of the surrounding décor. Flowergirl was five foot five, but for her carriage and demeanour she may as well have been Everest. Passively she stood before Bomb and carefully ran her eyes over the body presented for her, noting every freckle and mole, regarding the dark areolas with lazy interest as they began to relax and take on the spongy texture of a flaccid nipple. She flicked her gaze over the tight abdominals, the de-furred mound and the sweep of strong thighs. All was in order, unflawed, unmarked and un-pierced, healthy and vibrant. Slowly she strolled around behind the figure, silently admiring the massive latissimus dorsi and trapezius muscle groups, the high rounded buttocks and meaty hamstrings and calves. Finally, she reached out one tapered finger, so pale and slender against the blunt back, and barely touching traced the series of small glyphs tattooed from the nape of the neck down the top of the spine. There were three of them, each depicting a past Master or Mistress.

"Labarum," she murmured, grazing her nail along the Chi Rho cross initialling Bomb's first Italian Master. The skin goose-fleshed under her fingertip which pleased her; she liked sensitivity to her touch.

The next glyph was of a snake swallowing its own tail, "Ouroboros," she recognized again. Her finger trailed over the ridges of vertebrae. "Aah," she sighed, "how I miss her."

The last was an ankh representing Bomb's time in the North of Africa. Again, no scars or man-made blemishes. She made one last sweeping gaze as she returned to face the tall woman. Pleased with what she had seen so far, she nevertheless kept her face emotionless.

Raising her arm, she pointed to the open bedroom door in an unspoken

command. Bomb moved towards the room, standing just inside awaiting her next instruction.

“On the bed on all fours.”

She did so, assuming the position with practiced ease, back straight, arms and thighs at a perfect ninety degree angle, parallel to each other. She poised breathtakingly still looking dead ahead, like a piece of mahogany furniture.

The first stroke of the riding crop came across the firmly fleshed orbs of her backside, absolutely level and centre; the second was a few inches below that mean-line, the next above. A blink and the slightest sway on each blow betrayed the sting and shock to her system. The flesh heated and bloomed, red welts rose in crisp lines across the buttocks as more strokes filled in the three guidelines.

Less care for symmetry was given to the back of her thighs; this sensitive area brought a crinkle of a frown to the sweat-sheened brow. Several welts adorned her hamstrings before finally the crop was applied at random to her broad back. Here a myriad of criss-crosses patterned from shoulder to kidneys every stroke being of equal strength to the last, every one raising a red echo of itself without breaking the skin. She never made a sound.

Resting, Flowergirl moved directly behind to view with pleasure the soaked sex protruding shyly towards her from between the apex of the chunky thighs, the shaven skin slick with excitement. She was aware that she too was wet in response to these sodden folds and the energy she had put into the flogging.

“Get up.” Throwing away the crop, she pointed to where she wanted Bomb to stand.

“Tasya.” The Russian girl hurried into the room,

“Strip.” White linen immediately pooled on the cream carpet.

“Bed.” Tasya crawled onto the brocade cover just vacated by Bomb and assumed her kneeling, sitting on her heels, palms on her knees, waiting.

Flowergirl now turned to Bomb. “Undress me.”

Immediately stepping forward, Bomb moved behind the smaller woman and lowered the zipper; the dress spilled off her shoulders and over her naked breasts, full and rose tipped. She carefully stepped out of the floating fabric and it was at once draped over a nearby chair. Turning, she kicked her sandals off and, standing with her back to the bed and Tasya, waited as the tall woman knelt before her to gently draw the silk panties down her thighs and off her feet. She noticed the nostrils aligned with her sex quiver at her scent, a small smile creeping across her lips. This was correct behaviour. All three were motionless for a moment before she sat down on the edge of the bed.

“Cradle me,” she cast over her shoulder. Shifting quickly to obey, the paler girl bodily cupped her mistress, a thigh splayed either side of her as armrests; back to belly, the dark head cushioned back against small round

breasts. Bomb still knelt before the bed, level with Flowergirl's furred sex as she lay back on the younger woman.

"Touch me, Tasya." Small practiced fingers reached around her and began to knead her full breasts, circling the areolas with knowing pressure. Slowly she opened her legs before the kneeling woman, never blinking as she watched deep brown eyes drink in her pink saturated sex.

She shifted slightly under the delightful administrations of Tasya's skilful fingers; her nipples were fully erect, each tug pulling all the way through her core straight down to her cunt. She looked directly into the dark eyes hovering before her,

"Eat me." Bomb's head bowed, her thick tongue burrowing even as the words were uttered. The pulsating heat from her striped back and buttocks poured from her mouth into the soft folds opening before her. It was an honour to feed on someone of the stature of Flowergirl. She speared as deeply as she could, rolling her tongue around the textured inner walls, tenderly grinding the outer lips against her teeth. Her hands remained on the floor before her to give balance as she gorged like a starving animal on a carcass. Only her mouth could touch until told otherwise. She angled her head slightly so her rounded nose nudged the stiffened clitoris pushing out to meet her.

The hands on Flowergirl's breasts stroked mercilessly with firm teasing strokes she herself had taught the girl. Occasionally a small hand would cup a breast and gently nestle it in a cool palm before kneading the entire globe and then return to the aching pink tips. Tasya was panting. Flowergirl knew the young slave's gaze was travelling down the length of her body to where the shining black head was tearing expertly into her. She could feel Tasya's pebbled nipples scraping her shoulder blades. Her own eyes were feasting on the same sight. Her hips began to grind back down onto the tongue and teeth below her, her own breathing rasping from her throat. She was thrashing now, heaving her ass up off the bed trying to make contact between her pulsing clit and the thick penetrating tongue that seemed intent on sucking her dry.

"Suck me," she managed to moan out of a tight throat. Bold lips immediately encircled her humming clitoris drawing on it deeply, pulling and tugging on it, then releasing only to suckle gently. Tasya continued the generous kneading of both her breasts; the dark head between her legs rolled and swayed as Bomb ate her out. Her nails clawed across the Russian girl's milky thighs as she heaved herself into orgasm, crying out cradled in her slave's arms, sex opened to the gorging greed of her visitor.

When the sheen that coated her dried, she rose up barely glancing at the bleeding scratches on Tasya thighs, ignoring the bowed black head of the still kneeling figure.

"Tasya, help her clean up...run me my bath as well." They both stood; Bomb quietly followed the smaller woman to one of the bathrooms.

Alone now, she lifted the phone and dialled a Cairo number.

“I’m pleased. The money will be in your account tomorrow end of business.” Replacing the handset, happy at the latest acquisition to her stable, she smiled and lit a French cigarette.



MSPRISM

msprism is Irish but works and lives between Ireland, the UK and Greece. Sailing and writing are her two main interests. She has had several articles published in a variety of Arts magazines and was once a syndicated cartoonist for an Irish newspaper group to pay her way through college.

A newcomer to the online fanfic scene she knows a captive audience when she sees one and just jumped right in. She would love feedback. Her email is msprism@hotmail.co.uk.



Aplenty

Trish Shields

women:
a golden pear,
so well-rounded and poised;
succulent flesh in many shapes
and forms

her scent
tantalizes,
taking one's breath away;
her fiery touch sets heart and soul
ablaze

purpled
lips from kisses
sing a song of ardour
as we love until the sun sets
each night

fertile
fields well-tended
lie fallow; the tiller
soon becomes the tilled, hands wrist-deep
in sighs

all thought
conquered with one
smile, her fingers burning
trails across my skin - bountiful
harvest



The Nearness of You

Trish Shields

the
tips
of your
ears are red,
flushed by excitement.
the scent of your body leaves me
breathless, and yet up to this moment we have not touched.
passion's flames streaks across your skin,
rendering me mute,
unable
to think
or
move.
and then
with one step
I can feel the heat
drawing me closer, closer still,
until we are breathing the same air, then the same breath.
before long the same thought is shared,
blossoming into
a bonfire
within
each
heart.
fingers
now explore,
leaving us heady
with lust's vintage, sober no more,
imbibing each night
greedily
'til dawn's
last
touch.



The Blank Page

Trish Shields

I stare
out my window,
trapped within white silence,
no incendiary thoughts spur
me on.

then rain
drips slowly down
each pane, drawing my thoughts
to you - my fingers trace the path
of wet

sweet thoughts
of your repose
after a night of love
blossom, scattering the webs from
my mind.

your lips
pure seduction;
each word spoken a gift.
your touch brands me; each stroke brings me
higher

with eyes
closed I begin
to write, no longer caught
in a cell of white marble, cold
and blank

a sigh
escapes my lips.
looking up, I'm caught - your
gaze is all the inspiration
I'll need.



TRISH SHIELDS

Trish Shields resides with her partner and three children on Vancouver Island, Canada. She has studied creative writing under Matt Hughes, Canadian author of *Fools Errant* and *Fool Me Twice*. She also studied creative writing at the Algonquin College in Ottawa, Ontario.

Soul Speak, a book of poetry published by Troubadour Books, was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award in 2001. Trish's first fictional novel, *Inferno*, is published by Baycrest Books. She has poetry and short stories published internationally. She was the editor/co-ordinator for the Canadian Poetry Association's 20th Anniversary Anthology published in 2006. Other publications include Regina Weese's *Elan* anthology, *Washing the Color of Water Golden* by Sun Rising Poetry Press, and her first chapbook, *Coast Lines*, co-authored by Katherine L. Gordon, released in February, 2007.

"I've been writing poetry since I was eleven years old. I consider poetry the best way for me to convey what's in my heart and mind. I think it's very therapeutic for the soul. Being a word-smith means I delight in language, in how it sounds to the ear and looks like on paper. Words can create pictures when read but they can also convey thoughts in how they are presented on paper. For instance, a cinquain is a five line poem consisting of 2, 4, 6, 8, 2 (22) syllables respectively. Adelaide Crapsey, an American poet, developed the poetic form in the early 20th century. She was heavily influenced by the Japanese forms, tanka and haiku.

The cinquain format has a gentle roll to it. When five or six cinquain verses are connected then you have a crown cinquain. Each verse can be seen as a mini poem on its own as well as being part of the greater whole. For me, this poetic form conveys the beauty and simplicity of a tender heart, be it filled with love or lying broken on the floor.

The Fibonacci format is derived from the mathematical Fibonacci sequence developed by Leonardo Pisano, an Italian mathematician. This poetic meter has been found in the 12th Century Sanskrit poetry so although there has been a revival of sorts recently, it is a very old poetic form indeed. It is generally a six line, 20 syllable poem although the only limit placed on this form is that each line must add up to the next in syllables. Example being, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, etc. Instead of continuing to add more syllables to each line, I chose to reduce and then add until the final sequence came to an end, much like the wave I was trying to impart to the reader.

While some people see concrete structure in poetry very limiting, I find that it can be very freeing. When writing poetic forms that require concise thinking, I'm forced to analyze each word chosen, each line created, and finally the overall feel of the final product. Call it minimalistic poetry. To convey a large thought with the use of very little words is truly a challenge and can be a tremendously rewarding experience.

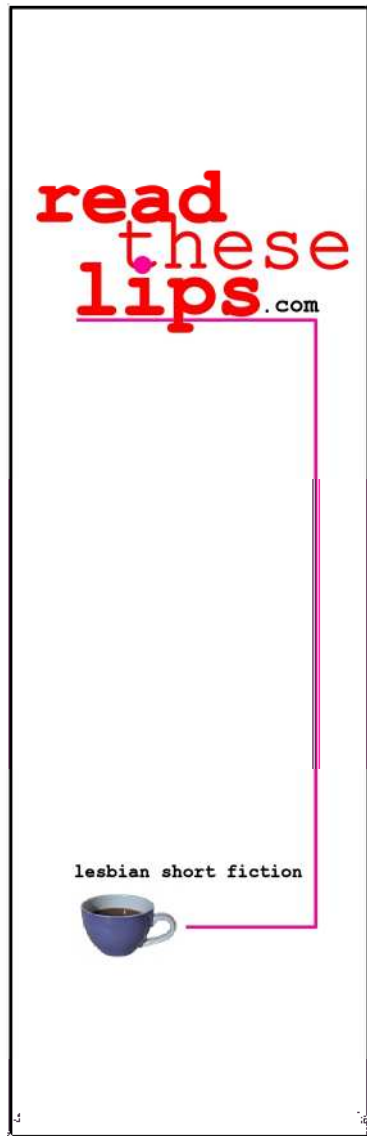
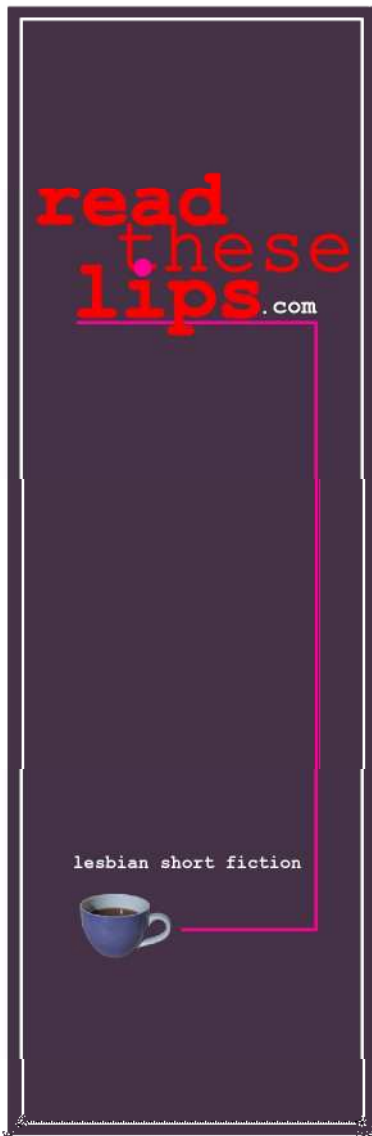
I find the use of the building syllables in the Fibonacci format perfect to convey the rising ardor in my love/lust poetry. Each line becomes a wave, carrying the reader along for a joyous ride to be enjoyed again and again.

TRISH SHIELDS

While I must admit my favourite poetic form is free verse, I can't help but dabble in the different types and styles of poetry. Just as there are different subject matters conveyed in poetry, there are different styles, rhythms, meters and formats to compliment them. It's a joy to see which format works best with a poem - it's a great pastime I hope never to tire of."

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bookmarks

Study Buddies

Lara Zielinsky

Following a quick pull through her hair with the stiff bristles of a thick brush, Gail tucked her notebook and *Everyday Russian, Volume II*, under her left arm. She hurried out of her dormitory room on the second floor of Drayer Hall to the east staircase past Kirsten and Marla arguing in French in the corridor.

Gail threw a wrench in their argument with a casual interjection over her shoulder as she hit the panic bar on the exit door. “*Le roi du café.*” (The king of coffee.)

The book Gail had seen in Kirsten’s hand, probably Honoré de Balzac’s collection of novelettes she slept with under her pillow, slammed with a thud against the closing stairwell door and Gail laughed, dancing down the stairs and out into the late spring night.

It was time for her tutoring session with Lannie.

Gail hurried across the street, taking an alley behind the drugstore one block over to Dunmore Street. She headed up the narrow exterior staircase of a small apartment building.

Gail recalled her first meeting with Lannie Birkenau. She was a senior just returned from a spring and summer semester in St. Petersburg, Russia, along with three other students giving their impressions and recollections to a group of wide-eyed first year students corralled on the floor of the Russian Language House’s common room.

Lannie’s voice had woven a tight story, casting even tighter threads around Gail’s soul with her stories of moonlight on the riverbanks, walking through the czarist treasures museum, and reaching down to grasp fists full of soil and feeling she had come home.

When Professor Tartakov had suggested the students in first year Russian find a study buddy to practice diction, Gail sought out Lannie.

That was eight months ago.

Her diction was nearly perfect now. Gail had received the top grade on the last two oral exams for Tartakov’s class.

Thanks to Lannie, her other oral skills had broadened too, since New Year’s Eve, and a little vodka-induced bravery.

When she finally knocked at the door of 194-B Dunmore Street, Gail was smiling with the memories of Lannie’s throaty voice waking the neighbors to bang on the wall just last week..

“*Пожалуйста. О внутри.*” (Please. Come in.) Lannie’s voice called to her through the door.

Gail reached for the knob and turned it forcefully, letting herself into the small entry. “Lannie?”

“*В кухне* (In the kitchen),” she answered.

Her spine tingling, Gail dropped her books on the ottoman in front of the fold-out sofa and strode through the single room to the apartment’s small kitchenette.

With long soot black hair fine and straight to her waist, Lannie stood at the stove with her back to Gail. Glancing down, Gail saw that Lannie’s legs were bare beneath the length of an oversized Oxford shirt. Gail could hear the slight sizzle of something and sniffed to identify bratwurst and sauerkraut.

“*Голодно* (Hungry)?” Lannie asked without turning around.

Moving up behind her, aligning their bodies, pushing her pelvis into Lannie’s rear, Gail wrapped her arms around Lannie’s chest. Gail nuzzled Lannie’s ear pulling her back against her body. “*Только если обед включает вас.*” (Only if dinner includes you.)

Her hands parted the buttons of the white cotton shirt, finding naked breasts, their pert size fitting perfectly into the palms of her hands. She tugged at the nipples. Lannie arched her back and the spatula clattered to the stove top. Her arms came up to encircle Gail’s head and dragged her mouth to hers.

While continuing her hands’ activities, Gail tore away from the sweetness of Lannie’s mouth to the apex of her throat and shoulder, sucking on the salt-sweet skin there. She was rewarded by the throatiness of Lannie’s voice groaning and moaning her name with her dreamy mix of trained Russian and native Chicagoan accent.

Pulling her gently aside, Gail reached past Lannie and turned off the burner on the stove.

They would eventually eat the vodka-cooked bratwurst.

They would also eventually get to the grammar test material for Friday’s class.

Right now, what Gail wanted to study most was the language between lovers.



LARA ZIELINSKY

Lara Zielinsky lives and works in Orlando, Florida. A longtime internet writer, her first published novel *Turning Point* is now available from P.D. Publishing (www.pdpublishing.com/turningendpage.html). In 2006, she was published in the lesbian short story anthology, *Telltale Kisses*. Both are available through Starcrossed Productions (www.scp-inc.biz), Amazon, or your local GLBT bookseller. You may write to her at laraz@lzfiction.net or visit her website, www.lzfiction.net, for more of her writings.



On Retreat

Anne Laughlin

It was the sight of a door ajar that led me to trouble. I was wandering around the Maple Grove Serenity Center during the first hours of my week-long stay there when I saw a sign pointing toward the private quarters of the nuns who ran the Center. They were the Sisters of Something or Other and their quarters were found in a separate wing of the large shambling building that overlooked a swift stream and eighty acres of woodland. The wing was connected to the building by a long hall that led to the slightly open door. And beyond that? I could only imagine. Did they each have their own room? Did they sit together each night and share their day? Did they squabble? Did they sneak into each other's rooms and have the quietest sex imaginable? I had to admit that the last bit was what I really wanted to know.

My curiosity got the better of me, again, and I crept down the hall in my flip-flops. They seemed to make a tremendous noise slapping against the shiny linoleum tiled floors, but when I changed my gait to quiet them they squeaked. I took them off and proceeded barefoot. Only a few more yards and I'd be at the door. I looked behind me and the hall was still empty.

This was all craziness, of course. My whole purpose in coming to the retreat center for a week was to ask myself some hard questions. I was feeling lonely when surrounded by friends, bored by the things that had given me pleasure, restless without having any idea where to put my energies. It felt like time to ask myself what I was doing with my life. It seemed like it might be an awful lot to squeeze into a week, but after only a couple of hours of sitting in my little room, rearranging paper and pens and other tools for plotting my new direction in life, I became quite bored, to be honest. I couldn't believe only a couple hours had gone by. I realized there was going to be scads of time to sort myself out.

I admit I was curious about nuns before I even got to the Center. They were a mystifying lot to me, perhaps because I was raised in an entirely secular setting. I never saw nuns other than those on TV or in the movies where they had the ability to fly or to hit a high C while twirling around in a meadow. Some played guitar and others worked with the French Resistance. They were exotic, to say the least. I think it's the fact that a nun lives her whole life in community with other nuns that I'm most fascinated with. Do they act like a family, fighting and loving each other all at once? Is it really possible that they are celibate? For their entire lives? You can't tell me that these perfectly healthy women aren't looking to each other with more than faith, hope and charity on their minds.

I tried to imagine what it would be like to sneak into the room of a

beautiful young nun, sliding in next to her on a bed no wider than my rear end was last year before I lost all that weight. My hand glides under her ankle-length nightgown, requiring quite a bit of moving about and causing the scratchy wool blanket to fall to the same linoleum tile floor found in the hallway. The young nun, whose name is James (in that wonderfully ironic way sisters have of naming themselves after men), is now both cold and a little impatient. I stand up on my knees and remove her gown, pulling it up and over her head, hardly disturbing her absurdly short, choppy hair. I have a quick vision of the sisters sitting in a kitchen and cutting each other's hair with dull scissors. Now I lower Sister James back down on the bed and proceed to use every move I know in my quest to have her cry out with lust. Even in my fantasy I fail. She is much more disciplined than I'll ever be in anything. She is a champion silent screamer.

I was now very close to the door leading to the private quarters. I stopped to listen for any noise coming from the other side of the door and heard nothing. I knew that all of the sisters had jobs in the Center. Some were spiritual advisors to the retreatants, and others had jobs in offices in the basement doing God knows what (Ha!) and looking very serious while going about their business. I'd already scouted out that part of the building. Perhaps the sisters were all at their jobs and the private quarters were empty. I snuck my head around the door and peered in, seeing a modest reception room. Another door lay wide open on the opposite side of this room and led to a much larger, warmer looking common room. I tiptoed through the reception room and looked in. It was really enormous. If the sisters had to sit here with each other every night, at least there was plenty of room to go off in a huff to one corner or another. There must have been six different furniture groupings scattered about.

I was just contemplating trying to make it across this wide space to see what was beyond the next door opposite when I spied some movement to my right. I dropped to my knees and hid behind a ratty old stuffed chair, slowly moving so that I could catch a glimpse of two figures sitting near a sunny window at the far end of the room. An elderly sister sat in an overstuffed chair, her walker pushed off to her side. Next to her, in a chair pulled up close, was a young sister, maybe a novice, if that's what they still called them. She had absurdly short, choppy hair, a plaid skirt and wool sweater that she may have knit herself. Her eyes were enormous in her pale face and they were turning to the older nun as she passed over a cup of tea. She held onto the cup until she was sure the older woman had a firm grip, and she watched closely as the first sip was taken. The look on her face, in those big eyes, was not one of disciplined patience, or subservience, or deference. I realized as I watched the two of them that the look on her face was one of love. At that moment it felt like no one had ever looked at me like that, and even worse, that I had never looked that way at anyone either. The tableau was a picture of perfect peace and contentment.

I felt a bit shattered. I continued to watch as the older and younger nun enjoyed their tea together, sipping quietly, exchanging a few observations I couldn't hear, and seeming to not be in a hurry to go anywhere or do anything else. When they were done, the young helped the old get up and take hold of her walker, and together they slowly made their way to the door across the room from me, and into the inner sanctum. I listened for sound coming from either direction, and when it seemed all was clear, I made my way out through the reception area and down the long hallway unseen. Suddenly the idea of being caught snooping around in the private quarters seemed like the worst possible thing that could happen.

I got back to my tiny room and tried to pass off my disquiet as simply the disappointment of a lark not turning out to be as fun or interesting as I had hoped. I checked my watch and saw it was time for the mid-day meal, and since all the meals were to be taken in silence with fellow retreatants, I grabbed a copy of *The New Yorker* to read at the table and headed to the dining room. After serving myself at the small buffet and sitting down at the long table, I looked at the other ten or so diners and realized I was the only one with reading material. Everyone there seemed completely comfortable eating slowly and quietly, looking at their food and then out toward the distance as they chewed. If their eyes crossed paths they smiled and then returned to their food.

I decided I would feel more out of place reading the magazine than not reading it, so I started thinking about the young nun in the common room and how serene she seemed. I squirmed a little because she looked like the nun with the ankle-length nightgown—the fantasy nun—and it felt wrong now to have imagined taking her nightgown off by pulling it over her head and then trying to make her scream with lust. It felt wrong, not because she isn't someone who could enjoy the physical sensation of sex, but because I could somehow feel that she only would enjoy sex if she felt love with it. It would not be the obsessive, frantic, got-to-have-you-now kind of love that I was familiar with. It would be the kind of love that came from being calm enough to know how you feel about someone. A kind of calm I've never felt.

My list of things I needed to do to make my life more meaningful had become longer since arriving at the Center instead of shorter. I knew it was going to get longer still. I ate two desserts and slunk out of the dining room, thinking a nap seemed in order. I needed to rest before taking on the next step in this existential journey. As I rounded the corner into the hall leading to my room, I came face to face with the young nun. I excused myself and stepped aside to let her pass, only to see the most wonderful smile light up her face. Strangely, it made her look older, and as I looked into her big eyes I saw some kind of wisdom there that made her seem older as well.

"You are an interesting woman," she said, effectively shocking me senseless. I stared at her as she continued. "I saw you hiding in our community room as I had tea with Sister Rosalee."

I struggled with a sense of paralysis before I was able to say, “I think I must have taken a wrong turn somewhere. I realized it when I saw the two of you.”

“So you hid behind the chair?” Thankfully, she was still smiling.

“Well, I, uh, have military training.” God, how lame. Lame, lame.

“Let’s walk toward the chapel,” she said, taking my elbow and turning me in the opposite direction.

“I don’t want to go to the chapel,” I said, with a bit of fear in my voice.

“Oh, we’re not going into the chapel. Just through it. There’s a wonderful courtyard beyond it and I thought we’d go out there and talk.”

“This isn’t something evangelical you’re doing, is it?”

“No, I swear. Our mission here is to just host people on their spiritual journey, or whatever it is they’re seeking here. I just want to hear about you. As I said, you interest me. For instance, your military training. And your own reason for being here.”

We walked through the modest chapel and out a door into an enclosed courtyard, lush with flowerbeds and trim bushes, trees with bird feeders, trellises and pergolas all stuffed with flowers and vines. Several benches were spaced around the area, but we were quite alone. The sister took a seat and patted the space beside her. “Sit down and tell me about yourself.”

And I did.



ANNE LAUGHLIN

Anne Laughlin is a Chicago writer and real estate agent. Her short stories have appeared in *Best Lesbian Romance* (Cleis Press), *Erotic Interludes 4* and *Erotic Interludes 5* (Bold Strokes Books), and the upcoming *Best Lesbian Love Stories: Summer Flings* (Alyson Books). Her first novel *Sometimes Quickly* is due out in 2008 (PD Publishing). Anne and her partner Linda live in a house on the Chicago River, where a little bit of nature is found in their big-city life. She can be reached at annie3310@comcast.net.



Getting Home

JLNicky

"I wish you weren't going tomorrow. I'm frightened." Joanne spoke softly as the two women stood in the doorway waving to her departing parents. Kristen sighed, watching the car drive off down the residential street. She closed the door and pulled her wife into a hug.

"I promise I'll be careful, love."

They clung to each other, savoring each other's touch, calming their troubled minds.

"We knew this would happen. It was only a matter of time."

"But, Iraq? It's..." Joanne trembled within the strong, safe arms. "I promised myself I would be supportive. I guess I just didn't know how hard that would be."

Kristen looked down to meet the warm brown eyes filled with worry looking back.

"I know that feeling, love. It's been a threat over our heads for so long. Now it's here and I..." Kristen's voice cracked with the raw emotion she could only express with her gaze.

Joanne closed her eyes at the intense look and tilted her head down to rest against the firm breasts of the woman she loved.

"Please let us know how you are. Jeffrey—" She paused. No...he'll be fine. *It's me that's going to be upset. He'll probably help keep my mind occupied, him and his Barney Tape.* "We'll both miss you terribly." Joanne tightened her arms around Kristen and frowned at her own careless words as she felt the tension grow in Kristen.

Kristen held her breath, thinking of their four-year old already asleep upstairs. He had wound his sweet way into her soul just as deeply as his mother had. Joanne released her and linked their fingers.

"Let's go check on him. I'm sure he needs it." Joanne saw the tension ease a bit as Kristen nodded.

They walked back into the house and turned off the last few lights before heading upstairs.

They walked down the hallway to the young boy's door and slowly opened it wider after noting his sleeping features. Kristen moved a bit closer and with a light touch, she brushed his brown hair away from his soft cherubic face. He was so peaceful; she swallowed a sudden lump that formed in her throat. Joanne watched with heartbreak and wondered how she could ever survive without this tall, sensitive woman.

Her thoughts jumped to that moment two years ago when Kristen caught the slipping groceries just before they dropped all over the parking lot. *Jeffrey was fussing and his wail from the car seat was loud enough to attract*

everyone in the parking lot. Joanne smiled softly as she remembered. Jeffrey calmed down immediately when Kristen gave him a piece of ice to suck on. It was hot that day. Joanne shivered with the sudden heat she felt when Kristen smiled at her. She had been dressed in her uniform and it was quite...mmm mmm delicious. Shopping had never been the same since. Thank God.

Kristen stood up from the boy's bed and turned, catching that soft smile on Joanne's lips.

"What's that little smile about? Share, please?" Kristen kissed Joanne's forehead as they moved back into the hallway.

"I was just remembering a really courteous, gorgeous lieutenant who managed to quiet my son and save my bacon all in one fell swoop." Joanne teased her grocery hero. Kristen felt a blush rise and chuckled at Joanne's ability to make her blush so easily.

"I didn't save your bacon. I saved a huge bag of gummy bears if I recall correctly. Who saved who, my love? As I remember you stole my breath away."

Joanne smiled and shook her head at the sweet compliment. "No, you cannot get out of that backrub you promised earlier. No matter what sweet words you manage to find."

Kristen shook her head no, her green eyes darkening as she took in the view of the beautiful woman entering their bedroom.

Her voice dropped low as she caught Joanne's gaze. "I had much more than a backrub in mind tonight." The sensual pitch of her voice and the heat in her eyes, now darkened to emerald, stimulated her wife faster than any touch could.

Joanne's breath caught when she looked up to see the raw hunger in her wife's dark green eyes as Kristen moved closer slowly removing her clothing. Buttons undone, soft cotton swept back, a bra unclasped, and she was topless. Her full breasts and hard nipples instantly ached for the touch of her lover's hands and mouth.

Kristen moved them toward the bed even as she removed the last vestiges of Joanne's clothing. She rapidly discarded her own garments. The heat between them was growing. Kristen felt a touch of desperation in her cravings and paused to slow her actions once again.

"I want you so much, my love. I can't believe how much you have changed me. You're so beautiful." Her lips touched quivering stomach muscles. She moved slowly upward to lick between her breasts. Her own hot flesh pressed down as she lowered her body onto Joanne's.

Joanne heard her pulse pounding in her ears as she felt the rush of blood and desire running through her. She closed her eyes in sudden ecstasy as Kristen cupped her breasts in each hand, her thumbs teasing the hardened tips. A softly murmured "please" was all she could voice as Kristen suddenly sucked one nipple into her hot mouth. The surge of

pleasure was intense. Joanne lifted her leg and pressed into the wet vee between Kristen's legs, straddling her own. They both moaned.

Kristen let her tongue flick the sensitive tip as she held Joanne's breast and stroked her soft skin. She moved to the other breast to show it attention as well. Joanne arched upward, responding to the pleasure.

Kristen slowly explored down the beautiful body that lay beneath her. Her short hair tickling over Joanne's skin, sensitizing her flesh. Hot breath riffled through brown curls sending shivers of delight through her body. Kristen quickly covered Joanne's mound with her mouth. Her tongue softly parted the swollen lips, then stroked down the length of her hot, wet sex. Joanne gasped at the sensual intrusion as Kristen found her hooded clit and focused on taking her higher, pleasuring her fully.

They moved together as one, their breaths a counterpoint to each other as they gave and took. Joanne pressed harder into Kristen. Strong hands guided her and held her captive as Kristen drank the flowing juices.

"Make me come. I want to come in your mouth," Joanne cried out softly as her wife held her on the edge of release. Kristen let her tongue glide over the engorged clit, now throbbing and prominent. The steady, pressure-filled strokes focused on giving Joanne the ultimate release. She arched from the bed as her body sought the pinnacle Kristen was taking her toward.

Her body tensed once, twice, as she felt the release crash over her senses. Glowing with perspiration, her slick skin trembled. Muscles filled with the tension of her climax suddenly became boneless. She sank onto the mattress as Kristen slowly removed her mouth and softly stroked the legs and hips she had held to her moments before. A quick movement and Kristen wrapped her arms over Joanne and gently shushed her as she snuggled against her on the bed. She pulled the covers up to lay over them as Joanne made a half-hearted denial. Kristen's fingers brushed the damp brown hair from Joanne's forehead and she bestowed a soft kiss in its place.

"I love you. That's all I want you to feel right now. I know you love me, my darling. This is for you. I want you to enjoy this because when I come home, I plan on letting you show me how much you love me." Kristen's soft whisper brought tears to Joanne's eyes.

"Please hurry back. My heart hurts already," Joanne whispered, her voice cracking as she felt the tears crest, break, and fall.

"I promise to be careful and keep in contact when I can. I can't promise more than that, except to tell you that my heart will be with you and Jeffrey every second we're apart."

Joanne sniffled and tucked her head into the crook of Kristen's neckline. They whispered words of love, holding each other closely. The hours passed far too quickly.

The next morning Kristen's heart constricted painfully as she watched the two figures dearest to her in the world grow smaller in her rear view mirror. As she arrived at the base and parked her car, she drew a deep

breath. Taking a moment, she began to tuck the emotions of love, devotion, tenderness, caring, and family, deep in her heart. These treasures would sustain her for the long months ahead. She looked at the Captain's bars pinned to her hat. Then, checking her reflection in the rear view mirror, she pulled on her hat and slipped on her sunglasses. Captain Bradley stepped from the car.

The deploying members of the 39th Comptroller Squadron began boarding the plane that was taking them into Iraq's hostile territory. Captain Bradley proudly surveyed the men and women under her charge. She felt confident her leadership would take them through the trials ahead and get them safely home.

Finally able to ready herself for the flight, she dropped down into the assigned seat and leaned back. Closing her eyes, she carefully allowed herself to feel the guarded emotions for her family, picturing their beautiful faces. She had fourteen hours of flight time to remember every loving detail of the last two years she had spent living with Joanne and their very precocious son. She knew she could get through the months ahead because getting home would never be further away than her heart.



JLNICKY

I am a 39 year-old lesbian. A full time graduate student, I am pursuing my Masters degree in IT, and write as a hobby. You can find more of my work on the website I designed at www.butchesbabesandbards.com. I have two Dalmatians and just recently moved from San Francisco, CA to Kansas. Your feedback is welcome at JLNickymaster@aol.com.



Heartbreak

Shadylady

Melissa Mathers walked aimlessly down the sidewalk, her head tilted downward and her thoughts racing out of control. As she walked past the coffee shop, a song stopped her in her tracks, and she listened to the words being sung to *"How Do You Mend A Broken Heart."*

God, if she were able to answer that question, she wouldn't be here crying gallons of tears. The pain of lost love was unbelievable. With each breath she took, her heart hurt. Her soul felt drained and lost, wandering endlessly, asking senseless questions. What went wrong? Did she not love enough? Could she not love enough? Was she afraid to reach out for the love she wanted? She didn't know the answer to any of these questions. She just knew that there was a hole in her large enough that a bus could drive through. She was trying to think of what life would be like in the next hour, the next day or next week, but she only saw endless darkness. She looked around her and saw nothing had stopped just because her heart had.

Taking a deep sigh, Melissa turned to continue her walk.

"Hey, Mel. Come join us in a cup of coffee," a voice called out to her.

Turning back, Melissa saw a group of women sitting at a table in the courtyard holding coffee cups. As she lifted her hand to acknowledge them, she noted that Stephanie was sitting in the midst of the group. Her heart skipped as their eyes locked, Stephanie's angry glare boring down on her anguished gaze. Mel recalled the angry words that passed between them less than twenty-four hours ago.

"I don't give a fuck what you say. I'm sick and tired of you working overtime and weekends. We never get to go out and have any fun any more. If you won't take me out then I'll damn well find someone that can," Stephanie fumed as she finished styling her hair.

"Stephanie, please don't say that. I've been working like a dog to save for the European vacation you say you can't live without."

"Borrow the money, use a credit card, or don't pay the bills for a couple months. There must be another way to get the money without working all the time for it."

"You know me better than that, Stephanie. Either I pay for the trip or we don't go."

"Well then you give me no choice here. I'm going out tonight with Renée and maybe I'll be back by the time you get home...or not."

"Don't go, baby. I'll leave earlier than I have been and we'll stay here and watch a movie together."

"Can't you get it into your thick head? I'm sick of staying home. I am going

out tonight whether you are here or not.”

“Please don’t go. Wait for me.”

“The hell with it. I’ll see you later.” Stephanie picked up her car keys and slammed the door loudly as she left.

Melissa turned, her face buried in her hands as tears trickled through her fingers and dripped onto her pressed pants. She wiped uselessly at the smudges while trying to get her emotions under control. She continued down the street with thoughts of Stephanie thundering through her mind. As she stepped from the curb, she never saw the car that was coming down the street. She felt a hard blow to her right side and then a sense of weightlessness as she was tossed high into the air. Almost as quickly as she left the earth, her body crashed into the pavement, shattering bones and slamming her head twice against the ground. It was a blessing as blackness descended, blocking out the pain on impact.

“Oh my God! Did you see that?” one of the women in the courtyard yelled as she stood, her chair falling backward. “Melissa’s been hit by a car.”

Stephanie’s face paled as she shot to her feet, trying to see. A crowd was already blocking Melissa’s body from her sight. She had heard brakes squealing just seconds before Melissa had been hit. She raced forward, knocking other customers aside and pushing gawkers out of her way.

Stephanie saw the crumpled body of her lover lying twisted on the road. Running to her, she dropped to her knees and tried to cradle Melissa’s bleeding head against her chest. She could see that she was still breathing although each breath was ragged and gargled with the sound of fluid in her lungs.

From out of the blackness, Melissa could feel someone lifting her body to hold her against a soft pillowing breast. She tried to open her eyes, but all she could do was struggle to breathe. Pain engulfed her entire being. She could hear sirens in the distance and wished they would get to her quicker.

Close to her ear, she could hear a voice that sounded like Stephanie whispering to her.

“Oh God, baby...don’t die. Please don’t die.”

The sirens quieted as several vehicles braked to a stop close to where Melissa was lying.

Within seconds, the police and EMT’s had managed to move Stephanie out of the way as they tended to Melissa. With no time to spare, they started an IV as she was being rolled onto a backboard where her head was strapped immobile.

When the emergency team loaded Melissa into the ambulance, Stephanie rushed forward. “Please, she’s my partner. Let me ride with her.”

“Ma’am...let us get her there as quickly as we can. We don’t have the time to put you in front. Follow us to Mercy as fast as you can. Be careful.”

Melissa felt excruciating pain as the stretcher she was in was lifted into

the air and slid roughly into the back of the ambulance. Even before she was strapped firmly in place, the ambulance peeled down the street. As it jerked side to side, Melissa couldn't help gasping aloud while searing bolts of pain shot down her right side. Her head continued to throb with each beat of her heart. She could feel warm blood running over her forehead and down behind her ear.

The crowd watched as the woman who was hit by the car was treated and taken from the scene. All eyes then turned toward the car which had collided with an electric pole after hitting the jay walker. The ambulance and emergency crews were working feverishly using the Jaws of Life to extract the unconscious woman from the car. It seemed like hours, but it was actually less than ten minutes before the ambulance was racing off with the second victim of the accident.

Stephanie turned toward her friends who were signalling her over to them.

"Come on, we'll take you to Mercy."

As their car pulled into the Emergency entrance, Stephanie frantically pushed open the door before it came to a full stop. She ran into the Emergency Department and over to the registration desk. "Please, can you help me? I am looking for Melissa Mathers."

The receptionist looked up from her screen. Her face set as she looked at Stephanie. "What relation are you to the person you are looking for?"

"I'm her partner."

"I'm sorry, but I can't give out any information except to family members."

"I am her family. She is my partner. We have lived together for the last six years."

"Ma'am, I am sorry, but we only give information to blood relatives unless you have a power of attorney as her legal guardian."

"What the hell! Please can't you tell me anything about Melissa?"

"I am sorry, Miss."

Angrily, Stephanie turned and stormed toward her friends who had followed her.

"They won't tell me a damned thing. Fuck! I need to know how she is."

The group fell silent. None of them knew what to do. While they gathered tensely in the waiting room, several staff members passed by.

"What a shame about the young woman who was brought in. The crew did everything they could but she was dead on arrival."

"No kidding. She was a mess. I don't know how she even made it into the ambulance alive."

"They're trying to find her family now. I sure am glad that I won't be in the room when they tell her family she's dead."

Stephanie sank into a chair, her knees buckling, and loud sobs racked

her body. She buried her face in her hands with grief. Her friends clustered around her to shield her from prying eyes.

“Excuse me.” A young nurse walked up to them. “Can you tell me if one of you is Stephanie Long?”

The group of women parted as one of them pointed to the still crying woman.

“Ms Long?” the nurse asked as she placed a hand on Stephanie’s shoulder.

Stephanie looked up through a blur of tears and nodded.

“Can you come with me?” the nurse requested while taking a step backward.

“Yes....but why?” Stephanie asked in a trembling voice.

“Miss Mathers’s going to need surgery, but she won’t sign the papers without speaking to you first.”

“What! She’s alive?” Stephanie cried out as she leapt to her feet.

“Oh, very much so, but in a great amount of pain from the injuries she sustained. Come with me, please, so we can start the treatment she needs.”

The nurse turned and walked back toward the closed doors of the treatment area. Stephanie rushed to follow her, silently thanking God for the opportunity to be with Melissa.

There would be many physical and emotional hurts to heal, but having been given a second chance, Stephanie was going to do all in her power to make amends to Melissa and show her how much she really loved her.



SHADYLADY

Shadylady is a true Southern Lady who has found a way to release pent-up energy through the keys of her computer. She draws from her feelings and her imagination to create her tales. Her writing career started only a short few years ago following a bet on whether or not she could write a story that was entertaining. Encouraged by many online friends and readers, she has continued to write and post for readers to enjoy. Her writings can be found at www.thesandbox101.com. Her email is the_shadylady_629@yahoo.com.



The Eyes of March

A.K. Naten

The eyes...it was all in the eyes.

She had the most gorgeous, uniquely colored eyes I'd ever seen. Bluish at one time, greenish at the next. Stormy and piercing when upset or angry; placid and peaceful when she was calm and content. Normally they were clear and bright, full of life, and dancing with a hint of mirth.

But tonight those eyes weren't dancing. Tonight they were pale and lifeless as they stared at me with uncertainty. It was difficult to see much in the dimly lit, secluded corner of the restaurant where we were seated, but I could tell that she was studying me closely. I could not hide my sorrow, and she knew it. At that moment there were no words needed; our eyes spoke volumes.

The thing is, I hadn't planned for any of this. I hadn't planned for us to be so sad; I hadn't planned for us to be sitting in this restaurant on this particularly cold and windy March evening. Hell, I hadn't planned to get involved with her in the first place. None of it had been *planned*...it just happened. And now it was such a damned mess.

It had started out innocently, really. Leah and I met at the county hospital where I was a nurse in the Burn Unit and she was performing some volunteer duties with a few other people. We saw each other often and quickly became friends. I was immediately captivated by her astounding eyes and we seemed to be naturally drawn to each other. Dark-haired and petite, her good looks and easy smile were what attracted me initially, but it was her kind soul and warm heart that hooked me for good.

I knew Leah was married to Graham Pryce III. She told me all about the wealthy, influential, politically well-connected Pryce family. She also told me what a bastard Graham was and how her parents pushed her into marrying him anyway. Leah knew that I was gay and quite unapologetic about it. As the two of us became better friends, we bared our souls more and more and didn't hide much from each other. Eventually, we didn't hide our feelings either.

We didn't expect our friendship to escalate into something more. We never intended to fall for each other so hard, so quick. When we did realize that something was indeed happening, we tried to fight it—tried, but failed. It was a love that should not and could not be, and yet, here we were, fully engaged and wrapped up in each other.

This was why I was so troubled—why my heart was full of anguish and her eyes full of tears.

Leah said often that she wished she could just leave Graham, but she

knew what her family would do if she did. Her family and her husband's family would make her life a living hell if she tried to leave or divorce. And if they found out about me—hoo boy, it would certainly be worse than hell.

She insisted that it would be a worthy sacrifice to suffer a little public humiliation and dirty laundry-airing if it meant getting away from the Pryce family. But we both knew that it wouldn't stop at mere humiliation. She hated that she felt obligated to do as her family commanded. She hated that she was so damned loyal. It was ironic, really, because I had always admired her loyalty and her sense of right versus wrong.

I knew Leah felt torn between what her heart desired and what her mind felt constrained to do. I knew that it would be up to me to do something about our 'situation'. After much soul-searching and agonizing, I had come to a decision. It wasn't going to be easy, but I felt it was the only choice. The problem would be in convincing Leah that it was the best thing.

I hated the fact that I was on edge tonight and I hated that she could tell. I couldn't look her straight in the eyes, knowing I had to say what I was about to say. I wanted so badly to look into her beautiful green-blue depths and know that everything was okay. It always felt like everything would be all right when she was looking at me with those clear, expressive eyes of hers.

After the waiter had taken our food order and left us alone, Leah reached out to grasp my hand. "Hey." I glanced at her briefly. "Why so glum?" she asked.

I knew it was now or never. I cleared my throat, "I didn't want to get into it right away, but...well, you know we have to talk, Leah." I finally met her piercing gaze. "About...us—" I motioned between us "—about what we're doing." Leah dropped her gaze and stared at our linked hands. "We have to do something, because we can't continue on like this. I mean...I just can't do this anymore."

She didn't say anything for a moment, but then I felt her hands tightening in mine. The expression that overtook her features told me that a meltdown was imminent. Dammit.

I felt lousy for putting a damper on the evening so early, but I had to do something. I was miserable, and I knew that Leah was too. I hated that we had to be secretive. I hated always having to meet her in such clandestine ways, but I knew that she had no other choice. We often traveled far and wide just so we could meet up someplace and spend time together. This had been the case tonight. A goddamn two-hour drive just to have dinner.

Never in my life had I been secretive about a relationship, and I'd never been relegated to seeing a lover only on occasion. I mean, I loved Leah, but meeting once, maybe twice a month just wasn't good enough anymore. I didn't want to give her an ultimatum or pressure her to do something she wasn't ready to do, but damn, this was driving me insane.

I didn't blame Leah for the situation we found ourselves in. As I said, it all just happened, so I never pushed her or made any demands on her. I'd never suggested she leave her husband and never insisted that she make a choice between her family or me. I knew Leah was between a rock and a hard place, and honestly, I felt that it was my fault for putting her there. But Leah always contradicted me, saying that I just opened her eyes to a truth she'd been denying for a long time. Still, I knew the situation had to change before we both went mad and did something crazy.

"So, what do you propose we do?" Leah finally asked, her voice quiet and slightly shaky.

My heart clenched and I sighed to cover my distress. "I don't know. I don't think we have much of a choice, really." I glanced up. Leah looked panic-stricken. I drew a deep breath, knowing that I had to forge on, that I had to get it out before I lost my nerve completely. "I found another job, a supervisory job, at another hospital." The comment was met with silence. "I'm thinking of taking it." When I glanced up again, Leah's face was pale. I tried to inject an edge of optimism, "It'd be a good promotion for me."

"Where is this job?"

I looked away. If I had to look at her pained eyes, I'd lose it completely. "Miami."

"Miami!?" Leah's outburst turned a few heads. "You're going to *Miami*?! Jesus Christ, Blaine!"

I squeezed our joined hands, "Shh!" I knew she was upset, but I didn't want to draw attention to us. "Baby, shh!"

"You're going to leave me?! Oh God...oh Blaine...you're going to *leave*?" Leah began to cry, careless of the irritated gazes she was receiving.

"Leah...Leah, listen to me!" I kept my voice as hushed as I could while leaning forward and tugging on her hands, trying to keep her reigned in. "Honey, you know we can't go on like this! Meeting only here and there, when you're able to sneak away and I have a free evening. Lying constantly...hiding and worrying all the time...it's crazy! I can't do this anymore!"

I wasn't sure she was hearing me. She pulled her hands away and covered her face, sobbing openly. Jesus. My eyes filled with tears and I brought a hand up to cradle my forehead. I couldn't look at her. My heart was breaking.

After a few moments, Leah calmed down enough to regain her composure. "I suppose I can't blame you." She began quietly, wiping at her nose with a tissue. "You've wasted enough of your time. You shouldn't throw your life away waiting for me to make up my mind and do something."

She was trying to be strong, but I could see through it. I leaned forward again, "No, it isn't that. I don't feel that way—I've never felt that way, Leah, you know that." Moist eyes met mine. "I just think it'd be better if...if we

both just tried to move on.”

She interrupted with a snort of anger, “Better for who, Blaine? Me? Or you!”

I reached out and linked our hands again. “Leah,” I spoke quietly and calmly, even though my lower lip trembled and my eyes threatened to betray me with a waterfall of tears. “Baby...it’d be better for *both* of us.” Leah gave a huff of disbelief. “It’s just gotten too painful. When we’re together it’s—” I almost couldn’t say the words “—it’s like we’re just torturing each other!” Tears began to spill down my cheeks. Dammit. “I no longer think about how wonderful it is to be together; all I can think about is how wrong it is that we *can’t* be together! All I do is count down the minutes until we have to leave each other again. And it’s killing me, Leah! It’s killing *us*!” With that, my voice broke and the tears began to flow free and hard. For a long moment we both just cried quietly.

“I want to agree with you. I really do.” Leah’s voice was hushed and strained when she spoke again. “And I want to tell you to go and live your life and find someone new, and fall in love and be happy, but...” She trailed off as her body began to shake with renewed sobs. “But I *can’t*, Blaine! I’m not like you! I’m selfish and cowardly, and I don’t want to let you go! ...I don’t think I can let you *go*!”

God. I knew this would be painful...I just didn’t realize how much.

Wanting to get away from any eyes that might be prying, I got out of my seat and came around to Leah, sliding an arm around her shoulders. Leaning down, I whispered in her ear, “Let’s get out of here, okay? Let’s go back to my place and talk there.” A dark head mutely nodded consent, so I quickly tossed some bills on the table and led both of us out of the restaurant.

Neither of us spoke during the long drive to my apartment. We were keenly aware of each other’s anxiety and sorrow, so words were unnecessary. We just held hands, alternately squeezing and stroking as our emotions and thoughts continued to swirl and churn like the blustery March winds.

We finally reached the apartment and went inside, still not speaking. I took our coats and walked out to the hallway, leaving Leah alone in the living room. As I hung the coats in the closet, I began thinking about the times she’d been here with me. The first time we kissed on the living room sofa...the first time we said ‘I love you’...the first night we spent together. As I closed the closet door, I realized that this could be the last time we’d be here, together like this. The thought made my heart ache and my eyes began to well anew with still more tears. I quickly decided that if we were going to say goodbye tonight, I wanted it to be memorable.

I touched Leah’s back to tell her that I’d returned to the living room.

When she didn't turn around, I gently slid my arms around her waist and pulled her close. We stood like that in silence for a while. I could feel her trembling and pulled her even closer, closing my eyes and pressing my lips against the side of her dark head.

"Baby, please don't cry," I whispered, my voice unsteady.

When Leah finally turned to face me, her blue-green eyes were spilling over, their depths profoundly sad, but there was something else there too. They bored into me, and I saw the naked want and hunger behind the tears. Leah's breathing began to pick up as the two of us felt our bodies and minds pulled together by the overpowering mutual attraction that got us into this bind in the first place. As sorrowful as we were, we still could not deny the incredible need we felt for one another.

My eyes silently answered her call and I reached for her, wanting to let myself go and just allow my feelings to guide me. Suddenly we were grasping at one another, our mouths crashing together as our fingers gripped and tangled in each other's hair.

I grabbed Leah's shoulders, backing her up until she was pressed against the living room wall. We kissed forcefully, frantically, able to think of nothing but our want. The only thing that mattered was the taste, feel and sensation of our mouths, minds, and bodies melding together.

Leah moaned as my tongue probed deep. I pressed myself against her even harder, wanting to be closer, so close that I could feel her blood pulsing against my skin. Quite abruptly, she broke away and pulled back, her clear eyes staring at me with such intensity. I understood the meaning of that look; she'd fixed me with it a dozen times before. Commanded by our raging desire, we took each other's hand and walked silently back to the bedroom.

We undressed quickly and slipped beneath the covers, our bodies automatically twining together, so close that we could feel our breath mingling. I reached up and touched my fingertips to Leah's cheek, gently caressing it as a tear slipped out from beneath dark lashes.

"I'll always love you," I whispered.

"I'll always love you, too," Leah responded unsteadily then leaned forward, softly pressing our lips together.

I kissed her back and we began to cry, physical want mixing with tearful misery. The emotion of the moment was overwhelming; both of us were desperately holding on for dear life, not wanting to let go, but knowing that we would have to. We clutched each other tightly, clinging on to shoulders and gripping at hips as they undulated and ground against thighs and hands. We could not touch or feel each other enough.

Our desire, hunger, and frenzied need escalated until we were a moist mixture of mouths, hands and bodies. Thighs intermingled and fingernails dug deep as flesh pressed together, kissing, thrusting and gasping in desperate unison until at last we brought one another to our breaking

points.

We erupted violently, bursting apart yet remaining together.

As the hour of a new dawn approached, we lay in each other's arms, both of us contemplating the near and distant future, both wishing that things were somehow different.

But things weren't different. We were who we were.

As we listened to the March winds continually whistling outside, we were reminded of Mother Nature's power, and her fickle tendencies.

Perhaps we could hope that one day she would shift the winds and blow our lives in a new direction, allowing us to meet again as different people, living under different circumstances.

The morning arrived and still I found myself staring into Leah's eyes, searching... feeling... memorizing.

Situations and circumstances may keep us apart, but I shall never forget that March, nor her eyes.



A.K. NATEN

Originally from Pennsylvania, A. K. Naten resides now in the Sunshine State of Florida. Currently working in the educational field, she has an oddly varied background of architecture, real estate, computer tech. support, and human resources. A lover of ancient history, A. K. has a particular fascination with all things Egyptian. She spends the little free time she has playing sports, hanging out with friends, and writing. Her debut novel, *Turning Tides*, was published in 2005.

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The Portrait

Ren Peters

Juggling a large coffee, an art portfolio, and her keys, Eileen unlocked her studio door and flipped on the lights. She put everything on the reception desk, then went back to close the door and turn the sign to show she was open for business. Smiling, she touched the gold letters printed in reverse on the glass pane. “Eileen McVeigh, Portrait Photography”—it still pleased her to see those neatly painted letters each morning when she arrived at work.

While checking the phone messages, Eileen sat at the desk and sipped her coffee. Just one message this morning. She leaned forward when she heard the quiet, refined voice of Daniela Forrester.

“Ms. McVeigh...Eileen...I received your message that the proofs are ready. I understand you are open until two o'clock today. Either my brother or I will be by to pick them up this afternoon before you close. Thank you.”

Eileen hit the replay button and listened twice more to the message. The voice captivated her, just as the woman herself had two weeks ago. She listened again. *She called me Eileen. But she said, “My brother or I.”*

Eileen shivered. “Let it be you, baby. Please!”

William and Daniela Forrester wanted portraits for their parents' Christmas gift. The young man, very handsome and very impatient with the whole process, had asked to be photographed first. He clearly wanted the rest of his Saturday morning for more important activities and left immediately when Eileen was finished with him. The young woman though—there was a vision to dwell on! Eileen was physically attracted to her the minute she walked into the studio. She was a classic beauty. Dressed simply in a skirt and a silk jewel-neck shell, she wore a strand of pearls and had her hair swept up off her long neck into a neatly wound French twist. Her high cheek bones, straight nose, and almond-shaped eyes gave her an aristocratic, almost aloof air, and her quiet demeanor added to her appeal. She was young, around twenty-five, but looked more sophisticated, more mature than that, and very distant. Once the brother left, that wall of reserve fell away and the warm approachable woman who emerged further piqued Eileen's interest.

Trying to put aside her growing attraction, Eileen had begun the shoot systematically and, as was her wont, engaged the woman in conversation to get her to be more relaxed for the camera.

“Ms Forrester, could you turn your head a bit to the left? Yes, like that.” *Click.*

“Please, call me Dannie. I get too much ‘Ms. Forrester’ at school.” *Click.*

Caught that smile.

“So you’re a teacher, Dannie.” *Click. Click.* “Where?”

“At JFK High—” she paused “—English. That usually makes people very self-conscious about speaking to me.” A little frown. *Click.*

“Well, I loved English, especially poetry, so you don’t scare me.” Another smile. *Click. Click.*

They talked easily about poetry and books as Eileen moved around working quickly and deliberately. Then she put down the SLR and began to adjust the height on the portrait camera. “These next will be the formal shots. Relax now. I’ll come position you when I’m done here.”

“Why do you take the others then?”

“Truthfully? People come here asking for a formal portrait, but frequently what they prefer is a more candid pose. I give them proofs for both and it saves a second sitting. There, that looks about right. Now let me get you sitting a little higher.”

And that was when it happened. Eileen was sure she had just meant to adjust the height of the stool. She didn’t mean to touch her, but when Dannie stood and they were within breathing space of each other, she noticed an errant hair loosened from the French twist. Instinctively, she reached out to tuck the hair behind Dannie’s ear. Then, without thinking, she let her fingers trail lightly down the line of Dannie’s cheek to her chin where her hand lingered a moment too long. The skin was smooth and cool to the touch, like alabaster. Such a beautiful face, but so restricted in the formal hairdo. And the neck, so confined by the neckline of the shell.

“You need to be free,” she murmured.

They looked steadily into each other’s eyes. Eileen thought she saw a flicker of recognition there...a kindred spirit...a look of longing, but just as she moved closer, Dannie pulled back.

Eileen recovered her senses and hastily turned away to adjust the seat. “There, that should do it.” She stood back as Dannie sat once more, then directed her position with words rather than touch. “You know, you really should let me photograph you with your hair down and in an open-necked shirt.”

“Don’t I look all right?” A crease wrinkled Dannie’s brow, concern in her voice.

Eileen wanted to kick herself. “No, no. That’s not...I mean yes, you look fine. I didn’t mean you don’t look good.” She could feel her face begin to flush. “You look better than good... you look great!” *Christ, I’m babbling. Get a grip, McVeigh!* “You’re fine. It’s just that you have a beautiful line to your face, and I think I could take some really great shots of you looking less formal.”

The rest of the sitting had gone all right for the shoot but abysmally for Eileen. Try as she might, she could not coax any more pleasantries from Dannie until finally, the only words that passed between them were Eileen’s

directions.

As Dannie gathered her purse and jacket to leave, Eileen tried once more to connect with the haunting beauty. “I didn’t mean to upset you before.”

“You didn’t, really. I just want these pictures to be perfect for our—”

“I know you do,” interrupted Eileen, “and I should have waited until we finished before asking you. It’s just that, as you can see—” she gestured towards the framed portraits on the wall behind the desk “—I also take less formal portraits. I try to capture the personality in these, not just make a good likeness. I think there’s a spontaneity that you don’t give in to very often. I’d like to capture that.” Seeing the wavering hesitancy in Dannie’s eyes, she quickly added, “You won’t have to pay for it. I often have models sit for me. It’s practice.” She said the last with a deprecating shrug and flashed her best smile.

With a promise to think about it, Dannie Forrester had walked out of her studio and, maybe, out of her life completely. Time and again in the last two weeks, Eileen had run through the scenario of that morning, sometimes sure that she had seen a spark of recognition in Dannie’s look, sometimes just as sure she hadn’t. If the brother came to pick up the proofs, she knew the answer was no. Not wanting to dwell on that possibility, Eileen was happy for the two walk-ins that kept her busy until just after one. She was in the darkroom loading the rolls of film into developing canisters when the bell announced a customer.

“I’m in the darkroom. Be right with you,” she called out. She could hear light footsteps enter the waiting room, stop, then walk through the studio towards her. It sounded like a woman’s step! Eileen’s heartbeat quickened. Hands shaking, she tried to get the last roll wound onto the developing reel as quickly as possible. Her fingers seemed to thicken and refused to move as her nervousness grew. *Why won’t this damn film load faster?*

A tap at the door. “Just a minute. I’m loading exposed film.”

“It’s me...Dannie Forrester.”

Oh, baby, you’re here! “I’ll be right out.”

“Take your time.” There was a pause. “My hair is down.”



Rediscovery

Ren Peters

I wonder.
Is it my age-tendered skin
That so responds to you?
Or is it remorse for wasted years
That longingly draws me close?
I am ever lost in the feel
Of our bodies together;
The nexus of hands, lips, legs
Centers me,
And I am brought to this:
I could lie forever, Love,
Feathering fingers along your back,
Lightly palming the curve of a breast,
Or, in the hollow of your arms,
Feel your warmth,
Inhale the scent of you,
And, ever...
Gently...
Touch the soft comfort
Of your body.



REN PETERS

Ren Peters has been a lot of things...Peace Corps Volunteer, voting rights activist, world traveler. She played softball and tennis, climbed most of the mountains in the Adirondacks and camped all along the northern Appalachian Trail. Fascinated by new technology, she's a gadget girl who has to have the latest high tech toys. She loves reading lesbian fiction, working and playing with the computer, driving fast sports cars, and her life partner...but not in that order. Her email is renpeters@gmail.com.



Memory Puzzles

Anne Azel

When you are five everything is upright. Chair and table legs, people, the world. You see everything from a different perspective and so much of life goes over your head. Now that I am an adult, I strive to make sense of the pieces I remember of my early years.

My parents were upright. They had come through the war years. My father had won the war and my mother had maintained the home front. Now they were reaping the benefits of the victors.

We had a white, wood clapboard home built in a row of others for the soldiers coming home. Neat little gardens, neat little windows and a family car. I ate my breakfast oatmeal at the new Formica and chrome kitchen table set. The surface of the table fascinated me. It was light grey and had a blurred pattern on it that looked like ice cubes. I imagined that this is what it would be like to be frozen inside an iceberg.

"A man has needs," grumbled my father, getting up to pour coffee from the stainless steel coffee pot that had been percolating happily on the stove. Dahda, dahda dit da, it went while the coffee shot up into the glass bubble in the lid.

"I know. I'm just so depressed. I feel frozen inside."

"Maybe we could get a babysitter this weekend and go to the drive-in," my dad suggested.

"David, you know we are saving for a new sofa for the rec-room. A night out like that would cost us nine or ten dollars."

Dad sighed, picked up his newspaper and disappeared behind it.

I looked closely at my mom. She didn't look frozen like the pattern on the table. Maybe she was frozen in a different way.

"Rainy, I mean Chris, phoned to say she had some free time and could come over today to help me get some of the studs up for the rec-room in the basement," Mom commented, as she poured milk on her Kellogg's Corn Flakes.

"That's men's work," Dad commented.

"You're a man and you don't know the first thing about building. Besides you are so busy at work these days. It was past ten when you got home last night."

Dad squirmed uneasily. "We have a new product line coming out this spring. We're all run off our feet trying to meet our deadline."

"I know, David. You know I understand. That's why I'm grateful that Chris can help with the rec-room. She really is very good. Because of the war, we women learned we can do a lot of jobs that once were just thought to be for men."

"She's not married, is she?"

"No, I think there was someone overseas. You know she was in the navy like you, David. Stationed in England."

"Not too many women enlisted."

"She enlisted the same time as her brother. They were twins. He was on a destroyer guarding convoy ships in the North Atlantic. A U-boat sunk them."

"I'm sorry to hear that. So many good men were lost. I imagine that's what happened to Chris's interest as well. Too many women now without husbands because of the war. It's not natural. How does she support herself?"

"She manages her father's construction company. It would have gone to her brother but — well, she does just fine."

"Not right all the same. She should be married with kids by now. The war changed everything. You rarely saw slacks on women before the war. Next thing, they'll be wanting their zippers in the front like men."

"David! Not in front of our daughter."

"Sorry." Dad went back to his paper. Mom finished her cereal.

I sort through my memory puzzle pieces. I have only two small memories of Chris, although I think she was around a lot. The first is a vague image of stout legs and strong, big hands. I think she usually came when I had my afternoon nap because I remember the door.

I had been put down for my nap and woke from a nightmare calling for my mom, but there was no answer. The house was strangely quiet. I came out into the hall and no one was around. My parent's bedroom door was closed. Fear gripped my heart and I screamed as the tears rolled down my face. My parent's bedroom door popped open and there was my mom.

She picked me up and hugged me against her cotton housecoat, comforting me and putting me back to bed. That's when I remember seeing Chris's face.

I saw her over my mother's shoulder. She was standing between the uprights of the doorway wearing a man's undershirt. Her hair was in a page boy style and her eyes were dark and moody.

After that, there was a big blank in my memories. What I next remember is living with my grandmother. I am eight and I am reading a Nancy Drew book in the stairwell. It's a very hot day and the cool air from the basement has seeped up to me. My grandmother and her friend are in the kitchen having tea. Gnarled work hands wrap around tea cups for warmth even on this hot day.

"I saw the announcement in the paper. So, David is going to marry that woman."

"Yes, it's a disgrace. The ink is barely dry on the divorce papers."

"Will David take Samantha back now?"

"He says not. He's going to pay for her to stay here. He wants a new

start, he says.”

“That’s that new wife of his talking. She doesn’t want to bother with another woman’s child. I never understood why Marge didn’t take Samantha with her instead of leaving her with you.”

“She couldn’t afford to keep Sammy. You know, starting out all over again alone.”

“Do you hear from Marge?”

“Rarely. She’s living in New Mexico now. It’s such a long way away.”

“Who can blame her for leaving, what with David carrying on like he was.”

“Yes.”

“What happened to that friend of Marge’s? What was her name?”

“I don’t know. More tea?”

So my memories begin again there. I have lots of these pieces. It is the earlier ones that form the edges of my image that I have lost. My dad had remarried. My mom had gone. I lived with my grandmother who found the extra money handy, although raising another child tiresome. I was not unhappy, just confused and different from the other kids. I worked hard in school.

School was something stable in my life. I was wanted there. When I was home sick with the measles, the school phoned to see where I was. They cared.

I learned to play the piano because my grandmother wanted me to. There was an old wood up-right piano in the parlour that had belonged to my great grandmother. The keys stuck and it was not in tune. It drove me nuts as I had a perfect pitch.

As I got older and entered my teens, my piano became my lover. I caressed her, played with her teasingly and demanded deep emotion from her. All that I was entered her. We were one. I excelled at school and went off to university to study music. My grandmother was delighted.

My father had agreed to send monthly support payments as long as I stayed in school. I got my PhD. He died of a heart attack at work.

I hadn’t seen him since I was six, but I went to his funeral. His wife seemed genuinely upset, but I couldn’t tell if it was because my dad was dead or because I’d come to the funeral.

“I’m surprised to see you here.”

“He was my father.”

“You hardly knew him. You are like your mother, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really remember her.”

“You are.”

Dad had sired three more children. Two boys and a girl. They hadn’t known about me until then. It was a bit awkward.

I pull myself away from the memories I’ve locked in a box in the back of my mind as Alice pulls up in front of a dusty New Mexico graveyard.

“Are you okay?” she asks, reaching over to take my hand. “You’ve been very quiet.”

“I’m okay. I was just remembering. Let’s go see if we can find her.”

“Okay, love.”

My partner and I get out of the rented car and walk over to an adobe arch with an iron gate. The gate opens onto a small garden of beautiful flowers. The old adobe chapel lies straight ahead. We skirt around it heading for the graveyard behind.

“She painted this place. I remember the picture in the art gallery, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Can you remember her painting?”

“I was only very young. I remember her building a rec-room with her friend. She didn’t really become famous for her work until shortly before she died.”

“Did you ever hear from her as you were growing up?”

Alice has all sorts of questions. I can’t blame her. Out of the blue yesterday, I suddenly announced that my mother had been Margaret Rainier, the artist, and that I wanted to visit her grave while we were in New Mexico.

“I got a post card from her once after I gave a concert in Denver years ago. The post card was a picture of Chaco Canyon. The card just said, ‘I was there and saw you conduct. I am so proud of you. Love Mom.’”

“That was it? She never tried to see you?”

“No.”

Alice takes my hand again and I hold on tightly. I am not sure why I am here really. Mom was never part of my life—never wanted to be. It was only five years ago, just before I met Alice that I found out my mother was Margaret Rainier.

My grandmother was in a nursing home by then. She would die a few months later. I walked into her room and she waved an outdated magazine in my face.

“Look at this. It’s your mother.”

My heart stopped and I felt dizzy as I tried to navigate my way to my grandmother’s bedside and sink into the visitor’s chair. I took the magazine with cold hands and looked at the picture. A stranger’s face, lean and sun lined, looked back at me. The article said she lived somewhere in New Mexico. There were some examples of her work and the name of the gallery that carried her art.

“Are you sure, Grandmom? You haven’t seen her in years and this article calls her Rainier, not Williams like me.”

“It’s your mom. I’d know her anywhere.”

I was not sure. My granny was very old and forgetful since her stroke. This woman did not fit my scrap box of memories. Nevertheless, I folded the

magazine and kept it. A few days later, I contacted the gallery about Margaret Rainier.

“I’m sorry, I can’t give out an artist’s address.”

“I think I might be related to her.”

“All I could do is pass on a message to her agent if you want.”

My courage failed me. “No, that’s okay. I’m probably wrong.”

I bought one of her pictures though. It is a landscape in grey. A world frozen in an ice cube stillness. It’s called Table Rock. The painting cost me a lot of money, but I love it.

“Babe, are you still with me?”

“Sorry, yes.”

We wander among the graves until we find her. I knew she’d died in her late seventies. She and another woman had been killed in a car crash. There they were, side by side. Margaret and Chris Rainier.

I hear my mother’s voice coming back to me from that big, black void of my childhood.

“I’ve got to leave, Sammy. I know you can never understand. You are better off here with your grandmother having a normal life. I love you so much. Rainy and I are going to live out west, you see.”

“Marge? We need to go.”

“I’m coming, Rainy.”

“Take care of her, Granny. She’ll be a good girl for you.”

“I blame Dave. Him taking off with that woman.”

“No. We just weren’t meant to be, Granny. Rainy has a place out west where we can stay until we get on our feet. I’ll write.”

I sink to my knees, the tears rolling down my face. They weren’t sisters. “They were lovers,” I choke.

“You could have been friends. If only she had told you,” Alice sighs.

The pieces of the puzzle that are me move together. I am one again. Alice holds me as I grieve for my mother for the first time.



Driving Philosophies

Anne Azel

I pull up in front of the United Church Manse and Reverend Carol Carpenter gets in. Knowing from experience that she would be waiting at the end of her driveway for me, I have made a conscious effort to be on time. We are as different as different can be. I am tall for a woman and built like a board. Carol is on the short side and rounded in all the right places that a woman should be.

She drops her well-thumbed Bible on top of the file folder that lies between us on the seat. The folder contains my forensic report. The image makes me smile. Science and religion, two opposing world views. We are unlikely friends—the atheist and the cleric.

“Is it her?”

“Yes. I did the autopsy yesterday. Twenty healthy teeth with two incisors missing and another showing natural root dissolving. The subject’s approximate age, height and sex are all within the natural range of a six-year-old female. What remains of the pyjamas is consistent with what she was last known to be wearing. I think we can be pretty confident that we have found the victim.”

“Was she...”

“No, I don’t think so. There are no broken bones from anything but animal breakage and her clothes had not been removed. I suspect the victim woke early from her nap and wandered out of the house while her mom was with the baby. She got lost in the forest and died of exposure. The fall leaves covered her up and she wasn’t found until this spring.”

“Why can’t you say her name? It was Mary. Little Mary Gribbin.” I hear the anger in Carol’s voice.

I don’t look at her when I answer. I can’t. I am not comfortable when opening the door to my feelings even a little bit.

“Two days ago, I examined the nearly decomposed remains of a small child found under a layer of leaves in the bush. The elements and animals had reduced her to basically hair, sinew and bones. We used a rake to make sure we’d got as many pieces as possible. I took that little body back to the lab in Toronto, undressed it, photographed and measured it, boiled it down to clean bone, and examined every inch of it. If I gave her a name ... if I had given any of them life, I don’t think I’d have lasted long in forensics.”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to imply that you didn’t care, Anna.”

“I’m committed to seeing that the dead get the dignity of being buried with their name and that justice is done for them. I deal with the rights of the dead. You deal with the healing of the living.”

I change the subject. “Bren’s sister, Debra, is coming up this weekend.

You and her really hit it off last time she was here. You want to come to dinner Saturday night?"

There is a moment's hesitation. Carol married Brenda and me quietly in our home. I would have just as well gone to a justice of the peace, but Bren wanted a minister. We didn't go to Carol's church even though the United Church has been pretty progressive in supporting gay rights.

Church doctrine is one thing; the beliefs and attitudes of a congregation are quite another. Carol couldn't let us use the church because her congregation had forbidden her from doing so. They had chosen to ignore the Church's policies and the law of Canada because of their own traditional religious beliefs. Carol took a chance even performing a marriage ceremony for us. If her congregation had found out, she could have been asked to leave. The house was fine with us. I teased Bren that it was likely I'd be struck by lightning if I tried to step into a church anyway.

"I'll have to see if I can make it."

"Okay." Carol is a latent lesbian. She's never acted on her feelings, replacing marriage with religion. Brenda and I would like her to grow to be more comfortable with who she is. Carol would like me to stop hiding my soul in the well of science. We agree to disagree.

It's Carol's turn to change the subject. "I have never been involved in anything like this before. How do you handle it?"

"We'll go in and I'll break the news to the family and go over my findings and answer any questions. Then I leave you to deal with the aftermath."

"Thanks!"

"We all have our roles."

I focus then on my driving. It is a beautiful spring day and at this point the road winds along the edge of the water. Windswept islands covered in evergreens dot the deep waters on one side and on the other, rock rises in a tall cliff. It is an outcrop of the Precambrian Shield, some of the oldest rock in the world.

As I come out of a sharp curve onto a straight stretch of road that cuts through the forest, I become aware of Carol praying softly to herself. I don't say anything, and after a few minutes she opens up the conversation again.

"I was recalling verses from the Bible that might provide some comfort for the family."

"What are they?"

"There are many. 'Our God is a God that saves: from the Sovereign Lord comes escape from death.' That's from Psalm 68, verse 20. Then there is John 5, verse 24, 'I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned: he has crossed from death to life.' Do you have any concept of a life after death, Anna?"

"Nope. I believe strongly in dust to dust, ashes to ashes. Once you are gone, you are gone."

"Don't you find that a cold place to be? What is the point of living a good

life if it only leads to death? In John 3, verse 15, we are promised, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

“I guess I don’t feel I need the reward of eternal life to live my life well. All the billions of life forms on planet Earth and only humans can look up and see the stars. To have lived and to have been so fully aware of this little part of the universe is a good enough reason for existing to me. Especially if I’ve made it a little better.”

“You are a Christian at heart, Anna,” Carol teases.

“There is no reason to be insulting,” I counter and we both laugh.

“So how are the minions in your flock these days?”

“Minions they are not. They are very much my masters. I serve the congregation not them me. Let’s see. There is an issue brewing over whether the church’s new rug should be red or royal blue. Mrs. Edle is not speaking to Mrs. Waterford because she dared to use the same recipe that Mrs. Edle makes for Hermit cookies and brought them to the Missionary Society meeting. And Ed Fells has still not fixed the church furnace properly. God forgive me, but I deliberately cut my sermon short last week because my feet were freezing. At least the congregation can wear boots and their coats in church. The flame of faith has not been keeping me too warm lately.”

I laugh. Being the minister of a small, northern village has a lot more to do with politics and good management and far less to do with faith than most people think.

“Too bad you couldn’t invite the devil in to warm the place up.”

“Get behind me Satan and bring a bucket of hot coals!”

The mood is light now so I dare to push my agenda a bit.

“So, did you read those lesbian romances Debra gave you?”

“Some.” Carol blushes. “I don’t know, Anna. On the one hand, I know this is who I am. On the other hand, I am just not comfortable with being that person. I want to experience love, but frankly, my parish would tar and feather me and run me out of town if they thought for a second that I was a lesbian. My commitment to my calling is stronger, I guess, than my personal needs. Or maybe I’m just afraid and hiding in a comfortable pew. Still, I’m not really happy living a lie.”

Carol knows I’m not the one to judge. I live with a woman. I even married her, but I don’t wear my orientation on my sleeve. I admire those lesbian women who have come out in a big way to fight for gay rights, but it is not me. I just want to blend into the community and be left alone to live my life happily. I’m sure the neighbours suspect what the relationship between Bren and me is, but they don’t ask out of politeness, and we don’t tell out of a need for privacy and normality.

“I understand. I’ve no desire to come out either.”

“Brenda’s sister, Debra is out,” commented Carol.

“Out and proud,” I agree. “But she knows everyone has to find their own way. She’ll respect your privacy.” I feel more than see Carol relax.

"I'll bring the wine Saturday."

"Good." I change the subject not wanting to cause Carol anymore stress in her day than she is already facing.

"You know what bugs me about religion?"

"Everything?"

"No. I have a great respect for the philosophy behind faiths. It's just that organized religions don't really seek a philosophical understanding. They preach dogma instead of guiding individuals towards enlightenment. So they get bogged down on the Bible saying the world is flat, or the centre of the universe, or that gays are going to rot in hell, instead of trying to understand the spiritual message behind the text. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I do. And to some extent I agree. But I also realize that enlightenment is not something we are all capable of achieving. The Church acts as a foundation in our lives, giving us stability. Sure, it can seem archaic at times. It's easy to find fault, but the Church gives a framework for people to live by. And on a day like this, when two young parents are going to learn that their child is dead, it provides a deep, meaningful, spiritual comfort. Jesus's love heals, guides and gives us hope even in the darkest of times."

"A good shot of whiskey never hurts either," I add. Carol gives me a playful swat. "I'm your cross to bear, aren't I, Carol?" I laugh.

She smiles. "Well you are certainly my doubting Thomas."

I pull into the driveway and, for a minute, the two of us sit in silence, not wanting to make that first move towards performing one of the worst tasks our professions demand of us.

"But Jesus said, 'Suffer the little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven,'" Carol whispers as she picks up her Bible and opens the car door.

"Amen," I sigh, picking up my report to follow her.



ANNE AZEL

Anne Azel was born in England. She has travelled all over the world and had wonderful experiences, many of which are reflected in her stories. This has been both amazingly rewarding and damn hard work.

Anne says, "To me, writing is a way of sharing experiences and also a way to creatively record my travels. I find it very relaxing to write and I have met some truly amazing people since I started to post my stories more than eleven years ago."

Anne has previously published *Seasons* (two editions), *Murder Mystery Series*, *Journeys* and *Encounters: Book I* and *Encounters: Book II*. Her most recent novel *Gold Mountain* won the Canadian Lesbian Fiction Addicts Readers' Choice Award for Published General Lesbian Fiction in 2006.

Anne is now retired and lives in the north she loves, enjoying canoeing, painting and forensic anthropology. Her plans are to make the so-called golden years the best of her life. As her granddad once said: It doesn't matter when you go as long as you go with a smile on your face and a pocket full of good memories.

You can contact Anne at a_azel@hotmail.com or see her website at www.jes.com.au/~azel/index.html.



Tomorrow, When I Last Saw Her

Tricia Dearborn

I was standing in the supermarket minding my own business—thinking about what fruit to buy, actually—when she handed me a mango and vanished.

When I say vanished, I mean that literally. Into air. Leaving me standing there, a mango in my hand and my mouth hanging open.

What astonished me more, even, than the fact of her vanishing was the way she gave me the fruit, pressed it into my hand tenderly, and gently closed my fingers around it. Her hands held mine for the briefest instant. It was the intimate gesture of a lover.

I had never seen her before in my life.

The mango remained in my hand though I held it at eye-level and gazed at it intensely for some moments in case it, too, disappeared. Then I placed it gently in my trolley, walked to the checkout somewhat dazed, and made my purchases.

The mango sat in the fruit bowl for several days. When I realised it was getting over-ripe, I ate it. That night I dreamed.

Before me is a small, green gate, weathered, lichened. Beyond the gate is a shady path. I lay my hand on the gate and push it open. Its bottom drags along the ground with a scraping sound.

Suddenly I was awake, racked by a yearning I couldn't explain.

When next I went shopping, I approached the fruit and veg section with caution. Once my nerves settled, and I'd got what I wanted, I hung round for a bit just in case something happened. I spent five minutes trying to look as if I was choosing the perfect avocado before walking away feeling like a fool.

I'd been accused of having an overactive imagination before, and by the time a few more weeks had gone by, I'd have been prepared to believe I'd invented the whole thing. Perhaps it had been some strange hallucinatory effect of sleep deprivation—I'd been on a bit of an insomniac stint at the time. Maybe in my exhaustion-induced altered state I'd lost focus at a crucial moment, had missed her stepping into another aisle and had just *thought* she vanished.

Then, on a coolish March Friday evening, as I sat on the sofa at home, she handed me the remote. I took it from her as if it were the most natural thing in the world; somehow I didn't notice anything amiss.

Later I played those few moments over and over in my mind. Out of the corner of my eye, I'd seen her dark hair fall past her cheek as she leaned

forward to grab the remote. Then, as I turned toward her, she held it out without looking at me, her eyes on the screen, expecting my hand to be there to receive it. Which it was.

Then, as before, she vanished. And I sat there with the remote in my hand, the TV blaring some raucous ad, wondering if I was going mad.

That night I dreamed again.

I'm walking along a narrow, shady path. Ahead of me, three poles mark a boundary where the path leads into what looks like a park. As I reach the poles and rest my hand on one of them, I can hear in the distance the faint sounds of a puppy's barking that somehow

merge into the relentless *pip-pip-pip-pip* of my alarm.

I needed to talk to someone about this.

So what are you saying? said Laurie. You saw a ghost in the supermarket?

She didn't look ghostly, I said. She looked as real as you do right now. She *felt* real.

You touched her?

She touched me. I told you—she put a mango in my hand, and then she kind of squeezed my hand with both of hers.

I know you've been wanting a girlfriend, she said. This isn't some kind of creative visualisation thing, is it?

I know the difference between creative visualisation and—whatever that was, I said.

She shrugged, and the conversation moved to other topics.

It was April before I saw her again. My friend Fiona was visiting, and I noticed with some surprise that she'd started to pour the tea. Then I became aware that the strong, short-fingered hands that held the teapot were not Fiona's, and looked up to meet the brown eyes of my supermarket woman. Not that I'd seen her eyes before, but I had no doubt it was her. The eyes were all I really saw. They held a look of suppressed mischief and delight and common understanding, as if someone had just spoken of something that was a long-standing joke between us.

I felt the corners of my mouth lift in the beginnings of a smile as she handed me my cup, having stirred in the one sugar I take. And was gone. I sat slightly stunned, my fingers gripping the cup. Fiona was getting towards the end of a long work story and hadn't noticed a thing. Where the woman had been was an empty chair.

I took a sip of my tea.

That night, I was not surprised to dream.

I walk past the poles, out from the sheltering trees and into the park. Trees are in bud; there's a feeling of raw early spring. I see her sitting on a

bench across the park, the wind whipping her hair across her face. She's bending down to a puppy, laughing.

The worst thing about these dreams was the longing they left me with, pure and keen and unassuageable—as if there were something I desired intensely just out of my fingertips' reach. It was starting to drive me crazy.

Maybe, I thought, she's a real person I've seen around and been subconsciously attracted to, and I'm just starting to imagine her in places she isn't. I described her to friends, pretending she was someone I'd met at a workshop and wanted to contact.

The next time I mentioned it to Laurie, she said, Forget it.

What? I said, surprised.

Maybe it'll happen again, she said, and maybe it won't. Maybe it's one of those weird, inexplicable things, and you'll never find out what it all means. What can you do about it, anyway? Claire—how can I say this? I think you're getting a little obsessed. Just forget about it. Get out there and have some fun.

She was probably right; and anyway, this is the kind of advice I can take. I worked as little as possible through the rest of the autumn, and spent most of my time shopping for winter clothes and going out dancing. I had a fling with a girl I'd met at a club. The dark-haired woman gradually faded from my mind.

It was a chilly June night and I was curled in bed with a book, a hot water bottle at my feet. I was suddenly aware of the warmth of her body beside me, but as before, I felt no alarm. When she turned over and slid her arm round my waist, I snuggled back against her. I felt her lips on the back of my neck.

And then, just as suddenly, she was gone. I turned on the lamp, sat up in bed. I could see the indentation on the pillow where her head had been. And when I buried my face in it, hoping to get a scent of her, I saw one of the dark hairs on the pillowcase, easily distinguishable from those of my auburn crop.

I fell asleep with the hair clamped in my fist.

I'm walking across the park towards her. She laughs as the puppy leaps to lick her face. Then she looks up, hearing my steps on the gravel path. I clear my throat to speak—

and the noise woke me. I lay in the early dawn light fuzzily wishing I'd held my tongue. I had wanted to get closer. I had wanted to cup the curve of her cheek in my palm, bury my nose in the scent of her neck.

The hair was still clenched in my hand. I curled it up carefully and put it in the box I keep my jewellery in. It was still there when I got home from work. After several weeks had passed with no sign of her, I took the hair to

bed with me, holding it in my fist as I had the first time.

Before me is a small, weathered green gate. Beyond the gate is a shady path—

I'd been here before.
A week later I tried again.

I'm walking along a shady path. Ahead of me, I see three poles that mark a boundary—

Now I was curious. I took the hair to bed with me the next three nights. The first night I dreamed that I entered the park; the next night, I crossed to where she sat at the bench; and the next night—

Before me is a weathered green gate—

A few weeks later I confessed to Laurie that I wasn't doing so well not thinking about the dark-haired woman; told her how when the yearning got too great I'd take the hair to bed and dream; but always it was the gate, the path, the park, the bench—then the gate again. I never got any closer.

What happened to forgetting about it? she said.

I did, I said, for a while. I hate myself when I take that stupid hair to bed. But that's when I get to see her. I keep thinking maybe one night I'll break the cycle.

What happened to you and Bree?

Oh, that was over weeks ago.

Well, maybe you need a new fling to take your mind off it. Maybe you need to chuck that hair down the toilet.

On a particularly nasty August day, gusty and rainy and exceedingly cold, I was feeling fed up with the seemingly endless winter, the rottenness of the weather, and just about anything else you'd care to name. I wondered what I was doing wasting my dreaming hours—not to mention large chunks of my waking life—on a woman I'd never know.

That night I burnt the hair. I held it in my fingertips over a candle, gradually feeding it into the flame, watching as it frizzled into non-existence.

And somehow that worked. I stopped thinking about her.

A Saturday morning soon after, and in the name of spring cleaning I'd decided to get rid of some old kitchen chairs, remnants from a share house of years ago, that I disliked and never used. I was driving along looking for the entrance to the council dump when I spotted the gate. *The gate.*

I drove on numbly for a second, then pulled over, parked the car, and silently walked back. I stood before the gate, the small, green, weathered gate that I knew so well. I placed my hand on it, pushed it back, the bottom

scraping along the ground, and walked through it onto the path.

It was strange to walk somewhere I'd never been and know what I'd see as I rounded each bend. To lay my hand on one of the poles at the end of the path, this time feeling the roughness of its grain against my palm. To enter the park in the light of actual day.

And here are the trees in bud, the bench, the puppy. The woman. The wind flattens my hair against my scalp, flicks hers across her eyes. I hear the sound of my feet on the gravel path I tread. I pinch the flesh inside my left elbow hard, and know for sure that I'm not dreaming, that finally we are in the same today.

She looks up, fingers still resting in the puppy's fur. She has been laughing and the laughter fades to a look of mild enquiry as I approach. There is no recognition in her eyes. She doesn't know me yet.

I clear my throat to speak.



TRICIA DEARBORN

Tricia Dearborn is a poet, writer and editor. She grew up in an Australian country town and moved to Sydney to study, graduating with a Biochemistry Honours degree and a Master of Arts. She lives with her partner in Sydney. Her poems, short stories and reviews have appeared in literary journals in Australia and the US, including *Southerly*, *Westerly*, *Island* and *Antipodes*. Her first collection of poetry, *Frankenstein's bathtub*, was published in 2001 by Interactive Press. In that year, she also received a New Work grant for poetry from the Australia Council for the Arts, and won first prize in the University of Canberra National Short Story Competition. In 2003, she was one of the poets selected to tour with the *Poets on Wheels* program, giving readings and workshops in country New South Wales. Currently, a selection of her poems is featured online in *Thylazine's* 'Twelve Australian Poets at Work Series No. 2' (www.thylazine.org). Her email is tricia_dearborn@iprimus.com.au.



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